

Rediscovering the Jewish Jesus: Reorienting the Church and Reimagining a Relationship

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Why is a *Jewish* Jesus important to Christian faith and belief in our time? In the long history of Christianity, this question would typically have been answered with a shrug. The prevailing depiction of Jesus as the divine son embodying a new covenant superseding Israel’s old covenant had the effect of so diminishing his Jewishness that even if it were acknowledged, it would have been regarded as a mere accident of his birth. Over the course of history, Christians typically paid little attention to Jesus’ natal origins; it was, at best, “more declared than elaborated on.”¹ For the Third Reich, however, Jesus was an Aryan.²

In losing sight of his Jewishness, Christians have essentially removed Jesus from his world and developed a dualistic pattern in which Christianity superseded a Judaism become obsolete by virtue of the coming of Christ.³ As a consequence, many interpretations of the gospels represented Jesus as one sent from God to remedy the defects of Jewish teachings by offering the true salvific path. Early church teachings generally characterized Jesus in opposition to Judaism, with considerable effect. Thus, over the centuries, many Christians understood the teaching of Jesus as a counterpoint to what they assumed were the legalism and strictures of Jewish teaching. Philip Cunningham has described this perspective as undergirded by an “oppositional imagination” in which Christians tend to internalize a negative appraisal of Judaism. He describes this as a “paradigm that over centuries became conditioned in Christian culture, prompting people to consciously or unconsciously presume that Judaism and Christianity—and so Jews and Christians—conflict with

¹ Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 7.

² See Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus, The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.)

³ See the discussion in Philip A. Cunningham, “Challenges to Imagining Jesus as a Jew.” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 21, no. 1 (2026): 1-15. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/scjr/article/view/21702/13765>

each other at a fundamental, existential level.”⁴ As a consequence, the teaching of Jesus became detached from Judaism, thereby giving rise to the aptly titled *The Misunderstood Jew*.⁵

The abundant scholarship resituating Jesus in his Jewish matrix is one of the most important theological developments in our time because it offers learned explorations into the world of Jesus—a Galilean learned in Torah, emphasizing its two great commandments by juxtaposing two texts (Deut 6:4-5 and Lev 19:18) and honoring its teaching by debating with other teachers. One who spoke of a merciful and forgiving Father and shocked the self-righteous by associating with outcasts. One so committed to Jewish life in Israel that a Gentile Syrophenician woman’s insistence that he heal her daughter initially took him aback (Mark 7:24-30; Matt 15:21-28). One whose family dwelling would in all likelihood have been marked by a *mezuzah* and who, the synoptics writers attest, wore “fringes” (*tzitzit*; see Num 15:37-40).⁶

Resituating Jesus in his Jewish matrix offers new possibilities of perceiving Jesus of Nazareth through a new lens as a Jewish man in his historical context. It widens the horizon for understanding the New Testament, offers insight into the process by which Judaism and Christianity emerged in relation to one another over several centuries, and enhances possibilities for healing the fractures resulting from the church’s fundamental misconstrual of Judaism that led to Christians’ largely “tormented” history with Jews. And yet, despite abundant literature offering a wealth of information about Judaism in the first century of the Common Era, Jesus more often is portrayed—and generally understood—as the founder of Christianity surrounded by his Christian disciples.

In the initial section of this article, I explore how and why early church writers in effect denied the Jewishness of Jesus by setting him in opposition to the Law and characterizing his teaching as the one true way of salvation. In the second section I address the necessity of creating a more accurate narrative of Christian origins so as to provide the context for preaching or teaching about a Jewish Jesus.

I. The Absence of the Jewish Jesus in Early Church Writings⁷

Why is it that Jesus’ Jewishness seems to have so little meaning to many, if not most Christians? After all, it is widely agreed that Jesus was a Jew of the first-century. Yet for most Christians that fact seems devoid of content, and therefore bears little significance. While various reasons may function here, I am persuaded that the theological interpretations of the early church writers have played the major

⁴ See P. A. Cunningham, “Reading the New Testament with an Oppositional Imagination,” Marc Z. Brettler, Mary C. Boys and Joel Lohr, eds. *Disrupted Readings: Honouring the Work and Wisdom of Amy-Jill Levine* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Phoenix, 2026), 70-85.

⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

⁶ Matt 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk 8:40-56; see *Misunderstood Jew*, 23-24; also 162

⁷ Research for this section on selected early church writers appears in greater length in my *Breaking of a New Dawn: Reorienting Christianity’s Relation with Judaism* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2025).

role. In seeking to articulate what it meant to be a Christian, they seemed unable to even imagine that the Christ was a Jew because they regarded Judaism as the prime Other. Their literature typically portrays Judaism as the tradition from which followers of Christ most needed to differentiate themselves—a differentiation based on a construction of what they understood Judaism to be. Having so characterized Judaism, there was little possibility of comprehending a Jewish Jesus.

A recognizably Jewish Jesus is largely missing from that extensive and complex body of literature of the early church, East and West. What this literature did so powerfully was to establish, in effect, the principal patterns by which later Christians viewed the New Testament in relation to the “Old” Testament and, significantly, also the relation of the church to Judaism. The staying power of this patristic legacy must be recognized if scholars today are to present the Jewish Jesus in ways that are meaningful for the ordinary life of the church. Only when the determinative influence of early church literature becomes known and recognized for its limitations will the church more adequately and insightfully be able to develop a more capacious understanding of how its initial relation with Judaism left a problematic theological legacy. The Jewishness of Jesus must become a criterion for assessing the adequacy of the church’s understanding of the Scriptures and the ways in which liturgical life embodies it in prayer and ritual performance.

Among the ways in which early church writers shaped Christianity, two in particular have exercised a lasting influence: the relation of the Testaments as one of promise to fulfilment and the characterization of Judaism as obsolete. A number of scholarly studies of the patristic writers’ depiction of Judaism exist, but they seem to have made little impact beyond that specialized area.⁸ At least in part, Jesus’ Jewishness has had little effect because most in the church have at best a vague notion of Judaism, past and present.

What complicates reversing the profound misunderstandings that have accrued in Christian theology is that the literature of the early church is overwhelmingly unknown in the churches of the West. Most Christians are unaware of the legacy these writers contributed to the contemporary church. Yet in the ordinary life of the church, how people understand the relation of the “Old” Testament to the New and what Judaism is can be directly traced to this literature of the nascent church. Already by mid-second-century, Justin Martyr offered an extensive account of the ways in which the followers of Christ grasped the meaning of the Scriptures more truly than did Jews: “your Scriptures” are no longer “yours but ours. For we believe and obey them, whereas you, though you read them, do not grasp their spirit” (29:2).⁹ For Justin the church has become Israel (123:9); he saw little reason for the continuation of Judaism.

⁸ See, among numerous others, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: the Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. (New York: Seabury, 1974); Stephen G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians 70-170 CE* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, 2nd ed (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

⁹ St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. Michael Slusser (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003). All further references are taken from this edition. References identified by chapter and paragraph.

Fundamental Interpretive Patterns in Early Church Writings: Justin Martyr and Augustine of Hippo

Justin Martyr

Justin's conception of the Old Testament reverberates through subsequent literature. The *Dialogue with Trypho* (ca. 150-160) is a fascinating text, albeit less dialogue and more disputation—what Tessa Rajak accurately renames as “Talking at Trypho.”¹⁰ Justin, a philosopher convinced of the utter truth of the Way of Christ, is engaged in a debate with the learned Jew Trypho, whom he hopes to persuade that Christ's way is “the only sure and useful philosophy” (8.1). As the author, Justin's standpoint dominates. Trypho, however, reveals himself an attentive listener, showing openness to his new friend Justin's logic yet convinced of the necessity of fulfilling the “whole written law” (8.3).

Justin's primary argument with Trypho is that Jews do not regard Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Trypho's teachers, he says, are “ignorant of the meaning of the Scriptures” (9.1) and are responsible for having led him astray. They—and therefore Trypho—simply do not grasp the meaning of Scripture and are unable to recognize how the prophets speak of Christ: “The Lawgiver has come, and you do not see him; the poor have the gospel preached to them, the blind see, yet you do not understand” (12.2). To that end, Justin, showing considerable familiarity with a Greek text of the Jewish scriptures, cites numerous prophetic texts at length as proof of Jesus' messianic nature. But he does not convince his interlocutor. Trypho responds: “All the words of the prophets which you just quoted are ambiguous, sir, and they certainly do not prove what you want them to prove” (51.1).

Justin heaps scorn on two key dimensions of Jewish practice: circumcision and Sabbath. His diatribe against circumcision is unrelenting: “What you really need is another circumcision, though you prize that of the flesh” (12.3). Circumcision was merely a “distinguishing mark, to set you off from other nations and from us Christians” so that “you and only you might suffer the afflictions that are now justly yours, that only your land be desolate, and your cities ruined by fire” (16.2). It was merely a “type” (or foreshadowing) of the “true circumcision by which we are circumcised from error and wickedness through our Lord Jesus Christ....” (41.4). The followers of Christ, in contrast, “have the salutary circumcision, namely, that of the heart.” Further, Justin writes, “We, indeed, who have come to God through Jesus Christ, have received, not a physical, but a spiritual circumcision ... by means of baptism” (43.2).¹¹

¹⁰ Tessa Rajak, “Talking at Trypho: Christian Apologetics as Anti-Judaism in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*,” in *The Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59-80.

¹¹ See Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Regarding the Sabbath, Justin accuses Jews of failing to understand its real meaning: “The New Law [of Christ] demands that you observe a perpetual Sabbath, whereas you consider yourselves religious when you refrain from work on one day a week, and in doing so you don’t understand the real meaning of that precept” (12.3). God commanded circumcision, Sabbath, sacrifices, oblations and festivals because of “their [Jews’] hardness of heart” (41.3). God “issued his ordinances about the Sabbaths and oblations” so that they might not worship idols and forget God, becoming “impious and godless, as indeed, you always seem to have been” (92.4). *In effect, the ritual practices of the Torah are irrelevant and in Christ its ethical demands are fulfilled.*

As a result, the law “was only intended for Jews” and “is already obsolete.” In contrast, Christ is the “everlasting and final law” and it is Christ’s law that is in “opposition to an older law” and “abrogates” it, just as the “trustworthy covenant” offered in Christ voids the earlier covenant (11.2). So, Justin concludes, “we are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham” (11.5). In a remarkable assertion, Justin claims that the fledgling group of Christ followers “are the true people of Israel” (140.3). Jews, by contrast, are unable to drink from the living fountain of God and must drink only from “the broken cisterns that can hold no water” (140.3.) Not only have Christians become a “holy people” (119.3) but Christ “founded a new race which is regenerated by him through water and faith and wood, which held the mystery of the cross....” (138.2).¹²

While it is apparent that Justin was a knowledgeable student of the texts Jews held holy, his sweeping judgments about Judaism indicated little familiarity with how Jewish communities actually interpreted those texts and strove to live by them. His characterization of Sabbath, for example, as instituted because of Jews’ “hardness of heart,” wrenches its function out of its biblical moorage. Justin is oblivious to its positive function, particularly the radicality of instituting a day of rest for all, including even animals. In effect, Justin erases Jews as the people Israel. Only those who follow Christ can be regarded as Israel’s true people. As the first to deem Christians “Israel,” he makes the theological move from “We are Israel also” to “We are Israel instead”—a dangerous religious idea, as history would verify.¹³

By the end of this lengthy work (142 chapters), there is no clear resolution. Trypho remains faithful to his Jewish way of life despite Justin’s attempts to persuade him to the contrary. While failing to convince Trypho, Justin nonetheless established arguments that have had a lasting effect on the church. Traces of the boundaries he drew remain in many Christian theologies today, particularly his arrogant assertion that “your Scriptures” (the Jewish Bible), are no longer “yours, but ours. For we believe and obey them, whereas you, though you read them, do not grasp their spirit” (29.2).

¹² See Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹³ Rachel Mikva, *Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Boston: Beacon, 2020), 95.

Reading Justin's often callous (mis)representation of Judaism in our time raises many concerns. In essence, his disputation with Trypho was a lengthy argument that nascent Christianity had displaced Judaism, which was also in its own formative period before becoming rabbinic Judaism. The proto-Christians were a small minority in comparison to Jews within the Roman Empire in the mid-second-century. Nevertheless, for Justin, Judaism had been superseded. Justin's rhetoric constituted a theological "takeover."¹⁴ He "constructed" what he thought Judaism was and then deconstructed it by contrasting it with what he believed to be the "only sure and useful philosophy," the Way of Christ.

Justin's *Dialogue* reveals the (unintended?) consequences of the rhetorical style of early church writers as influenced by their Greco-Roman education in which the ability to argue persuasively and definitively was regarded as an art form. His is a cerebral depiction of Judaism. He is a philosopher shaped by the rhetorical practices of formulating a well-defined argument against one's philosophical opponent. Despite Trypho's evident learning, Justin makes no attempt to understand his opponent's beliefs and practices as part of a diverse people. Justin has a construction of what Judaism is in his mind, and nothing Trypho says affects his construct. In Justin's mind, this seems to be a dispute over how to read texts in light of his premise that the coming of Christ fulfilled all that the Bible (and Judaism) promised. Both he and Trypho cite texts to justify their arguments, but there is no possibility of coming to a mutual understanding because in this rhetorical world, overcoming one's opponent is the goal. Yet in the end, Trypho is not vanquished. Justin has failed to convince him of the "only sure and useful philosophy."

Although Justin Martyr wrote as one Christ follower who held no church office and thus as one whose arguments had no intrinsic authority, the biblical hermeneutics of many early church writers largely followed Justin's perspective, thereby reflecting his considerable influence: "Justin Martyr's mid-second century *Dialogue with Trypho* is a foundational text for subsequent patristic traditions adversus Judaeos, 'against the Jews.' His way of thinking became a 'drive wheel' of patristic theology."¹⁵ In many respects it continues to function in similar ways today, albeit without explicit recognition. It became embedded in the tradition as the "story line" of the development of the church in relation to Judaism.

Augustine of Hippo

The most significant early variation from Justin's perspective may be found in Augustine's more nuanced reading in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The bishop of Hippo (354-430) recognized the importance of literal interpretations, thus affirming God's election of Israel and the bestowal of the Law as a good for those who received it. He viewed Jewish practices, grounded in the Law, as conforming

¹⁴ Judith Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 136-140.

¹⁵ Paula Fredriksen, *Ancient Christianities: The First Five Hundred Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 18-19.

to God's will, even blood sacrifices and circumcision—the two Jewish practices most roundly criticized by Justin and early church writers. Augustine insisted that Jesus and his disciples kept the commandments.

Augustine considered the Jews to be essential for the church insofar as they were “wandering book slaves who witness to ‘Christian truth.’” The Jew was a

book custodian (*custos librorum*), librarian (*bibliothecarius, librarius*), and guardian of the book cask (*scriniarius, capsarius*). The Law and the prophets universally speak about Christ, [but] the Jews, reading wrongly, unwittingly carry these books that they think are theirs but that actually belong to the church. In this way the Jews help the church to spread the gospel.¹⁶

And even though the North African bishop believed Jews were blind to the truth of the Gospel, he believed that the Jews served the church as the guardians of the books, “bearing the Law and the Prophets, and testifying to the doctrine of the church, so that we honor in the sacrament what they disclose in the letter” (*Against Faustus*, 12.23). In an assertion that would play a significant role in limiting violence against Jews for centuries, Augustine argued that God protects the Jews even though they murdered Christ, just as he had done long ago with the murderer Cain. Jews bear the “mark of Cain” as a sign that no ruler should “kill” (see Ps 59:12: (“Do not kill them, or my people may forget”) the Jews because the Jews are essential witnesses to God's Law.¹⁷

More Hostile Interpretive Patterns in Early Church Writings: John Chrysostom and Ephrem of Syria

The construction of Judaism as the reverse-mirror of Christianity took on more ominous dimensions in the fourth-century writings of John Chrysostom and Ephrem the Syrian, who perceived the proximate other, the Jew, as a threat to Christian identity. As the Christianization of the empire became a reality and the church attained greater power in the civil order, theological antisemitism became a growing threat to Jewish life. Violent rhetoric has its consequences.¹⁸

Both John Chrysostom and Ephrem were deeply concerned with differentiating the Christian movement from Judaism. They harshly denounced mixing with Jews or taking on Jewish ritual practices. Those who “mixed” formed an amorphous grouping of people drawn both to Judaism and Christianity: “Judaizers.” But they were not making merely *intellectual argument against Judaizing but rather arousing hostility to Jews*. This decisive turn had disastrous effects neither Chrysostom nor Ephrem could have fully anticipated and that the church has never satisfactorily grappled with.

¹⁶ Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, 321.

¹⁷ See the full discussion in Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, 290-352.

¹⁸ Cited in Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 320-321.

John Chrysostom

The learned and prolific John Chrysostom (b. 350) authored numerous works in three genres: his minor works or *opuscula*, primarily on the ascetical and monastic life; numerous letters; and homilies (over 800 survive). His literary legacy is the most extensive of the Greek patristic writers. Moreover, he had a public platform. Christian leaders in late antiquity preached in massive, basilica-style churches enabling them to reach more people, thus offering Christianity mass-market appeal and giving it more visibility in Roman society.¹⁹

Chrysostom's prolix preaching, sometimes lasting for more than two hours, revealed his intense desire to form a robust Christian identity among his congregants. His intention was that his hearers become "correctly Christian."²⁰ He left no room for ambiguity in the religious boundaries he established. He assailed Jews and Judaizing Christians in a series of sermons likely preached in Antioch's Great Church in autumn 386 and 387. Although the sermons are addressed to his congregants, "Judaizers" are the ostensible addressees. In his denunciation of Judaizers, however, he engages in a scathing denunciation of the "pitiable and miserable" Jews (I.2.1) whose festivals "are soon to march upon us one after the other" (I.1.5).²¹ "If loyal Christians are the audience of the sermons, the Judaizers are the target of his wrath and the Jews its victims."²² Unsurprisingly, the religiously fluid Judaizers were a source of agitation for the theologically orthodox Chrysostom, particularly in the season when Jews were celebrating the holidays of *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* and *Sukkot*. The Jews' liminal status—"half-Christians"—threatened his construal of both Christianity and Judaism. By "mixing what cannot be mixed" (IV.8.6), some Christians had become sick with the disease of Judaism (I.4.8). The Jews are "more dangerous than any wolves," because they are "bent on surrounding my sheep," that is, the Judaizers (IV.1.2). He instructed his congregants to return to the truth that is Christianity; to rescue a Judaizer was even more virtuous than giving alms to the poor.

When you see the poor, you would not find it easy to pass them by. When any of you see some Christian running to the synagogue, do not look the other way. Find some argument you can use as a halter to bring him back to the Church. This kind of almsgiving is greater than giving to the poor....The man who gives to the poor takes away the poor man's hunger; the man who sets a Judaizing Christian straight, wins a victory over godlessness. The first man gave

¹⁹ Isabella Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Romans and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

²⁰ Christine Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism and Christian Orthodoxy: Ephrem's Hymns in Fourth-Century Syria* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 19.

²¹ References from St. John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, trans. Paul W. Harkins (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1979).

²² John G. Gager, "The Partings of the Ways: A View from the Perspective of Early Christianity. A Christian Perspective," in *Interwoven Destinies: Jews and Christians through the Ages*, ed. Eugene J. Fisher (New York: Paulist, 1993), 62.

consolation to the poor; the second puts a stop to reckless transgression. The first freed the body from pain, the other snatched a soul from the fires of hell (VI.7.7-9).

As Chrysostom inveighs against the Judaizers, he makes clear his contempt for Judaism and speaks frequently about his battle with “Jews” (e.g., IV. 7.1; V.1.3.; VIII.1.1). He despises Judaism. More importantly, God, he says, hates the Jews. God has turned his back on the Jews and abandoned them by allowing the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of their homeland. In a rhetorical question addressed to Jews, asks, “Is it not obvious that he [God] hated you and turned his back on you once and for all?” (VI. 4.4). After all, “You did slay Christ, you did lift violent hands against the Master, you did spill his precious blood. This is why you have no chance for atonement, excuse, or defense” (VI.2.10). Because of the Jews’ “mad rage against Christ the Anointed One,” there is no room for anyone else’s sin to surpass theirs. In an imaginary address to Jews, he says they are thus “in the grip of your present sufferings not because of the sins committed in the rest of your lives but because of that one reckless act [i.e., the crucifixion]. If this were not the case, God would not have turned his back on you in such a way, even if you had already sinned ten thousand times” (VI.3.3).

The synagogue, the site where Jews gather, is a “stronghold of sin, a lodging for demons, a fortress of the devil, the destruction of the soul, the precipice and pit of all perdition, or whatever other name you give it.” Even to call it a brothel would be a more of a compliment than it deserved (VI. 7.7). Demons dwell in the synagogues, “not only in the place itself, but in the souls of the Jews” (I.6.6-7). As to the Judaizer who comes to the festivals, “What greater evidence could there be that a man does not love our Lord than when he participates in the festival of those who slew Christ?” (II.3.8). “Does God hate their festivals and do you share in them?” (I.7.2). Going to the synagogue, he thunders, “is a greater crime than going to the theater”; attending the theater may be wicked, but “what goes on in the synagogue is godlessness” (IV.8.3). By directing his hearers to avoid and loath the synagogue, Chrysostom has instilled what Christine Shepardson terms “*topophobia*,” a fear of certain places so as to prevent the members of his church from entering the synagogue.²³

The unrelenting invective of these homilies is contemptible. But what effect did the homilies actually have? I am not aware of evidence that reveals widespread outbreaks of violence against Jewish communities in late fourth-century Antioch. Yet, it is difficult to believe that there were no individual acts of aggression against Jews and Jewish institutions inspired by the sermons.

It seems likely, however, that the consequences of Chrysostom’s invectives were more subtle, insidious and influential, transcending the time and place of their

²³ Shepardson, *Anti-Judaism*, 109.

origin. Wendy Mayer, a preeminent scholar of Chrysostom, explores this possibility.²⁴ Drawing on moral psychology and cognitive linguistics, Mayer argues that his homilies touch “modes of thought that are basic to the human brain and thus to at least some degree common across cultures and history” (66). Chrysostom’s repeated use of certain metaphors (e.g., Jews as sick and diseased, demons dwelling in synagogues and, more insidiously, in Jewish souls) activates the same circuits in the brain that may stimulate particular kinds of actions: “From a neural perspective, rhetoric triggers neurochemical reactions that produce affective, pre-conscious dispositions that prompt the brain to fit them within the linguistic structures rhetorically constituted through cultural experience” (89).

Violent rhetoric, Mayer observes, “reduces the listener’s capacity for conscious critical thought” because it stimulates “constant activation to the point of habituation of one pattern of thought” (90). It seems that human beings make rational judgments less often than we assume. Neuroscience reveals that affect more than logic shapes our thinking and action, particularly when constant repetition constrains the critical faculties of the prefrontal regions of the brain. Rhetoric that rouses emotion, such as anger and fear, rallies a receptive audience, thus increasing the probability that the audience will be less likely to think critically and more prone to act out of their emotions.

It is probable that Chrysostom preached six of the homilies (Discourses III—VIII) in close sequence in 387. Mayer invites consideration of the likely effect on those who heard all six:

When the audience is told that the Jews are polluted, criminal murderers, who are enemies of God, and the concept that they are impure, polluted, and disgusting is constantly reinforced, the intuitive inference for an individuals in whose brain the justice and purity foundations are strongly entrenched is not only that Jews can be killed with impunity, but that they *should* be killed, because they deserve it, the punishment fits the crime, and the Jew is a dangerous threat to the health/purity of God’s Body (the church). The Jew, on the other hand, is external to it and thus her/his killing expiatory, unpolluting, and justifiable (118; emphasis in original).

Nor would the effects be limited only to his hearers in Antioch’s Great Church, with a likely maximum capacity of five-hundred persons. Chrysostom’s sermons were taken down by stenographers and have had a long afterlife. It is impossible to estimate how many Christians over the centuries might have heard or read about Jews as dirty and repulsive—as criminals, murders, and, above all, as God’s enemies. And in a wired age, his fourth century fulminations have the capacity to reach far beyond those gathered in Antioch’s Great Church. They continue to feed anti-semitism.

²⁴ Wendy Mayer, “Preaching Hatred? John Chrysostom, Neuroscience, and the Jews,” in *Revisioning John Chrysostom, New Approaches, New Perspectives*, ed. Chris de Wet and W. Mayer (Boston: Leiden, 2019), 58-136.

Ephrem

Ephrem hailed from the eastern Syrian town of Nisibis and became an ardent and influential proponent of the teachings of the Council of Nicaea (325), which established Christian orthodoxy with regard to Jesus. Ephrem may have lacked the authority of a bishop of a major see like Alexandria, but as a poet and as a churchman, and perhaps as a deacon, he was enormously influential in shaping Christianity in eastern Syria through his prolific composition of hymnody in poetic metered verses (*madrāshē*) as well as homilies in verse and prose compositions, primarily biblical commentaries. Ephrem is best known for the lyrical beauty of his hymns in Syriac that covered diverse topics, including paradise, the resurrection, virginity, the Virgin Mary, heresies and the emperor Julian.

In a recent translation of four sets of Ephrem's compositions (*On the Holy Fast, On the Crucifixion, On the Resurrection, and On the Unleavened Bread*), *madrāshē* are rendered as "teaching songs," which speaks to their didactic character.²⁵ According to Syriac tradition, Ephrem founded women's choirs specifically to sing his *madrāshē*; women's choirs played a significant role in Syriac Christianity. As another poet-theologian, Jacob of Sarug (451-521) wrote in his *On Ephrem*:

Our sisters also were strengthened by you [Ephrem] to give praise;
For women were not allowed to speak in church [cf. 1 Cor. 14:34].
Your instruction opened the closed mouths of the daughters of Eve;
And behold, the gatherings of the glorious (church) resound with their melodies.²⁶

Of the many teaching songs Ephrem composed, those *On the Unleavened Bread* are particularly pertinent. There are 21 in this collection, although some are found only in fragments. The teaching most vehemently expressed throughout *On the Unleavened Bread* is the stark contrast between the sacrificial lamb of the Passover and the sacrificial lamb Jesus. Ephrem emphasizes the profound disparity between the Exodus of the Jews and the Passion of Jesus Christ, such as in *Teaching Song 19*:

The true lamb stood up
and broke his body
for the innocent ones
who had eaten the paschal lamb.

²⁵ *St Ephrem the Syrian: Songs for the Fast and Pascha*, trans. Blake Hartung et al. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 2022). See also *Ephrem the Syrian's Hymns on the Unleavened Bread*, trans. J. Edward Walters (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012).

²⁶ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women and Children in Syriac Christianity," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daviel King (London: Routledge, 2018), 557.

He slaughtered and ate the Pascha,
and he broke his body;
he removed the shadow
and gave the truth.

The eater was dispersed
within the unleavened bread;
his body became for us
the true unleavened bread.
(Stanzas 1-3)

Subsequent stanzas play on key events in Israel's history. Then Ephrem
heightens the contrast stanzas 16-28:

My brothers and sisters, do not take
that unleavened bread
from the people whose hands
are stained with blood,

lest there stick
to that unleavened bread
some of filth
that fills their hands.

Although the meat is pure,
no one eats
what has been sacrificed
because it is defiled.

Thus how impure
is that unleavened bread,
since the hands that killed the Son
kneaded it?

The hand that is stained
by the blood of animals—
it is an abomination for us
to take food from it.

Who then shall receive
from that hand,
which is thoroughly stained
with the blood of the prophets?

My brothers and sisters, let us not eat
with the medicine of life
the unleavened bread of the people
as the poison of death.

for the blood of the Messiah
is mixed and dwells in
the unleavened bread of the people
and in our Eucharist.

Whoever received it in the Eucharist
received the medicine of life;
whoever ate it with the people
received the poison of death.
As for the blood for which
they cried out that it be upon them,
it is mixed in their festivals
and their Sabbaths.

And whoever adheres
to their festivals
to him also comes
the splattering of blood.

The people that does not eat
from a pig
is a pig that is
bathed in much blood.

Flee and keep away from it,
For look, it is shaking
lest you be defiled
by the splattering of blood.

That this hymn is a teaching song renders it even more deeply disturbing. Consider what it conveys about Jews to those who heard it performed and especially to those who performed it. Ephrem disparages the Jews' Passover as but a shadow, a mere type or anticipation of Christ's true sacrifice—a sacrifice the Jews instigated and carried out, a sacrifice that has forever stained their hands with blood, including the blood of the prophets. Thus, Ephrem sees the unleavened bread Jews eat during Passover as toxic, a "poison of death," mixed as it is with the blood of the Messiah—a stark contrast to the "medicine of life." To those Christians who might be tempted to participate in some way in Jewish rituals during Passover season, Ephrem warns they will also be splattered with Christ's blood and thus defiled.

Jews may not eat the products of pigs, but they are themselves pigs “bathed in much blood.” The refrain sung between *each* stanza intensified the vilification of Jews:

Praise to the Messiah who, through his body, abolished the unleavened bread of the people in the presence of the people!

Ephrem’s poetry would have had lasting emotional power because it was sung, likely in a liturgical setting, affecting people at more than a rational level. Yet we are left wondering about Ephrem’s hostility to Jews, a question for which historical sources do not provide clear answers. Given Ephrem’s commitment to the orthodoxy of the Nicene formulation, it may well be that his antagonism was driven by a perceived need to enforce boundaries between Christians and Jews at a time when those boundaries were not as definitive on the ground as they were in the minds of certain theologians. He “emphasizes the idea of Gentile Christianity without any Judaizing elements, something that appears not yet to have been a clear reality in fourth-century Syria.”²⁷ Ephrem’s rhetoric, embedded in liturgical language, was an attempt at establishing a definitive differentiation from Judaism and by so doing, upholding the decrees of Nicaea.

While Ephrem was singular in the fourth century for embedding his Nicene orthodoxy in powerful poetry, in other ways he was part of a common trajectory of his time. He exemplifies the way in which polemics served as a tool for forming and deepening group identity during a century characterized by an intensification of anti-Jewish judgments. If earlier writers derided Judaism, by the fourth century the rhetoric was directed as well at *Jews themselves*. Their rhetoric, as Guy Stroumsa analyzes it, “helped transform anti-Jewish theological argument into what can be called antisemitic prejudice.”²⁸ Theological antisemitism was born.

In sum, there is a triad of beliefs among many in the early church who believed that Jesus the Christ fulfilled God’s promises to Israel: (1) The Jewish people who received the first promises failed to grasp the deeper meaning of their own holy texts. (2) Consequently, whether out of malevolence or ignorance, they crucified this messiah. (3) Through this murderous act, Jews’ covenantal relationship to God ended. These three stark claims circulated in the bloodstream of early Christians.

As the early generations of the Christ followers worked out the meaning of their way of life, they necessarily had to situate themselves in relation to the Other, the Jews. They confronted complex issues: How should they understand themselves vis-à-vis [other] Jews? Vis-à-vis non-Jewish Christ-followers, who came in large numbers late in the first century and then increased significantly in the next several centuries? Vis-à-vis followers of Graeco-Roman traditions (“pagans”), many mystified by this new movement? Vis-à-vis civic and imperial authorities

²⁷ Shepardson, 37.

²⁸ Stroumsa, Guy, “From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism,” in *Contra Judaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, ed. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), 1-26; 20.

who viewed them as beyond the scope of Rome's definition of a licit religious tradition? Yet, although identity formation typically involves establishing boundaries and binaries, the literature suggests that Christians were more apt to emphasize differentiation from Jews than they were from pagans: "It is the proximate other that stimulates the greatest anxiety."²⁹ As the sociologist Lewis Coser had argued in 1956, "The closer the groups, the more intense the conflict."³⁰

In grappling with these questions, Christ followers fashioned varying responses. Practical matters demanded decisions, especially about their relation to Judaism: Did non-Jewish Christ followers need to keep the dietary laws? And if they did not, then what did that mean for Jesus' Jewish followers? Need non-Jewish men who became disciples be circumcised? Should the rituals of Christ followers involve both Jewish festivals and meals in memory of Jesus the Jew? And the most pressing question of all: In what ways did discipleship in the name of Christ reorient understanding of the holy texts of the Jews that Christ followers accepted as their own after considerable debate?

And then there was the matter of lucidly articulating belief. Jesus taught in poetry, parables, and enigmatic sayings. He spoke about God his father and the advocate to come, about God's kingdom, about one's life resembling a grain of wheat fallen to the ground. But how to convey this in more systematic ways that accorded with the ways of philosophers? How to express profound poetry in a philosopher's prose? And how to do so with the rhetorical sophistication of the Graeco-Roman schools of rhetoric?

So, to be clear: Articulating who they were as Christians and how they understood themselves vis-à-vis other religious and civil traditions was a monumental task. It was also a contentious one; theological differences were so fiercely discussed that various divisions arose in the still fledgling church, giving rise to accusations of heresy. Yet amidst all this much wisdom may be found in their writings. That they, like us all, had imperfect vision is entirely understandable. Nevertheless, *retrieving and reclaiming the Jewishness of Jesus first requires recognizing the limitations of these early church writers' apologetically driven understanding of Judaism.*

II. Retrieving and Reclaiming a Jewish Jesus for Reorienting the Church

The writers of the early church bequeathed a body of substantive and rich theological understanding to the Christian tradition that has endured through the centuries. So too, however, did their misrepresentation of Judaism, devolving into a polemic against Jews with tragic consequences for Jewish communities. Although biblical and theological scholarship of the last seventy years or so has offered a comprehensive critique of the erroneous depictions of Judaism, this learning has yet to be integrated into the lives of most Christians, including the leaders of most local churches. And for Catholics, who are now at a sixty-one-year remove

²⁹ Mikva, 99.

³⁰ Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956), 146.

from the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, the insights of that breakthrough document and subsequent documents seem to play virtually no explicit role in the life of ordinary Catholics.³¹

The extent to which the interpretive perspectives of the patristic writers have become embedded in the life of the church means that serious thought needs to be given to the educational premises and processes that have potential for providing understandings aligned with both contemporary scholarship and church teaching. Grasping the meaning and significance of the Jewishness of Jesus involves far more than a simple acknowledgement that Jesus was a Jew. Rather, it entails comprehending a web of interconnected understandings that can counter the simplistic story of Christian origins that the vast majority of Christians have internalized. This will be difficult; however inadequate, the present supersessionist narrative has had a powerful hold on the churches. Thus, those who seek to teach the meaning and significance of a Jewish Jesus are likely to confront considerable cognitive dissonance. In turn, this likelihood means acknowledging the magnitude of the task at hand, identifying the various elements involved in grasping the meaning and significance of the Jewishness of Jesus, and strategizing ways of communicating key concepts.

A preliminary step would be to enable congregants to study the New Testament in ways that situate Jesus in his Jewish world and offer a window into the gradual emergence of the church concurrently with the process by which the Jewish tradition was also evolving in dramatic ways. Perhaps the most salient outcome of placing Jesus in his context is a heightened realization that his Judaism was not a mere accident of his birth. Many Christians know Jesus was born a Jew, but they view him in effect as if he were already breaking with Judaism, taking on the identity of a Christian, and forming the church with his disciples. Yet the NT testifies otherwise: Paul, speaking of his “own brothers and sisters, my own flesh and blood,” says that “from them, according to the flesh, comes the Christ” (Rom 9: 3,5). Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21), thereby becoming a member of Israel’s covenanted people. He is a familiar enough figure in a hometown synagogue that the congregation is skeptical that this carpenter’s son possessed the wisdom he seemed to manifest (Luke 4:16-30). And the congregants in the nearby town of Capernaum are astounded at the authority with which this man taught (Luke 4: 31-32). He and other teachers of Torah frequently spar with one another over interpretations of texts; disputing their meaning was to honor the tradition. Yet, precisely what “kind” of a Jew he was is difficult to discern because we lack knowledge of the norms for Torah observance in this period. Even if scholars are unable to provide detailed analyses of the level of his Torah observance in relation to other Jewish teachers, they do not question his Jewish identity.

To remove Jesus from his Jewish context also means reading the NT through the lens of oppositional imagination. This lens not only obscures Jesus’ Jewishness; it also compresses the intricate correlation between Old and New Testament texts

³¹ See my “Nostra Aetate at Sixty: Reviving a Moribund Decree,” *Ecumenical Trends* 54, no. 5 (September-October 2025): 1-6

into the promise-to-fulfillment paradigm. This formulaic perspective oversimplifies and distorts the relationship, thereby losing the rich weave of the two testaments.

One way of countering the oppositional imagination is to invite persons to place themselves into the shoes of those first-century disciples who sought to explain to their communities what Jesus the Christ meant to them. Since the first two generations of disciples seem to have been Jews, it is clear the Israel's scriptures—its stories, peoples, poetry, and prayers—constituted their lexicon in conveying their experiences and articulating their understandings-on-process. Disciples in the latter decades of the first century, such as those who composed the gospel accounts, filtered what had been passed on from the earlier generations through the lens of their own experiences in a period when their communities now had a large number of Gentile Christ followers. Helping persons to understand relevant details of the compositional process offers the possibility of growing beyond fundamentalist readings; the gospel writers passed on those traditions in ways they believed would speak to their own communities in the latter third of the first century CE.

Even as the NT became appended to the anthology of books constituting the Jewish Scriptures (*Tanakh*) that Christians term the “Old Testament,” its origins lie in Jewish life—in the narratives, poetry, practices, symbols, and beliefs of Judaism in the Second Temple period (ca. 515 BCE—70 CE). Yet it *became* Christian scriptures. Those who composed the NT in the first century CE came from this world, a world in which following the way of Jesus, the Jew from the backwater village of Nazareth, became one among several modes of living Jewishly. Judaism shaped their imaginations, their vocabulary, their world of reference.³²

What the church needs is a forthright and accessible account of that intricate dance in which both Judaism and Christianity developed in relation to one another. Contrary to what has been conveyed to Christians over the ages, Judaism did not remain static. Nor is it the religion of the Old Testament. Judaism developed in new and powerful ways through the rabbinic movement, which continues into the present.³³ In the subtitle of Peter Schäfer's *The Jewish Jesus* we find a key concept for rethinking the conventional perspective: Judaism and Christianity “shaped” each other.³⁴ They were two nations in one womb.³⁵

Christians need a new story of their origins that offers a holistic account reflective of major dimensions of a scholarly consensus. Many have internalized a narrative of Christian origins in which the life and ministry of Jesus Christ are depicted as a corrective to and contrast with Judaism in order to show the ascendancy

³² Scholars cannot determine with any level of certainty whether the NT writers were Jewish. Their texts, however, reflect their Jewish world—and a time when the growth of Gentile Christ-followers became more numerous, thereby raising issues

³³ See Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, *The More Torah, the More Life: A Christian Commentary on Mishnah Avot* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

³⁴ Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

³⁵ See Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

of Christianity. This account distorts history, detaches Jesus and his disciples from the Way that formed and sustained them, misrepresents the complex and protracted process by which Christianity developed, and hands on a one-dimensional portrayal of Judaism as an inferior tradition essentially similar to the perspective of Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*.

Christians also need a new origin story because the old one became a theological rationale for a polemic against Judaism that helped to fuel centuries of contemptuous teaching about Judaism and vitriol directed at Jews. The fulminations of John Chrysostom and the callous poetry of Ephrem of Syria, for example, should not merely be consigned to history but serve as exemplars of ways in which religious beliefs have been—and continue to be—perverted into hatred of a religious “other.” Christians need to confront the reality that their teachings all too often were used to justify harm inflicted on Jewish communities or to rationalize Jewish suffering.

Many significant correctives have been made in recent years to aspects of the origin narrative. Yet for vast numbers of Christians, the simplistic understandings they internalized remain, now somewhat awkwardly juxtaposed with more adequate accounts of certain topics, e.g., the Pharisees or the passion narratives. A new narrative needs to be inclusive of sound scholarship, coherently laid out, and widely communicated in ways accessible and adaptable to differing audiences.

The project on the Jewishness of Jesus, of which this essay is a part, has offered many rich insights that invite further study and conversation.³⁶ Perhaps a fitting successor project would be for some Jewish and Christian scholars to collaborate, as appropriate to each tradition, in drafting a new narrative of Christian origins. No simple task—but one that would more adequately speak to the complex, messy, and conflictual differentiation process of our respective ancestors in faith. Such a narrative holds the promise, at least for Christians, of revealing the inadequacy and injustice of our supersessionist certitudes, enabling us to more truthfully about the complexity of the past, enriching our understanding of Jesus and his movement, and reorienting our relationship with the Jewish people.

³⁶ Here I refer to the essays included *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 21, no. 1 (2026).