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Jesus the Jew and Christianity's Indebtedness to Judaism

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See Also: *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory (https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/jesus-the-jew-in-christian-memory/C9A4428D862E8AA3E13A14EE2113D692)* (Cambridge; 2020).

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In this essay, I will explore Christianity's ongoing indebtedness to Judaism as ingrained in the memory of Jesus the Jew. While Jesus' rootedness in Second Temple Judaism has become a dominant factor in Historical Jesus research, Christianity's connection to Judaism is still often seen as a specialized interest of some Christian theologians who choose that focus over other approaches in the study of world religions. Here, I will argue that the reason for Christianity's ongoing indebtedness to Judaism lies in the ongoing meaning of Jesus the Jew for his followers who are Christians. For this reason, Jesus the Jew should have wide relevance for Christianity.

The centuries-old Historical Jesus research peaked during the last forty years, focusing on Jesus' embeddedness in Second Temple Judaism. The paradigm change that led scholars to re-read New Testament settings as sources for Jesus' thoroughgoing Judaism was itself the result of Christian historical consciousness: Post-Shoah Christianity corrected thought patterns of supersessionism (or replacement-theology), the notion that Christianity had superseded Judaism and spiritually replaced it. Christian theologians and exegetes found that the idea of Christianity replacing Judaism was both theologically and scripturally (Romans 11) mistaken (Meyer 2018). The theological understanding that Judaism is, in fact, neither replaced nor obsolete has shed new light on historical research itself. Thus today, most scholars search for Jesus within, rather than in opposition to, his historical environment.

This re-discovery of Jesus' Jewishness offers far-reaching theological opportunities for 21st century Christianity as both the traditional claim of superiority and the popular assertion of Christian universalism are based on a decontextualized Jesus. This Jesus had long been projected as having no primary belonging or attachment. Consequently, he could be presented as connecting to everybody. A non-embedded Jesus who lends himself to universal equidistance had long been the outcome as well as the presupposition of Historical Jesus research. In sharp contrast, today's scholars presuppose and find a Jesus whose historicity gains probability with his contextualization. I strongly contend that remembering Jesus' Jewishness and his rootedness in Second Temple Judaism does not make the Christian faith any less distinct, original, or special. While the memory of Jesus the Jew and the notion of Christianity's rootedness in Judaism are not in themselves critical theories, they can facilitate Christian self-criticism and self-correction vis-à-vis Judaism. For instance, the memory of Jesus the Jew can help to overcome false claims of superiority or superficial notions of uniqueness that have distorted Christianity for a long time.

My thesis is that intensifying the memory of Jesus the Jew helps accentuate core features of Christian Thought, such as relatedness and indebtedness, that are easily overshadowed by Christian aspirations toward an ultimate truth or universal grace.

Contemporary History of Jesus the Jew

During the last third of the twentieth century, academic Historical Jesus research and Jewish-Christian dialogue developed independently. New Testament scholars, historians, and exegetes invested in the former; theologians engaged clergy and learned lay people

in the latter. But the two endeavors were also deeply intertwined, both personally and intellectually. Those New Testament exegetes traveled to study with Jewish scholars at Hebrew University and eventually brought about the most striking changes in their discipline, with the best example probably that of E.P. Sanders (1985). Remarkably, the scientific analysis of texts profited from the in-person encounters between Jewish and Christian academics. On the other hand, various dialogic frameworks of engaged Christians and Jews eventually facilitated major insights into critical hermeneutics, a reflection upon the understanding of texts that proved vital for a profound change of perspective.

Jesus' Jewishness has become a central topic in interreligious conversations between Jews and Christians worldwide, especially in Europe and the United States. Numerous church declarations of the 1980s emphatically confessed "Jesus the Jew," though usually without any in-depth explanation of a theological meaning to this re-remembered Jewishness. Subsequently, understanding Jesus as part of his Jewish environment has become mainstream methodology in Gospel exegesis, and "context" has been a key-word in Historical Jesus research for the last forty years, the so-called "Third Quest" (Witherington 1997). In this long contemporary phase of research, the cultural and religious environment of the Historical Jesus has been recognized as that of Second Temple Judaism.

Nevertheless, identifying "Judaism" as his context did not always promote further inquiries into theological horizons of Jesus being a Jew. As research about the various sects within the Second Temple period proliferated, discussion of Jesus' exact placement within the broad spectrum of religious groups has at times led to historicizing his Jewishness. Perceiving Jesus as close to the groups like the Pharisees or Second Temple Hasidism may relegate his belonging to an "ancient" Jewish sect rather than to the Jewish chain of generations. "Jesus the Jew" connects to today's Jews and Judaism, while "Jesus the contemporary of the Pharisees" has no equivalent today.

Adherence to Commandments

Jewish scholars like Joseph Klausner (1874-1958) had portrayed Jesus as belonging to Judaism long before the Third Quest (1925). But the major change regarding Jesus' Jewishness occurred when David Flusser, professor for New Testament and Rabbinical Literature at Hebrew University, demonstrated Jesus' overall adherence to Jewish Law (1969).

Since then, re-visioning Jesus as observing the Jewish religious commandments of his time has presented a major challenge for Christians. However, different Jewish legal discourse of the Second Temple period is from today's mainstream practices of Shabbat and Kashrut, a continuity of Jewish legal reasoning, of halakhic discourse, cannot be denied. But an observant, halakhically committed Jesus remains very far from Christian consciousness even today. Thus, despite the renewed historical insight, "Jesus the Jew" does not fit seamlessly into 21st-century Christianity. Not a Jesus of Jewish history, but the Jesus who is Jewish presents a challenge to the Christian faith tradition.

Remarkably, the readiness to set aside traditional viewpoints and to look at Jesus the Jew anew was first and foremost developed in dialogue groups and semi-academic study frameworks. At the same time, academic, university-based Historical Jesus research often continued to build on certain notions of Christianity's superiority that had long undermined scientific New Testament studies. Even when affirming Jesus' being part of his environment, he was still highlighted as "exceptional," "radical," or "revolutionary," indicating an individual standpoint in contrast to contemporaneous common Judaism. Thus, even decades into the Third Quest with its overall agreement about Jesus' core belonging to Second Temple Judaism, assessments of his Jewishness as "marginal" continue. Depicting Jesus as a "marginal Jew" allows for distance from and criticism of "common Judaism." Inadvertently, Jesus becomes somewhat "less" Jewish, enabling identification for today's Christians. It seems that the greatest challenge to Christian theology is not the Historical Jesus, neither the revolutionary nor the marginal Jesus. Instead, it is Jesus the Jew who introduces Christian theological rethinking. Ironically, in the highly fragmented sectarian Jewish world of Jesus, despite certain common denominators, each group emphasized most strongly its own distinctiveness and correctness. Come to think of it, that does sound like Judaism today!

Uniqueness and Singularity

Research has shown that all historical placements of Jesus have Christological repercussions. This is most apparent with regard to the recurring question of Jesus' singularity. The suggested singularity of Jesus has long served both as a prerequisite and result of historical comparison – and one can easily see the methodological impasse here. The example of Jesus' compliance with contemporaneous Jewish law is the most telling. In accordance with the Third Quest's basic historical conviction, Jesus' religious and cultural context was structured by ceremonial law. Many New Testament scholars

maintain the presumption of Jesus as critical of certain legal traditions. To imagine Jesus as both generally observant and, at times, challenging legal traditions need not at all be contradictory. Why should Jesus as a Second Temple Jew not participate in Halakhic discourse? The Christian projection comes into play when Jesus is presented not as opposed to a specific interpretation of Halakhah but disrespectful of commandments in general. When his approach is not presented as a certain legal opinion but as an antinomian attitude, Christian anachronism becomes apparent. Why should Jesus not have sometimes held a singular opinion? Jewish legal discussion consists of and enfolds with many different opinions, and each opinion is unique in its composition. Historically, Jesus may have expressed minority opinions. Anachronism looms when Jesus' individual stance is contrasted to his opponents' uniform position. While a continuous unique voice with a repeatedly singular opinion seems like a construct, a projected group of Jewish legal discussants agreeing among themselves in unison certainly is! Jesus may have presented minority legal positions, but it is historically unlikely that everybody else in his vibrant surrounding shared the same majority opinion. Thus, Jesus' critical stance as such is not ahistorical, but the positioning of a singular voice critiquing an otherwise consensus outlook is. As E.P. Sanders has argued, building the uniqueness of Christ on claiming historical singularity for Jesus shows a misunderstanding of the Christian message. It is academically ironic and theologically beautiful that a New Testament scholar – not a systematic theologian or dogmatician – pointed out that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ cannot and should not be argued with a suggested singularity of the historical Jesus. E.P. Sanders has convincingly shown that Historical Jesus research claiming Jesus' uniqueness usually understood the term "unique" as superior (1990). However, building the uniqueness of Christ on claiming historical singularity for Jesus shows a misunderstanding of the Christian message. I would like to strengthen Sanders' argument by adding that this view is also dogmatically distorted. The Church Fathers strongly rejected the idea that Jesus became Christ on account of his spiritual achievements. They labeled the notion that Jesus became God's son due to his special powers of *dynamism*, which they regarded as heresy. Thus, I would add to Sanders' argument that building faith in the one Son on the basis of his charisma is antithetical to the Early Church's ruling against dynamism.

As a result, the Christian memory of Jesus the Jew serves as a "time-changer." The Gospel narratives detail a Jesus of history that is remembered, and the main time-zone of memory is the present. Thus, remembering Jesus' Jewishness highlights the specific

Christian alignment to an Other, the Jew Jesus, who is not obsolete and will never be outdated. This Christian affiliation to a specific Otherness that is Jewishness cannot adequately be described as particularism or universalism. Instead, the memory of Jesus the Jew affords a most particular orientation on a universal Christian outlook.

A historically detached Jesus can be turned into a principle of love. Jesus, embedded in Jewish life of the Second Temple period, will remain a person, with a face, a specific textual memory. His Jewishness does not only keep him human, as has been emphasized (Henrix 2011), it also saves his being a person – which was of high importance to the Church Fathers. One of the most elegant rationalizations of the trinity was modalism, presenting Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit as three modes of God. Modalism was rejected precisely because through it, Jesus Christ would lose his face, and his personhood would be reduced to presenting just a mode of divinity.

Jesus the Jew does not easily lend himself to an abstraction. He can also not be turned into a mode of general wisdom. Jesus the Jew as the way, the truth, and the life will not be the one way, an ultimate truth, the only life, but rather a way, truth, and life to be shared. Christianity is specific in how the way, the truth, and life of Jesus Christ is shared. Here, the memory of Jesus the Jew comes to the fore.

Indebted Christianity

While supersessionism in all its variations presupposes the superiority of the Christian faith, Christian indebtedness to Jews and Judaism should by no means be mistaken for theological concession. Christianity's inherent relatedness to Judaism does not present a lack. Instead, indebtedness describes the historical and theological situation of Christians accurately: Their faith is born into the covenantal relationship between the Jewish people, or the people Israel, and the God of Israel.

Christian indebtedness to Judaism does not originate in the Shoah; it originates in Jesus the Jew. However, the Shoah blatantly reveals the abyss of supersessionist thinking. Not every supersessionist Christian church has facilitated or silently stood by genocide, and some Christians have rescued Jews. But as a whole, Christianity failed the Jews. Not all Christians failed the Jews, but the failure of Christianity is every Christian's history. Thus, the notion of indebtedness itself is not a means of theological penance. Christian indebtedness to Jews and Judaism is a theological factor of Jewish-Christian relations. The concrete historical Christian failure to rescue Jews only deepens the wound as indebtedness increases responsibility. Understanding indebtedness can lead to a

Christian approach to Jews and Judaism that is appropriate for the post-Shoah situation, for Christian indebtedness to Judaism today is necessarily a post-Shoah indebtedness. The dialogue of the religions, where everybody simply rejoices in the beauty of each other's otherness is an ahistorical construct. It is not appropriate with regard to the painful history of Jewish-Christian relations. As Christian indebtedness to Judaism was theologically true before the Shoah, the notion of indebtedness does not in itself constitute post-Shoah ethics. While the memory of Jesus the Jew and the notion of Christianity's rootedness in Judaism are not in themselves critical theories, they can facilitate Christian self-criticism and self-correction vis-à-vis Judaism. In particular, the memory of Jesus' Jewishness and the notion of indebtedness can help to develop a Christian non-supersessionist identity. Jesus the Jew does not lend himself to domestication, nor does he serve as a pre-formulated answer to Christological questions. Jesus the Jew remains a challenge to Christians precisely as Other.

Here also lies Christianity's chance to overcome the thought patterns of supersessionism and superiority, including the guise of "uniqueness" or "universality." The underlying debates of the Historical Jesus research serve as a mirror for Christological self-critique. The Christian faith does not need a unique Jesus, and universality does not enhance truth. Truly unique in Christianity is that there is space for otherness, for Jesus the Other, in the center, at the heart of the Christian faith. The particular belonging of Jesus, his attachment to the Jewish people and Judaism, has universal meaning. There is no Christianity, whether Eastern, southern or northern, without a particular attachment to Judaism.

For sure, indebtedness as the structure of a relationship presents great challenges. Indebtedness is not an ideal form of relationship since it lacks symmetry and mutuality. Here, the structure of Levinas' notion of the responsibility for the Other is helpful. Responsibility intensifies when it is taken (1998). Something similar could be said about Christianity's indebtedness to Judaism: the debt increases when it is recognized. As Jesus the Jew, the signifier of Christianity's indebtedness to Judaism is not primarily a matter of the past for Christians; indebtedness will continue to shape Christianity. Instead of a false notion of superiority leading to condescending attitudes and missionizing activities, embracing indebtedness offers Christians new opportunities. They can search for truth in the realm of attachment rather than equidistance, and they are relieved from proving their truth by myths of historical uniqueness.

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