

***The Widening of God's Mercy:* A Response to Adam Gregerman**

CHRISTOPHER B. HAYS

hays@fuller.edu

Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA 91182

An article on Christian views of Jesus as a Jew, by Adam Gregerman, was recently published by this journal.¹ It spends six pages discussing *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*, which I wrote along with my late father, Richard B. Hays, and which won the 2025 PROSE Award for Humanities in Theology and Religious Studies. When Gregerman's comments came to my attention, I was disappointed; my father and I of course knew that the book would be scorned by those who disliked its message of inclusion for LGBTQ people in Christian churches, but I was taken aback to see a Jewish peer scholar portray it as harshly anti-Jewish.²

This is a serious charge, one that I do not take lightly given the anti-Jewish structure of so much Christian scholarship, yesterday and today, and the harm it has done to Jews and others. I therefore welcome the scrutiny of the book implied in this charge, but Gregerman's review reflects inattention to the book's content and authors and thus misrepresents both. I am reluctant to respond publicly, but the stakes are such that I feel I should. And for readers of this journal, perhaps the episode provides a useful case study for interfaith dialogue.

The focus of the book is to argue that Christians with differing sexual orientations should be fully included in the life, sacraments, and leadership of the Church.³ It does so by surveying the Bible as a story of increasing inclusion, including various intrabiblical conversations and changing views throughout the canon, as an invitation to embrace changing doctrine in our own times. It is an intellectually serious, but basically popular-level, work of theology intended primarily for Christian leaders and laypeople seeking insight on these issues.

The fact that the book is not about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity (or Christ) does not excuse it from scrutiny on that front. Any book written by senior scholars, especially one that received the attention and acclaim that this one has, is fair game for critique—indeed, under different circumstances I would be flattered to be analyzed alongside the likes of Pope Benedict XVI and Ernst

¹ Adam Gregerman, "A Unique Jew?: Judaism and Christology in Catholic and Protestant Theology," *SCJR* 21 (2026): 1–22.

² Gregerman, "A Unique Jew?," 18.

³ Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 5, 213, 215.

Käsemann. So I accept that we are fair game, and I turn to address the claims that Gregerman makes about the book. Regrettably, Richard passed away shortly after the book came out, and so he is not here to speak for himself, but I nevertheless feel able to respond meaningfully.

Anyone who intends to criticize a book in print for six pages should take the time to understand it, and its authors. Gregerman has not done so, in my view. I will return to his *ad hominem* comments, but there are two basic points on which I take exception to his presentation of the book:

1. Whereas he portrays the book as contrasting Jewish and Christian identities, and suggests that we portray “Israelites and Jews” negatively, in fact the book is full of positive examples of Israelites and Jews (and, I would add, Judahites⁴). Nor do we shy away from criticizing Christianity and Christians. The book in fact makes an explicit analogy between the diverse spectrum of present-day Christianity and that of ancient Israelites and early Jews and Christians. It does not vilify any one group, but rather emphasizes our commonality. It explicitly argues that all who seek to follow the will of God are in many respects equally challenged in trying to discern it in our ever-changing historical situations.
2. Gregerman focuses on negative examples from the book—i.e., those in which ancient Israelites, Judahites, and Jews were exclusionary and hateful. And he at least *appears* to be claiming that these portrayals are unfair; indeed, one gets the sense that he would view any negative portrayal of these communities as inherently supersessionist and anti-Jewish. But in fact, the book avoids binary stereotypes and false generalizations, presenting its material instead with texture and nuance.

The first point is easier to address in this response, since it allows me to focus on what the book actually says and does. Here is one of Gregerman’s summary statements about our work:

When discussing Israelites / Jews not as such but in contrast to others (typically the prophets, Jesus, Paul, etc.), the Hayses harshly denounce them as stubborn, ignorant of their own scriptures, and hateful toward outsiders. To defend their conception of mercy they cast them as the negative foil to the divine blessings, merciful treatment, and openness to outsiders that God and Jesus truly desire.⁵

Even internally, this statement raises questions: A thoughtful discussion of ancient Israel and the Hebrew prophets recognizes that the prophets were part of Israel, and had significant constituencies, and eventually prestige, within Israel and Judah.

⁴ I favor this additional precision in order to recognize the complexity of the use of these gentiles in the biblical period, before scholars conventionally speak of Jews and Judaism.

⁵ Gregerman, “A Unique Jew?,” 14.

Even the harshest of biblical prophetic statements were canonized by Jewish scribes, and the prophets continue to be celebrated by Jews and Christians alike. Gregerman seems to be lumping us in with those who contrast the lone prophet with a benighted Israel, a trope used in *adversus Iudaeos* polemics. This book is not that. Throughout the book we do not denigrate Israel and Judaism, or seek to glorify Christianity by comparison. On the contrary, we discuss many Israelite, Judahite, and Jewish authors and groups that shaped the Hebrew Bible and testified to God's grace and mercy as faithful heroes of theology; and at the level of the story, we portray various biblical figures as similarly heroic. I will go chapter by chapter:

Chapter 1 focuses on creation, particularly the Priestly author of the first creation story, and the psalmist who composed Ps 8, who are celebrated for their marveling at the goodness of creation itself. And Sarah and Abraham's "simple joy" at new life (Gen 17:17; 18:12) is held up as a comparison to God's own response to humanity.

Chapter 2 focuses on the difficulties of the primeval history and the period of wilderness wandering, demonstrating God's forbearance in shepherding humankind early in the story. Abraham is again praised, for challenging God to live up to the highest standards of justice and mercy (Gen 18). It culminates with a reflection on Moses's appeal to the ancient formula, "Yahweh is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love," in an effort to dissuade God from destroying the people (Num 14:15–19, cf. Exod 32).

Moses recurs as a hero in Chapter 3, which focuses on the extension of inheritance rights to the daughters of Zelophehad in Num 27. One would expect from Gregerman's analysis that we would contrast the lawgiver with Jesus, but we do just the opposite: "When people stand up today to challenge biblical statutes and ordinances, the best biblical response is to ask whether they are correct. That was the way of Moses with the daughters of Zelophehad, and the principle that Jesus applied to the law: 'The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27)." Rather than portraying Jesus as breaking from or surpassing Judaism, we explicitly located him in the same Mosaic tradition that inspired the later Jewish rabbis.

Chapter 4 focuses on the complex history of the sacrifice of the firstborn, and the responses to it by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. I wrote, "As with the law of the sacrifice of the firstborn, the laws about sexuality in the Torah have done harm to children. I and many other biblical scholars are in a camp analogous to Jeremiah's, believing that the laws have been misunderstood and misapplied. Others may prefer to take a stance like Ezekiel's and simply say that the laws given were not good."⁶ Thus I sought to locate our moral reasoning within the scope of voices in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus and the New Testament do not swoop in to supersede it and solve the problem. The chapter includes an introduction to the Mishnah and Talmud and an invitation to Christians to consider their value because they "wrestle with the

⁶ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 68

meaning of the laws and stories.”⁷ It closes with a reflection on Bereshit Rabbah on the Akkedah (Gen 22) as another helpful resource in the ethical conversation.

Chapter 5 takes on the ethical problem of the conquest traditions, especially the explicit order to wipe out the Canaanites (e.g., Deut 7). This is presented not as a moral problem that Christianity solves, but as one that was already recognized and addressed within the Hebrew Bible. The chapter notes the “tribalism” of many biblical passages, but then goes on to note the expansive and inclusive vision of the Hebrew Bible more generally, from the initial call of Abraham to the “mixed multitude” of the Exodus (Exod 12:38), to the diversity of David’s royal court. It says, “The tribalism of the Old Testament ... sits very uneasily with the actual stories of the people’s origins, which are repeatedly said to be highly diverse.”⁸ This section concludes: “This broader divine vision for the whole world is named at the people’s origins, and it continues to play a role in the stories about its exodus and state formation. It was always God’s will.”⁹ The chapter then goes on to discuss the international visions of prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah precisely as manifestations of this same trend through the whole Hebrew Bible. In short, the chapter shows that a broad, global view of the divine plan was not an invention of Christianity.

Chapter 6 continues with the prophets, and their diverse responses to a God who changes his mind, often in favor of mercy towards humanity. It closes with a reflection on the shape of the Jewish and Christian canons of the Hebrew Bible, and finds commonality across their differences: “The canon of the Hebrew Bible reads differently depending on whether one reads it as the Jewish Tanakh or the Christian Old Testament. The Old Testament ends with the prophets, while the Tanakh ends with the writings... Yet we find both canons emphasizing to the end a God who is ‘gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.’”¹⁰ It draws examples from Neh 9:17 and Joel 2:13. Again, not only do I not recognize my work in Gregerman’s analysis; I find that it directly contradicts his claims by identifying common ground rather than portraying Judaism negatively.

Chapter 7 focuses on Isa 56:1–8’s explicit response to the laws of the Torah that would exclude foreigners and eunuchs from the temple, and the former from priestly service. This is an entirely mainstream understanding of the passage, and I give dozens of scriptural references covering both cases to substantiate the statement that both groups addressed had reason “to expect to be excluded.”¹¹ Thus, in light of the many inclusive passages the whole book has also identified, the basic historical conclusion is that “the definition of Israel’s ethnic boundaries was still

⁷ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 56.

⁸ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 73–74.

⁹ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 76.

¹⁰ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 93–94.

¹¹ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 101.

under constant negotiation.”¹² That is to say: Jews in the postexilic period had different views about foreigners.¹³

It is perplexing that anyone could read Ezra-Nehemiah and then object to the historical conclusion that there was xenophobia in Persian Period Yehud, but Gregerman does. He particularly singles out my reference to “a long tradition of suspicion toward foreigners and a culture of ongoing, aggressive xenophobia,”¹⁴ to which Isa 56 responds. This is indeed strong language. Is it warranted? Let’s take the Moabites as a case study: Israel and Judah are said to have been consistently at war with Moab, from the time of the wilderness wandering (Num 21–24; cf. Exod 15:15), through the time of the judges (Judges 3:12–30) and the united monarchy (2 Sam 8:2), and into the divided monarchy (2 Kgs 3). The biblical authors imagined Moab’s patriarch as the product of an incestuous union (Gen 19:36–37); the law says that no Moabite could be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, “even to the tenth generation” (Deut. 23:3); the prophets inveighed against them (Isa 25:11; Jer 48; Ezek 25:8–11; Amos 2:1–3; Zeph 2:9–10); and in the postexilic period, Ezra (9:1) and Nehemiah (13:1–2, 23–30) were still trying to banish Moabite women from the community. Similar sets of texts could be gathered about Edom and other nations. If that doesn’t constitute “a long tradition of suspicion ... and a culture of ongoing, aggressive xenophobia,” then what would? The key, however, is that we never portray this tradition and ideology as the true nature of ancient Israel and Judah, or of Judaism. It was one view among others. And when the author of Isa 56 took it on, he did so as a Jew among Jews. The whole point of the book is that people always had alternatives *within their own communities* about how they might view the world, as we all do now.

Similarly, Gregerman objects to my saying that “other Jews broadly ‘excluded [eunuchs] from the circle of blessing that was supposed to be [for] God’s people.’” He says I “assume the worst about them, speculating that ... ‘not everyone was on board with’ an inclusive attitude.”¹⁵ My claim was very modest, however. What I actually wrote was, “Why would the foreigner and the eunuch *think that they were excluded* from the circle of blessing that was supposed to be for God’s people?”¹⁶ This is implied by the Isaianic text itself: “Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree,’ etc.” (Isa 56:3). Furthermore, is Gregerman seriously suggesting that *everyone was on board* with an inclusive attitude in Persian Period Yehud?

Moving on, Gregerman says that Deut 23:1 is thin evidence for this historical conclusion that it was used to exclude eunuchs. One could discuss whether and how it was actually applied to eunuchs in the Persian Period, but the idea that Isaiah is responding to such an exclusionary use of the law is mainstream Hebrew Bible

¹² Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 101.

¹³ See the circumspect summary of various perspectives in Gary N. Knoppers, “Intermarriage, Social Complexity, and Ethnic Diversity in the Genealogy of Judah,” *JBL* 120 (2001): 15–30.

¹⁴ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 102.

¹⁵ Gregerman, “A Unique Jew?,” 14.

¹⁶ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 97.

scholarship, and certainly not just in Christian circles; the same interpretation of the passage and its historical context is adopted by major Jewish commentators such as Marvin Sweeney and Shalom Paul.¹⁷ As for Gregerman's statement that I think the prophet of Isa 56 was something of a hero and give some credit to his account of things,¹⁸ he is correct about that. He does not mention that I cite the Talmud's judgment in support of Isaiah's lofty stature (*b. Mak.* 23b–24a).¹⁹

The Hebrew Bible section of the book ends with the following paragraph. I dearly wish that Gregerman had quoted it, because it directly addresses his concern, while contradicting his assessment that we “cast [Israelites / Jews] as the negative foil to the divine blessings, merciful treatment, and openness to outsiders that God and Jesus truly desire”:

Christians confess that Jesus was the Son of God and that he revealed God's identity and intentions in a unique way. But at least in this case, he was also preaching something that any rabbi working from the Hebrew scriptures could have taught. One reason Jesus welcomed a surprisingly broad range of people was that Isaiah did, too. And like the postexilic prophet, Jesus had to reckon with the weight of scripture when he spoke. In the New Testament, the interpretation of texts by the community becomes a major theme. The rabbinic tradition out of which Jesus came could serve as a helpful model for Christians, because it inherently records and recognizes differing opinions. Although the Christian tradition is no less diverse, there is a tendency in some quarters to talk as if we could simply tally up the biblical passages with the right keywords and derive the right answers—without having to really encounter God anew. We don't think to bring new questions to God like Moses, or argue with God like Job. The fresh encounter with a surprising God sets the trajectory for the reimaginings and revisions that take place in the New Testament—and continue into our times.²⁰

This statement is quite clear: Jesus came out of the same tradition as the rabbis, and “any rabbi working from the Hebrew scriptures could have taught” what he taught; and he was in line with Isaiah in particular!

One can see how the opening sentence of that quotation would lead one to expect an assertion of Jesus' uniqueness in what follows. But “Christians confess that Jesus was the Son of God” is simply a statement of fact about the content of Christian confessions, and it is there to set up just the opposite move (“But...”).

Gregerman lumps us together with Pope Benedict, whom he summarizes as ultimately asserting that the historical method is insufficient to Jesus—that he “broke with the ‘literal historical form’ which bound only one people (Israel) to

¹⁷ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 40–66*, FOTL (Eerdmans, 2016), 252; Shalom M. Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, ECC (Eerdmans, 2012), 449.

¹⁸ Gregerman, “A Unique Jew?,” 15.

¹⁹ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 96–97.

²⁰ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 107–108.

God in favor of a ‘new perspective’ that creates this inclusive community of believers.”²¹ Insofar as this correctly describes Benedict’s thinking, I am not in agreement with it. I said just the opposite: That Jesus’s teachings on the book’s key topics were consistent with rabbinic understanding of texts such as Isaiah, and that his perspective was consistent with others in his historical surroundings.

Overall, it appears from his review that Gregerman came to *The Widening of God’s Mercy* with preconceived ideas, based on Benedict’s work as well as even older Christian scholarship, primarily essays by Käsemann (from 1964) and S. W. Sykes (from 1972). But none of these were part of my intellectual formation, and I cannot see what they have to do with our book.

In the background of our book lies my memory of a comment that my teacher Patrick D. Miller once made: “There is nothing new in the New Testament.”²² That is consistent with my view that God’s self-revelation in the Hebrew Bible is true and sufficient, against the Marcionite heresy and the like. That is one of the messages I sought to convey in the book: The changes and shifts in the New Testament are in line with those that had already taken place in the Hebrew Bible.

Since Richard is no longer with us to offer his own response, I will be briefer in my comments about the New Testament chapters, which he primarily drafted. I returned to those chapters last September when I preached at First Presbyterian Church in New Canaan, CT. The scripture passages were Isa 56:1-8, Mark 3:1-6, and Acts 11:1–18, and I was speaking about the same issues as the book. I began with the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over the Sabbath in Mark 3. I led with this:

... I want to do my Jewish friends a favor by pointing out that this story in Mark 3 is not making a distinction between Jews and Christians. There are no Christians in this story. Jesus was a Jew, too, and he was quite adamant about that, as he said in Matt 5:17: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” So this story is about an intra-Jewish dispute; these are two different approaches to Judaism. Jews in that time had a choice about how to be Jewish. And ... we have a choice today about how to be Christian.²³

This is a statement Richard would also have endorsed, and it is completely consistent with the tone and content of our book. I view myself as part of one humanity under God, alongside my Jewish friends. We do not have all the same scriptures or interpretations or tradition, but we have the same God; the issues Christians face

²¹ Gregerman, “A Unique Jew?”, 12.

²² The comment was characteristic of his thinking, and was recorded posthumously as, “There is nothing revealed about the character of God in the New Testament that is not already revealed in the Old Testament” (<https://ptsem.edu/about/the-quad/news/news-remembering-patrick-miller/>). While this is more carefully stated, I remember the briefer formulation.

²³ Christopher B. Hays, “Besides Those Already Gathered,” First Presbyterian Church in New Canaan, CT, September 21, 2025.

now with respect to inclusion and exclusion are not new ones, nor are they neatly solved by the New Testament, which itself closes with scenes of fiery and violent judgment on much of the earth. We all face the same issues in interpreting our sacred texts, whether we are Jewish or Christian. Gregerman seems uninterested in the ethical and interpretive challenges posed by the sometimes-ugly aspects of the Bible and the history to which it witnesses. To ask why would require speculation.

Gregerman also objects to our portrayal of the Temple as exclusionary when Jesus casts out the moneychangers (Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17).²⁴ Once again, one could debate the socioreligious realities of Roman-period Jerusalem, but more importantly, Gregerman sees in this example an anti-Jewish bias, and that will not hold up. Given all that is known about the factions of Second Temple Judaism, it should be unnecessary to point out that this is not a Christian claim; tensions around the Temple predated Christianity, as reflected in postexilic strata of Isaiah (e.g., 66:1-6), and again among the Jewish sectarians at Qumran, who also felt excluded by the Temple leadership in a similar period (as reflected by the Damascus Document [1CD] and the War Scroll [1QM]), etc. It begins to seem that Gregerman objects to anyone (or just to non-Jews?) pointing out any negativity or strife within ancient Israelite and Jewish communities, regardless of how widely accepted or historically supported those claims may be.

Jewish-Christian dialogue can be very fraught, with good reason. I acknowledge the long history of the abuse of Jews (and their texts and ideas) by Christians, so I can understand the preconceived notions that led to the kind of reading that Gregerman gives our book. But I find his insulting remarks about our scholarly *bona fides* really quite inexplicable and inappropriate:

Despite being Bible scholars, the Hayses read texts superficially, as if they are reliable accounts of actual events. They are indifferent to the ways the gospel writers have carefully constructed conflict stories and show no awareness that the gospels as we have them reflect the interests of the writers decades after Jesus. In particular, they fail to read the gospels critically and skeptically, especially the portraits of Jesus's unbelieving Jewish opponents, whom the evangelists are likely to be biased against.

This is a quite an accusation against two senior scholars with decades of teaching graduate-level biblical studies in major institutions, and extensive leadership in diverse professional guilds. We have track records of reading biblical texts in sophisticated, historical-critical ways. Consistent with that, the Hebrew Bible portion of the book is full of references to the complexities of historical scholarship.²⁵

²⁴ Gregerman, "A Unique Jew?," 16.

²⁵ For example: it discusses the various strata of the book of Isaiah (35, 96ff., etc.); the implications of source criticism of the Torah (46); inner-biblical legal exegesis (55-56); the Josianic composition of Deuteronomy (65); critical reflection on reception history (76); additions to the book of Amos (93);

This is all well established, but an irregular review like this also must not stand unchallenged on the record.

Since Gregerman's dismissive comment about our scholarship focuses on the NT side of the book, I will note that he is speaking about a winner of the Burkitt Medal—and one who repeatedly warned, throughout his career, about the risk of interpretations of the New Testament that “lend themselves to anti-Jewish and/or high-handedly supersessionist theologies.”²⁶ In his *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, he goes so far as to warn readers about the book of John's “superheated animosity toward the Jews,” which he considered “deeply disturbing”: “One shudders to contemplate the ethical outworking of such a theological perspective on the Jews. ... The Gospel of John really does adopt a stance toward Judaism that can only engender polemics and hostility.”²⁷

Lest anyone think that Richard changed his tune in *The Widening of God's Mercy*, he cautions against contrasting Jesus's message with Judaism: “Christian interpreters have too often made the disastrous mistake of thinking that Jesus was opposing Judaism and seeking to replace it with a more universal, purely spiritual religion (Christianity). On the contrary, Jesus was firmly rooted in Jewish prophetic tradition. Both his critique of the Jewish authorities of his time and his expansive vision of God's mercy were grounded in Israel's scriptures. ... So Jesus should be understood first of all as a radical Jewish prophet.”²⁸ And indeed there is more historical-backgrounds work in the New Testament section than the review recognizes, although much of it is done in the footnotes, for the sake of readability.

Richard also consistently made careful distinctions and limited generalizations about the Judaism of Jesus' time. Occasionally this is stated programmatically: In a discussion of xenophobia, for example, he goes on to say: “At the same time, within the cosmopolitan Mediterranean culture of the first century, other Jews were much more open to free association with their gentile neighbors. Judaism was no more monolithic than is Christianity in the twenty-first century; there was a wide spectrum of belief and practice.”²⁹ A few pages later he says of accepting Gentile hospitality: “To be sure, on this matter as on many others, actual Jewish practices varied; some Jews, especially in the diaspora, sought ways to accommodate their meal practices to the dominant gentile cultures of the Greco-Roman world.”³⁰

Gregerman specifically objects to the book's portrayal of “the portraits of Jesus's unbelieving Jewish opponents.” There certainly are places where certain views held among Jews in the period are criticized, but even then, my re-survey of the book suggests that Richard did not stereotype Jews and Judaism, but rather repeatedly limited and restricted the scope of his comments. For example:

differences between canonical arrangements (93–94); the postexilic compilation of the Torah (94–95); and scribal reinterpretation in manuscript variants (104–105). These critical issues are not amplified because it's not that kind of book.

²⁶ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Baylor University, 2016), 355.

²⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperCollins, 1996), 426–427.

²⁸ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 116–117.

²⁹ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 154.

³⁰ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 171.

- *some members* of a council of Jewish leaders are fretting [about Jesus]" (112)
- "Some observant Jews were wary of associating too closely with gentiles" (141)
- "Within the community of the Jerusalem church, *there was a group of believers associated with the Pharisees* who argued that gentile converts should not only be circumcised as a token of membership (a fairly severe initiation ritual) but also be required to keep the law of Moses in its entirety (Acts 15:5)." (177)

As with the aforementioned analysis of Ezra-Nehemiah, these limited claims are widely accepted among critical scholars, and it would be very difficult to gainsay them.

The book thus does portray *some* ancient Israelites and Jews as "uncompassionate, staunchly legalistic, and stubborn."³¹ However, it does not impugn Judaism as such—as I have just shown, the book is full of positive examples as well. And we are even-handed in our criticism; the negative examples are evoked precisely because we have found a significant portion of present-day *Christians* uncompassionate, staunchly legalistic, and stubborn. These traits are not characteristic of Judaism any more than they are of Christianity; they are somewhat characteristic of the human heart and mind, and we all may struggle with them at times. What we are doing in the book, then, is *precisely the opposite* of denigrating Judaism in order to praise Christianity. We are instead addressing tendencies common among Jews and Christians, as well as many others.

As with the section of the book on the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament section seeks to break down barriers between Judaism and Christianity. For example, Richard wrote:

Most people today think of "Christianity" and "Judaism" as separate religions. But that distinction did not exist so clearly twenty centuries ago, in the first decades of the church's existence. In fact, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the burning controversial issue for his early followers was whether gentiles could join the church at all without first becoming converts to Judaism.³²

Furthermore, at key junctures, he asked Christian readers (who are, again, the primary audience) to reconsider things sympathetically from a Jewish standpoint. For example, in discussing dietary laws, he writes:

Many non-Jewish readers today may reflexively side with "the strong," thinking, "Why are these dietary scruples such a big deal?" That casual judgment, however, badly underestimates the centrality of meal practices to Jewish identity. We should recall that three of the four "essentials" stipulated for gentile converts in the letter of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:23–29) pertain to foods

³¹ Gregerman, "A Unique Jew?," 17.

³² Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 152.

that may or may not be eaten. The Torah's dietary laws were no less salient for devout Jews in antiquity than are rules about sexual morality for conservative Christians today. Keeping that analogy in mind may help us comprehend both the intensity of the disputes in Rome and the extraordinary character of Paul's pastoral response to these controversies.³³

Since he is ultimately arguing against the strict interpretation of the laws in question, at first glance this may not seem to express solidarity. However, in light of his own journey from one point of view to another, it is in fact an expression of sympathy (and indeed he remained sympathetic with, and in contact with, old friends who had not made the move that he did).

Again, the book is a literary and theological survey, primarily for lay readers and clergy. Because of our profound awareness of how much more could be said, we did include a brief note "On History and Narrative" in the front matter:

Some who read drafts of this book wanted more discussion of our interpretive assumptions, our methods, our (to use a fancy word) *hermeneutics*. We are setting aside theoretical and methodological reflections for another day, and we think the book is basically self-explanatory: It is written by and for people who think it matters what the Bible says, and who believe that the best way to do it justice is to read it carefully.

The book is essentially a literary and theological reading of a series of episodes in the story of God and humankind. These biblical narratives serve as the basis for the church's preaching and teaching; it is these narratives that have shaped the imagination of readers within the community of faith from antiquity to the present time. Accordingly, this book is an exercise in narrative interpretation; our goal is to demonstrate that the biblical story, taken as a whole, depicts the ever-widening path of God's mercy.³⁴

I have since offered some methodological reflections,³⁵ but our expectation that the book is "basically self-explanatory" has mostly been met; the vast majority of readers (both within our guilds and without) have received it warmly and in the spirit in which it was offered. Its goal was never to reconstruct in detail the historical Jewish matrix of the Roman period out of which the New Testament emerged. Instead, it builds on repeated irenic statements about ancient Israel/Judah and ancient Judaism (which Gregerman notes but does not consider), and trusts the reader to infer in all cases what is only sometimes made explicit: There was a diversity of viewpoints within ancient Judaism, as there is in present-day Judaism and present-day Christianity. And so we all have choices to make about how we inhabit and make use of our religious traditions.

³³ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 200.

³⁴ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 21–22.

³⁵ Christopher B. Hays, "The Biblical Interpreter as Agent of the Holy Spirit and Opener of Doors" (for Walter Brueggemann FS), *Religions*, in press.

It is ironic that a book about God's charity should receive such an uncharitable reception; and that a book that sought to be positive in its view of God and humanity has been singled out as if it were denigrating. In the spirit of this journal's mission, I would like to close with an appeal that we represent our interlocutors accurately, and also represent ancient texts accurately, even our own. It can be difficult to face up to the ethical dilemmas posed by the interpretation of ancient texts, especially when they represent one's own scriptures, and are thus intimately connected to questions of community identity. In this case, our book reckons far more fully with the complexity and difficulty of the ancient sources than Gregerman's review, which in effect bristles at any suggestion that *any* ancient Israelites, Judahites, or Jews were ever exclusionary or held problematic ideologies.

We know that anti-Judaism has been and remains rampant. But if scholars listen to each other poorly and apply the charge of anti-Judaism cheaply, as I believe Gregerman has, it loses the teeth we need it to have in order to address the problem. It is reduced to mudslinging. That is no way to engender the respect of friendship, which we desperately need. It is to invent enemies, and we already have more than enough of those.

I will end this response by quoting the end of my Chapter 6, which follows from the discussion of the differences between the Jewish and Protestant canons: "no matter what trajectory we take from the Hebrew Bible, its authors embrace ... mercy as a crucial article of faith. Whether we aspire to *tikkun 'olam* (repairing the world) or *imitatio Christi* (imitating Christ), the widening mercy of God for the whole earth stands at the center."³⁶

I invite anyone to read *The Widening of God's Mercy* and judge for themselves.

³⁶ Hays and Hays, *Widening*, 94.