

REVIEW

Neta Stahl

Jesus among the Jews: Representation and Thought

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Jesus among the Jews brings together scholars from across Jewish Studies to look at receptions of Jesus, from the earliest Jewish understandings through medieval debates up to contemporary Israeli uses, covering rabbis, messiahs, philosophers, theologians, poets, and artists. Essay titles are relatively self-explanatory and they include: Daniel Boyarin, “A Jewish Reader of Jesus: Mark, the Evangelist”; Michael Swartz, “The Magical Jesus in Ancient Jewish Literature”; Avigdor Shinan, “Where is Jonah From?”; Adam Gregerman, “Celsus’ Jew and the Theological Threat from Christianity”; Moshe Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalistic ‘Son of God’ on Jesus and Christianity”; Elchanan Reiner, “From Joshua through Jesus to Simeon bar Yohai: Towards a Typology of Galilean Heroes”; Matt Goldish, “The Salvation of Jesus and Jewish Messiahs”; Pawel Maciejko, “Jacob Frank and Jesus Christ”; Yitzhak Melamed, “*Christus Secundum Spiritum*: Spinoza, Jesus and the Infinite Intellect”; Warren Zev Harvey, “Harry Austryn Wolfson on the Jews’ Reclamation of Jesus”; Leora Batnitzky, “Jesus in Modern Jewish Thought”; Glenda Abramson, “The Crucified Brother: Uri Zvi Greenberg and Jesus”; Neta Stahl, “‘We Left Yeshu’: On Three Twentieth-Century Hebrew Poets’ Longing for Jesus”; and Amitai Mendelsohn, “Jesus of the Sabra Thorns: The Figure of Jesus in Israeli Art.” What is clear throughout is that Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Western interaction and construction have always been diverse, including blurred “religious” boundaries, accommodation, engagement, influence, wariness, and/or polemical distancing, and all the while showing how the figure

of Jesus says something broader about Jewish engagements with changing social, political, and historical contexts.

Whether intended or not, there is a chronological development that seems to run throughout the volume, from the earlier engagements with more elevated and messianic presentations of Jesus to more ethical, political, and existential constructions of the “Jewish Jesus” in modernity and post-modernity. As a volume like this does not typically aim for comprehensiveness in historic representations, a more detailed essay providing an overview could have brought out some of the overall trends and tendencies in Jewish receptions of Jesus. For this reviewer at least, certain related questions came to mind (some of which were touched upon in individual essays). Was the influence of Liberal Protestantism, the burgeoning quest for the historical Jesus, and William Wrede’s claim that Jesus’ Messianic status as an early Christian creation so pervasive in modern (non-Jewish) study of Jesus that Messianic questions came to be seen as later Christian accretions, thereby “setting free” the Jewish Jesus of history? (Maybe this chronological development partly explains why Jacob Taubes had to return to Messianic questions in order to present Paul as a revolutionary figure?) I am not suggesting that this modern shift away from claims about Jesus’ Messianic and elevated identity is necessarily the whole story or even correct; indeed, a case for precursors to the modern “Jewish Jesus” might be found as far back as the Gospels, as one contributor, Daniel Boyarin, has implied in the detailed discussions in his essay. But certainly an essay looking at general patterns, continuities, and discontinuities would have helped this already stimulating collection. Nevertheless, the individual essays are all fascinating in their own right and clearly presented, and collectively the wide-range of essays provides genuine insights into the interaction between changing constructions of Jesus and cultural contexts. The decision to include scholars and theologians alongside artists and poets in the essay topics was particularly important in this respect. The diversity and chronological range will mean that scholars in

Jewish Studies and Biblical Studies, as well as interested outsiders, will inevitably learn something new.

What is particularly notable to this reviewer is how this sort of interdisciplinary work could be a model for the developing field of reception history of biblical texts and characters. Such collaborations illustrate how biblical texts and figures (whether specifically Jewish or Christian) have played a central role in the history of ideas, which is especially important given that these texts and figures are still typically overlooked outside faculties and departments of Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies. And, rather than asking the individual scholar to overstretch, what this version of interdisciplinary collaboration can do is to bring scholars together from different areas and play to their strengths, and thereby contribute to a broader understanding of the role of the Bible in historical and cultural change. In terms of a volume such as this one, it would be intriguing to see what could be done in the future by widening the debate further still to include, and bring into discussion, other receptions of Jesus (or indeed other figures and texts), most obviously in traditions associated with the Qur'an and Islam. There is also obvious potential for the discussion of politicized constructions of Jesus in relation to the nation-state and modernity as presented in this volume (by Batnitzky, Abramson, and Stahl, for example) to be brought into fruitful dialogue with the related research. For example, work by Halvor Moxnes, Susannah Heschel, Ward Blanton, Shawn Kelley, and others on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian thinkers and historical Jesus scholars raise similar questions. It is a fitting testimony to an engaging collection such as *Jesus among the Jews* that it can so easily generate bigger ideas about, and stimulate creative developments in, the fields of Biblical Studies, Jewish Studies, and Religion.