



Modern Jewish Views of Jesus

31/01/2008 | Pawlikowski, John T.

Within the last century a small number of Jewish scholars have taken a new approach to the Jesus question but now in more cooperation and dialogue with Christian scholars than ever before.

Modern Jewish Views of Jesus

The long history of antisemitism in Christianity, particularly from the Middle Ages into the modern era culminating in the Holocaust, has made it very difficult for Jewish religious writers to focus on Jesus and his teachings in a positive way. As Dr. Eugene Borowitz, one of contemporary Judaism's leading theologians, told me at a conference some years ago, he would be hard-pressed to find a hundred Jews interested in a theological discussion about Jesus.

Despite this emotional block that continues to exist in many Jewish circles regarding the person and message of Jesus a small number of modern and contemporary Jewish scholars and artists have raised the "Jesus question," if I may call it that, within the last century. A recent book by Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* is an excellent introduction to the new interest in Jesus that surfaced in early Reform Judaism and in the Yiddish cultural identity movement (often quite secular in its orientation) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The interesting aspect of this early modern Jewish re-appropriation of Jesus is its decidedly anti-Christian dimension. Its goal was to "rescue" Jesus from the supposed distortions of him within Christianity. And with some Jewish writers and artists of the period (e.g. Chagall) Jesus was portrayed as taking upon himself the sufferings of the Jewish people throughout Christian history. There was also a belief among some of these Jewish authors that appropriating the founder of Christianity, clearly the dominant religion in Western society, would enhance the Jewish community's integration into that society, a major goal of these Reform Jewish and Yiddish writers. Their efforts did generate considerable internal opposition, particularly among Orthodox Jews and those Yiddish writers who wanted to make the quest for the re-establishment of a Jewish political state in Palestine the focal point in the quest for a modern Jewish identity.

These early efforts at reclaiming Jesus and his teachings for the Jewish community have largely been relegated to history in terms of contemporary Judaism. Looking at them retrospectively they had both a positive and negative impact. They lifted up Jesus' fundamental Jewishness at a time when most Christian biblical scholars, following the lead of prominent German exegetes, were trying to divorce Jesus from any positive ties to the Jewish religious tradition and arguing that Judaism had run its course with the appearance of Jesus. This modern Jewish scholarship

provoked some initial studies regarding Jesus and Judaism by a few pioneering Christian scholars who eventually laid the foundation for a total about-face in Christianity on this subject as is evident in the writings of many biblical scholars today such as Cardinal Carlo Martini, S.J., as well as the 1985 *Vatican Notes on the Correct Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catechetics and Preaching* released to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*.

The critiques of antisemitism central to these Jewish writers "turn to Jesus as a Jew" also began the process of challenging the Christian conscience on the history of antisemitism in the churches. The late Pope John Paul II eventually named antisemitism a "sin" in several of his writings.

On the negative side, the eventual rejection within the world Jewish community of this early modern effort to re-appropriate the Jewish Jesus as an integral part of creating a modern Jewish religious and cultural identity and fostering Jewish integration into modern liberal society resulted in the removal of the "Jesus question" from the Jewish scholarly agenda and from Jewish public discussion. The Holocaust also played a major role in this regard. Hence Dr. Borowitz's comment to me mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

Even the groundbreaking Jewish document on Christianity *Dabru Emet* ("speaking the truth") signed by over two hundred Jewish scholars and rabbis makes no mention of Jesus. When asked about this omission at an international conference at Cambridge University shortly after *Dabru Emet*'s release in 2000, one of its authors Dr. Michael Signer of the University of Notre Dame responded that the time was not yet right for raising the "Jesus question" from the Jewish side.

A few Jewish scholars are beginning to break the barrier of silence regarding Jesus that has persisted for a half century or more. Géza Vermes of Oxford University has produced a trilogy of books written in a popular style, showing the Jewish roots of Jesus' teachings in the gospels. *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* is the most recent volume in this trilogy. An American biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine has produced a book in which she depicts Jesus as a Jew speaking to Jews and starting a reform movement within the then wide world of Judaism rather than an entirely new religious community.

Several Jewish scholars have gone beyond the issue of the Jewish context of Jesus' teachings to a thoughtful evaluation of the theological dimensions of the Christology that developed out of those teachings. In a challenging new volume, *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity*, Dr. Michael Kogan argues that Jews need to see the Christological tradition that grew around Jesus as an authentic appropriation of the absolute and incomprehensible mystery of God's presence alongside the equally authentic Jewish appropriation of that divine presence. And Dr. Elliot Wolfson has explored possible links between incarnational Christology and incarnational emphasis he sees in some mystical Jewish texts from the same period.

Other Jewish scholars such as the Orthodox theologian Irving Greenberg, one of the most creative Jewish scholars in the Christian-Jewish dialogue over the years who has been in the forefront of the new Jewish thinking about Jesus and Christianity, speaks of Jesus as "a failed Messiah," but not a "false Messiah." In his eyes Moses too was a "failed Messiah." At first glance using the term "failed Messiah" may sound quite negative to Christian ears. But Greenberg, along with Dr. Byron Sherwin of Chicago's Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies who joins Greenberg in using this term with reference to Jesus, intend it as a very positive evaluation of Jesus' work. As they see it, Jesus did much to promote the messianic vision integral to Judaism even though he could not inaugurate the full messianic age within his short lifetime. Such a perspective is actually not all that far from the Christian language of "already, but not yet" often used today in describing Jesus' inauguration of the messianic kingdom.

The final movement regarding the "Jesus question" in Judaism involves the recent wholesale re-examination of prevailing notions about the "parting of the ways" between Judaism and

Christianity. A growing number of Christian and Jewish scholars (e.g., Daniel Boyarin) are presenting the relationship between church and synagogue in an entirely new light. In this perspective Jesus and a large part of the church (perhaps the majority) remained fully integrated within a Jewish setting for several centuries. Even "Christ worship" is not seen as totally antithetical to continued membership in the then wide tent of the Jewish community. In this perspective found in recent books such as *The Ways that Never Parted* (eds. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed) and *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (ed. Matt Jackson-McCabe) Jesus along with a significant sector of the early Christian community remained fully tied to Judaism. For Jewish scholars within this new scholarly group Jesus becomes an important Jewish leader advocating reform along with other prominent Jewish leaders in his day.

The "Jesus question" is definitely making a comeback on the agenda in certain Jewish circles, much more than it was even a decade ago. The new Jewish quest for Jesus, however, is now being done much more in collaboration with Christian scholarship than was the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Where it will lead remains an open question.

John T. Pawlikowski OSM, Ph.D is a Professor and the Director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies Program Catholic Theological Union Chicago and President of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Martin Buber Haus Heppenheim, Germany