



Understanding Jesus means understanding Judaism

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In 2021, the Deutsche Bibel Gesellschaft published *Das Neue Testament - jüdisch Erklärt*, the German translation of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2d edition (Oxford University Press, 2017), which I co-edited with Marc Z. Brettler. We Jews who wrote the annotations and the essays for the English edition could only have done so because of the welcome we received from Christians.

From the Ten Points of Seelisberg developed in 1947, to the 1965 Conciliar document, *Nostra Aetate*, to the numerous statements from church bodies that affirm Romans 11.29 concerning the Jewish people, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,” ecclesial organizations and Christian individuals have increasingly recognized that Jesus and Paul spoke from within, rather than against, their Jewish contexts. Also recognizing how select readings of the New Testament have led to Jew-hatred, some are taking steps to correct the negative impressions certain New Testament texts can yield.

Had Christians not shown such grace, I would never have become a New Testament scholar. Growing up in a predominantly Roman Catholic neighborhood in Massachusetts, USA, I found my friends’ traditions interesting and intriguing: saints and sacraments, Christmas and Easter, priests and nuns (who still dressed as priests and nuns).

When I was seven years old, a girl said to me, “You killed our Lord.”

“I did not,” I responded. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Yes, you did,” the girl insisted. “Our priest said so.”

I thought that priests wore those collars to keep them from telling a lie. Were they to lie, the collar would choke them. (I still think this is a good idea). I asked,

“Is the priest dead?”

“No,” she said.

The priest said I had killed G-d, the collar did not kill the priest, therefore, I must have killed G-d. When I returned from school, my mother asked me why I was crying. “I killed G-d,” I explained. “The priest said I killed G-d.” My mother assured me that the priest had made a mistake. A few years later, *Nostra Aetate* stopped much of this hateful teaching in Roman Catholic settings.

I concluded that the priest had made a translation error. I decided, I’d read the Christian Bible (no one told me it was written in Greek), solve the translation problem, and end antisemitism. To facilitate this process, I announced to my parents that I would attend catechism – Catholic religious education class. My very wise mother said, “As long as you remember who you are, go and learn. It is good to know about other people’s religion.”

The Catholic teachers liked me -- probably because I was the only seven-year-old who wanted to be in class. I never heard them say anything anti-Jewish. To the contrary, I’d hear a gospel story and I would think, “That’s sounds like a story I learned in the synagogue.”

In John 4, Jesus meets a woman at a well and they discuss marriage: I was reminded of Abraham’s servant and Rebecca (Genesis 24), Moses and Zipporah (Exodus 2), and especially of Jacob and Rachel (Genesis 29), since John 4 is set at Jacob’s well.

Jesus produces food miraculously, heals suffering people, and raises the dead. He reminded me of the prophets Elijah and Elisha as well as of rabbinic miracle workers, such as Haninah ben Dosa and Honi the Circle-maker.

Jesus is rescued when King Herod's soldiers kill the children in Bethlehem, and I was reminded of Moses, rescued when Pharaoh orders that all boys born to Hebrew women be drowned. It did not surprise me that baby Jesus would travel to and from Egypt, enter water (baptism), face temptation in the wilderness, ascend a mountain, and deliver a law (the Sermon on the Mount) since the pattern was established in Shemot, the Book of Exodus.

In Matthew 23, Jesus issues complaints against Pharisees, including their liking the best seats in the synagogue. In my synagogue, one family always had the best seats, and my mother would complain. Jesus the Jew who criticizes other Jews sounded not only like the prophets Amos and Hosea – he sounded like my mother.

Several years later, I read the New Testament and quickly found the problems. Matthew 27.25 has “all the people” cry, “his blood be on us and on our children,” and so all Jews came to be blamed for the death of Jesus. In John 8.44, Jesus calls the “Jews” (Greek *loudaioi*) “children of the devil.” Twice elderly Christians have asked me when I had my horns removed. They read John 8, had seen Michelangelo's statue of the horned Moses, and concluded that Jews have horns.[\[2\]](#)

In Acts 3.15, Peter accuses the “Israelites” – that is, Jews – of having “killed the Author of Life,” and in later chapters “the Jews” seek to kill Paul. 1 Thessalonians 2.14b-16 insists that the “Jews killed the Lord Jesus,” and Revelation 2.9 and 3.9 mention a “synagogue of Satan.” Reading the New Testament, one can easily conclude that the Jews are deceitful, dangerous, and damned.

However, reading the New Testament, I also realized two other things, which have guided my studies.

First, we choose how to read. We can choose to read the Bible in ways that promote love and compassion, not bigotry and hate.

Second, the New Testament is Jewish history: Jesus is the first person in literature to be called “Rabbi,” and the only Pharisee from whom we have extant sources is Paul of Tarsus. The Gospels give us some of the earliest examples of naming a child at a circumcision (*bris*) and of attributing Psalms that lack superscriptions to King David. More, Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, about righteousness, about love of G-d and love of neighbor, are thoroughly Jewish.

But problems continue. For many historically uninformed Christians, Jesus' Jewish context serves to epitomize what is wrong with the world. If Jesus preaches good news to the poor, so the common impression goes, Jews, who are “lovers of money” (Luke 16.14) must be preaching good news to the rich. If Jesus speaks to or heals women, so ‘the Jews’ promote a patriarchal society that makes the Taliban look progressive.

Why should we, both Jews and Christians, look at Jesus in his Jewish context? Beyond recovering mutual history and understanding how we came to separate, doing the history corrects the anti-Jewish stereotypes that continue to appear in Christian teaching and preaching.

For example, to correct the related notions that Jews found following Torah (the Law of Moses) to be burdensome and that Jesus came to replace the Torah with grace, we find instead that the Law was not burdensome, and that Jesus intensifies the commandments.

Jesus states, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to

abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5.17). “Fulfill” does not mean “to end”; it means that Jesus will show his disciples how best, in his view, to follow the commandments. He then does what rabbinic Judaism calls “building a fence around the law” (Pirke Avot 1.1), that is, making new laws to ensure that the original ones are faithfully followed. Extending the commandment, “Do not murder,” Jesus forbids being “angry with a brothers or sister” (Matthew 5.21-22). Extending the commandment against adultery, Jesus forbids lust (Matthew 5.27-28).^[3]

Regarding the purity laws –concerning matters such as menstruation, childbirth, and the treatment of corpses, Jesus does not abrogate them. To the contrary, he restores purity. He literally “dries up” (Mark 5.29) the hemorrhaging woman. He cleanses people suffering from leprosy, he raises the dead to life.

Jesus signals his dedication to Torah by wearing fringes on his garment (Hebrew: tzitzit), which, according to Numbers 15.38, remind people of the commandments. It is his fringes that the woman with hemorrhages touches in hopes of a healing (Matthew 9.20). When Jesus complains that Pharisees wear broad fringes (Matt 23.5), we can conclude that his were less ostentatious.

The Gospels depict Jesus healing people, in synagogues on the Sabbath. Was healing forbidden? Not at all, and that’s why when Jesus does these healings, the congregations typically praise G-d. We also learn from these scenes that free health care is a miracle.

Why do Christians not follow those commandments concerning circumcision, diet, family purity, etc.? In the messianic age, which Paul believed had begun with the death and resurrection of Jesus, gentiles were to turn from worshiping their gods to worshiping the G-d of Israel. But according to Paul, the “apostle to the gentiles,” these gentiles were not to convert to Judaism, for then only Jews would be worshiping G-d. For Paul, while distinctions remained between Jews and gentiles, all are equal in the congregations. But as the church became increasingly detached from its Jewish origins, these Jewish practices became first marginalized and later, declared heretical.

If we teach how Jesus lived and died a Jew, we'll be able better to understand his teachings, and we'll promote better Jewish-Christian relations: Christians will come to appreciate the depth of Jesus' life within its Jewish context, and Jews, I hope, will come to recognize Jesus as a fellow Jew. The theological distinctions between Jews and Christians will not be reconciled until the messiah comes (or, if you prefer, comes back). Until then, we do well to learn both more of our own tradition as well as the tradition our neighbors.

^[1] With gratitude to Wolfgang Kraus, Axel Töllner, Florian Voss, Michael Tilly, Jan Raithel and the many others who produced *Das Neue Testament - jüdisch Erklärt*.

^[2] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

^[3] For more on Jesus's extensions of Torah, see Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Beginner's Guide to the Sermon on the Mount* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020).

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