

Foreword

Part of a special volume on the [“Jesus the Jew / Jesus the Christ” Research Project](#)

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The figure of Jesus is the center of faith and source of hope for billions. His teachings have shaped civilizations, inspired art and literature, and influenced laws and institutions. Yet Jesus has often been viewed through interpretive lenses that obscure the most basic fact of his identity as a first-century Galilean Jew, formed by the religious, cultural, and political world of late Second Temple Judaism.

Even the name by which most of the world knows him can partly conceal that identity. The latinized “Jesus Christ,” like its Greek forerunner *Iēsous Christos*, stands at a distance from the Hebrew *Yeshua ha-Mashiach*—“*Yeshua*, the Anointed One.” Christians confess Jesus as the Christ, often ignoring that they are, in fact, confessing *Yeshua ha-Mashiach*. Jews, by contrast, have generally recognized Jesus as *Yeshua* (or *Yeshu*¹) while rejecting the claim that he was the promised *ha-Mashiach*, partially because the term came to have different connotations for Jews and Christians. Over centuries, this disagreement encouraged a false opposition: Jesus “the Christian” set against the Judaism he was presumed to have displaced.

Jewish–Christian encounter thus too often became a battleground of disputation and polemic, imagined as a contest in which only one side could prevail. This dynamic distorted the historical record, nourished anti-Judaism and, at its worst, contributed to antisemitic violence.

Whatever one believes about Jesus’s messianic identity, he cannot be understood apart from Judaism. His language, scriptures, worship, and religious practices were Jewish. He lived among Jews, debated other Jewish interpreters, worshiped the God of Israel, observed Jewish customs, and proclaimed his message within the hopes and tensions of late Second Temple Judaism. His earliest followers did not understand themselves to be abandoning Israel’s story for an entirely new religion; they believed they were witnessing the fulfillment or realization of promises made to Israel.²

The present special volume, *Jesus the Jew / Jesus the Christ*, is the fruit of the labors of a multiyear international research project³ involving Jewish and Christian

¹ See Eran Shuali, “Yešu or Yešua? A Sketch of the History of Jesus’ Names in Hebrew from Antiquity to the Present,” *Revue des études juives* 179, no. 1-2 (2020): 161-179.

² See e.g., Mt 5:17-18, Lk 4:16-20, Jn 1:43-46.

³ The project began in 2019, with the title “Christ Jesus the Jew: The Importance of his Jewish Identity for Christians and for Jews Today.”

scholars, organized by four university centers specialized in Jewish-Christian Dialogue and Study.⁴ A great debt of gratitude is owed to these organizing institutions and their directors, the volume editors, and indeed to all the participating and contributing scholars.

This special volume brings together articles that explore the multifaceted dimensions of *Jesus the Jew / Jesus the Christ* without trying to collapse them into one. The collection does not ask readers to choose between “Jesus the Jew” and “Jesus the Christ,” as though they were mutually exclusive portraits, nor does it erase the defining differences between Judaism and Christianity and their profoundly different perceptions of Jesus. Rather, it argues that the designation *Jesus the Christ* is historically and theologically unintelligible without the designation *Jesus the Jew*.

The Christ of faith is not an abstract figure detached from Jewish history, and the Jesus of history cannot be considered apart from the claims made about him by his first—Jewish—followers. Those followers interpreted his life, death, and reported resurrection through Israel’s scriptures and the expectations of contemporary Jewish apocalyptic thought. Their claims were extraordinary and unprecedented, but they arose from the conviction that God remained faithful to Israel and that Israel’s—and indeed humanity’s—story had entered a decisive phase because Jesus “was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.”⁵ The relationship between Jesus (and his early followers) and Judaism is therefore one of continuity and conflict, dialogue and division—but not of simple rupture.

The articles gathered here therefore go beyond widespread notions of Jesus as a rebel who abandoned his heritage or as a figure whose Jewish identity is incidental, to discover a person whose life and mission are deeply rooted in Israel’s history. They also trace how Christianity emerged from Judaism while gradually becoming a distinct religious movement, and how the disagreements separating Jews and Christians today remain bound to the shared scriptural and historical world from which both traditions arose.

For Christians, this recognition is indispensable if they are to take their faith in the Incarnation seriously. That belief itself does not begin outside Judaism; it emerges from within the context of late Second Temple Judaism.⁶ Christians believe that God truly entered human history through a process involving the election and calling of the people of Israel⁷ and culminating in the Incarnation.

⁴ The Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, the Center for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religions at Universität Salzburg, and the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia.

⁵ 1 Cor 15:4.

⁶ See Michael Wyschogrod, “A Jewish Perspective on Incarnation,” *Modern Theology* 12, no. 2 (1996): 195-209.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*,” §§3-4; 13-15. See also Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, and Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, “A Journey of Hope: Sixty Years of Interreligious Dialogue and Fraternity in the Light of the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*,” §§10-13: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dof_doc_20260916_nota-cammino-speranza_en.html

Christian belief thus locates God's decisive entrance into human history in a Jewish man, born to a Jewish mother, shaped by Jewish Scripture, and situated within Israel's covenantal history.⁸ Jesus's Jewishness is therefore an essential part of the reality of the incarnation, not an incidental feature that can be set aside.

Likewise, the proclamation of the kingdom of God and titles such as "Messiah," "Son of David," "Son of Man," "Son of God," and "Suffering Servant" cannot be understood apart from the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish hopes associated with them.

This perspective also clarifies the relationship between Israel and the Church. Christian claims of fulfillment become incoherent when Judaism is treated as obsolete or irrelevant. Christianity remains indebted to Jewish Scripture, worship, and concepts of covenant and holiness, as well as to the Jewish people through whom these traditions are preserved and developed. For Christians, then, Jesus's Jewish identity is fundamental because, through the Incarnation, it situates Jesus in the story to which he belongs, makes his teachings intelligible, and gives meaning to the title "Christ." It also challenges Christians to approach Judaism with historical honesty and theological humility. To know Jesus as the Christ, Christians must first take seriously Jesus the Jew. Indeed, the experience of sustained dialogue between Jews and Christians in recent decades demonstrates that Christians can discover more about Jesus and his life by studying with Jews living today, and that by studying with Christians, Jews can discover more about their own history and identity.

For Jewish readers, studying Jesus and the New Testament may at first seem counterintuitive. As observed by Rabbi Prof. Samuel Sandmel in his seminal work, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*: "throughout the centuries [...] it was customary, in fact commendable, for Jews to shun the New Testament. It was a book belonging in a context freighted with emotion. After all, it was the sacred scripture of a group that proved itself to be the enemy and the persecutor."⁹

And yet, as Jewish scholarship since the last century has shown,¹⁰ the texts of the New Testament are valuable primary witnesses to the diverse religious landscape, messianic expectations, and social and political tensions of first-century Judaism. Its twenty-seven books illuminate the ancestral environment from which both Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity emerged, while also documenting the beginning struggles through which an originally Jewish movement developed a distinct identity.¹¹

⁸ Mt 1:1-25; Gal 4:4-5.

⁹ Samuel Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament* (Augmented Edition; New York: Ktav Publishing House / Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1974), XI-XII.

¹⁰ An overview can be found here: Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 13-60. A more dedicated study is Daniel F. Moore, *Jesus, an Emerging Jewish Mosaic: Jewish Perspectives, Post-Holocaust* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

¹¹ It should be remarked that Jews and Christians collaborating in scriptural research is presently unfolding with historically unprecedented regularity. To give only two examples out of many possibilities, eighty Jewish scholars have just published the third edition of Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2026). Not very long ago it would have been quite difficult to find that many Jewish scholars with New Testament expertise.

Reconsidering Jesus within this setting repositions him from a figure long associated, in Jewish memory, exclusively with a community that often persecuted Jews to a figure firmly rooted in Jewish history. This neither demands Jews to accept Christian theological claims, nor Christians to abandon their profession of faith, nor does it diminish the awareness of horrendous suffering inflicted in Jesus's name. Instead, it makes possible a historically grounded encounter with a Jewish teacher and with the early Jewish debates from which Christianity eventually emerged.

The Second Vatican Council expressed the aspiration that guides this collection: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues."¹²

It is in this spirit that the following articles are offered. Their authors approach the subject from different historical, biblical, and theological angles, and they do not necessarily reach identical conclusions. Together, however, they invite readers to replace inherited caricatures with careful inquiry, to acknowledge both kinship and difference, and to pursue dialogue without denying the convictions distinctive to either tradition. In short, this collection shows that Christians and Jews can learn together, even about divisive topics that were avoided in the past.

This approach also echoes an international symposium held on November 9, 2021 at the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, one of the four university sponsors of this project. It was aptly called "Reading from the Same Text: From Dialogue to Jewish-Christian Studies." Indeed, the Centre's director at that time, Most Rev. Prof. Étienne Vetö,¹³ called for "moving from Jewish-Christian dialogue to Jewish-Christian studies."¹⁴ Dialogue reaches its fullness only when Jews and Christians move beyond speaking about, or even to, one another and begin studying together—reading texts side by side, bringing distinct traditions of interpretation into conversation, and confronting both common inheritances and enduring differences with intellectual honesty. Such study does not seek to dissolve theological distinctions or manufacture agreements. Rather, it creates a disciplined space in which mutual understanding can grow through sustained attention to history, scripture, and the interpretive traditions

Also recently published is the latest volume in an Italian series: Marco Cassuto Morselli, Massimo Gargiulo, and Giulio Michelini, eds., *La Bibbia dell'Amicizia* (Milan: San Paolo, 2026). In its four volumes, Jewish and Christian authors offer commentaries on verses from the Torah, the Nevi'im, the Ketuvim, and the New Testament.

¹² Second Vatican Council, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions *Nosstra Aetate*," §4.

¹³ One of the original planners of the project, Étienne Vetö is now auxiliary bishop of Reims (since 2023) and serves as delegate for dialogue with Judaism of the French Bishops' Conference.

¹⁴ See Lisa Palmieri-Billig, "Jewish-Christian dialogue and studies take a leap forward: a commemorative Symposium marks the advent of a new era," *La Stampa*, Dec 15, 2021; updated Mar 24, 2026: <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2021/12/15/news/jewish-christian-dialogue-and-studies-take-a-leap-forward-a-commemorative-symposium-marks-the-advent-of-a-new-era-1.41032441/>

of both communities. The present collection participates in that movement by inviting its contributors and readers to approach Jesus not as a possession of one tradition deployed against the other, but as a Jewish figure whose life, reception, and significance demand serious engagement from both.

To engage the figure of Jesus responsibly, then, means to take seriously both the Jewish world to which he belongs and the history of interpretation that followed him. For Christians, this deepens the understanding of the title “Christ.” For Jews, it opens access to a historically significant figure in the development of both Jewish and Western religious life. For both communities, it offers common ground on which greater knowledge, respect, reconciliation, and friendship may be built. This collection is both an exercise of that engagement and a contribution to that shared responsibility. Especially in our troubled world, “Christians and Jews, unable to do without one another, should continue to walk this path together until the end of time on earth.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Dicasteries for the Doctrine of the Faith, Promoting Christian Unity, and Interreligious Dialogue, “A Journey of Hope,” §34.