



Blindness or Insight? The Jewish Rejection of Jesus Christ

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Rabbi Michael Signer, Abrams Professor in the Department of Theology at Notre Dame University, reviews some classic Jewish responses to the historical figure of Jesus and to Christian claims about him, and highlights the opportunity for productive new conversations about such issues between Jews and Christians.

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[Michael A. Signer](#)

From Disputation to Dialogue: Past the Stumbling Block

In 1863 Abraham Geiger, the leading Rabbi of liberal Judaism in Germany, described the liberating role of scholarly study in the area of religious studies: “The deepest contents of all the

spiritual movements is scholarship. Where scholarship turns with its power it brings light to whatever was in chaos. The study of Judaism can proceed hand in hand to build a supportive circle with

Christian theologians.”¹ From our present perspective we can look back after almost one hundred and fifty years with profound sadness and some hope. The “supportive

circle” of Jewish scholars and Christian theologians never emerged during Geiger’s day or in subsequent decades. Generations of Christian scholars turned away from the efforts made by liberal

Jewish theologians to open collaborative investigations of the history of early Christianity or later periods. The nightmare of the Shoah extinguished the institutions and many of the scholars of

European Jewry who might have participated.

However, during the last fifty years there are signs that Geiger’s hope for scholarship to “turn with its power” and bring light could be realized. Churches have made significant statements

such as *Nostra Aetate* (1965) that support a more positive attitude toward Judaism and the Jewish people.² Many of these statements have been brought to life in the

on-going activities of Pope John Paul II to move toward reconciliation.³ His efforts toward

reconciliation between Christians and Jews are grounded in his deep theological

conviction and have expressed themselves in his actions during his visit to Jerusalem in March 2000. Statements by ecclesiastical groups that encourage individual Christians to ameliorate their

relationship to Judaism have been matched by intensified contacts between theologians and scholars.

We look back wistfully and conjecture what discussions about Christianity and Judaism might have been very different if theologians like Leo Baeck and Franz Rosenzweig would have read Pelikan or

Lindbeck instead of Harnack.⁴ In the field of New Testament studies John Meier has observed that what distinguishes the scholarly literature of the “third quest for the

historical Jesus” from previous efforts has been the fruitful exchange between Jewish and Christian scholars.⁵

In the Jewish community we find the partnership between ecclesial bodies and scholarly investigations to be a most significant component of moving the reconciliation with Christians forward.

Whatever misgivings scholars of either faith community may have with their Churches or Synagogues they have discovered that without serious dialogue with those who serve directly in the pulpits, there

is little hope that their hard won scholarly gains will be heard or read by the people in the pews who need them the most. As scholars—historians or theologians—we have come to realize our

obligations to our communities of faith and to include them in our deliberations.⁶ We realize that religious life occurs not in the pages of learned journals but in the

homilies delivered during liturgies, and in the rituals and rites of celebration of our sacred calendars. We want to be bold and see broader horizons than previous generations, and we hope that we can

be guides to those who doubt and those who are so certain that they are afraid to doubt.

What motivates me to answer the question of this conference, “Who is it that you say I am?”—is grounded in the praxis of my teaching in a Catholic university and as a Rabbi with

responsibility to Reform Judaism in North America. I hear a paraphrase of “Who do you say I

am?” in my classes at the university of Notre Dame. It usually occurs after the first month of lectures.

The topic of the course makes very little difference. One bold soul inquires, “Rabbi, what do the Jewish people think about Jesus?” or—“Who is it that you and the Jewish people say he is?”

My answer to their question usually evokes some disappointment. They cannot grasp how it is possible that Jesus Christ—so central to their lives and community—could have been so marginal in my own

Jewish community. Their inquiries resonated with a more positive and hopeful assertion by a theology student at the university of Augsburg. He spoke to me at a seminar with great enthusiasm arguing

that Jesus Christ was the bridge between Jews and Christians—between Judaism and Christianity—because only Jesus Christ was simultaneously a Jew and a Christian. When I indicated to this

well-meaning student that I hardly thought that the historical life of Jesus would be sufficient to sustain the Christian community he sadly agreed. He conceded that ultimately the question of who

Jesus *was* would be an inadequate response to who Jesus *is*.

In reflecting upon my answers to both the American and German students the words of Paul (I Cor. 1:23) came to mind: “We preach Christ crucified, folly to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the

Jews.” This use of the term *skandalon* calls to mind the commandment of Leviticus 19:14 not to put a stumbling block before the blind. Yet is precisely the image of partial blindness that Paul

ascribes to the Jews and which later came to be incorporated into the iconography of the medieval church in the west as “Synagoga.”⁷ Is it possible for Jews to speak

with Christians about the question of Jesus Christ and turn the image of the stumbling block into a positive image—as a boundary marker, perhaps—that will encourage further discussion rather than

close down discourse?

Over the past thirty years Christians and Jews have come to understand each other in their own integrity—within the wholeness of their assembled communities and traditions. In the course of those

discussions many negative perceptions of Judaism have been removed.⁸ Can this new effort be sustained in a dialogue between the two communities about how Christians

approach the ineffable? Is it possible to examine the negation of Jesus Christ in the Jewish

tradition as insight rather than blindness?

In the discussion that follows I would, first, like to suggest a framework for Jewish discussions with Christians about the nature of Jesus Christ. Second, I will survey some of the most

significant responses of the Jewish tradition with respect to Jesus Christ and demonstrate a remarkable continuity from antiquity to modernity. Finally, I will set out an agenda that outlines what

stake the Jewish community has in future Christian theological deliberations about Christology.

From Silence to Speech: The Two Horizons of the Christological Discussion

Let us begin with the Christological question before us and search for a framework where a Jewish response might contribute to a deeper conversation. The question “Who is it that you say I am?”

has a particular resonance for the Jewish reader. The final linguistic unit: “I am” recalls the ineffable name, YHWH, in the book of Exodus that God imparts to Moses (Ex. 3). While the question in

the book of Exodus is a divine response to a question raised by Moses, the inquiry by Jesus in the Gospel demands a human response from the apostles to a divine query. In either case the Jewish

reluctance to utilize the *nomina sacra* immediately sets the boundary of what might be articulated in human speech. From the late biblical period and into the rabbinic literature the Jewish

tradition discovered euphemisms for the use of the divine name. Nouns such as “the heavens” “the place” “the Holy One” replaced the Tetragrammaton YHWH and Elohim.⁹

Rabbinic and Medieval Hebrew literature referred to Jesus, the inquirer, as “oto ha-ish” (that man). The name of Jesus Christ, as we will see further on, was removed from many rabbinic texts

as an act of self-censorship.¹⁰ However, if we inquire why self-censorship was important to these earlier generations two distinct answers are plausible. The first answer

would be that once Christianity became the majority religion in the West it began to diminish the legal status of Judaism.¹¹ In order to avoid further danger the Jewish

community encoded references to Jesus by the derisive term “that man.”

An alternative answer to the development of the use of “*oto ha-ish or that man*” would follow this line of reasoning. The Jewish tradition holds a great reverence for words and particularly

for names. This reverence is clear with respect to the *nomina sacra*, the divine names, where there has been a reticence among Jews even to pronounce them. Therefore for Jews to utter the name

“Jesus Christ” would have been an apparent validation of belief in him. Lest we think that this reticence to utter the name Jesus Christ is relegated to the past, there are many Jews who asserted

their youthful religious identity by joining their public school classmates in singing Christmas carols but remaining silent when the lyrics required them to say Jesus or Christ.¹²

The rabbinic proverb “Silence is appropriate for wisdom” has been at the heart of the popular Jewish reaction—from antiquity to modernity—to public statements about the nature of Jesus

Christ.¹³ We shall see later in this paper that the Jewish negation of Jesus as Christ went well beyond silence. Within the confines of their own community, Jews had a

clearly articulated negation about Jesus. Silence in public discussion and articulate refutation within the privacy of the Jewish community was a strategy for the physical survival of the Jewish

community in Christendom. This bifurcated approach was a strategy for physical safety and survival of the community. It began to break down in the second half of the nineteenth century and continued

until the beginning of the Shoah.¹⁴

The changes that have occurred in Christian theology since the Shoah urge an effort to renew a serious discussion between our communities. Christian communities that no longer target Jews for

proselytism may open the doors to fruitful discussion about Christology. The discourse should be carefully framed to provide respect for Christian belief and tradition and must accord a presentation

of Jewish perspectives that are grounded in the Jewish tradition.¹⁵

Let me propose two horizons for a dialogue between Jews and Christians about the question, “Who is it that you say I am?” The first horizon for christological discussion is what I call the

ontological or existential horizon. The assertion by Jesus in the Gospel of John that “I am the way and the truth and the life and whoever believes in me shall have life eternal” indicates that

the person who professes Jesus Christ has a unique ontological status. The believer is

transformed from mortality to eternal life because he or she accepts this truth. This truth is affirmed by the

speech by Peter after the initial commissioning of the disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14-41). That passage indicates that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ a

change has occurred in the way God offers salvation to humankind. In the Pauline writings there are frequent references to the power of salvation that occurs when the individual becomes part of the

community of believers.¹⁶ Subsequent generations of Christian authors have attempted to describe the ineffable change that occurs in the heart, mind and soul of those who

believe.

The ontological or existential horizon can be understood in the deep private experience of a faith community. It requires a commitment of faith in order to comprehend its language. As a Jew I may

read the meditations of Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross or Thomas Merton. However, when they attempt to describe the profound change that Jesus as Christ makes in their lives I can only read them

empathetically. When I attend Christian worship and watch the faces of those who go up to take the Eucharist, I can observe the change in their demeanor and glimpse traces of their inner experience.

The private nature of these experiences creates a language of belief that can at best be appreciated by non-believers but can never fully engage them beyond an appreciation of how they function in

the life of the Christian community. Their descriptions invite empathy, but cannot provide a comprehensible account of their inner experience for one who does not share their conviction. Rabbi Joseph

Soloveitchik's 1964 essay, "Confrontation," captures the difficulty that Jews might have in understanding the ontological/existential horizon of Christology. He argues for a strict boundary

between faith communities with respect to the discussion of these theological claims. He asserts that the language of faith is a "private language" in the Wittgensteinian mode that can only be

understood by those who share common faith commitments.¹⁷

From my perspective Christological discussions have a second horizon that I would call temporal/eschatological. My study of the Christian tradition has taught me that Jesus Christ enters the

economy of salvation and transforms history. Jesus Christ, the *eschaton* or end enters at the mid-point pointing the way for humanity to the ultimate end when God will be “all in all.” St.

Augustine’s sermon or treatise on the Jews focuses in this very theme of how the reading of God’s revelation in Hebrew Scriptures is changed by Jesus Christ.¹⁸ From

the Christian perspective Jesus lived in history and demonstrates the way beyond history. The temporal/eschatological horizon provides Jews and Christians with subject matter for very fruitful

discussions. Sacred history built on the foundation of the Hebrew Bible forms the main point of convergence and divergence between us. Christians and Jews share the prophetic visions of divine

judgment and mercy “in the end of days.” The apocalyptic literature promises justification to endure suffering until the *eschaton*. What Christians and Jews have not shared and still do not share

is the claim that Jesus Christ entered human history as God’s incarnation. Debates from antiquity to modernity indicate that it is precisely the temporal/eschatological horizon that has been the

platform for disputation between our communities. Of course in the Christian community the ontological and temporal horizons are fused—it is because Jesus is the Christ that he brings triumph over

death and a vision of Christian community in love until the *eschaton*. The Jewish negation of Jesus as Christ, as we shall now discern, begins with the temporal/eschatological horizon. It asserts that

there was a man named Jesus, but he was not “the Christ.”

“That Man:” Jesus as fully human

There is a remarkable consistency in the responses by Jewish writers from antiquity to modernity about Jesus.¹⁹ He is portrayed as a historical person who was a member

of the Jewish people. Jews knew the details of the life of Jesus as they are narrated in the gospels despite the fact that these documents never held canonical status. Since the fourth century Jews

lived in cultures where Jesus was understood as the exclusive savior of the majority Christian community. Until the late twentieth century the Jewish community was—and for some Christian groups

remains—a target for proselytization.²⁰ With this historical and contemporary situation we can understand that the Jewish negation of Jesus Christ was not only a denial

of the truth of Christianity. It was an assertion of the continuing validity of God’s revelation and commandments that would accompany the Jewish people until *their* Messiah arrived to deliver

them from exile and the “yoke of the gentiles.” For these reasons the Jewish negation of Jesus was couched in an angry, assertive and almost scandalous rhetoric.

We turn now, in this section of the paper, to two documents from the early medieval period that reflect the sharp Jewish negation of Jesus: the *Toledot Yeshu* [narrative of Jesus] and *Sefer*

Nestor HaKomer [The Book of Nestor the Priest]. They each represent a different genre: *Toledot Yeshu* is a narrative of negation that retells the life of Jesus. It is filled with detail that

demonstrates that Jesus is not the Christ or Messiah.²¹ *Sefer Nestor HaKomer* is written as a philosophical dialogue that demonstrates how Christian proofs about the

theological significance of Jesus as messiah do not withstand the scrutiny of reason. *Nestor HaKomer* is the ancestor of many compositions that would be written under the pressure of

evangelization by the mendicants in the high middle ages.²²

Toledot Yeshu seems to have been composed in ninth or tenth-century Europe, most likely in Italy.²³ Though it existed in many manuscripts and several versions

Jews never printed it. There is some evidence that the ninth century bishop Agobard of Lyons knew of its existence. Johann Christoph Wagenseil in his *Tela Ignea Satanae* (1681) printed it in

order to demonstrate what calumnies Jews committed against the name of Jesus.²⁴

Toledot Yeshu is indeed a parody and biting satire on the life of Jesus. It draws upon passages in the Talmud and from apocryphal gospels that portray Jesus in an unfavorable light. However,

if *Toledot Yeshu* is read in light of its rhetorical purpose—to persuade a Jew who might be wavering toward baptism—then we can discern the lines of argument that a minority makes in order

to preserve its identity.

Following upon the pattern of the Gospels, *Toledot Yeshu* begins with an infancy narrative.²⁵ Mary was to betroth a scion of the house of David named Johanan who

was also a great Torah scholar and a student of Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach. However, during Johanan's absence Mary was raped. In order to preserve her honor and Johanan's it was arranged for them to

marry. The oscillation between the Davidic lineage of Jesus and his connection to rabbinic circles is preserved. However, the supernatural conception of Jesus is turned into the calumny of rape.

Toledot Yeshu portrays the young Jesus as a student of Torah and very clever. Difficulties arise when Jesus fails to display appropriate respect for the authority of his teachers. He

violated the custom of humility and the document raises the question "Who is the teacher and who is the student?" From this altercation, the circumstances of Jesus' birth are also revealed. The

rabbis then sentenced Jesus to death for being one who leads others astray. Yet the narrative consistently portrays Jesus as a brilliant interpreter of Scripture. He depicts himself as the object of

prophecies in Isaiah and Jeremiah. The rabbis offer counter-interpretations.

Jesus is therefore expelled from rabbinic circles and seeks his own group of disciples. He gathers these disciples through his miracles. *Toledot Yeshu* offers an explanation for these

miracles. Jesus entered the holy of holies and read the divine name. He wrote it down, cut a slit in his arm where he placed the parchment with the divine name. Afterwards he used the divine name to

perform miracles. Once again, *Toledot Yeshu* places the activities of Jesus within a natural realm of explanation. The use of the divine name for magical purposes was known amongst rabbinic

Jews. Jesus was simply part of this tradition and his miracles were not a demonstration of divine favor. In the concluding part of *Toledot Yeshu* the rabbis send Judas Iscariot into the holy of

holies to retrieve the divine name and engage in a contest with Jesus before the Roman ruler.

In the *Toledot Yeshu* there is an exchange between Jesus and the rabbinical sages about his name that speaks directly to the question of his identity. Jesus is asked, "What is your name?"

He responds, "My name is Mattai [When]." The rabbis ask what is the basis in Scripture for this name. Jesus responds Ps. 42:3 "When shall I come and see the face of God." The sages

responded, "When will he die and lose his name?" Ps. 41:6. Again the sages ask his name and Jesus answers, "My name is Naqi [clean]." When asked the Scriptural basis for this name, Jesus

responds, Ps. 24:4 “[I am of] clean hands and a pure heart.” The sages counter with “God will not remit all punishment” Ex. 34:7. Once again the sages ask for the name and its Scriptural proof

and Jesus responds that his name is “Beni [my son]” and the scriptural proof is Ex. 4:22 “Israel, my first born” and the response of the sages is “I will kill your first born” Ex. 4:23.

The final exchange about the name is when Jesus asserts that his name is “Netzer” or sprout and the Scriptural proof is Is. 11:1 “He shall grow out of the stump of Jesse.” To this name the

Rabbis responded with Is. 14:9, “Then you were sent from your grave like a hated sprout.”

Toledot Yeshu thus presents its audience with a disputation over the biblical proof of Jesus’ identity. The names begin with the wisdom literature or psalms. Jesus is not the subject of

“when” he will come to see the face of God, but the very opposite—he will lose his name. He is not of clean hands and pure heart, but the one whom God will not hold guiltless despite his mercy

to the thousandth generation.

The center of the exchange citing texts from the book of Exodus is over whether or not Jesus can assert that he is ‘beni’ my son. Here the *Toledot Yeshu* places two succeeding verses

against one another. Jesus asserts that he is Israel God’s first born while the rabbis put his sonship among those of the Egyptians whom God will smite. Any hope that Jesus might assert his name as

the sprout of Jesse is dashed by the assertion of the sages that he will be sent from his grave like a hated sprout. This negation of Jesus’ claim to messianic prophecy is at the midpoint of the

narrative and foreshadows his death by crucifixion for “misleading the generation.”

The concluding parts of *Toledot Yeshu* focus on the death and burial of Jesus. There is no resurrection but simply a misplacement of his body so that the grave would not be robbed. After the

death of Jesus the disciples continue to dispute with the sages. The disciples claimed, “You have killed the messiah of God and Israel” while the sages asserted, “You believe in a false

prophet.” In some versions of the *Toledot Yeshu* the separation of Jesus’ disciples from Israel is the result of the machinations of the sages. They convince a great sage named Elijah [in

the ms. Strasbourg version] that he should lead the Christians out of the community of Israel. Elijah agrees to their request and tells the followers of Jesus that they must change their worship;

cease to observe the Sabbath and change the day of their worship to Sunday; no longer observe

Passover but celebrate the feast of the resurrection. He claims that circumcision is a decision that is up

to them. The Christians call this Elijah “Paul” and it was he who brought about the separation between Jews and Christians. Arguments then ceased within the household of Israel.

Contemporary Christian readers might want to approach the *Toledot Yeshu* with the same perspective that Jews now read some of the more assertive rhetoric in the Early Christian Authors.

Robert Wilken has taught us that even John Chrysostom’s paschal sermons are an assertion of Christian identity.²⁶ Surely, the *Toledot Yeshu* stamps the life of

Jesus with a Jewish narrative. All supernatural elements of Jesus’ life are given natural explanations. Biblical messianic prophecies are refuted by utilizing the rabbinic hermeneutic technique of *gezerah*

shavah (the use of the same word in another context). Surprisingly from our modern perspective where so much violence has resulted from the charge of deicide by Jewish hands the *Toledot Yeshu*

affirms that Jews did put Jesus to death. For the sages it was not a deicide but simply the death of a rebellious Jewish student. The narrative about Jesus in *Toledot Yeshu* is not about one who

“is” in the profound sense of the Christian tradition—but about a man who “was” and whose existence brought sadness and sorrow to the house of Israel. *Toledot Yeshu* is, therefore, an

internal document, filled with passion and pathos, and had a profound influence in the folkloric life of the Jewish people.

In the Book of Nestor the Priest we discover a framework much more suitable for academic debate. It originated in the Islamic east and was composed in Arabic. In the ninth or tenth century it was

translated into Hebrew. When comparing the Arabic version with the Hebrew, Stroumsa and Lasker point out that the latter version is more acerbic and describes Christian arguments with more derisory

terminology. Removing the debate from the cultural sphere of Islam where Judaism and Christianity were both minority religions to the realm of Christendom motivated the translator to “strengthen the

weak knees” of his co-religionists.²⁷

Nestor is described as a priest who converted to Judaism and debated with pagans and sages. This literary motif descends from antiquity but no doubt had verisimilitude in both the Islamic and

Christian worlds of the Middle Ages. The composition is set in a series of propositions or questions which are then systematically refuted.

Rather than rehearse the responses to each of these questions I think that it is more useful to gain some understanding of how *Nestor HaKomer* frames the discussion. It begins with the

question of the incarnation: How could God take on human form and guide humanity? A comparison of Jesus with figures from the Old Testament consistently reveals the superiority of the latter [par. 4].

A description of the Christian argument for the trinity follows the problem of the incarnation [par 25-26]. A discussion of the religious practices of Jesus follows. It raises the question: should

Christians follow the Jewish practices that Jesus did? [par. 33-36, 63-69]. Nestor raises the issue about the validity of Jesus' divinity based on the premise that he did not demonstrate the attribute

of omnipotence. It asks why it was necessary for Jesus to pray to God to relieve his burden of suffering or why he permitted people to mock him before his crucifixion [par 51-53]. Indeed, why did

Jesus need to eat and sleep if he was divine [108].

The framework of these questions and responses is significant for the history of many Jewish-Christian debates in the Middle Ages and modernity. When later polemical treatises asserted that reason

could ultimately convince Jews of the truth about Jesus Christ and Christianity, the arguments offered by Nestor appear.

In its arguments Nestor covers much of the same ground as *Toledot Yeshu*. However, it adds an important additional dimension. Nestor indicates that Christianity itself stands in opposition to

the life and teachings of Jesus. For Nestor, Jesus was an ordinary Jew who followed the law. As we have seen the assertion that Jesus was human and lived within history forms the basis of the Jewish

negation of Jesus. At times they were reluctant to speak about Jesus at all as Nachmanides asserted in his 1263 debate with Pablo Christiani, "We will not discuss Jesus but whether or not the

messiah has come.”²⁸ On other occasions, particularly with the approach of modernity, Jewish authors fell back on the human Jesus theme as Moses Mendelssohn did when he

averred, “Jesus of Nazareth observed not only the laws of Moses but also the teachings of the rabbis....and you, dear brothers and fellow human beings who follow the teachings of Jesus, should you

be so angry with us when we do what the founder of your religion did that which was preserved through his authority.”²⁹

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Jewish negation of Jesus Christ came to focus more and more on the distinction between Jesus and Paul.³⁰ While

Abraham Geiger asserted that Jesus should be placed within the Pharisaic context, he argued that it was Paul who was influenced by paganism. Leo Baeck distinguished between the classical religion of

ethics as practiced by Jesus and the Pharisees and the romantic religion of abandonment asserted by Paul.³¹ Joseph Klausner and Samuel Sandmel both argued that Jesus was a

loyal Jew, while Paul was the founder of a Christianity that was harmonious with paganism.³² More recent historical scholarship by Jews examines Jesus and Paul within a

broader historical context reclaiming both of them into a pluralistic Judaism of the period and some have asserted that there is a co-emergence of Judaism and Christianity as distinct religions only

in the fourth century.³³

It is important to remember after rehearsing the specific Jewish negations about Jesus as the Christ that they apply only to members of the Jewish community. Rabbis in the Talmud had already

developed the concept of the “Noachide commandments” that opened God’s lovingkindness to all the nations of the world.³⁴ Some medieval rabbis thought that Christian

belief in Jesus and the Trinity was permissible for Christians because it brought them under the wings of the God of Israel. From antiquity through modernity Jewish theologians have been prepared to

assert the independent validity of Christianity for Christians.³⁵ Does this assertion put Jewish theologians beyond any interest in future Christological discussions?

Toward a Future Agenda: The Jewish Interest in Continued Christological Discussion

In these concluding remarks I will argue that Jews have a profound interest in the internal debates by Christians. Our position as serious interlocutors will oscillate between silence and intense

discussions with Christians. There is no question that Jewish attempts at reclamation of Jesus have foundered within the Jewish community. Martin Buber's assertion that Jesus was his elder brother

did not earn him accolades among his co-religionists.³⁶ Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath's admonition to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations that Jews name Jesus as one

of our great teachers received no enthusiastic response among some of his most ardent followers.³⁷ The ontological horizon—the change in the spirit and being of the

individual believer—that Jesus brings to Christians as their Christ stops at the door of the rabbinic assertion that Torah is God's living covenant with the Jewish people. The *metanoia*

among recent Christian theologians that the covenant with God and the Jewish people has never been revoked surely re-enforces the trust the Jewish theologians will develop in our future discussions.

Perhaps the time has come to recover Franz Rosenzweig's assertion about his own life and paraphrase it as a general rule: Jews do not come to God through Christ but as Jews—and Christians come

to God through Christ as Christians. This axiom leaves us as a Jewish community with an opportunity to engage in conversation and deliberation with the Ecclesia, those who constitute the "body of

Christ." It is precisely with Christians, through whom Christ acts, that Jews can enter into profound discoveries about the way that God acts in our lives and how our traditions make demands upon us

to help in the establishment of divine sovereignty in the world.³⁸

As Jews we have an interest in what Christians believe and how it transforms them. It has been the appreciation of Jesus Christ as human and his capacity for human suffering, as described by

Professor Metz in his lecture for this conference which has brought Christians to a deep appreciation of Jewish loss during the Shoah.³⁹ The Trinitarian reflections in the

writings of Catherine LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson that emphasize interrelationship rather than hierarchy open believing Christians to positive relationships with those who live beyond the household

of the Ecclesia.⁴⁰ Christologies that emphasize Jesus Christ as one who lived with the poor, the suffering, the alien—as we find in Liberation theologies—have found

sympathetic ears and outreaching arms from members of the Jewish community whose religious identity is founded upon the fusing of rite, ritual and prophetic justice.⁴¹

In this paper I have attempted to reverse the perspective that Jews and Christians have had about the Jewish negation of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ remains a stumbling block, but not one that

causes the downfall of either community. The presence of Jews and Christians in the world of the twenty-first century will be very different from the previous two millennia. After witnessing a near

annihilation of those who denied Jesus Christ, many Christians have made radical *metanoia* about those to whom they have been so intimately and separately bound through the temporal horizon. The

images of Ecclesia and Synagoga have found two new iconographic expressions in recent publications. The German edition of Cardinal Ratzinger's book about the Jewish-Christian relationship and world

religions has cleverly repositioned the medieval Ecclesia at the arm of Synagoga in a supportive gesture.⁴² Sr. Mary Boys' book *Has God only One Blessing?* bears a

photograph of her newly commissioned sculpture where Ecclesia and Synagoga sit side by side.⁴³ The temporal/eschatological of Christology horizon has opened opportunities

for productive new conversations between our communities. The ontological horizon of the Christian experience of Jesus Christ in this new era may provide Jews an opportunity to listen and learn

without fear.

Notes

1. Quoted in Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 149.
2. The statements and relevant commentaries may be found in Helga Croner, *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations* (London and New York: Stimulus Books, 1977) and *More Stepping Stones in Jewish Christian Relations: An Unabridged Collection of Documents: 1975-1983* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) and Roger Brooks [ed.], *Unanswered Questions: Theological Views of Jewish-Catholic Relations* (Notre Dame, IN:

Notre Dame Press, 1988). More recent statements can be accessed through

www.jcrelations.net.

3. Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki [eds.], *Pope John Paul II: Spiritual Pilgrimage Texts on Jews and Judaism 1979-1995* (New York: Crossroad, 1995). See also Tad Szulc, *Pope John Paul II: The Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1995), Darcy O'Brien, *The Hidden Pope* (New York: Daybreak Books, 1998), and George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999). The relationship between Christians and Jews with respect to theological speculation and public gesture in the papacy of John Paul II requires further study.
4. Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971-1989). Pelikan's examination of the history of doctrine pays careful attention to relations with Judaism and Jewish ideas. This irenic approach can be contrasted with that of Adolph Harnack whose ideas about Judaism as thoroughly surpassed by Christianity were questioned by Leo Baeck in *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961). See Samuel Sandmel, *Leo Baeck on Christianity* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute: 1975) Albert Friedlander, *Leo Baeck: Teacher of Theresienstadt* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1991) and Walter Homolka, *Jewish Identity in Modern Times: Leo Baeck and Modern Protestantism* for the development of Baeck's refutations of Harnack's ideas about Judaism.
5. John P. Meier, "The Present State of the `Third Quest' for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain," *Biblica* 80/4 (1999) 459-87.
6. The balance between theoretical and praxis-oriented issues in Jewish-Christian dialogue is examined by Martin Cunz, "Pastoral Aspects of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue" and my own essay, "Communitas et Universitas: From Theory to Praxis in Judaeo-Christian Studies" in Jakob J. Petuchowski, *When Jews and Christians Meet* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).
7. Rom. 11:25 ascribes partial blindness to the Jews [*caecitas ex parte*] that will be removed when the fullness of the gentiles come in. 2 Cor 3:14 describes the Jews as being "of hardened minds" and unable to understand the reading of Scripture.
8. The removal of anti-Jewish stereotypes from Christian catechesis has been described by Eugene Fisher, *Faith Without Prejudice: Rebuilding Christian Attitudes Toward Judaism* (New York: Crossroads, 1993) and Philip A. Cunningham, *Education for Shalom: Religion Textbooks and the Enhancement of the Catholic-Jewish Relationship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995). The work of the Vatican Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews has encouraged this work in its 1985 document, "[Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis](#)."
9. On the paraphrase or substitution for biblical names for God in the rabbinic period see George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge: MA, 1958) and E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, translated by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979).
10. Self-censorship in rabbinic literature is the subject of study by Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth* (Leiden: Brill, 1964); William Popper, *The Censorship of Hebrew Books* (New York: B. Franklin, 1968), Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1977) and Robert Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1975).
11. The history of the diminution of Jewish legal status beginning with the conversion of Constantine is narrated by James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (London: The Soncino Press, 1934) and the important study by Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relationships between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135-435)*, translated from the French by H. McKeating (New York: Oxford University Press for the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1986).
12. The charming story "The Loudest Voice" by Grace Paley provides an illustration of the ambivalence of the community of twentieth-century Eastern-European Jewish immigrants in

- America to permit their children to say the name of Jesus in public in Grace Paley, *The Collected Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994).
13. Mishnah, *Tractate Aboth*.
 14. The breakdown of this two-pronged approach began with Moses Mendelssohn's response to Johann Christoph Lavater and continued through the writings of Abraham Geiger, Martin Buber and Franz Rozenzweig. For a history of the public presentation of the negation of Jesus Christ see Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Jüdisch-christliches Religionsgespräch in neunzehn Jahrhundert* (Koenigstein: Juedischer Verlag Athenaeum, 1984), Walter Jacob, *Christianity Through Jewish Eyes: The Search for a Common Ground* (New York: Hebrew Union College, 1974); Fritz A. Rothschild, *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Suzannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*.
 15. An appropriate approach to dialogue between Jews and Christians is suggested by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews in their document "[Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate \(n. 4\)](#)" (January 1975). David Novak offers description of a Jewish approach to dialogue in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Sandmel, Michael A. Signer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 1-6. The editors of the volume offer a new Jewish theological framework for dialogue on pp. xvii-xx. The statement, also known by the Hebrew name [Dabru Emet](#) was signed by more than two hundred rabbis, scholars and theologians.
 16. The narrative of Paul's conversion Acts 9 with its sensory deprivation and restoration illustrates the phenomenon. See Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). For Paul's soteriology within the historical context of first-century Palestine, see E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), David M. Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1961).
 17. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation" in *A Treasury of Tradition*, edited by Norman Lamm and Walter Wurzburger (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1967), 55-80. For a response to Soloveitchik see David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and David Ellenson, "History, Memory and Relationship" in *Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism*, edited by Michael A. Signer (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 170-181.
 18. *Adversus Judaeos* PL 42:51-64. The principal study has been B. Blumenkranz, *Die Judenpredigt Augustins* (Basel: Helbing and Lichtheim, 1946). His analysis has been challenged by Paula Fredriksen, "Excaecati Occultra Justitia Dei: Augustine on Jews and Judaism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3:3 (1995), 299-324 and Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: The Idea of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 23-65.
 19. Avigdor Shinan has compiled an anthology in Hebrew of Jewish authors who have written about Jesus Christ from antiquity through modern Israeli literature, *'Oto ha-'Ish: Yehudim Misapperim 'al Yeshu* [Jesus Through Jewish Eyes] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot and Dvir: 1999). This anthology makes available a series of texts about Jesus that have not been available to the Israeli public. Read together with the Open University Course compiled by Ora Limor, *Beyn Yehudim leNotserim: Yehudim veNotserim beMa'arav Europa 'ad Reshit ha-'Et ha-Hadasha* [Jews and Christians in Western Europe: Encounters Between Cultures in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance] (Tel Aviv: The Open University 1993), 7 volumes, and Israel Jacob Yuval, *Shnei Goyyim be-Bitneych: Yehudim ve-Notserim-Dimuyyim Hadadiim* [Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians] (Tel Aviv: 'Am Oved, 2000) a remarkably unapologetic perspective on Jewish approaches to Jesus Christ emerges. Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) reviews the Jewish attitudes towards Jesus that emerge from the modern quests for the historical Jesus. Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), and *Jesus Christ: King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Knopf,

- 1999) lucidly describe the historicist approach to Jesus as the background for the development of Christian theological ideas.
20. The [Southern Baptist Convention](#) has made direct approaches to convert the Jewish community in North America and has provided financial support for the group called "Jews for Jesus."
 21. All references to the *Toledot Yeshu* are from Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach J?dischen Quellen* (rpt: Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1977). Johann Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen ?berlieferung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1978) provides a form-critical analysis of the Talmudic passages that form the material for *Toledot Yeshu* as well as providing important bibliographical information. It is also appropriate to note that some modern Christians object to the name "Yeshu." They understand it as a truncated form of the name "Yeshu'ah" which means "salvation." During the medieval period—and in some versions of the *Toledot Yeshu*—the name "Yeshu" is an acronym for "Yemach Shemo U'zikhrono" [May his name and memory be blotted out!], an anathema against Jesus.
 22. Daniel J. Lasker and Sarah Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1996), 2 volumes presents the text in Arabic and Hebrew together with extensive commentary and notes. A comparison of both *Toledot Yeshu* and *Nestor HaKomer* can be found in Ora Limor, "Polemos Nestor HaKomer ve Toledot Yeshu [The Polemics of Nestor HaKomer and Toledot Yeshu]," *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 75 (1998), 109-128.
 23. On the earliest texts of the *Toledot Yeshu*, cf. Jacob Deutsch, "'Eduyot 'al Nusah Qadum shel Toledot Yeshu" *Tarbitz* 69:2 (2000), 177-197.
 24. Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu*, 27-153.
 25. The account of *Toledot Yeshu* in this article follows the version of ms. Vienna in Kraus, *Das Leben Jesu*, 64-88.
 26. Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983).
 27. Lasker and Stroumsa, *Polemic of Nestor*, 13-38.
 28. On the Barcelona debate and its background cf. Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and its Aftermath* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).
 29. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, translated by Allan Arkush; introduction and commentary by Alexander Altmann (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1986), 135.
 30. On nineteenth-century debates between Jews and Christians cf. Suzannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, 186-242; Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), Hans Joachim Schoeps, *J?disch-christliches Religionsgespr?ch in neunzehn Jahrhunderten* (K?nigstein: J?discher Verlag Athenaeum, 1984), and Walter Jacob, *Christianity Through Jewish Eyes* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1974).
 31. Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961) and *Judaism and Christianity: Essays* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958). For an evaluation of Baeck's writings on Christianity cf. Albert Friedlaender, *Leo Baeck: Teacher of Theresienstadt* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1991); Walter Homolka, *Jewish Identity in Modern Times: Leo Baeck and German Protestantism* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1991); Samuel Sandmel, *Leo Baeck on Christianity*, Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 19 (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1975).
 32. Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (London: Allen and Ulwin, 1942) and *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life and Teaching* (London: Allen and Ulwin, 1925). Rabbi David Sandmel is currently writing an evaluation of Klausner's intellectual background and contributions to the study of early Christianity and Judaism. Samuel Sandmel, *The Genius of Paul* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1958); *The First Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). An evaluation of

- Sandmel's contribution to Jewish understanding of Christianity is a desideratum.
33. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Judaism and Christianity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Guy G. Stroumsa, "From Anti-Judaism to Antisemitism in Early Christianity" in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, edited by Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), 1-26.
 34. A thorough treatment of the Noachide commandments can be found in David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1983). The primary discussion of these laws is found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 50-60, and are codified by Maimonides in his *Yad HaHazakah*, Laws of Kings 8;10; 10:12. The traditional enumeration of the seven commandments would include the prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft and eating from a living animal as well as the injunction to establish a legal system.
 35. Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Jewish -Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962) is the best summary of the development of traditional Jewish law with respect to Christianity.
 36. Excerpts from Martin Buber's most significant writing about Christianity can be found in *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity*, edited by Fritz Rothschild (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 111-155. My opinions here are anecdotal and not the result of empirical research.
 37. I have been unable to locate the text of Eisendrath's address to the Biennial Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. However, I remember the issue discussed with great intensity during my youth.
 38. These ideas echo the following point in [Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity](#): "The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture. Christians know and serve God through Jesus Christ and the Christian tradition. Jews know and serve God through Torah and the Jewish tradition. That difference will not be settled by one community insisting that it has interpreted Scripture more accurately than the other, nor by one community exercising political power over the other. Jews can respect Christians' faithfulness to their own revelation just as we expect Christians to respect our faithfulness to our revelation. Neither Jew nor Christian should be pressed into affirming the teaching of the other community." (*Christianity in Jewish Terms*, p. xix). George Lindbeck's response from a Christian perspective can be found in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, pp. 357-366, where he coins the felicitous phrase "Appropriation: Sharing Israelhood" as an appropriate new Christian theological response to Judaism.
 39. Cfr. Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig, *Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) and J. Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).
 40. Catherine M. LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1991). Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in a Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
 41. *Judaism, Christianity and Liberation Theology: An Agenda for Dialogue*, edited by Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) and Mark Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Uprising and the Future* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989) focuses almost entirely on the Intifada and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its perspective is rather narrow and has resonated within the Jewish community. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *On Earth as It is in Heaven: Jews, Christians and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987) is a survey of possible areas of convergence between Jews and Christians. To capture the spirit of a Jewish theologian whose writings have inspired many to work in collaboration with Christians on areas of social justice one should read Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, edited by Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).
 42. Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger, *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der eine Bund* (Bad Tolz: Verlag

Urfeld, 1998). Dr. Rudolph Pesch who arranged for the publication of Ratzinger's lectures told me that the repositioning of the classical figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga was exactly his purpose. On the development of Ecclesia and Synagoga as Christian artistic motifs cf. Heinz Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte 11-13Jh.* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 447-636; Wolfgang Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages: Two Symbols in Art and Literature* (New York: Ungar, 1970); and Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970).

43. Mary C. Boys, [Has God Only One Blessing?](#) *Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press 2000).

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Rev. Leonard E. Boyle, O.P. , professor in the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies at Toronto and Prefect of the Vatican Library, who was

my first mentor in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, and to my colleagues in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame who daily renew my belief that continuing dialogue will yield profound

insights. Delivered as a lecture at a conference in Jerusalem sponsored by the Tantur Ecumenical Institute and the University of Notre Dame.