

Whose Jesus? Jewish Perspectives on Jesus of Nazareth – Experiences and Perspectives in Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Czyj Jezus? Żydowskie spojrzenie na Jezusa z Nazaretu –
doświadczenia i perspektywy w dialogu żydowsko-chrześcijańskim

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Abstract: This article examines the development of Jewish interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth within the broader framework of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Employing historical-critical and intellectual-historical methods, the study traces the emergence of Jewish scholarship on Jesus from the eighteenth century to the present. It argues that Jewish engagement with Jesus was closely connected with efforts by Jewish thinkers to redefine Jewish identity within societies shaped by Christian dominance. The article concludes that the Jewish quest for the historical Jesus has become an important stimulus for contemporary Christology and for the deepening of interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: Historical Jesus; Jewish-Christian dialogue; Christology; Judaism; Wissenschaft des Judentums

Abstrakt: Artykuł analizuje rozwój żydowskich interpretacji Jezusa z Nazaretu w kontekście dialogu żydowsko-chrześcijańskiego. Autor stosuje metodę historyczno-krytyczną oraz analizę historii idei, aby prześledzić powstanie żydowskich badań nad Jezusem od XVIII wieku do współczesności. Badanie pokazuje, że zainteresowanie Jezusem w myśli żydowskiej było w dużej mierze związane z próbą określenia tożsamości judaizmu w społeczeństwach zdominowanych przez chrześcijaństwo. Artykuł dowodzi, że żydowskie badania nad historycznym Jezusem stanowią ważny impuls dla współczesnej refleksji chrystologicznej oraz dla pogłębienia dialogu międzyreligijnego.

Słowa kluczowe: Jezus historyczny; dialog żydowsko-chrześcijański; chrystologia; judaizm; nauka o judaizmie

Introduction

At first glance, Jews and Christians today appear to enjoy a closer relationship than ever before. The horrors of the Shoah accelerated interreligious and intercultural dialogue between the two traditions. The Holocaust profoundly affected mainstream Christian churches and contributed to a reassessment of Christian theological attitudes toward Judaism. In many Western contexts, Judaism came to be recognised as a religious tradition possessing its own theological integrity. Catholic initiatives against antisemitism and the beginnings of the Christian-Jewish dialogue in Germany, for example, illustrate how theological reflection after the Second World War helped reshape relations between the two communities (Füllenbach 2015).

Within this renewed framework of dialogue, one striking development has been the emergence of a Jewish engagement with the figure of Jesus. This phenomenon, often described as a “Jewish quest for the historical Jesus,” has become a remarkable example of theological exchange between Judaism and Christianity.

1. Early Roots of the Jewish Engagement with Jesus

The origins of Jewish scholarly engagement with Jesus reach back at least to the eighteenth century. In 1751, Rabbi Jacob Emden emphasised Jesus’s Jewish identity and acknowledged the historical connection between Christianity and Judaism. Commenting on Avot 4:11 in his work *Ez Awot*, Emden wrote that Christians and Muslims belong to a community that ultimately serves the divine purpose and that both traditions emerged historically from Judaism while spreading knowledge of the God of Israel among the nations (Emden 1751). Emden’s reflections were closely related to contemporary Jewish concerns about messianic movements and the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the eighteenth century (Schacter 2012).

From the nineteenth century onward, Jewish thinkers increasingly studied Jesus within the context of Jewish history. This development paralleled Christian scholarly quests for the historical Jesus and reflected the intellectual environment created by the Enlightenment and Jewish emancipation. A wide range of Jewish thinkers contributed to this development, including Abraham Geiger, Joseph Klausner, Leo Baeck, Claude G. Montefiore, Robert Eisler, Joel

Carmichael, Martin Buber, Schalom Ben-Chorin, David Flusser, Hyam Maccoby, Jacob Neusner, Amy-Jill Levine and others.

A more detailed account of the development of Jewish Jesus research has been presented in my study *Jesus Reclaimed: Jewish Perspectives on the Nazarene* (Homolka 2015), later complemented by the volume *Jewish Jesus Research and Its Challenge to Christology Today* (Homolka 2016).

1.1. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the Reclaiming of Jesus

The Jewish study of Jesus was closely connected with the intellectual movement known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. This scholarly enterprise aimed to demonstrate the cultural and intellectual value of Jewish civilisation within modern European society and to secure recognition for Jewish scholarship within the academic world.

Jewish scholars investigating the historical Jesus were therefore often motivated less by theological curiosity than by a desire to reposition Judaism within a predominantly Christian cultural environment. Their work formed part of a broader effort to safeguard the enduring value of Jewish civilisation while seeking an acceptable place for Jewish life within societies historically shaped by Christianity (Homolka 2015; Homolka 2016).

In this sense, postcolonial theory offers useful analytical tools for understanding the conflicts that arose from Christian claims to cultural and theological supremacy (Castro Varela and Dhawan 2020). The Jewish quest for the historical Jesus, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a theological debate. Rather, it also functioned as a sociopolitical strategy designed to challenge Christian hegemonic narratives and to assert the legitimacy of Jewish intellectual traditions.

Christian theologians themselves have increasingly recognised the importance of confronting the historical entanglement between Christian theology and the scholarly study of Judaism. As Christian Wiese has shown in his study of Protestant academic culture in Wilhelmine Germany, a self-critical reassessment of Christian theological discourse is necessary to move beyond earlier limitations and enable productive interdisciplinary cooperation between Jewish studies and Christian theology (Wiese 2004, 444).

2. Debates in Modern Theology

The interaction between Jewish scholarship and Christian theology often produced intellectual conflicts. One prominent example is the debate between Leo

Baeck and the Protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Harnack argued that Christianity represented a spiritual breakthrough beyond what he perceived as the legalistic framework of ancient Judaism. In his influential *History of Dogma*, he interpreted Christian doctrine as the product of the historical development of the gospel within the cultural environment of the Greco-Roman world (Harnack 1901, 1:22). In his lectures later published as *What Is Christianity?*, Harnack emphasised the decisive role of great historical personalities whose influence transcended the limitations of their historical context (Harnack 1901, 53).

In this perspective, Jesus appeared as an epoch-making personality whose message supposedly transcended the religious framework of Judaism. Although Harnack acknowledged that many elements of Jesus' teaching were already present in Jewish tradition, he argued that they had lost their vitality within rabbinic teaching. The Pharisees, he suggested, had reduced religious teaching to a dead level in which the living spring of holiness had become polluted (Harnack 1901, 47–48).

Jewish scholars strongly rejected such interpretations. They regarded them as examples of a theological narrative that devalued Judaism in order to elevate Christianity.

2.1. Jewish Responses and the Reinterpretation of Jesus

Rabbi Leo Baeck was among the Jewish thinkers who sought to challenge these interpretations. In his work *The Gospel as a Document of the History of the Jewish Faith*, published in 1938, Baeck presented Jesus as a deeply Jewish figure whose teachings were firmly rooted in the religious traditions of Israel.

For Baeck, Jesus was a pious Jew who lived entirely within the spiritual world of Judaism. He neither intended to found a new religion nor could he have imagined becoming the object of divine worship. By reclaiming Jesus as a Jewish teacher, Baeck aimed to restore the historical context of the gospel tradition and to challenge Christian theological narratives that portrayed Judaism as spiritually obsolete.

These debates proved highly significant for the development of Jewish-Christian dialogue. They enabled Judaism to be heard as an independent intellectual voice and gradually transformed the relationship between Jewish and Christian scholars from subordination to a dialogue between partners.

3. Contemporary Developments and Christological Questions

In recent decades, Christian theologians have increasingly reconsidered the theological implications of Jesus' Jewish identity. Jan-Heiner Tück, for example, emphasises that the biblical description of Israel as "the apple of God's eye" (Zech 2:12) leaves no room for supersessionist interpretations that would replace Israel with the Church (Tück 2016, 17). According to Tück, whoever attacks Israel ultimately calls God himself into question.

These developments reflect a broader effort within Christian theology to find a position between different models of understanding the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Among the models discussed are the traditional substitution model, the participation model in which Christians share in Israel's covenant through Jesus, and the so-called two-covenant model, which recognises the continuing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people.

The rediscovery of Jesus as a Jew has therefore had profound consequences for Christian theology. The distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith has produced a variety of interpretations that challenge traditional Christological doctrines.

Conclusion

The Jewish engagement with Jesus represents far more than a scholarly curiosity. It reflects a broader historical process in which Jewish thinkers sought to assert their intellectual and religious autonomy within a Christian-dominated cultural environment.

At the same time, the Jewish quest for the historical Jesus has stimulated important developments within Christian theology. By emphasising the Jewish identity of Jesus, Jewish scholarship challenges Christian theologians to reconsider inherited assumptions and to articulate a Christology compatible with contemporary Jewish-Christian relations.

As Christoph Schwöbel has emphasised, the basic condition for genuine dialogue is the recognition of each partner's autonomy. Dialogue requires that both sides define their own positions independently while acknowledging each other as equal partners in the conversation (Schwöbel 1997).

The historical figure of Jesus thus continues to function both as a point of tension and as a bridge between Judaism and Christianity. The many images of Jesus—Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Jew, Yeshua ben Josef, and the Christ proclaimed by Christian faith—bear the marks of centuries of conflict but also contain the potential for a new beginning in Jewish-Christian relations.

This lecture is dedicated to my teacher Christoph Schwöbel (1955–2021), honouring his seventieth birthday and the fifth anniversary of his passing.

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