



## Jewish-Christian Relations

Insights and Issues in the ongoing Jewish-Christian Dialogue



# The Past and Future of Jewish Christianity

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**Matt Jackson-McCabe Jewish Christianity: The Making of the Christianity-Judaism Divide. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. pp. 328. \$65.**

# Jewish Christianity



*The Making of the  
Christianity-Judaism Divide*



Matt Jackson-McCabe

“Imagine a scholar of New Testament and Early Christianity who went to sleep on the eve of World War II and woke up today. Describe to her the major developments in the field.”

That was the question asked by Professor John Gager. Posed by one of the field’s most prominent proponents of reimagining the Jewishness of Jesus and Paul in a post-Holocaust context and in ways that extracted anti-Judaism from conceptions of Christian origins, the question required young scholars to grapple with the paradigm shifts in the field, describe new perspectives on this ancient history, and contextualize them within the events and intellectual trends of the long twentieth century. The exercise challenged them to integrate the individual scholarly trees into a description of the academic forest, and to articulate what ideas about Christian origins had been radically rethought in light of changing times and new scholarly approaches. One major theme regardless of how students chose to answer the question was about the Jewishness of Jesus, Paul, and the earliest Christ-following communities.

Matt Jackson-McCabe’s *Jewish Christianity: The Making of the Christianity-Judaism Divide* embarks on a similar exercise, focused on scholarly constructions of Jewish-Christian difference in the early decades and centuries following Jesus’ life, and on one specific category, “Jewish Christianity,” that scholars used, and continue to use, to articulate the phenomenon of communities, texts, and ideas that fit seemingly comfortably (and often also somewhat uncomfortably) within both ancient Judaism and Christianity. Jackson-McCabe’s story begins in early eighteenth century European scholarship, where he locates the first uses of the construct “Jewish Christianity,” and ends by reflecting on whether future scholars ought to continue employing the term or find a more compelling alternative.

What do we call – how do we imagine – Jewish communities that followed Christ, that did not yet see their commitments to Jesus as contradictory or even complicated, communities before the so-called “parting of the ways?” And, how do we reconstruct the relationship between Judaism and emergent Christianity, and their eventual bifurcation, in those early centuries? One set of answers offered in scholarship was “Jewish Christianity,” a modern scholarly category constructed to theorize such a phenomenon rather than to suggest that ancient people would have recognized the term or identified themselves in it. Jackson-McCabe clearly states that the subject of his study is “the interpretive category” that seeks to “bring new meaning to the ancient data,” rather than “the ancient data itself.” In his book, he argues that, for all of its usefulness over the past decades, the term and category “Jewish Christianity” is not as helpful as scholars have suggested, entwined as it is with Christian apologetics, and that, at this point in the history of modern scholarship, it obscures more than it illuminates. The category’s baggage – both its entanglement in Christian theology and also the way in which it has been so wholly reimagined by different scholars over the centuries – might be too heavy a burden. Letting go of the term and lifting up another would be less problematic and more productive. In order to advance this argument, the book traces the history of this scholarly conversation about “Jewish Christianity,” examining key moments in the development of the category. It joins other works that have grappled with this category in recent years, including Annette Yoshiko Reed’s 2018 *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism* and Stanley F. Jones’ 2012 edited volume *The Rediscovery of Jewish Christianity: From Toland to Baur*.

*Jewish Christianity: The Making of the Christianity-Judaism Divide* also engages, if implicitly, with threads in modern theology identified in Samuel Loncar’s recent *Marginalia* essay “Christianity’s Shadow Founder: Marcion, Anti-Judaism, and the Birth of Liberal Protestantism.” Loncar outlines Marcion’s Christian history, totally devoid of Jewish origins. Loncar argues that Marcion’s influence on Christian theological anti-Judaism is often overlooked even as it underpins a dominant Christian impulse—recurrent throughout the centuries and central to the development of Protestant modern theology in particular—writing Judaism and the Hebrew Bible completely out of Christian history, especially Jesus and his Jewish origins.

Jackson-McCabe, in his study of Jewish-Christianity, embraces a historical approach to Christianity's early history so Jewish that one cannot even speak of a Jewish-Christianity, not least because of the similar anti-Judaism embedded within the term "Jewish-Christianity," both by those who employed the term to extricate Jewishness from the early Jesus movement as well as those who tried to escape from anti-Jewishness by embracing Jesus' Judaism as an inherent part of the Christianity that eventually crystallized. Rather than imagining a Christianity without Judaism, or a Christianity that moved beyond or away from its Jewish origins, or even a Christianity that stood alongside Judaism, Jackson-McCabe challenges his readers to reconceive the early centuries, and scholarly discourse about them, as inextricable from Judaism, and to employ categories and language that appropriately reflects the history they wish to describe and illuminate.

Jackson-McCabe begins his story with the Irish freethinker John Toland, who, in a 1718 monograph titled *Nazarenus*, invented Jewish Christianity "as part of his Enlightenment-era retelling of the Christian incarnation myth." In contrast to ancient heresiologists (among them Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius), who pitted true Christianity (the term Jackson-McCabe uses to de-familiarize the idea behind the more commonly used "Christianity") against *haireisis* (sects or schools of thought such heresiologists sought to place outside the bounds of Christianity), "Toland argued that 'the original plan of Christianity' envisioned not one, but in fact multiple ways that the religion was to be practiced, depending upon the ethnicity and geographical location of its practitioners... the difference between Jews and Gentiles in early Christianity was not just a matter of ethnic backgrounds, but of distinct practices and even separate social institutions." Jackson-McCabe suggests that it was Toland's simultaneous commitment to enlightened humanism and Christianity, along with accusations launched against him that questioned his faith and his idiosyncratic beliefs, that motivated him to find a way of presenting the earliest form of Christianity as transcendent: "His innovative reconstruction, in other words, was in this sense Christian apologetic historiography in a newly critical mode: another means of claiming the power inherent in the concept of an 'original Christianity' in order to authorize whatever it is one might value in the present... If Christianity thus stands for a spiritual disposition transcendent of all culture, Judaism, for Toland, is a prime example of the sort of external culture that Christianity simultaneously affirms and overcomes." For this reason, he did not only imagine Jewish and Gentile Christianity, but also Muslim Christianity – in fact, Muslim Christianity was his starting point. Toland's ideas emerged from the English Enlightenment and sought to redefine early Christianity in a humanistic, even universalist vein, anticipating the spirit that undergirded critical biblical studies and the history of religions that would soon flourish. Toland also fiercely advocated for Jewish emancipation – just four years before publishing *Nazarenus*, he wrote a pamphlet arguing for the naturalization of the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland and a defense of Jews against prejudices volleyed against them. Jackson-McCabe demonstrates that, these commitments and values notwithstanding, Toland's constructed Jewish Christianity retained many of the same underlying assumptions that grounded the work of the heresiologists and apologists, especially the insistence that Christianity is "qualitatively different," ahistorical, and transcendent, incomparable to other cultural and historical movements, even as his aims differed significantly from theirs.

The book's second chapter turns to the writings of the English Deist Thomas Morgan and the Tübingen scholar F. C. Baur. Jackson-McCabe argues that these two scholars, "like Toland, were fundamentally concerned to advance the cause of Enlightenment humanism over against the traditional Christian theology that dominated their social environments." Unlike Toland, however, they used the category of Jewish Christianity to separate out the Jewish elements of the early Jesus movement, distilling an original Gentile Christianity untainted by what they viewed as problematic Jewish elements that unwittingly crept into the religion by later folks who misunderstood Jesus' critique of Judaism and Paul's creation of a specifically Gentile Christianity.

The idea of Jewish Christianity, invented by an advocate of Jewish emancipation in the early eighteenth century with philosemitic intentions and implications, had become only a couple

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decades later transformed into an idea hostile to Judaism, Jews, and Jewish history. This shift would become emblematic of the dramatic changes that the idea of Jewish Christianity underwent over the course of its history, used to both combat and promote anti-Judaism by returning to Christian origins and the question of the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers. Jackson-McCabe's study, which begins not with post-Holocaust scholarship that sought to find in the Jewishness of Jesus and early Jewish Christianity an antidote to antisemitism, nor earlier still with Baur and the Tübingen school's suspicion of the Jewish elements of the New Testament, but with the idiosyncratic Toland, highlights this unexpected dimension of the category's complicated past and continued malleability.

Morgan published *The Moral Philosopher*, a dialogue between Philalethes, a Christian Deist, and Theophanes, a Christian Jew, in 1737. The book does not argue that Jewish Christianity was the original Christianity, as Toland's work tried to establish. Instead, Morgan presents Jewish Christianity as "Christianity's primal perversion and the ultimate source of a later, misguided orthodoxy." In order to do so, Morgan claims Jesus to have been a Deist who rejected Judaism and elevates Paul's writings as representatives of true Christianity, casting doubt on the remainder of the New Testament writings (because they aligned too closely with Judaism) and constricting apostolic authority to Paul alone.

Like Morgan, Baur, writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, "identified his own theological values with Jesus, then divided what was typically imagined as a unified apostolic sphere into two distinct types of Christianity: a Pauline one correlated with the true, transcendent religion of Jesus; and a Jewish one that failed, precisely as a result of its Jewishness, to really grasp the true religion." One needed the tools of critical analysis, Baur suggested, to identify original Christianity from the writings compiled in the New Testament – to isolate Jesus' original teachings (for example the Sermon on the Mount) from within the gospel narratives, and to understand the writings of Paul, which represented true (Gentile) Christianity. As Jackson-McCabe explains, for Baur "Jewish Christianity represents the obfuscation of the transcendent religious consciousness of Jesus and Paul by the particular values of Judaism... As such, Judaism is not only the polar opposite of Christianity in principle, it was literally what Jesus and Paul rejected in historical fact." Judaism represented all that stood in tension with Baur's Enlightenment values, and that needed to be eradicated from original Christianity in order to affirm Christianity's true transcendence. According to Baur's historical reconstruction, Pauline and Jewish Christianities represented two traditions in conflict that were later merged by the Catholic Church into the New Testament canon. Jackson-McCabe concludes that Baur's work, though it has become paradigmatic of historical-critical scholarship on the New Testament, was a work of Christian apologetics, though philosophically and historically inflected – and thus much more in line with Toland and Morgan rather than a critical departure from such apologetic modes of historical reconstruction.

Baur's work in particular proved divisive. Those who accepted his findings, commonly known as the Tübingen school, found themselves at odds with those who used Baur's own critical methods to argue against his conclusions, chief among them Albrecht Ritschl and Joseph Lightfoot. Jackson-McCabe astutely notes that for all of their disagreements, both Baur's proponents and opponents took for granted Baur's framing of Christian origins as a conflict between Gentile and Jewish Christianity. Baur's critics quibbled instead about whether the apostles ought to be dismissed as representatives of Jewish Christianity (they argued that they ought not to be) and rejected "the idea that the canon was in any way tainted with a problematic, anti-Pauline Jewishness." In other words, Baur's critics did not question his framework but rather reified it as they argued about its details, leaving intact the idea of Jewish Christianity and its generally negative characterization, though placing it at the margins of the canon rather than at its center. This "alternative historical-critical accounts of Jewish Christianity, in which the apostles and the New Testament, though thoroughly Jewish, nonetheless retained their traditional roles as authoritative expressions of an authentic, primal Christianity," informing the subsequent work of Adolph Schliemann, Adolf von Harnack, Hugh Schonfield, and others.

Debates about the definition of Jewish Christianity took center stage in these later discussions. Was there a single Jewish Christianity that stood at odds with the teachings of Jesus and the movement developed by Paul, or was Jewish Christianity itself a multi-valent category, with, on the one hand, an apostolic variety that simply signaled the apostle's Jewishness and their tensions with Paul's mission to the Gentiles, and, on the other hand, a more negatively portrayed "Judaizing" Jewish Christianity that stood at odds with the original essence of original Christianity.

By the twentieth century, and especially in the aftermath of the Holocaust, "as critical reconstruction became less overtly Christian in orientation, the scholarly discourse around Jewish Christianity changed. The incarnational and occlusionistic models of Christianity's relationship to Judaism conveyed by the category in generations past were pushed increasingly below the surface. What had initially been formulated as a term of Christian apologetics was gradually transformed, over the course of the twentieth century, into an ostensibly neutral term of social history." Scholarship took new interest in understanding the Jewishness of the origins of Christianity: "The idea that 'original Christianity... had actually been a *Jewish* Christianity took on fresh resonances and rhetorical possibilities." Still, the apologetic ghosts of nineteenth century scholarship haunted this newer enterprise, which tried "to isolate the Jewishness of the early Jesus movement as an incidental attribute, ancillary to a more elemental Christianity assumed to lie beneath it."

Jackson-McCabe highlights, in his fourth chapter, new approaches to Jewish Christianity offered by the German Jewish scholar Hans Joachim Schoeps, the Roman Catholic cardinal Jean Daniélou, and the French scholar Marcel Simon. Each of these thinkers imagined Jewish Christianity differently. Schoeps, limiting the category of "Jewish Christianity" to the Ebionites, presented it as a particular sectarian postapostolic phenomenon. Daniélou, in contrast, saw Jewish Christianity as an early stage of Christian origins, that although orthodox was later superseded by more developed forms of theology that eventually culminated in Roman Catholicism. And Simon, more interested in social history than theology, defined Jewish Christianity in terms of Torah observance and demonstrated its persistence for centuries in interactions between Jews and Christians long after Judaism and Christianity had parted ways. Simon, writing in the wake of the Holocaust, offered an alternative to the historical narrative dominant until that point of "a stagnant and sanctimonious Judaism... replaced on the world stage by a spiritually vibrant and morally superior Christianity," proposing instead the metaphor of rival siblings who slowly parted ways. Still, Simon imagined Paul as a convert to Christianity who had definitively left Judaism for a new religion.

Though the Jewishness of Jesus was by then assumed by these scholars, so was the emergence of Christianity, if not during Jesus' own ministry then immediately following Jesus' crucifixion. That Christianity was originally Jewish in some way still meant that there was also something fundamentally not Jewish (Christian) from the beginning. It was this essential Christianity that grew out of Judaism and eventually parted ways. As Jackson-McCabe states: "it is only on the assumption that there was something fundamentally not Jewish at the heart of the early Jesus movement that renders its otherwise apparent Jewishness in need of special dissection and definition." This continued grappling with Jewish Christianity and the definition of what was meant by the term led scholars to question the usefulness of the category Jewish Christianity and propose suspending its use in favor of less fraught alternatives. If Jewish Christianity is anachronistic, because the early Jesus movement was simply Jewish, and thus (un)wittingly affirms Christian apologetics that run from ancient heresiological writings through these modern critical works by holding tightly to the idea of an original Christianity at the heart of the movement, why use the term at all?

In his fifth chapter, Jackson-McCabe turns to contemporary scholarship of the twenty first century, which finds itself in the midst of rethinking these inherited models of the parting of the ways and wondering how to discuss ancient Christianity and its origins in relation to Judaism. One major shift

that Jackson-McCabe identifies is the treatment of Christianity and Judaism as social constructions of identity, rather than ontological realities, and thus “fabricated and contingent.” They were not always two separate entities, but rather made into differentiated communities through the choices and impositions – ritual, social, theological, and political – of specific figures, groups, and social structures. The plurality of Judaisms and Christianities slowly developed in tandem – sharing a placenta, to transform the sibling metaphor into a twin metaphor – and only experienced a more definitive break with the Christianization of the empire, the moment that is often used as a turning point in the differentiation between the two religious traditions and communities. The rearrangement of ideas has been so full that the Jesus movement, and even Paul – used by Baur and others as the paradigm of Gentile Christianity – are often regarded as simply Jewish, with no mention of a connection to Christianity, which is deemed to postdate them significantly, while alternatives to the terms Jews and Judaism have likewise been proposed, in order to avoid projecting modern categories onto ancient history. At the heart of current debates rests the question: shall Jewish Christianity be discarded as a wholly unhelpful and imprecise category, or as an especially useful one that elides the differences that did not exist in the early centuries of Jewish-Christian history and that highlights the artificiality of those boundaries to begin with? Jackson-McCabe observes that “the debate is no longer merely how to define the concept, but whether it should be defined – or even still considered analytically useful – at all.”

Daniel Boyarin, the first Jewish scholar discussed by Jackson-McCabe, argued at the turn of the twenty-first century that Judaism and Christianity ought to be viewed on a spectrum, with Marcionites at one end and “Jews for whom Jesus meant nothing” at the other. The separation was blurry, because different groups overlapped messily with one another along this spectrum, though there were also clearly distinct social groups that identified as Jewish (and not Christian) and Christian (and not Jewish). This whole constellation, including early rabbinic Judaism and all of early Christianity is termed, by Boyarin, “Judaeo-Christianity.” In an interesting twist on this thesis, Boyarin suggests that Christians, as part of their self-definitional process, created not only Judaism but the category of religion itself. But in trying to avoid the hybridized Jewish-Christianity, Jackson-McCabe notes that Boyarin creates an alternative hybridized Judaeo-Christianity, undermining his argument that Judaism did not exist until the formation of Christianity, given that he suggests that it was all Judaism (or Christian Judaism, a term Boyarin uses) before the fourth century. Jackson-McCabe summarizes: “Boyarin’s attempt to reimagine the invention and separation of Christianity and Judaism as thoroughgoing products of human efforts at self-differentiation represents a major theoretical advance. By his own admission, however, his analysis is beset with terminological problems that quickly devolve into a string of paradoxes.”

Others, including Annette Yoshiko Reed and Petri Luomanen, offer alternative perspectives, in which the constructed and anachronistic nature of the category Jewish Christianity (or the hyphenated Jewish-Christianity) is fully embraced and used as a helpful heuristic when studying the early centuries of the common era. Something important is lost, they argue, when the category is jettisoned because it does important work obscuring, unsettling, and even deconstructing our notions of Judaism and Christianity. For Reed in particular, “the concept’s anachronism and vagueness are counted among its greatest virtues... Reed’s interest in Jewish Christianity is purely analytical. The category is not a reflection of some ancient construction of identity but a strategic reappropriation of a taxonomic dichotomy she wishes to deconstruct.” Jewish-Christianity encompasses all that does “not fit into a modern taxonomic system that treats ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ as mutually exclusive.” Reed is interested in the term precisely because of its usefulness for deconstructing categories and categorizations. Rather than asking when Judaism and Christianity definitively parted ways, Reed’s model seeks to find answers in the local – where, how, by whom, in what ways, and to what ends? She also points out, in a sense complementing Boyarin, that the ancient categorization or sorting between Jewish and Christian was itself a thoroughly Christian practice, and that the continued interest in that differentiation itself imposes Christian modes of classification onto a far more complicated past. Jewish-Christianity, moreover, upsets the temporality so often assumed in the study of ancient Judaism and Christianity, which

seeks to map the process of separation chronologically, from messy origins to more stable communities thereafter, which itself turns out to be a thoroughly a-historical approach to a complicated non-linear past.

While acknowledging the usefulness of Jewish Christianity as a means for deconstruction, Jackson-McCabe questions the category's utility for constructive ends, and even wonders if its deconstructive usefulness might itself have limited benefits: "To continue framing other segments of that hypothesized continuum as so many hybrid combinations of Christianity and Judaism is to carry on interpreting them decidedly through the eyes of their Christian rivals, treating the very conceptual distinctions we are trying to historicize yet again as simple analytical givens. The category 'Jewish Christianity' (with or without hyphen) does not explain the existence of Christianity; it continues to assume it." At this point in his book, Jackson-McCabe moves from expert analysis of the history of scholarship to his own proposals for new directions in the field.

To make his argument, Jackson-McCabe turns in his final chapter from the historiographical to the historical. He wonders: at what point in antiquity did it become important for certain people to create a taxonomy of Christianity and Judaism, and what alternative taxonomies existed with which it competed? Given that Christianity is "a socially constructed identity... the central question... is neither the similarities and differences in culture nor even the social interaction among ancient Christians and Jews, but how early Jesus groups imagined themselves and their characteristic cultures in relation to Judeans and theirs... at what point did Jesus groups begin to assert that Judeans and their distinguishing culture were per se 'other' and to reify that difference by postulating a distinction between Christianity and Judaism? Whatever its various social consequences, how widespread was this taxonomy before its imperial adoption in the centuries after Constantine?"

Jackson-McCabe identifies Ignatius of Antioch and his second century social network as claiming Jesus and his apostles as "the authoritative embodiment of values categorically other than Judean," and Judaism and Christianity as entirely distinct, ideas that made their way around a particular northern Mediterranean social network. Whether Ignatius invented or reflected this social taxonomy is not important for Jackson-McCabe; the fact that Ignatius' writings posit it, and that writings along his network then engage with it (e.g. Polycarp, Irenaeus), means that it traveled and developed among a particular set of communities connected in some way with him. While different figures within this network "disagreed sharply about *where* the line between them and Judeans should be drawn, what was not apparently in dispute among them was the more fundamental taxonomic premise that such a line between Christianity and Judaism *was in any event to be drawn*." Alternative taxonomies existed as well, and Jackson-McCabe discusses the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, a mid-fourth-century Syrian work, as one such example in which the primary division is between Judeans and the Nations, rather than Judeans and Christians. The Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, as Jackson-McCabe puts it, represent not "a Jewish Christianity but a Judaism seeking Gentile converts." Jackson-McCabe argues, therefore, that "whatever other purposes the interpretive construct 'Jewish Christianity' might serve for the modern reader, then, it is very much at odds with the historical task of elucidating the role played by social constructions of identity in the historical separation of Christianity and Judaism, at least where the Homilies are concerned." Jackson-McCabe extends this line of argumentation in his discussion of Ebionites, and, with somewhat more hesitation, also with regard to the Nazoreans.

He concludes with this point: that to continue labeling such communities and texts as Jewish Christian obscures their own self-conception and presentation as Judean, imposing classifications operative in one social network – for example that of Ignatius, Polycarp, and Irenaeus – onto another, rather than holding space for different and competing taxonomies, ones that had developed the notion of Christianity (and juxtaposed it with Judaism), and others that still operated within a world of Jews and the Nations. Jewish Christianity, even or especially as a heuristic, obliterates the very history it tries to illuminate by assuming the categories it seeks to



explain.

There are many ways of answering the question that Professor Gager posed to his students, and that Professor AnneMarie Luijendijk continued asking her students, including me, after Professor Gager's retirement. Much has changed in the field of early Christianity in the decade and a half since I took my comprehensive exam. Since then, I have often contemplated how I might go about answering that same question again, were I to encounter a scholar who had just awoken from a long slumber that began around the turn of the millennium. How would I update my answer? Jackson-McCabe's book highlights that, among the many subjects that scholars have explored, rethinking the fundamental categories by which scholars have organized the ancient world remains a central concern, especially in the last decade and a half. How we categorize, differentiate, and label our subjects of study sets the stage for how we imagine everything else about them, including their relationship to one another. Rearranging those categories and renaming them or dispensing with them altogether in favor of alternative ways of organizing our ancient sources provides us with the possibility of imagining the past in fundamentally different ways.

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