"The Messiah Confrontation: Pharisees Versus Sadducees and the Death of Jesus"

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A review essay.

THE MESSIAH CONFRONTATION:PHARISEES VERSUS SADDUCEES AND THE DEATH OF JESUSBy Israel KnohlEnglish translation: David MaiselPhiladelphia: Jewish Publication Society and Lincoln:University of Nebraska Press, 2022224 p.; $ 25,90

In his “Letter to Yemen” (c. 1172), Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1138-1204) referred to different types of historical anti-Judaism and attempts to destroy the Torah. The first “to lay claim to prophecy and to found a new Law, contrary to our divine religion” was

> Jesus the Nazarene . . . He impelled people to believe that he was sent by God . . . and that he was the Messiah . . . His purpose was to interpret the Torah in a fashion that would lead to its total annulment . . . The sages of blessed memory, aware of his objective before his reputation spread among our people, meted out a fitting punishment.[1]

Rambam, living in the Arab/Islamic world, with presumably limited contact with the Christian minority, perhaps had no reason to mince his words about the trial and death of Jesus. Unlike Rambam, Jews living in Christian countries and subject over the centuries to the charge - with murderous results – of collective and continued Jewish guilt for having killed Jesus would obviously have been sensitive to and embarrassed by Rambam’s explicit statement that the Jewish sages of his time gave Jesus the punishment he deserved. It was only in 1965 that collective Jewish “guilt” for killing Jesus was repudiated by the Second Vatican Council’s declaration “Nostra Aetate,”[2] contributing to a more positive and healthy relationship between Jews and Christians.

Regardless of what historical facts can be gleaned from ancient documents – none of them objective and contemporaneous and free from later ideologically motivated emendations and interpolations – Jews in Christian countries over the centuries had an obvious prudential interest in denying or at least underplaying Jewish involvement in, let alone blame for, the death of Jesus. Even serious academic studies, such as the 1968 book *The Trial and Death of Jesus*[3] by Haim Cohn (1911-2002), a scholarly jurist and Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court, questions the historicity of the diverse Gospel accounts, and emphasizes the Roman government’s involvement in the procedure (as acknowledged explicitly by the Roman historian Tacitus).[4]

A radically different approach to this contentious issue (including taking the accounts of the synoptic gospels seriously) has now been proposed by Israel Knohl, emeritus professor of Biblical studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Knohl acknowledges that the scholarly study of the trial and death of Jesus is not a purely academic exercise, but serves the purpose of a better relationship between Jews and Christians. In the Introduction to *The Messiah Confrontation: Pharisees Versus Sadducees and the Death of Jesus* he states:[5]

> This analysis has far-reaching consequences for the relationship between Jews and

> Christians. It demonstrates that the idea that the “Jewish people” killed Jesus is fundamentally mistaken . . . The second Vatican Ecumenical Council in Rome took the very positive step of declaring that the Jewish people as a whole should not be blamed for the death of Jesus. Important as this declaration was, it was not based on a detailed study of the historical events . . . This book offers the first-ever detailed historical basis for that declaration. I hope that *The Messiah Confrontation* will give rise to a new discourse between Jews and Christians and help to heal this vital relationship.

And at the end of the book, Knohl reiterates that hope:[6]

> It is my hope that this work will give rise to new discourse, understanding, and healing between Jews and Christians.

To summarize: according to Knohl, Jesus’ messianic conceptions were in accord with various themes in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the “Old Testament”), especially Second Isaiah and various Psalms, and were in many (not all) respects similar to the views of the majority of the Jews in the Land of Israel in his day, including the majority Pharisees, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qumran community.

Before reviewing some of Knohl’s claims, and questions I have about them, let me note that the book is eminently readable, and is accessible to the non-specialist. Its style is not technical, and the chapters are organized in a chronologically as well as thematically linear progression. Knohl also provides interesting insights into the political *Sitz im Leben* of various individuals, texts, or ideologies, and honestly presents opinions and interpretations which he ultimately rejects. Whether or not one ultimately accepts all of Knohl’s conclusions, his thesis is presented clearly and logically, provokes thought, and is worthy of serious consideration.

Knohl states his thesis from the outset and throughout the book. Although under Roman rule at the time the Jews in Judaea did not have the authority in capital cases, and it was the local Roman government which executed Jesus, and despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Jesus’ fellow Jews did not accept him as the messiah, Jesus and the Pharisees shared messianic conceptions, and the messianic ideological confrontation was not between Jesus and the Pharisees, but between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

In Ch. 1, “Birth of the messianic figure,” Knohl understands First Isaiah as despairing of the Davidic kings, and instead – like some Psalms – positing an exalted, even divine future messianic figure who will bring about ever-lasting righteousness, justice, and peace, and who (in 9:5-7) is called by divine names.

Whereas First Isaiah lived in Jerusalem with its stable (if not always righteous) Davidic monarchy of some 250 years, Hoshea (discussed in Ch. 2, “Rejection of the kingship concept”) lived in the northern kingdom, with no fixed dynasty or capital, and his period (c. 750 BCE) was characterized by political instability. Hoshea’s opposition to monarchy and human power is symbolized by his describing God not as king but as lover and father. Similarly, the book of Deuteronomy, a product of the north (thus the centrality of Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal) sees the institution of the monarchy as a concession to human demands (17:14 ff), like I Samuel 8:5, and therefore the king subject to restrictions.

Ch. 3, “Reconceiving the Messiah” describes the extension of the messianic idea by Jeremiah and Second Isaiah. With the end of the Davidic line (the exile and blinding of Zedekiah; the assassination of Gedaliah), there had to be a different paradigm. Whereas the earlier Assyrians enforced “ethnic cleansing” through exile and assimilation, the Babylonians permitted a degree of

ethnic cultural autonomy, and the Judaeans in Babylonia could substitute the Sabbath and the synagogue as surrogates for the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. With Persian rule, not a Davidic king but Cyrus – who permitted the exiles to return to Jerusalem – is called God's anointed by Second Isaiah (45:1). The messianic figure is no longer an exalted and victorious ruler, but the "suffering servant" (chapters 52-53), a theme later adopted, of course, by Christians as applying to Jesus, but at least in diverse Jewish interpretations as applying to Moses, or to the people of Israel, or even to the prophet himself (in chapters 56-66). Whereas for First Isaiah it is God who teaches and judges the nations, for Second Isaiah it is the servant who does this.

This leads to "The rise and fall of 'the branch'" (Ch. 4) in the Second Temple period, in which, under Persian rule, the Jews, led by the High Priest, but not a king, could have a religious, but not a political revival, and Zerubabel, who might have rekindled political hopes, rapidly disappeared without further mention or explanation. For Malachi (2:7), the last prophet, the High Priest who teaches knowledge and Torah and is God's messenger (*mal'akh*) or "angel."

Teaching the Torah was now central, and in Ch. 5, "Shifting sands of Torah authority" teachers replace the Temple, priests, and kings as the bearers of authority, a process which continued after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Knohl calls that process "democratization of learning." Both the Pharisees and Jesus belonged to this group of "popular teachers," as opposed to the earlier elite priestly class.

The "Torah's distinction between the human and the divine" undergoes a change, described in Ch. 6, especially in some of the Psalms, in which the king is described as semi-divine, adopted by God, and sitting next to God, thus providing precedents for later attributes of Jesus. Daniel, attributed to the 2nd-century BCE Maccabean revolt against the Syrian-Greeks, was responsible for "Introducing resurrection of the dead into Jewish thought" (Ch. 7), in response to the crisis of belief. Whereas in earlier biblical times the Israelites saw themselves as having been punished for abandoning and violating the Torah, now under Antiochus Epiphanes Jews were being punished for their loyal observance of the Torah.[7] Daniel's solution to this fundamental injustice was the belief in a resurrected afterlife, a belief later shared by the Pharisees and Jesus, but rejected (for lack of biblical basis) by other Jews, including the Sadducees.[8] "The Sadducees' denial of the doctrine of reward" (Ch. 8) thus preserved the Torah's strict distinction between the human and the divine, a distinction that would be blurred or even eliminated by an eternal afterlife.

Second Isaiah's concept of "the suffering servant" was then adopted and developed further in "Qumran accounts of an exalted and suffering messiah" (Ch. 9), in which Isaiah 52:14 was accordingly emended. According to Knohl, this was a deliberate emendation, not a scribal error. The community's dual messianism is reflected in their texts, which speak of a political and priestly warrior king and of a suffering messiah atoning for the sins of others.

Knohl then turns to "the Pharisees' expectations of an imminent messiah" (Ch. 10). Because of the Pharisees' affirmation of "the oral Torah," their traditions could not be committed to writing (although after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that prohibition had to be reversed, in order to preserve the oral traditions). Our knowledge of the Pharisees is accordingly derived from external sources, including the works of Josephus, Qumran documents, the New Testament, and later rabbinic references. In the apocryphal "Psalms of Solomon" 17:32 (together with *Megillat Ta`anit* the only pre-70 CE Pharisaic documents we have) we find a reference to "their king, messiah-Lord" (*kai basileus auton xristos kyriou*). Although various scholars regard this as a later Christian emendation, Knohl maintains that this is not an emendation, but the correct reading, reflecting the expectation of divine intervention in reaction to Roman military involvement in the country, especially in the centers of Jewish rebellions against the Romans in the Galilee following the death of Herod in 4 BCE, the year of the birth of Jesus.

"Jesus' messianic conception" is elaborated in Ch. 11. Following his baptism by John, which

exposed him to Qumran messianism,[9] Jesus did not claim royal Davidic descent, but spoke of himself as the son of God and suffering servant (as Knohl discussed, themes found in some earlier Jewish literature). Jesus' behavior in the Temple was offensive to the priests, but was seen by the Romans as fomenting rebellion. For the Sadducees, then, the confrontation with Jesus was religious, and was based on conflicting messianic ideas. For the Romans, the confrontation was political, which is why the sign attached to the cross on which he was executed cynically called him the king of the Jews.

Knohl's final chapter (11) brings us to his analysis of "the trial of Jesus" in the house of the High Priest (notably: not in the court, headed by the "Nasi" [president of the court]; and at night, not during the daytime when the court held session). Whereas the membership of the court consisted of both Sadducee and Pharisee judges, this trial was purely Sadducean, with no involvement of Pharisees (according to the New Testament accounts). In terms of procedure, the Pharisaic (later rabbinic) law precluded conviction based solely on self-incrimination, and the charge of blasphemy could only apply when the accused had explicitly pronounced the ineffable name of God, not any other term for God. For the Sadducees, Jesus' claim that the messiah, called "my lord" (punctuated *adoni*, not *adonai*) in his messianic reading of Psalm 110:1, who is higher than David and is the son of God and sitting next to God, was itself blasphemous. When Jesus replied to the High Priest, who asked whether "you are the messiah, the son of the blessed One (i.e., God)", Jesus replied "I am, and you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of Power" (Mark 14:61-62). For the Sadducee priests, who in any event rejected the notion of the messiah, such a claim would clearly have made him guilty of blasphemy, even without the Pharisaic condition of pronouncing the name of God. And so Jesus was convicted, by his own words, in the home of the Sadducee High Priest, and (since Jews had no authority in capital cases) handed over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for confirmation of the conviction and execution.

This is the case Knohl makes for trial and execution of Jesus in the background not of Jewish-Christian disagreements (in any event, there weren't yet any Christians), but of internal Jewish disagreements between the majority of the Jews (including Jesus) who were Pharisees, or who (like the Qumran community) agreed with the Pharisees on their messianic conceptions, and on the other hand the Sadducees who rejected such messianism.

As mentioned above, Knohl presents his thesis clearly and logically. Nevertheless, I have some difficulties with it. One of my problems with Knohl's thesis is his understanding in several places of theophoric names in the Tanakh, especially in the passage in Isaiah 9:5-6 referred to several times, which plays such an important role in Christian theology and exegesis. Knohl accepts the interpretation, central to a Christological reading of the passage, that the names describe attributes of the person thus named. But is that correct? Is it not more likely that such names – like Michael, Daniel, Gabriel, Adoniah, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Joshua, Jonathan (and even my name Raphael) – refer not to the power, character, or attributes of the person, but to the power and/or attributes of God? Another problem in this passage is its referent: to whom is Isaiah referring? The verbs *yulad* (born), *nitan* (given), *va-tehi* (was), and *va-yiqra* (called) are all perfect verbs, ordinarily understood as past-tense. That grammatical point is one reason traditional Jewish exegesis tends to identify the referent as someone in Isaiah's time, often understood as Hezekiah. Of course, grammatical considerations aside, later Jews familiar with Christian readings of this passage would have been motivated to find an actual historical figure in the time of Isaiah, to counter the Christian reading. On the surface of it, the grammar would not support reading the passage as referring to a future person (understood by Christians as Jesus), unless we have here a case of "prophetic perfect tense" – the wished-for future is so certain that the prophet describes it as already having been established.

As mentioned above, Knohl also agrees with the Christological reading of the text in the apocryphal Psalms of Solomon 17:32 "their king, messiah-Lord" (*kai basileus auton xristos kyriou*), as opposed to other scholars who regard this as a later Christian emendation.

Another problem I have is not what Knohl says but what he does not discuss, namely the *`am ha-are?* ("the people of the land"), mentioned (so far as I can tell) only once in passing on page 125. Although the term later came to be used in Jewish literature to refer to an individual ignorant Jew, its original usage was collective, and referred to the uneducated and uncultured rural classes, whose knowledge of the law and observance of the commandments was probably at best rather loose and minimal. With the exception of his limited visits to Jerusalem, Jesus' brief career took place in the Galilee, remote geographically and probably also culturally (at least to some extent) from the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem. By the descriptions of the people who came to hear Jesus and/or witnessed the miracles attributed to him in the Gospels, they would seem to have been members of this uneducated (or minimally educated) rural class. So Knohl's representing the Pharisees as the majority of the people may be an exaggeration or (even from a Jewish point of view) wishful thinking, at least in terms of referring to the Jews outside of the Jerusalem area. Assuming I'm correct on this, the question is whether and how it would affect Knohl's overall thesis, but the existence of large numbers of the *`am ha-are?*, especially in the Galilee, to whom Jesus seems to have appealed, should not be ignored.

Which point brings us to the Pharisees, with many or most of whose doctrines Jesus seems to have been in basic agreement, as Knohl states. The first question relates to the name *perushim*, which literally means "the separated ones." That may reflect their punctilious observance of the laws of diet and purity, which prevented them from eating with, or at least the food of, others, especially the *`am ha-are?*. However, was this a term these Jews applied to themselves? Or, regardless of whatever name – if they had a name – they applied to themselves, could this name have been what others called them, given their "being separated" in such basic matters as the food they ate? Are there not other instances in the history of religion in which the name of a group began with what they were called negatively by others, and only thereafter eventually adopted, however reluctantly, by the group itself? Think of Mormons, Quakers, Shakers, and even Protestants.

Then the question of Jesus' relation to the Pharisees needs to be further explored. Of course we find in the New Testament records of arguments between Jesus and "the Pharisees"[10] (all the Pharisees? some Pharisees?), although at least in some cases, such as washing one's hands before eating bread, or plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-2), the actual issue isn't clear. Were the Pharisaic rules, here called the "traditions of the elders" (i.e., "oral Torah" of the Pharisees?) already well established at that point, or was there still an as-yet undetermined practice? And to what extent was Jesus himself accused of laxity (Luke 11:37-38), as opposed to his coming to the defense of his disciples who violated the strict practice (Matthew 15:1-2, Mark 7:1-5)?

So now the question is whether Knohl's interesting thesis is correct. His thesis is well argued, and (as mentioned) he mentions various opposing interpretations of some critical passages. There is, however, an essential and inescapable difference between a plausible possibility and a definitive proof, which would certainly be impossible to expect 2000 years after the fact, and with no unbiased, disinterested, and unimpeachable contemporaneous documents. All these details I question (and others may find different points to question), affect our ability to agree, to a greater or lesser extent, with Knohl's thesis. However, while they are academically interesting, they are ultimately existentially irrelevant for Jews and Christians.

In light of that problem, one must question whether "the quest of the historical Jesus"[11] can ever succeed. Moreover, will it ever be possible to isolate completely the "historical Jesus" from the Christ of Christian tradition? Despite the existence of fanciful theories in books of fiction, even if some unknown document were someday be discovered in a remote cave or hiding place, would that change basic Jewish or Christian belief? After all, the essential question dividing Jews and Christians is not whether there was a man named Jesus who was executed on a cross in Jerusalem some 2000 years ago, but whether God died on that cross (and was subsequently

resurrected).

As that (former) Pharisee Paul, by his own words a student of Gamaliel, put it:[12]

> If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, who he did not raise . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins . . . But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.

That fundamental question of faith, by definition, is not a question that can be resolved by historians or archeologists, no matter what documents or material evidence they can find.

AFTERWORD

Permit me one final existential but not academic problem that I have with Knohl's interesting thesis. Kohl's explicit aim, as noted above, was not limited to a purely academic exercise. As he stated at the beginning of the book (to "give rise to a new discourse between Jews and Christians and help to heal this vital relationship") and at its end ("my hope that this work will give rise to new discourse, understanding, and healing between Jews and Christians"), he hopes for the book to ameliorate Jewish-Christian relations.

However, can this book – or any other book dealing with historical and theological issues – achieve such an admirable purpose? The Roman Catholic church a generation ago (1965) formally and clearly repudiated the notion of collective Jewish "guilt" then or since then for the death of Jesus (leading later in 1993 to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel in the time of Pope John Paul II). Since "Nostra Aetate" many other churches have also reevaluated their attitudes towards and relations with Judaism and the Jewish people. In addition, following Israel's victory in the 1967 "Six Day War" and the unification of Jerusalem, millenial beliefs have similarly led various Evangelical churches to a far more positive relationship with the Jewish people in general and the State of Israel in particular.

In that sense, may the thesis of this book constitute a sort of boomerang, by refocusing attention on alleged Jewish complicity in the death of Jesus? Is there not an implicit, and obviously unintended, categorization here of the "good Jews" – the Pharisees who, Knohl argues would have acquitted Jesus – versus the "bad Jews" – the Sadducees, who (according to Knohl) convicted Jesus and handed him over to the Roman governor for execution? In which case, even if Knohl's thesis is academically correct in all regards (despite my reservations), is this not a distinction without a difference for contemporary antisemites? Antisemites, whether of the racial type on the far-right, or on the "progressive" type on the far left, have one thing in common, and that is that they hate Jews and/or Judaism, and deny the right of the State of Israel to exist.[13]

Large sections of the western world today are secular and effectively post-Christian. The new forms of antisemitism, often taking the form of virulent anti-Zionism, denying the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in the State of Israel (as opposed to legitimate criticism of specific Israeli government policies), are not theological in nature, even if they are possibly unconsciously fed by contempt for Jews and Judaism over the centuries of Christian culture, now thankfully repudiated explicitly by so many churches.

Antisemitism is far from dead, less than eighty years after the end of the Shoah.[14] Is there any reason to hope that academic studies, such as this book, will change that age-old phenomenon? Are antisemites likely to read, understand, and be persuaded to change their ingrained prejudice

because of a book which attempts to show that the Sadducees, rather than the Pharisees (rabbinic Judaism being "the heirs of the Pharisees") were responsible for, or at least complicit in, the trial and death of Jesus?

In his revolutionary Der Judenstaat ("The Jewish State"), published in 1896, which led to the establishment of the Zionist movement (1897) and half a century later (1948) to the State of Israel, Theodor Herzl wrote of

> the erroneous assumption that antisemitism can be refuted by rational arguments. We are presumably as much hated for our merits as for our faults.[15]

As Herzl understood, it is precisely the irrational nature of prejudice and hatred, unrelated to facts, that render them impervious to rational argument. Is it likely that shifting alleged Jewish complicity and guilt in the death of Jesus from those who could be construed as the "good Jews" (the ancient Pharisees, who had much in common with Jesus, and thereby, implicitly, their heirs in rabbinic Judaism today) to those construed as the "bad Jews" (the ancient Sadducees who, Knohl argues, tried Jesus) will "lead to healing between Jews and Christians," let alone between Jews and today's post-Christian antisemites? I fear not, but *halevai* – would that it were so.

Raphael Jospe is a retired professor of Jewish philosophy. He and his wife live in Jerusalem, and are the parents of seven children, and (at last count) the grandparents of 24 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren. He is the author or editor of over 20 books and numerous articles, and served as the editor of the Jewish Philosophy division of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd edition). He serves as a Lt. Colonel in the National Rescue Unit of the Israeli Defense Forces reserves.