# A Documentary History of Jewish-Christian Relations: From Antiquity to the Present Day

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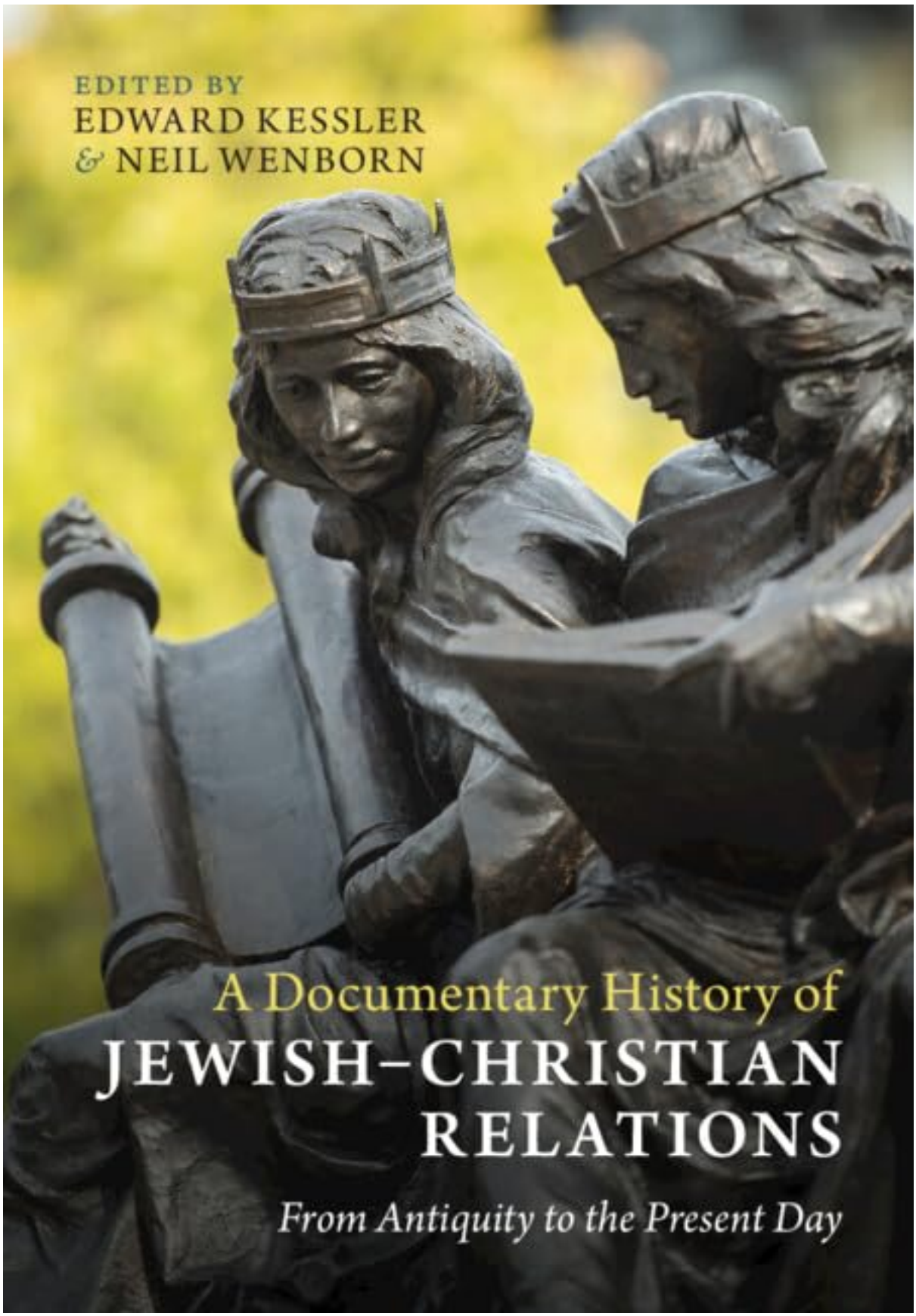
**Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn, Eds.A Documentary History of Jewish-Christian Relations: From Antiquity to the Present DayCambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, hardcover, xvii + 588 pp.**




*A Documentary History of Jewish-Christian Relations* is a significant accom-plishment in this field of study. This is the first comprehensive anthology of documents that covers the span of the encounter between Jews and Christians from antiquity to the contemporary era. While there have been other notable collections of sources, especially Jacob Marcus and Marc Saperstein's *The Jews in Christian Europe*, the scope and range of this present volume is unmatched.

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The editors of the volume, Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn, organized the volume into three major sections with nine total chapters. Prior to these chapters is an excellent introduction that on its own could be profitably read as a general sur-vey of the history of Christian-Jewish relations. Each chapter covers a discrete era and an individual editor for each chapter both presents an overall introduction to the period while also offering a commentary on each document. A bibliography accompanies each introduction and the individual documents. In addition, there are two appendices meant to be case studies of particularly illuminating moments of Christian-Jewish relations. The first is an appendix concerning the exegetical en-counter between Jews and Christians in late antiquity. The second is a collection of varied institutional statements regarding Christian-Jewish relations in the period since the end of World War Two.

Part One of this book begins in the first century and goes up to 900 CE and contains within it three chapters. Chapter One, from Matthew Novenson, focuses primarily on Pauline and gospel materials. Reflecting the current scholarly consen-sus on the Jewish origins of the New Testament, Novenson's commentaries primarily concern in-group tensions among Jesus believers and how the content of these texts would be later received and interpreted to foment anti-Judaism. Chapter Two, edited by James Carleton Page, covers Christian sources from the second to ninth centuries CE. This chapter contains many of the standard texts that scholars would expect, like those from Justin Martyr, John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo and canons from church councils. But there are also documents that are not as com-monly included in standard narratives of Christian-Jewish relations, such as material from the Pseudo-Clementine literature, Syriac literature, and inscriptions. However, there is surprisingly little material on the Western Latin tradition. For example, Pope Gregory I's papal judgment *Sicut Iudais* of 598 is not included, de-spite its great significance concerning the place of Jews in Western Europe during the era of Christendom. Finally, Chapter Three, edited by Philip Alexander, con-cerns rabbinic literature between the second and ninth centuries. Alexander illustrates how rabbinic literature reflects various dynamics of Jewish encounters with Christianity, arguing that rabbinic literature responds more to Christianity than might initially be assumed. At the same time, these texts reveal the difficulty of writing a simple historical account of Jewish responses to Christianity due to the problems of the dating of sources and their ambiguity.

Kessler composed the appendix to Part One that considers the exegetical en-counters between Jews and Christians. He uses this material to show that contact was closer between these two communities than many of the polemical texts in the prior two chapters suggest. This thesis also reflects a shift in scholarship in the modern era towards appreciating the complex relationships between Jews and Christians that emerged in late antiquity. The materials assembled focus on exeget-ical encounters in Palestine prior to the seventh century and concerning four discrete topics: the identity of the Messiah; the unity of God; the abrogation of the Torah; and the election of Israel. This is accomplished by engaging in a compara-tive study of four contested biblical passages that respectively concern these themes. On its own, this appendix can serve as a useful introduction to how Jews and Christians shared and competed over the Scriptures, making it highly adaptable to course instruction.

Part Two covers the years 900 to 1800 and contains two chapters that run from the medieval period to the Enlightenment. Chapter Four, by Saperstein and Kessler, deals with the Western medieval period. It offers a fairly standard accounting of the encounter between Christians and Jews that is not dissimilar to Marcus and Saperstein's previously mentioned anthology. While the introduction states that it seeks to redress the so-called "lachrymose view" of Jewish history, little documen-tary material is provided to do this. Rather, the chapter offers a fairly standard narrative of crusades, blood libels, accusations of host desecration, papal decrees, the burning of the Talmud, expulsions, and the Inquisition. While the chapter's introduction mentions the reality of social and economic exchange between Jews and Christians, no documents illustrate this. The most illuminating entry in this chapter is a selection of passages from Thomas Aquinas' commentary on the Letter to the Romans that illuminates both the possibility for mitigating

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Christian super-sessionism and the complex (and incomplete) ways that medieval Christian theologians thought about post-biblical Judaism. Chapter Five by Paul Kerry co-vers the Reformation and Enlightenment eras, running from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Kerry uses documents to highlight the complex Reformation legacies regarding Jews and Judaism, especially in the humanist and Hebraist movements. The energies unleashed by the Reformation do not leave Judaism un-touched. And, the cultural currents of an unmoored Christendom propel a Jewish search for belonging. This continues in the Enlightenment era in which documents show that Jews are both offered the first tastes of political emancipation while be-coming newly denigrated as symbols of the forces that opposed progress and rationalism. These documents illustrate how the unraveling of the established as-sumptions of a unified Christendom led to a greater exchange between Christians and Jews, offering opportunities for greater tolerance of Jews while making them new targets for conversion to either Christianity or a new form of rationalism stripped of primitive (Jewish) religion.

Part Three covers the period from 1800 to the contemporary era, with four chapters that become more finely grained as they approach the twenty-first century. Chapter Six runs from 1800 to 1914, covering the rise of modern antisemitism and political Zionism. Kessler selects documents that illustrate a period of increasing openness in dialogue between Jews and Christians, especially as Jews embraced emancipation in Western Europe and emigrated from the Pale of Settlement. At the same time, Jews continued to serve as scapegoats for contemporary problems, as seen in documents that illustrate the multiple movements that emerged from new forms of theological and racial antisemitism (see documents by Karl Marx and Richard Wagner) to the rise of Christian restorationist biblical interpretation that embraced the rise of early Jewish Zionism, as seen in a document from Lord Shaftesbury. A very useful contribution is a series of documents concerning the emergence of Protestant biblical criticism that reinscribed supersessionist views of Jews and Judaism (as illustrated via Adolf von Harnack) and responded to by Jew-ish intellectuals Leo Baeck and Claude Montefiore. Such exchanges will become the basis for an entirely new approach to biblical criticism that the final chapter of this volume documents. Chapter Seven, edited by Victoria Barnett, covers the pe-riod from World War One to the Holocaust. Barnett highlights two crucial issues. The first is the inability of Christian leaders to perceive how their history and the-ology could lead to the mistreatment of the Jews. Barnett illustrates this with documents that touch on the inadequate responses of the Confessing Church move-ment to the rise of Nazism. Barnett effectively uses sources from Irene Harand and Jacques Maritain to show early responses to the theological problems posed by Nazi antisemitism. Barnett also shows that a second crucial issue was the rise of antisemitic and fascist Christian movements in this era, with material from the Ger-man Christian Faith Movement, from both supporters and opponents. At the same time, key Jewish responses to the Shoah, such as an anonymous document from the Warsaw Ghetto on the problem of surrendering Jewish children to Christian fami-lies, give voice to Jewish experiences during perilous times. Many of the documents in this chapter would be excellent resources for teaching undergraduate and seminary students about this era and the issues they raise.

The final two chapters of this volume deal with the period after the Holocaust. Karma Ben Johanan edited the materials for Chapter Eight, concerning the period from the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 to the election of Pope John Paul II in 1978. These documents illustrate a key period in the development and maturation of Christian-Jewish relations. On the Jewish end, documents like Jules Isaac's *Jesus and Israel* (1948) or Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith* (1950) show the willingness of Jewish thinkers to push Christians to reconceptualize their views of Jews and Judaism. There is a reciprocal response that emerges from Christian sources. *Nostra Aetate* is an obvious watershed document from 1965, but this chap-ter also reveals the degree to which thinkers like Karl Barth, Krister Stendahl, and Dorothee Sölle were willing to reconceive of Christian theology in light of the Shoah. This chapter also helpfully illustrates how the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 required Christian reappraisals of its theology. This also revealed a divide between Western and Middle Eastern Christian churches. This chapter help-fully illustrates the thinking of the latter in documents from George Khodr and Damaskinos Papandreou. The

“flourishing of Jewish-Christian relations” is the topic of the final chapter, running up to the year 2020. Here Mary C. Boys focuses on the scholarship that has developed from the beginning of the papacy of John Paul II as an essential element that supports the institutional engagement between Jews and Christians. Key areas of scholarship include biblical and historical studies that have ushered in new understandings of Christian and rabbinic origins as over-lapping, shared, and contested narratives, as seen in the work of scholars like John Gager, Paula Fredriksen, Israel Yuval, Amy-Jill Levine, and Marc Brettler. Boys also accounts for a wide range of theological topics from a theology of Israel (Paul Van Buren) to Christology (Barbara Meyer and Willie James Jennings). Boys in-corporates selections from two particularly contested issues in contemporary theology: Christian Zionism and anti-Judaism’s manifestation in liberationist the-ologies. The volume concludes with a second appendix, this one containing a range of institutional statements concerning Christian-Jewish relations from 1947 to 2023, revealing the complexity of the on-going encounter between Christians and Jews.

The strengths of this volume are clear. It puts together into one place a rich collection of the entire history of the encounter between Christians and Jews. The material is introduced well and with historiographical nuance. The bibliographic information provided is up to date and varied. The book as a whole lends itself well for use in courses and can be profitably excerpted as appropriate. In short, this vol-ume is unparalleled in the service it provides for the study of the history of Christian-Jewish relations.

This is not to say that this book is not without its shortcomings. No one book, especially a historical anthology, can possibly cover everything. And yet, there are some elements that do call out for a fuller treatment. One is the odd periodization and treatment of the medieval period. By ending the first two chapters at the year 900 and then beginning the third chapter with the events of the First Crusade in 1096, there ends up being an odd elision of the early medieval period. This is be-cause most of the material in Chapter One only goes through the late antique period. There is one document from the Carolingian period, the *Annals of St-Bertin*, that deals with a case of conversion. But the story of the rich exchange between Chris-tians and Jews in Visigothic Spain or the ruminations on the Tabernacle by the Venerable Bede or the anti-Jewish writings of Agobard of Lyons, to give some examples, are unexplored. Moreover, the treatment of the medieval period is por-trayed as more or less lachrymose, despite the intentions of the editors. No examples of nuanced intellectual and cultural exchanges, like that between the schools of Rashi and St. Victory or the artistic workshops of Christians and Jews, are provided. This gap makes teaching the medieval period out of this volume more difficult because it requires supplementing an already extensive collection. On a different note, Chapters Five and Six are surprisingly focused primarily on Western European sources, offering little on life in Eastern Europe and Russia (like the emergence of the Haskalah) or how Christians and Jews interacted as minorities in the Ottoman Empire. Chapter Six’s treatment on the nineteenth century is thin on developments in the United States like the Blackstone Memorial or General Grant’s expulsion of Jews during the Civil War or the interaction of Catholic and Jewish immigrant communities. Finally, while Chapter Nine’s focus on the contribution of contemporary scholarship to the flourishing of relations is welcome, it also misses out on the chance to document some of the crucial events in Christian-Jew-ish relations over the past fifty years, including Christian debates over proselytizing Jews, the rise of messianic Jewish movements, the increasing rate of intermarriage between Christians and Jews, and controversies over public antisemitism, such as the 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*.

The framing of the last chapter in terms of the flourishing of relations raises a larger question about the historiography of *A Documentary History of Jewish-Christian Relations*. Does this volume represent a Whiggish view of history? That is, does the assemblage of documents assume a teleology of progress in which the superstitions and evils of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism, once revealed in the Holocaust, lead to an inexorable process of liberalizing moves and tolerance? While some of the later documents included, like the *Kairos Palestine* statement or the stated commitment of Southern Baptists to Jewish conversion to Christ, offer minor notes, the

overall thrust of the last two chapters does imply a narrative of progress. This is especially the case given that one author is Roman Catholic and the other specializes in Catholic-Jewish relations. It is precisely in this realm of dialogue that the most progress can be seen. Perhaps because this book was com-pleted before October 7, 2023 but published after it, readers might have a different sense of where Christian-Jewish relations are now heading. This is not to say that only a grim future lies ahead. Rather, it is to note that the remarkable developments in Christian-Jewish relations from 1947 to 2020 (the end point of the volume) oc-curred while a liberal political consensus held in the West that informed the work of both Christians and Jews. And yet, the past few years have heralded a shift to a more illiberal order. What that holds for Christian-Jewish relations will only be anthologized decades, if not centuries, from now. At this moment, part of what we have to navigate the future with is a knowledge of the past. And Kessler and Wen-born have provided excellent tools for doing just that.

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