What We Lose When Jesus Is Separated from His Jewish Roots

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Exodus gives us the reason for the Passover meal and its original instructions. Deuteronomy later directs Israel to sacrifice and eat the meal at the place God would choose for his name to dwell. The Gospels place Jesus in Jerusalem. He is a Jew at Passover, sitting within an ancient Jewish act of remembrance: slavery, ten plagues, blood on doorposts, deliverance from Egypt, unleavened bread and the obligation to tell the story again and again.

Christianity would eventually place this evening at the center of its own sacred memory and give it the name by which much of the world now knows it: the Last Supper. But in the telling of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus had gathered his disciples for Passover, and it would be his last.

The Last Supper was Jesus's last Passover.

It may sound like merely a difference in language, but it is much more than that. "Last Supper" points toward the Christianity that came afterward. "Last Passover" points back toward the Jewish people, Jewish memory and Jewish covenant to which Jesus already belonged.

As the Last Supper was retold within Christianity, many of its Passover details and images receded from view, helping to obscure not only Jesus's Judaism but also the Jewish symbolism through which Christianity came to understand Jesus himself. Paul would make the connection explicit: "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

That difference between the two names reveals one of the strangest transformations in religious history: a Jewish teacher became so completely identified with the religion that was built around him that he could eventually seem foreign to the religion to which he belonged. And ironically, of all the Jewish teachers in human history—including Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hillel—none has become more widely known throughout the world than Jesus.

This perplexing dynamic can be seen elsewhere in the Gospel story. When Jesus is asked which commandment is most important, he does not begin by announcing a new Christian teaching. He begins with the Shema from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel," and the command to love God with one's whole being. He then joins it to Leviticus: "Love your neighbor as yourself." What generations of Christians would rightly cherish as the heart of Jesus's moral teaching was spoken by a Jewish teacher through the language of Torah. For Jesus, Scripture was Hebrew scripture—the sacred writings of Judaism that Christians would later come to call the Old Testament.

At this point, a Christian reader may answer that Jesus fulfilled the Law and that the new covenant therefore made the old one unnecessary. But "fulfilled" cannot simply mean "discarded" without reversing Jesus's own words. In the familiar wording of the New International Version, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." He immediately adds that "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen" will disappear from the Law and warns against anyone who "sets aside one of the least of these

commands” (Matthew 5:17–19). Christians may debate how the Law applies after Jesus, but they cannot settle the matter by imagining that Jesus considered the Jewish scriptures disposable.

The same assumption often shapes the Christian understanding of the new covenant. Yet the new covenant itself comes from the Jewish prophet Jeremiah, who describes it not as the disappearance of the Law but as the moment when God will “put my law within them” and “write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). Whatever Christians believe changed through Jesus, neither Jesus nor Jeremiah describes the Law as something that simply vanished.

Seen in that light, other familiar Gospel scenes begin to read differently. Jesus is repeatedly addressed as Rabbi. He teaches in synagogues, observes the Sabbath and travels to Jerusalem for Jewish festivals. But his arguments about the Sabbath are especially revealing when placed within their Jewish context.

When challenged over what could be done on the Sabbath, he did not simply dismiss the commandment. He argued about its meaning. Matthew has him ask whether someone whose sheep fell into a pit on the Sabbath would not take hold of it and lift it out, before turning the question toward mercy for a human being.

The issue was not whether the Sabbath mattered, but what faithfulness to it required when religious observance encountered human need. Read this way, Jesus is not standing outside Judaism and abolishing a Jewish practice. He is participating in a Jewish argument about how a sacred commandment should be lived.

None of this makes Jesus less important to Christianity. It makes it harder to imagine that Christianity can understand him fully if it treats his Jewish life as simply background.

That Jewish inheritance extended beyond disputes over religious observance. Jesus’s concern for the poor and vulnerable stood within the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, who repeatedly challenged societies that practiced religion while tolerating injustice. His attacks on hypocrisy were not attacks on Judaism. Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah had made similarly uncomfortable arguments centuries earlier.

What began as disagreement among Jews, however, did not remain an internal Jewish argument. As the early Christian movement separated from Judaism and Christian institutions acquired political power, Jesus was increasingly presented to Jews not as one of their own teachers but as the reason they needed to abandon their religion. The distance between Jesus and Judaism was no longer created only by what happened during his lifetime. It was deepened by what Christians later did in his name.

For many Jews, Jesus is inseparable from centuries of forced conversion, expulsions, pogroms, blood libels, missionary pressure and the false accusation that Jews collectively killed him. Christian institutions and rulers repeatedly invoked his name to justify violence against Jews. The cross that represented sacrificial love to Christians became, for many Jews, associated with terror. That history cannot be brushed aside. It does, however, explain why most Jewish communities have rejected Christian claims about Jesus and why approaching him as a teacher can feel dangerous.

Any honest attempt to reconsider Jesus within Judaism must therefore do two things at once: respect the wound and challenge the taboo. That challenge begins by recovering the historical truth it has obscured:

Jesus was one of them.

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That estrangement was reinforced by another, quieter process: a centuries-long game of telephone. As the Jesus story passed through translation, theology, art and culture, its meaning shifted. The message was not necessarily lost, but parts of it became more distorted or difficult to hear. The bread and wine remained visible while the Jewish table faded from view.

Christian art made the same transformation visible. Across centuries of European painting and sculpture, the Jewish teacher from Roman Judea was repeatedly remade in the image of the societies portraying him: pale-skinned, sometimes fair- or red-haired, dressed, crowned or enthroned like a European king. Artists naturally imagined the sacred through the world they knew. Yet the accumulated effect was profound. Jesus no longer looked like a Jew among Jews. He looked like the sovereign of the Christian civilization that had claimed him.

Sadly, something was lost for Christians in that transformation as well.

The loss was not Jesus himself; Christianity placed him at the center of its faith. But it became possible to possess the flower while forgetting the soil from which it grew. Jesus's Jewishness isn't merely a fact about Jesus. It is part of the meaning of Jesus.

How do you understand the New Covenant without the covenant that gives the word meaning? How do you understand the Passover Lamb without Passover? How do you understand the Messiah without Israel? How do you understand Jesus's use of Scripture without the Jewish scriptures? How do you understand his greatest commandments without Deuteronomy and Leviticus?

Remove that soil and something of Jesus himself disappears with it.

This is why recovering the Jewish Jesus is not simply an act of historical courtesy toward Judaism. It can also be an act of Christian self-understanding. Christians who recover the Judaism of Jesus do not diminish Christ. They encounter more completely the Jewish life in which Christians believe Christ was revealed.

And once Jesus is seen again as a Jew, the history of violence against Jews must also be seen differently. The massacres of Jews during the Crusades and other atrocities committed in Christianity's name cannot be laid at the feet of Jesus. Neither can the Holocaust, which grew from Nazi racial ideology while drawing upon centuries of anti-Jewish prejudice. Jesus taught mercy, love of one's enemies and care for people who were poor, vulnerable or pushed to the margins. He directed his earthly ministry first toward Israel. The Jewish people persecuted across that history were his own people. To mistreat them was not to honor Jesus. It was to mistreat those to whom Jesus himself belonged.

Nowhere is that contradiction clearer than in one of the great hypocrisies of Christian history: the accusation that Jews collectively killed Jesus. Crucifixion was a Roman method of execution, and Jesus was put to death under Roman authority. The Gospel accounts describe the involvement of particular Jewish authorities, but that cannot justify assigning guilt to an entire people. Jesus, his disciples and nearly everyone surrounding the events were themselves Jews.

The contradiction was not only historical; it was theological. Christianity teaches that the crucifixion became the means of salvation. How, then, could Christians claim salvation through the cross while using that same cross to condemn the Jewish people?

That very paradox extends even into Christianity's vision of eternity. Revelation calls Jesus "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" and "the Root of David," and the New Jerusalem bears the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on its gates. How does a Christian hate Jews and expect to spend eternity worshipping one?

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Given the complexity of this subject matter, a question remains: Is it possible to separate the teacher from the theology and history that later gathered around him? Perhaps the mistake is assuming there is only one question we can ask about Jesus: Was he the Messiah? Judaism's traditional answer is no. But that is not the only possible question. Was Jesus a significant Jewish teacher? Beneath that question lies another, more difficult one: Is it somehow a betrayal of Judaism even to study him?

Learning about Jesus is not worshipping him. It is not accepting him as Messiah, prophet or Son of God. It is not adopting the New Testament as Jewish scripture or believing that every saying attributed to him was recorded exactly as he spoke it. Judaism remains free to question him, disagree with him or reject any teaching attributed to him. If no conversion is being sought, no Christian doctrine is being imposed and no Jewish belief must be surrendered, what harm would it do to see Jesus as a teacher? What, precisely, would Judaism lose?

Perhaps the more unsettling possibility is that refusing even to examine Jesus allows those who persecuted Jews in his name to preserve the estrangement they helped create. Their violence should not be allowed to define his teachings. Nor should it have the final word on whether one of Judaism's own historical voices can be heard.

But allowing Jesus back into his proverbial hometown would involve more than acknowledging a historical fact. It would mean allowing Jewish readers to ask Jewish questions of him again. And this is where reclamation might create an opening—not through agreement, but through recognition. What might change is the assumption that one tradition must lose something whenever the other recognizes what belongs to it.

That possibility matters because the estrangement has impoverished both sides. Christianity inherited Jesus while often forgetting the Jewish world that made his teachings intelligible. Judaism preserved the world that formed Jesus while often leaving one of its most consequential historical figures outside the boundaries of ordinary Jewish study.

The irony is that both traditions already know something about the cost of estrangement. At the center of Christianity is a Jew who suffers humiliation, violence and death. Jewish history carries centuries of suffering inflicted in part by people acting under the sign of that same Jew. Jesus and the Jewish people therefore meet, however painfully, around the experience of suffering.

That may not be the worst place for understanding to begin.

Suffering does have a way of stripping away abstractions. At the level of doctrine, Jews and Christians may remain separated by questions that cannot be resolved. But at the level of human suffering, the distance can become smaller. A crucified Jew and a persecuted Jewish people do not erase theological disagreements, but they make hatred harder to defend.

Perhaps Jesus's own words about the Law offer one final way of seeing the problem. The language beneath the familiar translation carries an almost physical contrast: he had not come to loosen or dismantle the Law, but to bring it to fullness. The image reaches back toward a covenant whose commandments were written in stone. Yet across centuries, human beings repeatedly loosened Jesus from the Jewish tradition that formed him. The separation was ours, not his.

The final question, then, may not be what Jews or Christians should do with Jesus, but what this history tells us about ourselves.

Whatever one believes theologically about Jesus, he didn't conduct the Crusades. He didn't organize pogroms. He didn't force conversions. He didn't place collective guilt for his death upon generations of Jewish people. Human beings did those things and invoked him while doing them.

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We cannot place responsibility for those choices on the figure in whose name they were made.

Even if nothing else here proves persuasive, one conviction remains: Jesus doesn’t need rehabilitation. We do.

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