

## **Jewish Views of the Religious Other (Christianity)**

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A brief but accurate presentation on the Jewish view on Christianity requires me to give an overview of the two thousand years of their shared history, from the birth of Christianity in the heart of the Judea and Galilee of the first century of the Common Era up to the present. We must also look at some especially significant moments of this history, both positive and negative, and then attempt to project the future of this unique relationship.

Let's start by reviewing the social, political and especially the spiritual life of Judea and Galilee at the start of the Common Era. This period, from about 165 BCE to 70 CE, is usually called the Late Second Temple Period. It spans a century of Jewish self-rule, the subjugation of the Jewish homelands by the power of Rome, the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, and the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by Roman legions in 70 CE. Jews of this period, partially in response to the pervasive influence of Greek (Hellenic) culture, fell into many different groups with various opinions on how to live as God wanted while under Greco-Roman rule.

I want to mention one particular idea that spread widely among Jews of this time. It is today called *apocalypticism*. It was based on the widespread belief that God was revealing to certain specially chosen people that God was soon going to intervene to bring peace and justice to Israel and to the world.

Thanks to the discovery, beginning in 1947, of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other texts, we now know more about Jewish ideas in the Late Second Temple Period than has been known for hundreds of years. We now know, for instance, that many apocalyptically-minded Jews anticipated that God would send various agents or “anointed ones” or “messiahs” whom God would send to help bring about the will of God in the world. However, there was a wide range of ideas about what these messiahs might be like and how they might help establish the “world to come” under God’s sovereignty. Some Jews hoped for a Jewish king like the famous King David of old who would rule with justice and mercy. Others longed for a new Moses who would interpret the Jewish scriptures, the Torah, so clearly that God’s commands would be perfectly followed. Jews who were priests naturally yearned for a priestly messiah who would rid the Jerusalem Temple of corrupted leaders and offer perfect sacrifices there. Some Jews thought that God would send angelic messengers to bring about the world to come. And, finally, there were apocalyptic Jews who imagined scenarios where these different messianic figures would interact in various ways.

In addition, in the Late Second Temple era there were different ways of responding to the overwhelming influence of Greco-Roman culture. One approach sought to maintain Jewish identity by resisting elements of Hellenism and by frowning on novel ways of interpreting the Torah. Another approach tried to creatively reinterpret the Torah in order to make it easier to observe the commandments in the context of Greek and Roman culture. Those who supported the first vision formed the Sadducees and other Jewish groups who were opposed to the creative re-interpreters, such as the Pharisees. For example, while the Pharisees thought there would be a resurrection of the righteous dead to share in God's world to come, the Sadducees rejected such innovations since they were not explicitly mentioned in the Torah.

It is in this multifaceted reality that Jesus was born and developed a very relevant message for his time. He announced in his teachings and in his actions the coming very soon of the Kingdom or Reign or Power of God, Jesus' way of speaking about the World to Come.

Clearly, Jesus was among those Jews who creatively studied and understood the Torah in new ways. He was thus very close to the Pharisees in some ways, while differing with them on certain questions of how to interpret the commandments. The later rabbinic writings – and the rabbis were heavily influenced by their Pharisaic predecessors – portray a very lively ferment in the debates among Jews during Jesus' lifetime. Jesus was definitely a participant in these spirited discussions, sometimes agreeing with one group or another and sometimes disagreeing. He was clearly devoted to the Torah and creatively interpreted it in the light of his conviction that the Reign of God was coming soon. Again, this meant that he sometimes shared the views of some of his Jewish contemporaries and differed with them at other times while agreeing with different Jewish groups.

However, Jesus' proclamation that God's Rule was coming had what we would call "political" aspects. If God was about to rule the world, then that had to mean that the mighty Roman Empire would somehow be toppled. Roman officials had a way of dealing with Jews who filled people's minds with dreams of the demise of Rome. They crucified them. Thousands of Jews were crucified during Rome's centuries-long rule over the people of Israel. Jesus was executed by Roman soldiers because they saw him as a pretender "king of the Jews."

So far, we have seen Jesus as fitting well within the contours of late Second Temple Judaism. Now, however, something unprecedented happens among some of the crucified preacher's followers. These apocalyptically enthusiastic Jews begin asserting that God had raised their slain leader to some never-before-experienced form of life. While some Jews, notably the Pharisees, had previously developed the idea that all the righteous dead would be raised to life in the World to Come, no one had imagined that a single individual would be so exalted before everyone else. The claim of those Jews who had followed the crucified Jesus that he had been raised and so revealed as the true Messiah seemed farfetched and fantastical to most other Jews. After all, peace and justice still did not appear, especially when the Romans devastated Jerusalem and its Temple forty years after Jesus' death. When the Jewish followers of Jesus began speaking about him as the divine

Son of God and also associated more and more with non-Jewish Gentiles, it seemed to most Jews who heard of this new movement that it had gone beyond what was acceptable to Jewish belief.

The Roman destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE meant that Jews could no longer offer sacrifices to God. Such sacrifices had been the highest form of Jewish worship. How could prayers to God continue to be offered? How could God's people ritually access God anymore? The catastrophe required Jewish leaders to create new forms of ritual and prayer. The disaster triggered a spiritual and communal rebuilding of Jewish identity. As rabbinic Judaism emerged and very gradually came to be the normative way of being Jewish, those Jews who followed the teachings of the crucified Jesus seemed further and further removed from the developing mainstream of the Jewish world.

A few Talmudic texts, written by Rabbis centuries after Jesus, present him as a scholar who erred in his teaching and as someone who performed miracles but for the wrong reasons. Even though there are strong parallels between rabbinic literature and Christian writings, as for example in similarities between rabbinic purification rites and Christian baptism, rabbinic Judaism and Christianity increasingly become opposed to one another as fellow minorities in the Roman Empire.

And so in the second century CE, we see Christian anti-Jewish writings emerge, such as the *Dialogue with Trypho* of Justin and especially the Easter sermon, the *Peri Pascha* of Melito of Sardis. The latter text, for the first time, accuses *all* Jews of being rejected by God because they *all* stand guilty of the crucifixion of Jesus. In these early centuries an entire body of Christian anti-Jewish sermons and literature appears. As Cardinal Edward Cassidy summarized in 1998, "an anti-Jewish tradition stamped its mark in various ways on Christian doctrine and teaching." Although rabbinic texts in this classical period refer very seldom to Christianity, in b. Shabbat 116a,b there is evidence of discord in the second half of the second century between Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Ishmael, and Raban Gamliel and Christians.

And now we must accelerate our pace. In the fourth century, the status of Christianity in the Roman Empire changed dramatically when in 313 the Emperor Constantine gave it legal status and when in 380 the Emperor Theodosius the First made Christianity the preferred religion of the Roman Empire. In the span of a few decades, Christianity jumped from having a very low status in Roman imperial society to becoming the legally favored religious group. Thus, a profound dissymmetry was created with respect to Judaism. As Christian bishops became leaders in the Roman judicial system, legal privileges that Jews had previously enjoyed were gradually whittled away. In the following centuries, especially after the Roman Empire collapsed in the West, the Jews became a "tolerated" minority in European Christendom. While all pagan religions were suppressed, Christians recognized their historical roots in Judaism and so allowed it to be practiced. However, Jews were kept in a marginal condition.

From the Jewish perspective, Jews recognized the Jewish roots of Christianity but also judged that there were idolatrous aspects to some Christian doctrines that Jews must reject. Especially problematic for Jews were the Christian ideas that God was a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that the Son had taken on human flesh and entered physically into human history. The Christian fondness for depicting God and Jesus in artwork also violated the Torah command against making graven images. Nonetheless, Medieval European Jews and Christians lived in close proximity and mutually influenced one another<sup>1</sup>

Jewish disagreement with central Christian beliefs can be seen in a series of medieval texts. Sa'adiah ben Yosef, the famous Gaon of Sura in Babylon during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, devoted in his famous *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*<sup>2</sup> a whole paragraph polemically refuting the core of the Christian faith. The same can be found in the famous Kuzari, *The Book of Proof and Evidence in Support of the Abased Religion* of Judah HaLevi in the Spain of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The extremely influential Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, explicitly defined Christians as idolaters,<sup>3</sup> probably because that judgement appears in the Talmud (b. Avodah Zarah 7b, uncensored editions). Maimonides' views were surely influenced by his lack of contact with Christians because he lived in Muslim-dominated Spain and later in the land of Egypt. It may also be that those he names as Christians<sup>4</sup> may actually be Jews who had converted to Christianity (see his explanation of the Mishnah [Hulin 1: 2] and his codification in Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Teshuvah 3: 8). A certain ambivalence may be detected in his more favorable opinion, echoed later by Yehudah HaLevi,<sup>5</sup> that both Christianity and Islam were God's way of preparing the rest of humanity for the true knowledge that would one day accompany the coming of the Messiah.<sup>6</sup>

An interesting aspect of Jewish thinking about Christianity is the question of whether Jews could engage in commercial transactions with Christians. Such economic ties were, of course, absolutely vital for the well-being of minority Jewish communities in medieval Christian Europe. The great rabbi of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Rabeinu Gershom ben Yehudah, in one of his rulings refers to Talmudic passages that prohibit transactions with idolaters because they swear oaths to false gods and used those transactions to acquire things for their idolatry worship. Gershom ben Yehudah believed that those restrictions were still in force and should be applied to Christians, but since commercial transactions were

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<sup>1</sup> Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/kapah/2a-2.htm#5>; מאמר שני - פרק ה

<sup>3</sup> Mishneh Torah: Hilkhot Maakhalot Asurot 11:7; Hilkhot Avodah Zara 10:1; Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:8; Hilkhot Melakhim 11:5.

<sup>4</sup> Dror Fiksler and Gil Nadal, "Are contemporary Christians Idolaters?" *Tehumim* 22 (2002) 68-74 (Heb.)

<sup>5</sup> Kuzari 4:23

<sup>6</sup> Mishneh Tirah, Hilkhot Melakhim 11:4

crucially necessary, he recommended that the rabbis not interfere, since it would be preferable for Jews to sin out of ignorance of the law rather than with full knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

The rabbis of later generations devised further arguments that would allow their congregations to interact with their Christian neighbors as non-idolaters.<sup>8</sup> In the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, central European rabbis developed the idea that Gentile Christians were permitted “associations” that were prohibited to Jews. Christians could “associate” (the Hebrew word for this concept is *shituf*) with the notion of a divine Trinity without thereby becoming idolaters, although such *shituf* would be unacceptable for Jews to perform.<sup>9</sup>

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Menachem ben Solomon Meiri, known as Hameiri, presented in his commentary on the Talmud, Beit HaBechirah, a very sophisticated definition of idolatrous worship. Idolatry, according to this sage, is an attitude in which the values of righteousness, justice, sexual ethics, etc. are not respected, or are replaced by evil values that destroy any civilized culture. He clearly does not regard Christianity as idolatrous since it proclaims virtues found also in the Torah. It is interesting to note that applying Hameiri’s definition of idolatry to the 20<sup>th</sup> century allows Nazism, Fascism, and Stalinism to be defined as idolatrous cults.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of modernity, we find that Rabbi Yosef Caro<sup>11</sup> and Rabbi Shabbatai ben Meir HaKohen<sup>12</sup> both definitively conclude that Christian is not to be deemed as an idolatrous cult because of the concepts they associate (*shituf*) with God. However, Rabbi Chatam Sofer, the father of Jewish orthodoxy who lived in Bratislava at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, considered Christianity to be idolatrous because of *shituf*.<sup>13</sup> He felt that the Christians associations with God had crossed a line.

These rabbinic determinations demonstrate the difficult theological and sociological problems that the rabbis faced with regard to Christianity. Additionally, especially after the Protestant Reformation, European Christianity was composed of multiple denominations with different theological teachings, further complicating things. A prominent example of how difficult it was for the rabbis to clarify their ideas about whether Christianity was idolatrous can be seen in the rulings of Rabbi Ovadyah Yosef. One of the greatest authorities on Jewish law in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he concluded that Christians should not be considered idolaters with regard to certain subjects,<sup>14</sup> but that they should be so considered in other cases.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Shlomo Eidelberg, *The response of Rabbenu Gershom Meor Hagola*, Yeshiva University, New York, 1955; Teshuva 21, p. 75-77

<sup>8</sup>J. Katz, *Bein Yehudim Le-Goyyim* (Between Jews and Gentiles), Bialik Institute, Jerusalem 5721 (1960/61), chapters 3-4; Moshe Halbertal, “‘Ones Possessed of Religion’: Religious Tolerance in The Teachings of The Me’iri,” *The Edah Journal* 1:1, Marjeshvan 5761, 2000; p.1-24.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Rabeinu Tam in Sanhedrin 63b, *Dibbur HaMathil* (opening words): *Asur La-Adam*.

<sup>10</sup> Beit HaBechirah, introduction to the second chapter of Avodah Zara; comentry to Yoma 84b; etc.

<sup>11</sup> Bet Iosef, Ioreh Deah 147:3, *Hoshen Mishpat* 182; *Shulhan Aruch*, Orach Chayim 156:1

<sup>12</sup> Sifte Cohen on Yoreh Deah 151:7

<sup>13</sup> Shu”T Chatam Sofer, Chelek Alef, Orach Jayim No. 84

<sup>14</sup> Sh”T Iabia Omer, *Helek* 7, Orach Jayim, Siman 22; Sh”T Iechave Daat, *Helek* 6, Siman 60

<sup>15</sup> Sh”T Iechave Daat, *Helek* 4, Siman 45.

We should also not lose sight of the fact that Jews would naturally be inclined to look unfavorably upon Christians and Christianity because of the long history of Christian persecution and occasional massacring of Jews. The Crusades; the Inquisition; expulsions from multiple countries such as France, England, Spain and Portugal; the carnage wrought by Bogdan Chmielnitzky in the seventeenth century; the pogroms in Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries all propagated hostility toward Jews that, combined with racist ideologies, culminated in the *Shoah* (or Holocaust).

The *Shoah* demonstrated that it was imperative for Jews to have a political state of their own if they were to survive. Despite the unlikelihood of success, the State of Israel came into being in 1948 and in 1949 was recognized as a member country of the United Nations by a vote of the General Assembly. For the first time in over two thousand years a society came into being in which Jews were the majority and enjoyed self-rule.

The Israeli Declaration of Independence adopted the principle of freedom of worship for the new country. An important policy paper published in 2010 on *The Status of Minorities in the Jewish State*,<sup>16</sup> cites rabbinic sources to conclude that Christianity is not to be considered idolatrous worship because of the *shituf* of its theological conceptions and ritual practices. However, the first to present this conclusive position was the great rabbi of Israel at the time of its establishment, Isaac HaLevi Herzog, in his well-known essay: "The rights of the minority in the Jewish state."<sup>17</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church responded to the *Shoah* at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). As the Council unfolded, it became clear to the assembled bishops and cardinals that a change in the relationship with the Jewish people must occur. This happened when the Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* rejected the ancient assertion that Jews were cursed by God for rejecting Jesus and called for friendly dialogues and joint study with Jews.

Since then, thanks to the encouragement of the successive popes, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and today Pope Francis, many Catholics and Jews have been deeply committed to the formation of a new relationship. They have entered into a profound friendship such has never been seen in the last two thousand years. My own friendship with Pope Francis is only one example of this wider rapprochement.

In the Catholic Church, *Nostra Aetate* was followed by four very important documents for the development Christian-Jewish relations, in 1974, 1985, 1998, and 2015. Perhaps Dr. Cunningham will say more about them in his response, but I will observe here that several statements were prepared by Jewish authors over these years as well.

The first was *Dabru Emet* ("Speak [the] Truth"). Written by four scholars representing diverse strands of the Jewish community, it was signed by over 220 rabbis and intellectuals from all branches of Judaism. First published on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2000 in [The](#)

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<sup>16</sup> אליעזר חדד, מיעוטים במדינה יהודית. היבטים הלכתיים, המכון הישראלי לדמוקרטיה, ירושלים, 2010  
[https://www.idi.org.il/media/3505/pp\\_80.pdf](https://www.idi.org.il/media/3505/pp_80.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> זכויות המיעוטים לפי ההלכה - הרב יצחק הלוי הרצוג [תחומין ב', עורך א' ורהפטיג, תשמ"א]

[New York Times](#), *Dabru Emet* affirms that there are theological differences between Christianity and Judaism. But its main purpose was to point out common ground and areas of convergence between Jews and Christianity and to alert Jewish readers that major reforms were underway in much of the Christian world. It was not an official document of any of the Jewish denominations per se, but *Dabru Emet*, while having controversial aspects, reflected what many [Jews](#) feel.

To mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate*, the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel prepared a statement called "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians." Published on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, the document is noteworthy in having been written and endorsed by dozens of Orthodox rabbis from Europe, Israel, and the United States. Orthodox Jews, incidentally, are that portion of the Jewish community that has been most hesitant to enter into dialogue with Christians. I was delighted to be asked by its authors to add my own statement of "approbation" to their text. Drawing upon some of the rabbis of the past whom I have already mentioned – Moses Maimonides and Yehudah Halevi – these rabbis went further by suggesting that Christianity also has a holy covenantal relationship with the God of Israel. They write that "the emergence of Christianity in human history is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations" and that "Jews and Christians will remain dedicated to the Covenant by playing an active role together in redeeming the world."

A more denominationally authoritative text, "Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*," was released in 2016 under the auspices of the Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel—all of them official Orthodox Jewish bodies. While not going as far as the "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven" in linking Christianity to God, and while repeatedly stressing that "the theological differences between Judaism and Christianity are profound," this Orthodox statement nonetheless declares that "we Jews view Catholics as our partners, close allies, friends and brothers in our mutual quest for a better world blessed with peace, social justice and security." Surely there has been great progress since 1965!

It is worth mentioning that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a significant number of Jewish intellectuals and historians have paid special attention in their works to the figure of Jesus, making him the subject of considerable research and analysis.<sup>18</sup> This is a sign of renewed interest on the part of Jews to their relationship with Christianity. A very significant indicator of this interest was the appearance in 2011, since reprinted in a second edition, of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, in which sixty Jewish scholars—including our own Dr. Adam Gregerman—offer academic commentaries and supplementary essays on the books of the Christian New Testament. That really is an astonishing development of our times. Medieval rabbis could not possibly have imagined that one day dozens of Jewish scholars

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<sup>18</sup> Neta Stahl, *Other and Brother; Jesus in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish Literary Landscape*, Oxford University Press, 2012; צבי סדן, בשר מבשרנו. ישוע מנצרת בהגות היהודית, כרמל, ירושלים תשס"ח

would be analyzing Christian scriptures and that their analyses would be gratefully welcomed by large numbers of Christians, including bishops and popes!

While it is obvious that much progress has been made in the encounter between Jews and Christians, much remains to be discussed. A very important point is whether the existence of the State of Israel has any theological significance for Christianity. It is true that on December 30, 1993, full diplomatic relations were established between the State of Israel and the Holy See (or the Vatican). But that agreement, naturally, did not delve into religious questions. For example, the Land of Israel is central to the Jewish people's understanding of their covenantal relationship with God. Thus, the existence of the State of Israel touches deeply on the well-being of the entire Jewish people. Can Christians, who see their religious tradition as universal, relate to the Jewish stress on landedness? For many Christians, who see themselves as a variant of the people of Israel, it is difficult to understand this issue.

Another topic to analyze together is the result of our new and deepening dialogue. After two thousand years since the life and death of Jesus, after two thousand years of disagreements and many futile disputes, we need to create a new language and grammar for our new relationship and dialogue. This is needed in order to further our reconciliation, one in which both of us, without abandoning our respective identities, establishes the ground on which the Judeo-Christian tradition can develop new fruits. From the ashes of the Second World War, through the efforts of many people, a new hope has been born. We must nurture and enable it to mature for the good of the human race and the presence of God within it.