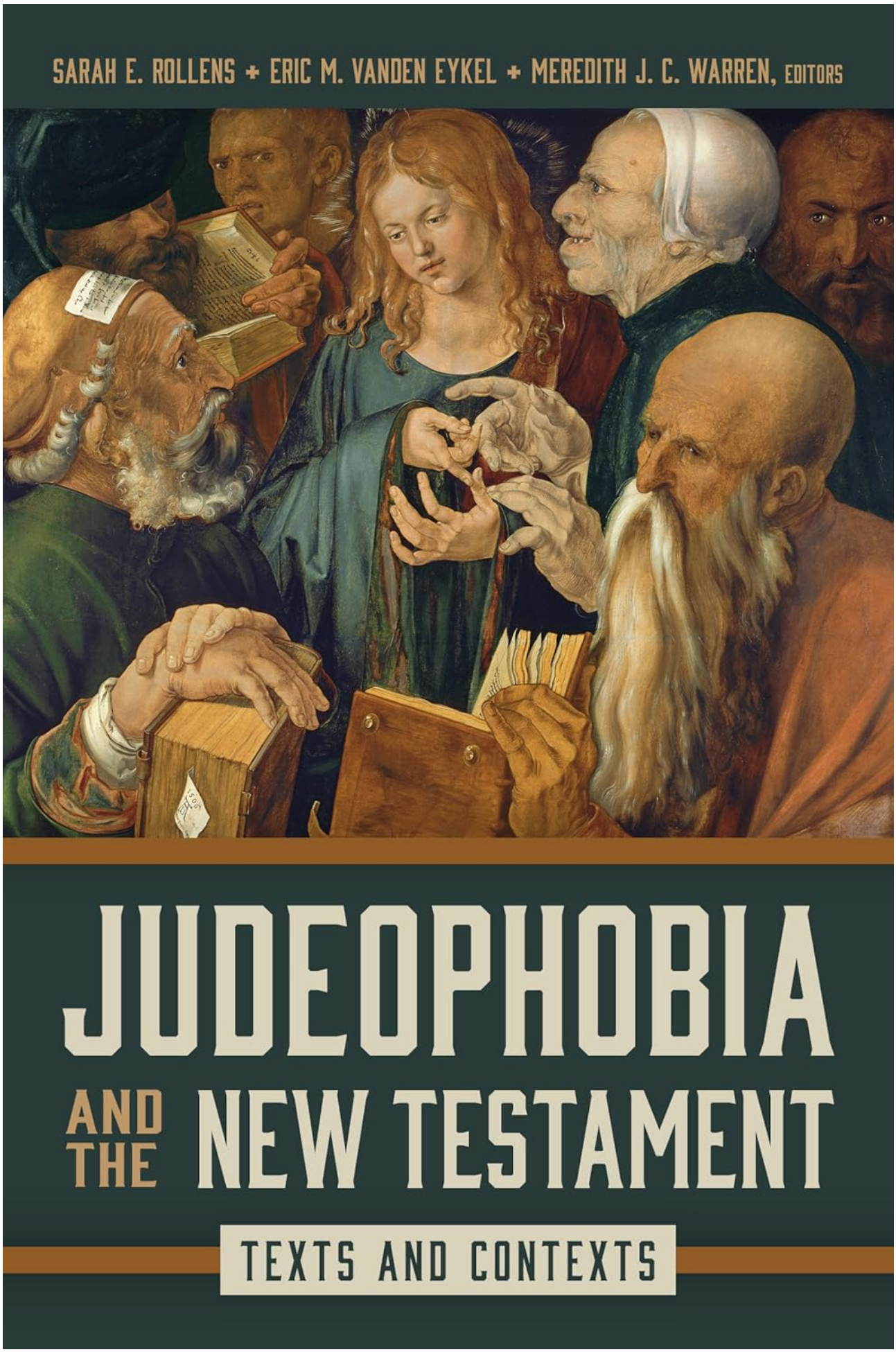
Judeophobia and the New Testament

01.05.2026 | Ethan Schwartz

Sarah E. Rollens, Eric M. Vanden Eykel, and Meredith J. C. Warren, Eds.Judeophobia and the New Testament: Texts and ContextsGrand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025x + 396 pp.


SARAH E. ROLLENS + ERIC M. VANDEN EYKEL + MEREDITH J. C. WARREN, EDITORS
JUDEOPHOBIA
AND THE NEW TESTAMENT
TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

All scriptures say negative things about various groups, posing difficulties for contemporary believers who value inclusivity. Nevertheless, the New Testament is uniquely challenging because it is so focused on one specific group: Jews. Animos-ity toward Jews and Judaism is tightly interwoven with the New Testament's guiding ideas. The fact that many of the ancient authors were probably Jewish themselves does not change the fact that they wrote things that have inspired Chris-tians to hate Jews ever since.

The new edited volume *Judeophobia and the New Testament: Texts and Con-texts* addresses the consequences of these dynamics in academic New Testament studies and in settings where it is taught—especially undergraduate and seminary classrooms. According to the editors, the idea emerged from social media conver-sations among scholars who were disturbed by just how deeply their students—and, worse, some of their colleagues—had unconsciously absorbed the New Testament's anti-Jewish ideas. Many were surprised to discover that there was no published resource for addressing this problem. (In the interest of disclosure, it seems that I myself participated in those conversations. In a teaching handout that was crowdsourced online and included in the book as an appendix, I am credited as a contributor.)

Judeophobia and the New Testament fills this lacuna, "aim[ing] to help New Testament scholarship account for [anti-Jewish] interpretations, take responsibility for them when necessary, and encourage the discipline to push back on rising anti-Jewish rhetoric and violence" (1). To accomplish this, the book gathers an impres-sive group of more than thirty scholars—mostly Christian or of Christian extraction, but some Jews as well, and encompassing various institutional contexts, professional statuses, and methodological orientations. "Our hope," the editors ex-plain, "is that pointing out diverse ways of being Jewish in ancient times … may go some way to supporting the necessary reminder for the present that Jews and Judaism are not monoliths" (10).

Readers will immediately note the use of the term "Judeophobia" instead of the more familiar "antisemitism" or "anti-Judaism." The introduction explains this choice: "Judeophobia" is helpfully pliable and avoids undue emphasis on race or religion. While the editors' reasoning will not convince everyone, they are certainly correct that all such terminology is heuristic and should not substitute for actual analysis. Whatever we call it, the topic is clear: negative attitudes toward Jews and Judaism in the New Testament and in its reception.

The book contains two sections. The first, "Contexts and Pedagogy," offers thematic essays on background dynamics that inform the problem. These include Judeophobia in the classroom, in various subfields of New Testament research, and in scholarly and popular presentations of ancient Judaism. The second section, "Texts in the New Testament and Beyond," offers targeted essays on Judeophobia in every canonical New Testament book and four extracanonical ones. All of the chapters are well suited to teaching: accessibly written, short, and supplemented with discussion questions. Two appended handouts for classroom use round out the volume.

Taken individually, several chapters in *Judeophobia and the New Testament* are welcome contributions. For instance, Sara Parks incisively unpacks Judeopho-bic motifs in feminist New Testament scholarship—a situation sure to surprise many liberal Christian readers. Adele Reinhartz lucidly summarizes her decades of pathbreaking scholarship on Jews in the Gospel of John. Alana M. Vincent and Mark A. Godin compellingly show how the prevailing universalist reading of Galatians "entails the erasure of anything distinctly Jewish" and "creates conditions that justify religious coercion and Christian supremacy" (207).

Considered as a whole, however, the picture is different. *Judeophobia and the New Testament* ultimately founders on, paradoxically enough, the very eagerness with which it pursues its admirable task. It proceeds rather like the Sermon on the Mount, repeatedly declaring, "You have heard that it was said, 'Jews and Judaism are bad'—but I say to you: Jews and Judaism are good." As a Jew, I appreciate this message! Yet the pattern quickly becomes tiresome. By

focusing so relentlessly on the New Testament's caricature of Jews and Judaism, the book reifies its own ver-sion of this caricature—positive rather than negative, but equally simplistic. It does not help readers appreciate the more complex ways that Jews have understood themselves, whether in antiquity or today.

For an illustrative example, consider James F. McGrath's chapter on New Tes-tament Judeophobia in Western popular culture. His main case study is a scene in the classic 1984 comedy *Ghostbusters.* The protagonists frantically warn that an imminent supernatural calamity will be "Old Testament biblical," "real wrath-of-God-type stuff." McGrath notes the casual association of the Old Testament with destruction. "The scriptwriters," he explains, "created characters who assume these elements are characteristic of Jewish scripture but not the New Testament, when that is not at all the case. They expect the film's audience to share this superses-sionist assumption" (89).

This critique might seem reasonable—but it faces one small problem: *Ghostbusters* was made by Jews. It was directed and produced by Ivan Reitman, whose parents survived the Holocaust, and co-written by star Harold Ramis. In this con-text, it seems more likely to me that the scene is slyly *mocking* the Judeophobic trope, not reflexively parroting it. Part of what is so funny is how it captures the absurd ways that people invoke the "wrathful God of the Old Testament." (McGrath conveniently omits that the scene also satirizes a Catholic cardinal, who prompts an eyebrow-raise from Ramis's Jewish-coded character.) It is simply in-credible to hear McGrath, a Christian New Testament scholar, charge the child of Holocaust survivors with Judeophobia. So zealous to defend Jews from crude Christian humor, he misses the possibility that Christianity is actually the butt of a Jewish joke.

A related dynamic appears in Nathan L. Shedd's chapter on Matthew. This is almost entirely devoted to the infamous verse that has long been taken to suggest eternal Jewish culpability for Jesus's crucifixion: "Then the people as a whole an-swered [to Pilate], "[Jesus's] blood be on us and on our children!" (Matt 27:25). Shedd situates this in its first-century context and later reception. Matthew's "cul-tural schematic," he concludes, "was an integral component in the formation of an even broader cultural ideology that located Jews of all times and places at the center of guilt in the death of Jesus" (108).

This is certainly true. However, Shedd says nothing about the common notion that Matthew is also the *most Jewish* gospel. For instance, Jesus famously declares, "Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:19). This concrete emphasis on law/Torah is something that an observant Jew could find ap-pealing (cf. m. Avot 2:1). Indeed, when I teach the New Testament to fellow Jews, they are often drawn to the Matthean Jesus because of such ideas. By neglecting this prospect, Shedd makes Matthew's gospel look more one-dimensionally Jude-ophobic than it actually is. He erases Judaism as a positive presence *in* the text and Jews as empowered readers of the text.

The problems in McGrath's and Shedd's chapters appear throughout *Judeo-phobia and the New Testament*. Although the Jewish contributors avoid these pitfalls, they are too few to change the overall picture. In fact, the editors highlight why this is so:

> Making the marginalized tradition (in this case, Judaism) do the heavy lifting of combating anti-Jewishness in New Testament scholarship is unfair and, frankly, unethical. … As an analogy, we might look to models of allyship in anti-racism efforts, wherein white allies have a responsibility to advocate for anti-racism in the spaces that they occupy. (15)

I agree with the analogy—but not for the reason the editors intend. Reading this book as a Jew, I

was reminded of Black linguist John McWhorter's charge that a leading white anti-racist activist's manifesto "rests upon a depiction of Black peo-ple as endlessly delicate poster children within the self-gratifying fantasy about how white America needs to think" ("The Dehumanizing Condescension of *White Fragility*," review of *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, by Robin DiAngelo, *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2020). Swap out "Black" for "Jewish" and "white" for "Christian," and you get a good description of *Judeophobia and the New Testament.* It is beset by the same awkward mix of earnestness and self-involvement: a dominant group advocates for a marginalized group in a manner that ends up centering themselves. In this way, ironically, the book replicates the soteriological structure of Christian proselytization: it is Christians' solemn responsibility to save the Jews. The difference is that here, the Christians are not saving the Jews *through* Christianity. They are saving the Jews from Christianity.

This suspicion of Christianity itself is, I believe, the key to understanding where and why *Judeophobia and the New Testament* goes wrong. Opposite the one-dimensional depiction of Judaism as positive and innocent stands a corre-spondingly one-dimensional depiction of Christianity as negative and malicious. The book deconstructs core Christian claims as Judeophobic fantasies and then punts on why these claims should still matter for Christians. If Jesus was not that different from the Pharisees, then what is the force of his critiques? If Paul affirmed the Torah, then what is novel about his theology? Normally, answering such ques-tions would not be the job of historical-critical scholars. But remember: this book is oriented toward non-specialists for whom some degree of personal investment in Christianity may be assumed. The failure to provide them with constructive takea-ways strongly suggests to me that subverting theologically normative Christian readings of the Bible is the actual point here. Challenging Judeophobia is a means to that end.

I confess that in this time of rising antisemitism, I have misgivings about reg-istering so dim an assessment of a volume with patently good intentions—and by scholars whom I respect. To be clear, this book is not actively harmful. Moreover, as I have mentioned, several chapters hold promise for classroom use. But given the enormous stakes, I was hoping for more. *Judeophobia and the New Testament* presents Jews as hapless objects of a Christian gaze, without voice or agency—a picture distressingly similar to the one that the book is criticizing. I am prepared to deal with this from our enemies. I expect better from our friends.

Ethan Schwartz holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible from Harvard University. He received his B.A. in philosophy and Jewish studies from the University of Chicago and his M.A. in Hebrew Bible from the Jewish Theological Seminary. Currently he is Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible at Villanova University, Pennsylvania/USA.

Source: Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations (SCJR), 20, no. 1, (2025): 1-4. DOI: https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v20i1.20041.

