

From Jewish Sage to Christian Messiah: Exploring Jesus' Jewishness

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*Anne Simon Lecture Series,
Monday March 31, 2008
Main Line Reform Temple, Wynnewood, PA*

There is perhaps no single figure who has been more discussed (and debated) in Western culture than the figure of Jesus. In Christian tradition, Jesus is celebrated as the messiah, whose death resulted in the redemption of humankind from sin. Already in Antiquity, however, Jesus' precise status was a topic of hot debate – even among those who felt that he held a special place in God's plan for the salvation of humankind. Some stressed his divine nature but debated his exact relationship to God. Others emphasized his bodily Incarnation and explored the meaning of his teachings, his suffering, and/or his death.

At one extreme were so-called “gnostics” who went so far as to suggest that Jesus was completely divine; for them, Jesus belonged to a higher reality than the realm of earthly matter – he was not really encased in human flesh, and his death was just an illusion. At the other extreme were some “Jewish-Christians” who suggested that Jesus was purely human; they thus focused solely on the meaning of the teachings of Jesus, celebrating his status as a prophet, while denying the Virgin Birth and setting aside the question of the meaning of his death. Still other Christians tried to navigate a middle path between these two extremes, striking a delicate balance between humanity and divinity when describing what it was (in their view) that made Jesus unique and distinct. This middle option has shaped most forms of Christianity that still survive today. Nevertheless, in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, there were perhaps as many views of who Jesus was, as there were different Christian groups and different Christian thinkers, speaking different languages in different geographical locales.

In modern secular scholarship in Religious Studies, the figure of Jesus is also debated – albeit in different ways. Such scholarship has sought to recover the “historical Jesus” by distinguishing the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. This has entailed trying to situate the figure of Jesus in the political, social, and cultural contexts of the first century CE. It has also meant asking about Jesus' own self-understanding, as possibly distinct from the ideas about him which were voiced by his followers and which took shape after his death.

In this line of academic research, there is also much debate: Did Jesus see himself as an apocalyptic prophet? Or as a wisdom teacher or philosopher? Did he think of himself as the messiah – and if so, in which of the many different ways that the term “messiah” was understood at his time? Did he see himself as a revolutionary, sent to deliver Israel from the earthly oppression of Roman rule? Or did he see himself as the one chosen by God to usher in the End-Time Judgment? Or perhaps as the one whose task was to proclaim the “kingdom of God” as a kingdom that had already arrived and could be found within all those who sought to seek it?

Nevertheless, in all these various debates about Jesus – whether ancient or modern, whether theological or historical, whether Christian or non-Christian – one

thing is generally agreed: Jesus was a Jew. He was born from a Jewish mother, and he lived and died as a Jew in the Land of Israel. Even those so-called “gnostics” who denied that Jesus even had a body, in any literal sense of taking on flesh, still admitted that the illusory form that he adopted was a Jewish body. Even in polemics against Christianity, Jesus’ Jewishness is consistently affirmed. At times when Jews lived under the threat of Christian persecution, for instance (particularly during the Middle Ages), some voiced critiques of Christian beliefs in Jesus’ divinity, doubted the monotheism of the Trinity, and questioned the use of images in Christian worship. What is striking, however, is that – even in circumstances of extreme persecution – medieval Jews did not disown Jesus. They did not deny the essential Jewishness of Christianity’s messiah. They may have critiqued Jesus as a magician or as a wayward student of the Rabbis, but he was still treated as part of the Jewish people. Sometimes, in fact, these polemics even hint at a surprisingly sympathetic approach to Jesus himself – as well-meaning but misunderstood.

In modern times, some Jewish thinkers made concerted efforts to recover the significance of Jesus as a part of Judaism’s history and heritage. Separating the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, they have explored the significance of Jesus’ teachings as part of the history of Jewish thought. Martin Buber, for instance, thus called Jesus a brother, and Joseph Klausner proclaimed him the “most Jewish of Jews.”

Perhaps the earliest sustained examination of the Jewishness of Jesus was pursued by Abraham Geiger (1810–1874). This 19th century German Jewish thinker is now most famous for his role in formulating Reform approaches to Judaism. Geiger, however, was also a respected historian and scholar. His studies began with literary and historical inquiries into the relationship between Rabbinic traditions and early Islam. Then, however, Geiger turned to an attempt to understand Jesus from a scholarly and historical perspective – and, more specifically, to understand Jesus as a figure who belonged to Jewish history, no less than to Christian belief.

The time that Geiger wrote was also a formative age for the emergence of modern secular scholarship on the origins of Christianity. Geiger’s studies built on inquiries into the “historical Jesus” in secular research on the New Testament, which was then being pursued almost wholly by scholars of Protestant background. Geiger was perhaps the first Jewish scholar to engage these questions in a sustained fashion that attracted the attention of both non-Jewish and Jewish scholars. He was especially influentially in proposing that traditions from the classical Rabbinic literature – and particularly the Mishnah and Talmud – might shed light on the teachings and self-conception of Jesus. In his view, comparison with Rabbinic traditions could help one to glimpse the “historical Jesus,” understood apart from the beliefs about him by his followers and later Christians.

Geiger concluded, in fact, that Jesus himself was a Pharisee. Perhaps not surprisingly, this conclusion struck many as shocking. In the scholarship of his time, efforts were being made to bring modern models of secular history to bear on the study of Jesus and Christianity. This type of study reflected an ideal of “objectivity,” namely, that one should be able to understand Jesus as a figure of importance within the history of the world, in the same way that one could understand other figures like Muhammad and the Buddha, whether or not one

believed in the normative force of their teachings for one's own life. Yet, at that time, the secular study of the Christian Origins was being pursued mainly in Protestant Christian seminaries and/or by those trained in those settings. Accordingly, their studies often took for granted a supersessionist model of history: the rise of Christianity was read as the restoration of biblical religion, which allegedly had been corrupted in post-biblical Judaism. It was thus common to treat Jesus as the founder of a new "religion" that was, by definition and from its very origins, in opposition to Judaism.

In addition, even though these early scholars acknowledged Jesus' Jewishness, many of them were unfamiliar with post-Christian Jewish sources and history. Their images of the Judaism of Jesus' time were thus drawn primarily from early Christian polemics against Jews and Judaism. Reconstructing the Jewish background of Jesus apart from any concerted appeal to first-hand Jewish sources, they often painted images of first-century Judaism as a dead and legalistic religion.

Recent trends in scholarship, however, have now opened the way for a new understanding of both Jesus and the Judaism of his time. The emergence of these new approaches has been predicated, first and foremost, on a major paradigm shift in the secular Study of Religion, in the wake of World War II. A number of Christian scholars responded to the horrors of the Holocaust by grappling anew with the images of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament and scholarship about it. The same decades saw the establishment of new institutional settings for the secular study of religion, such as Departments of Religious Studies and Jewish Studies within universities. They also saw the growing participation of non-Christian scholars in research on Jesus and the New Testament – including a number of Jewish scholars. In addition, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls provided new evidence for post-biblical Judaism, and it also drew fresh attention to a variety of other non-canonical Jewish sources (e.g., "Old Testament Pseudepigrapha") that expose the great richness and diversity of Jewish belief and practice in the time of Jesus.

With the maturation of the secular study of religion, the distinction between the "historical Jesus" and the Christ of faith has come to shape historical scholarship by Christians and Jews alike. Jewish scholars, such as David Flusser, have written celebrated studies of the historical Jesus in his Jewish context. And, especially in recent years, scholars of Christian background have been surprisingly open to the idea of a Jewish Jesus. In fact, popular and scholarly books increasingly echo the views of Geiger with regard to the Jewishness of Christianity's messiah and the importance of using Jewish sources to understand the New Testament.

I.

In what follows, I would like to share some of these scholarly insights into Jesus' relationship to the Judaism of his time. At the outset, however, I would like to emphasize what the academic study of such topics *does* and *does not* claim to do. Most importantly, such studies ask a different set of questions and hold a different set of assumptions than approaches to the religious past pursued within faith communities. Jewish and Christian traditions both have rich conceptions of history

and its interpretation. They are among those religious traditions in which the past is granted a normative significance; God is believed to operate in human history, and models from the past provide guides for action in the present. In each, there is a canon of scriptures that provide the present-day believer with knowledge about the past, and these scriptures are regarded as having universal significance for believers in all times and places.

The academic study of these traditions also draws on these same writings as sources for understanding the same past figures and events. By contrast, however, it approaches them from different perspectives. Historical inquiries focus on what these writings might have meant in their original contexts, bringing questions about their local, cultural, and political contexts to fore. In such studies, these writings are thus read them in light of other sources from the same time – including non-canonical writings, sources that preserve “outsider” perspectives on the groups in question, and archaeological and other material remains.

In addition, the academic study of these traditions presumes that the sources that survive today represent only a small sliver of the written and oral traditions that circulated in Antiquity. Literacy was limited in ancient times, such that written sources preserve an elite perspective (almost by definition). Moreover, in most of our surviving written sources, what we hear are the voices of those who ended up succeeding in shaping their respective traditions – the voices of the “winners” of history. Special efforts must thus be made also to hear the other voices that were lost, suppressed, and silenced – the perspectives that only survive in traces or fragments.

Since the focus of the academic study of religious history falls on tracing the details of the development of religious movements in their social, cultural, and political contexts, this type of historical inquiry also tends to pay special attention to the *differences* between sources within a religious tradition, rather than reading them as a harmonious whole. In addition, questions about the truth of teachings and beliefs are set aside. Whereas religious traditions look to the past for universal truths to guide human life in the present, the academic study of religious history attempts a smaller and distinct task, oriented wholly backwards – the task of reconstructing the past as it might have looked to those who lived it.

II.

What we will explore in the time remaining, then, is how Jesus might have looked to other Jews during his own lifetime – to those, in other words, who did not know that his death and resurrection would end up at the heart of a religion that came to distinguish itself from Judaism, eventually becoming the religion of the Roman Empire and a major force in world-history to this day.

To recover this first-century Jesus is a challenging task. After all, Jesus himself did not pen any writings. Most of our earliest sources about him are now contained in the New Testament. These sources were written by his followers and were shaped by their own beliefs in the importance of his death. There is also a language gap: Jesus and his first followers spoke Aramaic, but all of the earliest writings about Jesus were written in Greek. There is a geographical gap as well: the

Gospels tell us that Jesus lived in the Land of Israel and was particularly active in the Galilee, and the Book of Acts tells us that the church was initially centered in Jerusalem. Yet the writings now collected in the New Testament were all written outside of the Land of Israel (with the one possible exception of the Gospel of Matthew). We are faced, then, with notable gaps in time, language, and geography between Jesus and his earliest followers and those who committed his story to writing.

Our very earliest sources about Jesus are the letters of the apostle Paul. Jesus' death can be dated around 30 CE, and Paul's writings date from shortly afterwards, perhaps between 35 and 60 CE. Strikingly, however, Paul does not choose to tell us very much about Jesus' life or even his teachings. Rather, he focuses on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, proposing that these events have ushered in a new age – when salvation is open to Gentiles as well as Jews and when all humankind is able to become free from the enslavements of sin. The relative lack of reference to Jesus' life and teachings is perhaps not surprising; Paul himself notes that he did not know or follow Jesus when Jesus was alive. Rather, by his own account, Paul came to believe in Jesus after his death – inspired by a vision of the resurrected Christ, while traveling on the road to Damascus.

Accounts of Jesus' own life do not seem to be put to writing until several decades after his death. The Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Luke, and Gospel of John took their present forms between 70 and 100 CE. We will return to these writings in a moment. For now, what is significant to note is that the very first followers of Jesus did not seem to have been very concerned to record his life and teachings in written form. The reasons for this are uncertain. One possibility is that the earliest followers of Jesus valued the oral transmission of teachings more than writing – much like the Pharisees of their time and Rabbis afterwards. Another possibility is that they expected Jesus' return to occur in their own lifetimes, such that it was imagined to be unnecessary to record what they knew about him for posterity. Yet another possibility is that there were early writings about Jesus that are now lost.

In a moment, we will return to the question of whether and how we can derive historical information about Jesus' life from sources like the Gospels – sources written by his own followers and shaped by their evolving (and sometimes conflicting) beliefs about him. First, however, I would like to consider the one major and important exception to the broader pattern in our first-century evidence – namely, the writings of Flavius Josephus. Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian, who came from Israel but wrote in Rome. And the writings of Josephus famously preserve the only non-Christian references to Jesus from the first century.

Like Paul, Josephus seems to have been a Pharisee. And, like Jesus, he was active in the Galilee for part of his life. Josephus participated in the Jewish Revolt against Rome, as a general, until he was captured by the invading Roman army and brought under the patronage of the imperial Roman family of the Flavians. Under their patronage, Josephus wrote a number of books in Greek. His surviving works include an historical account of the Jewish revolt (*Jewish War*), a history of the Jewish people from Creation to his own time (*Jewish Antiquities*), an autobiography (*Life*), and a defense of the antiquity and significance of Judaism against

an Egyptian author, named Apion, who had denounced the Jews as a misanthropic people who had made no contribution to world civilization (*Against Apion*).

Josephus' own aims and concerns were quite different than those of Paul and the authors of the New Testament gospels. Like the authors of the Gospels, Josephus wrote in the wake of the failure of the Jewish Revolt against Rome: the Romans had viciously quelled the revolt and, in 70 CE, destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. Josephus, however, strives to convince his Roman audience not to see the Jews only in light of these recent events. He argues that the Jewish Revolt was sparked by a small handful of renegades, whose selfish and rash actions should not be read as characteristic of the Jewish people as a whole.

It is in the course of describing the unrest in the Land of Israel prior to the Revolt that Josephus first mentions Jesus. Josephus' aim, in this section, seems to be to displace some of the blame for the Jewish Revolt, away from the Jews and onto Roman governors of Judaea such as Pontius Pilate – who are depicted as having mismanaged the situation in Judaea such as to raise the ire of the Jewish populace. In the writings of Josephus, Jesus' death represents one of four examples of Pilate's misguided actions. His comments about Jesus can be reconstructed as follows:

Now, around this time, there was Jesus, a wise man, who did surprising deeds. He drew many after him. When Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the Cross, those who loved him at the first did not forsake him. And the tribe of "Christianoi" (so named from him) are not extinct to this day! (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.63–64).

In addition, Josephus makes a passing reference to Jesus when describing the death of Jesus' brother, James, at the hands of the Jewish high priesthood. This reference fits into the broader context of Josephus' critique of the high priests of his time. It also fits with his more general tendency to criticize the Jewish sect of the Sadducees, consistent with his own affiliation with the sect of the Pharisees. This second passage reads as follows:

But the younger Ananus, who (as we said) received the high priesthood, was of a bold disposition and exceptionally daring. He followed the party of the Sadducees, who are severe in judgment above all the Jews (as we have already shown). As therefore Ananus was of such a disposition, he thought he had now a good opportunity, as Festus was now dead, and Albinus was still on the road. So he assembled a council of judges and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called *Christos*, whose name was James, together with some others. Having accused them as lawbreakers, he delivered them over to be stoned. (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.9.1)

Here too, Josephus' overarching point is that certain people in positions of authority in first-century Judaea misused their power in unjust ways that agitated the Jewish populace. It was due to these unjust acts that the populace were in a state even to listen to those few Jewish renegades who wrongly wanted to revolt against Rome.

Keeping in mind Josephus' own concerns and biases, what can we learn from him about Jesus? First is that there were some first-century Jews (even outside of the Jesus Movement) who considered the deaths of Jesus and James to be unjust – and, moreover, to be "parade examples" of the wrongful abuse of political and religious power. Whereas the Gospels, for instance, sometimes depict the Pharisees

as helping Jewish priests and Roman authorities to orchestrate Jesus' death, we here find a first-hand account that shows that one first-century Pharisee actually saw things quite differently: Josephus seems to take Jesus' side against Romans, and James' side against the Jewish high priest.

Secondly, we might note that Josephus describes Jesus as a "wise-man" who can work "surprising deeds." The image of Jesus as wonder-worker fits well with the descriptions of Jesus' healing and miracles in the New Testament Gospels. In the Gospels, this is a mark of Jesus' unique status. In the context of Josephus' own writings, however, wonder-working is a bit less unusual. Josephus mentions a number of charismatic Jewish leaders who were able to heal and amaze. Although he seems to depict Jesus as one among many Jewish holy men, however, it remains significant that Josephus also appears to accept that Jesus did, in fact, have the power to perform amazing deeds.

The reference to Jesus as "wise-man" is interesting in another way. The title "wise-man" (*sophos anêr*) is not a title that we find used for Jesus in the New Testament or early Christian literature. It does seem to suggest, however, that Jesus may have been famous for the type of teachings described in the New Testament Gospels. Contrary to the traditional view of Jesus' teachings as a rejection of Judaism, then, the evidence of Josephus may suggest that Jesus had a reputation for wisdom among the Jews of his time.

That Josephus is aware of the Jesus Movement, moreover, is clear from his reference to the many who followed Jesus. In addition, Josephus refers to Jesus as "the so-called *Christos*." Here, it is important to recall that the Greek term *Christos* translates the Hebrew *meshiach* and means "messiah" (lit. anointed one). The reference to "the so-called *Christos*" is thus not an epithet or title – at least not in quite the same sense as later Christian references to Jesus as "Jesus Christ."

As in the case of wonder-working, Josephus' histories describe a number of Jewish figures from the time of Jesus who either claim to be the messiah or are thought to be so by others. In this, Jesus is also not distinctive in Josephus' account. What does distinguish Jesus, however, is that his followers believe in his status as messiah even after his death – calling themselves *Christianoi*. Josephus actually seems rather surprised that their love and loyalty for Jesus does not cease after his crucifixion; those who followed Jesus during his life did not stop following him after he had died, and they even continued to do so in Josephus' time.

This keen sense of surprise seems in keeping with what we know about ancient Jewish understandings of the messiah. By the first-century, there were many different ideas of what it meant to be a messiah – some pertaining to earthly victories over Israel's enemies and others to vindication in the World to Come, some concerning divine figures and some concerning human figures, some on the model of the king and some on the model of the priest. What these views shared, however, was the assumption that the messiah would certainly not die before accomplishing whatever task that God had sent him to do. In this, the Jesus Movement departed strikingly from earlier Jewish tradition. And, when we catch a glimpse of Jesus as seen through the eyes of Josephus, this is the only way in which Jesus seems to differ (at least in Josephus' assessment) from all other charismatic Jewish teachers of his time.

Before we turn to consider the evidence of the Gospels, we should also stop and note the significance of what Josephus does *not* say about Jesus. Just as Josephus' writings are the only first-century Jewish source for Jesus, so they are also our only first-century Jewish source for the different sects of Judaism at the time. Josephus famously describes the three major Jewish sects as [1] the Pharisees, [2] the Sadducees, and [3] the Essenes. He goes into some detail about what each sect believes and how they differ from one another.

Josephus describes the Sadducees as a priestly group, who are closely connected to the Temple and who derive their authority from it. He says that they believe that souls die with the bodies – thus suggesting their lack of any belief in resurrection or the Last Judgment. Sadducees are also said to limit scriptural authority to the Torah alone, not considering other writings or oral traditions. This seems to conform with what we know of this group from our two other major second-hand sources about them, namely, the New Testament Gospels, which often depict the Sadducees in conflict with Jesus and the Mishnah and Tosefta, which sometimes depicts Sadducees in conflict with Pharisees.

According to Josephus, the Pharisees were a popular, lay group who believed in both Fate and free will; they saw God's will as active on earth, even as individuals can choose to take wicked or righteous paths. Josephus dwells, in particular, on their beliefs about death. He states that:

They believe that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again. (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.14).

In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees are described as being popular among the Jewish populace. Notably, Josephus also describes them as adept in the “ancestral laws” – a term that some scholars have understood as an early articulation of what later becomes the Rabbinic idea of the “Oral Torah.” Second-hand references to the Pharisees are also found in the New Testament Gospels, which describe their debates with Jesus. In modern scholarship, the Rabbinic movement is often thought to have developed out of the Pharisaic movement. Although the two do share many beliefs and halakhic principles, it is perhaps not as simple as a direct connection: indeed, the classical Rabbinic literature also preserves some criticisms of the Pharisees for their hypocrisy – suggesting that at least some Rabbis had the same stereotype of the Pharisees that is more famously found in the Gospels.

The last of the three groups that Josephus describes are the Essenes. The Essenes are said to “teach the immortality of souls, and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for.” They also believe in predestination. Unlike other Jews of the time, they do not frequent the Temple, which they consider impure. According to Josephus, they also share all material goods in common, and they do not marry. Some modern scholars have associated this particular group with the community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls, while others have wondered whether Jesus himself may have been a member of the Essenes – the only one of these three sects not mentioned in the New Testament.

In Josephus' references to Jesus, however, he refrains from associating either Jesus or James with any of these three sects. Despite his concern, elsewhere in his histories, to describe the interactions of these sects and their influence on first-century Judaeon politics, he makes no connection, in this case, with any one sect. From Josephus' description of James, it is clear that James is certainly not a Sadducee and that he belongs to some group whom the Sadducees found dangerous and suspicious. Josephus does not, however, connect Jesus or his brother to the Pharisees or Essenes – whether as part of these sects or in any special opposition to them.

This silence is important to note, since the New Testament Gospels often depict Jesus in conflict with Pharisees. And, as we already noted, some modern scholars have sought to associate Jesus either with the Pharisees or with the Essenes. The evidence of Josephus, however, suggests that it may be misleading to try to pin Jesus down to any one of the three groups listed by Josephus. Even if Jesus' teachings may parallel some elements of Pharisaic beliefs (such as the belief in resurrection) and some elements of Essene beliefs (such as the critique of the purity of the Temple), his seems to be a unique combination.

III.

Lastly, we turn to the evidence of the Gospels. Consistent with the conventions surrounding both history-writing and biography in Antiquity, the Gospels are not straight-forward records of Jesus' life. In Antiquity, the practice of writing history was viewed as a task of drawing out the lessons of the past for the present and highlighting the universal meanings of certain events and figures. It was not – as in modern times – simply a task of accurately recording a series of events.

We have already glimpsed a bit of this ancient perspective in our discussion of Josephus, who writes according to the standards of the Greek and Roman history-writing of his time. Read from a modern perspective, Josephus' history might seem “biased” or “tendentious.” Yet Josephus follows the tradition of his own time, writing the story of the past from the perspective of his present in order to preserve its lessons for the future. The authors of the New Testament Gospel wrote their accounts of the life and death of Jesus right around the same time that Josephus was penning his histories of the Jewish people. And they too seem to have taken up the task of writing, not just to outline a series of events, but as an act of remembering the past and conveying its significance to their hearers – in their case: as an act of rendering the absent Jesus as present and meaningful in the life of believers.

This aim may help us to understand the many variances between the Gospels, with regard to the details and chronology of Jesus' life. Each might also draw on different sets of oral traditions about Jesus that circulated in different locales. In each, moreover, it is the message is most important. The Gospel of Mark highlights the theme of secrecy and revelation: throughout the Gospel, for instance, Jesus' disciples often misunderstand who Jesus is, and his significance for the history of humankind is only gradually revealed. The Gospel of Matthew celebrates Jesus as Jewish messiah, emphasizing the points of his life that correspond to prophecies in the Jewish scriptures. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts focus on the story

of how Jesus' mission resulted in the inclusion of Gentiles in God's salvation. And the Gospel of John depicts Jesus in cosmic terms, as the Logos: the "Word" who was with God at Creation, long prior to Jesus' Incarnation in the flesh.

In the scholarly quest to recover information about the "historical Jesus," special attention is paid to the differences between the Gospels and to the distinct aims that shaped each of them. In cases where a Gospel preserves a tradition that does not fit into its usual aims, for instance, that tradition is deemed more likely to have originated with Jesus himself. This task is made more complex by the likelihood that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke seem to have been based on the Gospel of Mark; they may have also shared a source that no longer survives (a source sometimes called "Q").

The task of extracting historical information about Jesus' life is also complicated by our evidence for the circulation of other Gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, and Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Indeed, accounts of Jesus' life seem to have proliferated in Antiquity – in the first and second centuries and well beyond. This suggests that the act of retelling the life of Jesus may have been considered (at least by some early Christians) as a pious act in and of itself; it was not merely a matter of trying to arrive at a single accurate written record, but rather a matter of retelling the tale anew, in each city and in each age, so as to express its continued relevance as a source of meaning for believers in different times and places. Some of this sense of this understanding of Gospel-writing may be reflected by the choice of later Christians to include four different accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament, rather than simply harmonizing these accounts all into one.

The scholarly task of mining the Gospels for historical information is thus to read these texts against the grain and not in the spirit in which they were likely written. Approached from such a perspective, however, what can these sources tell us about Jesus' life? From the parallels between the Gospels, there are some things that we can know for certain: Jesus was born and died a Jew. He lived in the Galilee. He was baptized by John the Baptist. He then started his own mission. He traveled around Roman Palestine preaching and gathering followers. He was a charismatic leader who was said to have worked miracles, healed people, and exorcised demons. He left the Galilee for Jerusalem during the time of Passover. He caused an uproar in the Temple by critiquing money-changers. He was arrested by the Roman procurator of Judaea Pontius Pilate and crucified.

To this, we might add that Jesus taught by means of parables. He preached about the Kingdom of God. He stressed the need for righteousness. He and his followers debated with other Jewish groups on many matters, even as they shared other beliefs (holding in common with the Pharisees, for instance, beliefs in resurrection at the End of Time). His followers believed him to be the messiah prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures, and they held this belief even after his death. They believed that he rose from the dead. We have already noted that this last point – that the messiah could die and still be the messiah – is the only one that appears to be completely and totally unprecedented in other varieties of Judaism at the time.

The Gospels themselves were written decades after Jesus' death, at a time when some members of the Jesus Movement were attempting to distinguish

themselves from their Jewish contemporaries. Yet, even here, we find no hint that Jesus saw himself as anything other than a Jew. These texts preserve traditions about Jesus as preaching in synagogues, visiting the Temple, celebrating Passover, interpreting the Jewish scriptures, and debating halakhic issues with Pharisees. Moreover, Jesus teaches by means of parables that recall in form and content the *meshalim* of the Jewish Wisdom literature and Rabbinic Midrash. Even his apocalyptic and messianic pronouncements fit surprisingly well within the Judaism of his time, an age of uncertainty and upheaval when many Jewish charismatics warned of impending End of Time. We may also find hints that he may have understood his message as oriented towards Jews in particular, at least at first. According to the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, he instructs his followers to preach only to “the lost sheep of Israel” (10:6).

Jesus’ Jewishness is evident even in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), a set of teachings traditionally read as exemplifying his break from Judaism. Yet, here too, we find exhortations to observe the whole of the Torah (5:17–20). Such statements shed an interesting perspective on his fierce polemics against the Pharisees, raising the possibility that he and his followers saw themselves as engaged in inner-Jewish debates, akin to the arguments between other Jewish sects. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, there are fierce polemics against the Jewish high priesthood and against “those who seek smooth things” (the latter of whom are possibly the Pharisees). We also find claims that the community responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls represents the “righteous remnant” and the true Israel, who alone are fated to be saved at the End of Time.

Also interesting are parallels between Jesus’ teachings and later Rabbinic traditions. Most famously, the Gospels attribute to Jesus a version of the “Golden Rule” (Matthew 7:12) which parallels a saying that the Talmud attributes to Hillel (*b. Shabbat* 31a). In Rabbinic tradition, Hillel’s version is celebrated as expressing the very core of Judaism. Whereas earlier scholars had read Jesus’ version as a rejection of the allegedly legalistic Judaism of his time, the Rabbinic parallel suggests that the situation may have been more complex. The two groups may have been more similar than either liked to claim.

To be sure, much of the New Testament focuses on the issue of Gentile salvation. It also contains some fiercely polemical statements about Jews. The medieval Christian demonization of Jews was buttressed, for instance, by the Gospel of John’s statement that the Devil is their father (8:44) and by Revelation’s references to the “synagogue of Satan” (2:9; 3:9). Likewise, the notion of Jewish collective guilt for the death of Jesus found precedent in the account of the crucifixion in the Gospel of Matthew, at which the crowd cries out: “His blood be upon us and our children!” (27:25).

Recent literary studies of the New Testament literature, however, have suggested that some of these statements may refer only to specific groups of Jews at the time, or hold different meanings when read in context, or make sense when framed as inner-Jewish debate. Likewise, comparative and historical studies have shown how the views of some of Jesus’ followers continue to resonate with internal debates among Jews in the first century and even beyond. Commonalities can be found on topics ranging from purity to eschatology, halakhic observance to biblical

interpretation. Some followers of Jesus, it seems, even retained a sense of Jewish identity, approaching Christ-devotion and Torah-observance as mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive.

Among the Gospels, Matthew exhibits the strongest connections with Judaism; Jesus is there defended as the Jewish messiah, and there is a persistent interest in the Torah and the Jewish people. But the other New Testament Gospels also contain clues about the Jesus Movement's close and complex relationship to Judaism; the Gospel of Mark can be profitably read against the background of Jewish reactions to the destruction of the Second Temple, while the Gospel of Luke exhibits striking parallels with Hellenistic Jewish writings from the Diaspora. The Gospel of John is infamous for its virulent anti-Jewish statements, but even these may reflect a break with a Jewish community of which its own group was originally a part.

Moreover, whatever their precise relationship with Judaism, New Testament writings are rich sources for Jewish history. In the course of telling the story of Jesus' life, the Gospels offer a wealth of information about the Land of Israel in the first century. Likewise, the Book of Acts tells us much about the Diaspora communities whose synagogues were visited by the earliest missionaries of the Jesus Movement. Moreover, in each case, comparison with contemporaneous Jewish sources has proved illuminating for our historical understanding of Christian Origins no less than ancient Judaism.

In the decades after Jesus' death, the Jesus Movement became displaced from its original Galilean and Judaeian settings. Nevertheless, the beliefs and practices of his followers (whether ethnic Jews or Gentile converts) continued to be influenced by the diverse forms of Judaism that flourished in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. In the New Testament, we can see the first traces of a long process by which some of Jesus' followers distinguished themselves first from other Jewish groups and progressively from Judaism more broadly. Nevertheless, a profound continuity with Judaism often served as the very ground for these innovations – and thus leaving open lines for contact and conversation for many centuries to come.

Sources and Suggested Readings

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