

Jewish-Christian Relations: Encounters Past and Present

Jews and Christians in the First Century CE

Origins

Jesus and his movement: his Jewish followers believed that he was the Messiah (30-33 CE).

One first-century Jewish group among others: Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Essenes.

The work of the apostle Paul – spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire

Consequences of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE.

Jesus the Jew

Emphasis on the historical Jesus in his Jewish context.

What kind of evidence is used by scholars with reference to Jesus the Jew?

Gospels

Paul's letters

The Roman historian Tacitus (*Christus, who was crucified by Pilate*).

Josephus (37-100 CE).

The Testimony of Josephus

- John the Baptist (but without linking him to Jesus).
- James the brother of Jesus.
- Jesus (*the Testimonium Flavianum*): a text revised by Christians?



The Testimonium Flavianum

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared. (*Antiquities* 18.3.3).

The Testimonium Flavianum

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders. Agapius, *Book of the Title*(10th century).

Jesus the Messiah

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?'. And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets'. He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah'. And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

(Mark 8:27-30)

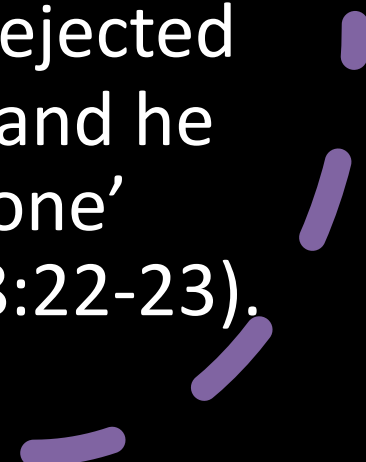
Jewish Messianic Expectations

- Popular prophetic and messianic movements (e.g., Theudas, 46-48 CE)
- Two messiahs in the Dead Sea Scrolls: king (descendant of David) and priest.
- Star of Jacob – Jewish warrior (Numbers 24:17).
- Simeon Bar Kochba (132-135 CE): the fulfillment of the messianic star according to some Jews.

Jesus the Messiah

- Why did the Jews refuse to accept Jesus as the Messiah?
- What about the biblical texts that predicted the coming of the Messiah?
- Nationalistic Messiah (and victorious) rather than a crucified Messiah.

‘The stone that was rejected by you, the builders, and he became the cornerstone’ (Acts 4:11; Psalm 118:22-23).



Jesus the Messiah in the Gospel of Mark

- The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Jesus the Messiah), Son of God (1:1).
- 'You are the Messiah' (8:23) (Matthew: + Son of the living God).
- 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Most High?' Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven' (14:61-62; cf. Daniel 7:13).
Matthew: 'You said so' (26:64).
Luke: 'You say that I am' (22:70).



Jesus the Messiah, Son of God

- Theological interpretation rather than a historical record.
- Accusations of blasphemy
- Claim by Jesus to be the Son of God, sitting on the right hand of God and coming with the clouds of heaven.

Jesus and his Jewish Contemporaries

- **Essenes** – the group responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. There is no reference to them in the New Testament; any links with the movement of John the Baptist?
- **Zealots** – freedom-fighters during the Jewish War (which led to the destruction of the Temple). Luke refers to ‘Simon the Zealot’.
- **Sadducees** – conflict with Jesus (e.g., Mark 12:18-27). No reference to them after 70 CE (aristocratic group who collaborated closely with the Romans).



Essenes and Zealots



The Pharisees: The
Enemies of Jesus?



Developments around 70 CE

Pharisees – reconstruction in the form of rabbinic Judaism; the descendants of Moses and Ezra. They are the main opponents of Jesus according to the Gospels, but they have much in common:

The coming of the Messiah

Angels

Life after death

Resurrection of the dead

Day of Judgement (Eschatology)

How reliable is the presentation of the Pharisees in the four Gospels? Tendency to generalize and to offer stereotypes, depicting them in complete opposition to Jesus (negative impact on later relations between Jews and Christians).



Conflict and Opposition: Polemical Language

- Use of polemical language between Jews and Christians. Has it contributed to hatred towards the Jews?
- Can the roots of anti-Semitism be found within the pages of the New Testament?
- Debates *between* Jews about Jewish issues.
- Not Christian arguments about 'outsiders'.
- Reading these texts within their historical context.
- It is also necessary to distinguish between context and effect (reception).
- These are authoritative texts that are open to misinterpretation and manipulation.

Accusations against the Jews in the Gospel of Matthew

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying “I am innocent of this man’s blood...”. Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:24-25).





Accusations against the Jews

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Whitewashing of Pilate's character (note what Jewish authors – Philo and Josephus – say about him).

Pilate mixes the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1-4)



‘His blood be on us and on our children....’

- ‘Christ’s blood was not only found on those who were present at the time, but also on all generations of Jews until the end of the world’ (Origen).
- Historical or theological record?
- Does the word people (*laos*) refer a) to the Jewish nation or b) ‘all those who stood in front of Pilate at the time’ (cf. Matthew 4:23; 9:35).
- Who are the ‘children’? One generation or all generations (descendants)? Destruction of the Temple as punishment for the people’s sins (i.e. one generation alone , if the Gospel of Matthew was composed shortly after 70 CE).



John's Gospel and the Jews

'You are the children of your father, the devil, and you seek to fulfill the wishes of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning; he does not stand in the truth for there is no truth in him' (John 8:44).



John's Gospel and Judaism

- Is it possible to discover an anti-Semitic potential in the Gospel of John?
'The Gospel of John has proved to be a dangerous document, for although it may not itself be anti-Semitic, it has given aid and comfort to anti-Semites' (D. Moody Smith).
- References to 'the Jews': this group personifies opposition to Jesus.
- It is emphasized that 'the Jews' (*hoi loudaioi*) were responsible for Jesus' death. Pilate announces that Jesus was innocent (18:38; 19:4, 6, 12) while 'the Jews' persevere and accuse him of blasphemy (19:7). 'Then Pilate handed him [Jesus] over to them [the Jews] to be crucified' (19:16).

Who are 'the Jews' in the Gospel of John?

A symbol of unbelief

Judaeans - i.e. the inhabitants of Judaea (though see John 12:9, 11; 19:20).

Jewish religious authorities, often juxtaposed with references to the Pharisees (11:46-52, 18:1-3, 18:12-14).

Those who are themselves Jews but fear 'the Jews' (7:13; 19:22).

Historical Context

Tension between Jesus believers and synagogue Jews (see John 9:22; 16:2).

‘In an era when there were ill feelings between the Church and the synagogue, ‘the Jews’ was a term used with a connotation of hostility to Christians..... This does not mean that the evangelist has forgotten the true circumstances of Jesus’ ministry in the anachronistic use of ‘the Jews’. By this term he indicates his belief that the Jews of his own time are the spiritual descendants of the Jewish authorities who were hostile to Jesus during the ministry’ (R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, lxxii).

Paul and Judaism



- 'Apostle to the Gentiles' – missionary beyond the boundaries of Judaism.
- Gentiles called to be the children of God.
- Paul: a Jew who came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Paul and Judaism

- Paul is convinced that Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26).
- 'The faithful remnant' (Christians) among the Jews (Rom. 11:5).
- Image of the olive tree: old branches are cut off in order to make room for new branches (11:28).
- Israel's privileges are put aside temporarily because of their hardness of heart (11:25).
- What is the significance of God's covenant with Israel?

The Two Testaments

- The old covenant/testament (*berît*) and the new covenant/testament: the starting-point of division between Judaism and Christianity.
- 'But this is the covenant that I will establish with the house of Israel after those days', says the Lord; 'I will place my law within them, I will write the law on their hearts, and I will be God to them and they will be my people' (Jeremiah 31:31-34).
- Agreement > God's faithfulness > obedience
- A new covenant through Jesus Christ
(redefinition of the covenant with Israel).
- Judaism – the old covenant that has now passed.



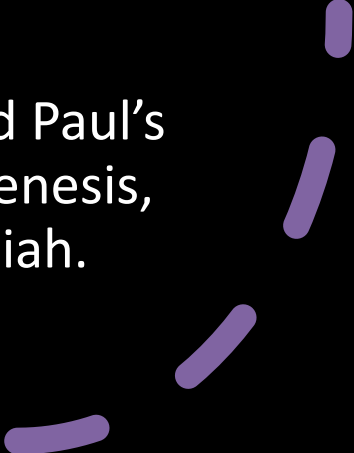
The Old and the New

Jewish methods of interpretation are evident in the New Testament in order to interpret Jesus and God's plan for the 'new Israel'.

Eschatological interpretation – discovery of references to the life and ministry of Jesus (birth, teaching, miracles, conflict with the authorities, death, resurrection).

Particular emphasis on the Prophets (prophetic/predictive significance).

Reading the Old to Interpret the New

- The importance of the Greek Bible (LXX – the Septuagint from Alexandria) – a Greek translation for the Jews of the Diaspora.
 - Bible of the early Christians (quotations and allusions in the New Testament).
 - An attempt by early Christians to maintain contact and community with the Jewish Scriptures.
 - Matthew's use of quotations which present Jesus' birth as the fulfilment of old prophecies.
 - Quotations in the Gospels and Paul's letters from specific books: Genesis, Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Isaiah.
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Breaking the Link?

- Marcion the heretic (90-155 CE) who sought to remove every Jewish text from the Christian Bible.
- Rejection of the Old Testament
- Focus on the letters of Paul and a particular version of Luke's Gospel.
- The wrathful God of the old covenant
- The loving God of the new covenant

