

A Response to Christopher B. Hays' Response to my Article in SCJR

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I appreciate that Christopher Hays engaged in a serious discussion and critique of my article "A Unique Jew?: Judaism and Christology in Catholic and Protestant Theology."¹ In this article I included a discussion of the book he wrote with his late father Richard Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*.² There is much in his response I agree with. Both in the book and in the response, they usually speak accurately and favorably about Judaism, correctly present Second Temple and New Testament scholarship, and most importantly address the vitally important and timely topic of inclusion and views of outsiders. For this they are to be praised, as I emphasize at the start of this section of my article.

However, in his response Hays says almost nothing about my specific thesis, which is what I want to focus on here. He quotes a reasonable statement of it: "When discussing Israelites / Jews not as such but in contrast to others (typically the prophets, Jesus, Paul, etc.), the Hays 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." His response to my argument is to insist on his positive view of Judaism: "[I] do not impugn Judaism as such—as I have just shown, the book is full of positive examples as well." This is welcome but irrelevant. I focus on what they say about Jews and Judaism *not as such but when describing Jesus*. At those points they consistently and unfortunately resort to hostile stereotypes in order to elevate Jesus' status and to underscore the newness and superiority of his teachings.

Commenting on Jews opposed to or not believing in Jesus and his claims, as well as sometimes commenting on Israelites / Jews who do not listen to the biblical prophets, they say much that is sadly familiar to scholars of Jewish-Christian relations. Those are the places where they contrast Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries (or, say, Amos and his contemporaries) and uncritically repeat traditional Christian polemics. Thus, in those cases they argue that some Jews were "strict," "blind to

¹ Both the original article and his response were published in SCJR 21 (2026).

² Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

the needs of afflicted people,” and “[hostile to] everyone who failed to obey the law scrupulously.” These Jews adhered to the “strictest prohibition[s].” They were so “scrupulous” that they ignored values such as “compassion [and] mercy.” After first praising Jews for “their well-meaning attempt to honor God’s law,” they then denounce a Jew questioning Jesus’ view on welcoming sinners as an example of those who “pride themselves on careful observance of the law and its purity standards.” There are more troubling examples in my article, but these hopefully illustrate my critique. That they also say positive things about some Jews does not “balance out” their hostile portraits of other Jews.

Hays insists that these “negative examples are evoked precisely because we have found a significant portion of present-day Christians uncompassionate, staunchly legalistic, and stubborn.” It is deeply disappointing that they felt a need to evoke so many hostile caricatures of Jews and Judaism to help promote God’s mercy among their fellow Christians.