

Abraham's Eldest Sons

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The Reluctant Parting: How the New Testament's Jewish Writers Created a Christian Book, by Julie Galambush; HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.

The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus, by Amy-Jill Levine; HarperOne, 2006.

THE MONOTHEISTIC religions are sometimes called Abrahamic faiths, with Judaism and Christianity and Islam each a son of Abraham. Christianity began as a sect that gradually parted from Judaism during the first and second centuries CE; some delay the parting until the third century CE; others believe the parting never needed to happen. The sect lived in different congregations scattered throughout ancient Palestine and the Roman Empire. They worshipped with Jews in the Temple before its destruction in 70 CE, and, for an unknown number of generations after that, different congregations were associated with local synagogues throughout the Diaspora.

The sect wasn't monolithic because Judaism wasn't monolithic. The codification of separate canons of scripture, and evolution of antithetical cultural identities, Christians under the control of the Gentiles, Jews under the control of the Rabbis, didn't happen suddenly. Yes there were tensions but these were accommodated within an overarching religious pluralism: back then, before the Rabbis, the Desert Fathers, Emperor Constantine, and Saint Augustine. The full meaning of this fact is hard to grasp. It challenges many centuries of ingrained thinking.

Over several generations, enmity emerged between Abraham's eldest sons, Judaism and Christianity, which became a leitmotiv in the development of Western civilisation. The relationship has improved but they still have unfinished business to work through. Also, while no longer enemies, they now face common threats and can't afford to offend one another. Western civilisation has advanced, as far as religious tolerance is concerned, but it's naïve to believe the advancement is secure and can't be reversed. There are threats from all quarters, from within the West, and from without the West. A lot depends on continued dialogue, cultural memory, and sound teaching, all of which need to occur in an environment of rapid globalisation. It's a big ask.

Received identities can make inter-faith dialogue surreal, as Rabbi Apple explained early in 2009, during an address to the NSW Council of Christians and Jews' Luncheon Club: "Though Jews and Christians often use the same words, these are frequently loaded terms which say quite different things. Like the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*, we all mean our words in our own way." This delicious observation suggests that, even at its most respectful, inter-faith dialogue will continue to have a *Through the Looking-Glass* quality that's more like intra-faith monologue. But we need to be careful even speaking of intra-faith monologue, as not all Jews are on the same page, and neither are all Christians. Inter-faith dialogue becomes curioiser and curioiser when there's no we or you or us or them. The dialogue isn't between Alice and the Mad Hatter; it's between many Mad Hatters.

Christians have been trying to understand the Jewish context of the New Testament and the Jewishness of Jesus for nearly two hundred years. Occasionally their well-meaning attempts have reinforced negative stereotypes of Jews. Things have taken a turn for the better since Christians started letting Jews teach them about Jewishness. Below are two examples. The first comes from a Jewish convert who focuses on the Jewish writers of the New Testament. The second comes from an Orthodox Jew who focuses on the Jewishness of Jesus.

The Reluctant Parting

The sub-title of Julie Galambush's book, *The Reluctant Parting* (2006), "How the New Testament's Jewish Writers Created a Jewish Book", highlights her focus on each writer's local congregation in a period of political upheaval and religious mutation. Her method is close reading with a concern to enter into the minds of the writers who wrote the texts. Her chronology is both thematic and strategic. John's gospel comes later as it requires separate consideration.

Mark's gospel was written shortly before or shortly after the destruction of the Temple, an event that focuses his expectations of an imminent apocalypse. He writes in an allusive style, weaving together a wide range of texts from the Jewish Bible which Jews in the first century CE would have recognised as messianic prophecies. In his local congregation, some of Jesus' contemporaries are still alive and the apocalypse is expected before their death. The identity of his local congregation is

obscure, and is often assumed to be Gentile, but there's more evidence they're Jewish: first, they're capable of following his nuanced references to the Jewish Bible; second, Mark records Jesus as saying his followers will be handed over to councils and beaten in synagogues, something that wouldn't happen to non-Jews, in an apparent reference to the experience of Mark's local congregation; third, Mark's distinctive portrayal of both Jesus' disciples and his local congregation as failures seems to require a Jewish audience; fourth, Mark was writing about his local congregation as stakeholders in the broader Jewish struggle with the Romans in the first century CE. Like the Rabbis, who would spend the next two centuries reclaiming and reshaping Jewish symbols in the wake of the Temple's destruction, Mark also salvages the Jewish symbolic world in the wake of the same disaster. Unlike the Rabbis, though, Mark isn't creating a vision for the long run. The time is near and the days are short.

Matthew's gospel was written after the destruction of the Temple but before a definitive parting of the ways between his local congregation and the local synagogues. The author was Jewish, and his gospel is frequently considered to be the most Jewish, as his local congregation was predominantly Jewish, and its members were concerned with how they were perceived in the local synagogues they continued to attend. Yet the gospel is a shock for modern Jewish readers, as Jesus not only spars with the Pharisees but Jewish crowds urge Pilate to crucify him, wildly calling his blood upon themselves: a call that echoed throughout the centuries of Christian persecution of Jews. The gospel sounds anti-Jewish not because it sees Jews as Other but because it represents a volley in an ongoing argument over whether Matthew's local congregation had forfeited its Jewish identity. The antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees is anachronistic: a retrojection of the conflict between Matthew's local congregation and local Pharisees. What was the conflict about? Matthew portrays a local congregation in competition with the local Pharisees to offer the most authentic version of Jewish life and belief. His threats and fulminations, culminating in an announcement that the kingdom of God will be taken away from the Jewish nation and given to another, acknowledge that his local congregation's future is among the Gentiles.

Luke's gospel was written after the destruction of the Temple during a period in which Gentiles were becoming prominent in his local congregation. During the same period, the Pharisees,

soon to be known as the Rabbis, were beginning to stake their claim as the rescuers of Judaism; thus, as in Matthew's local congregation, tension between Luke's local congregation and local Pharisees is evident. Luke addresses his gospel to Theophilus, which literally means God-fearer: a Gentile adherent to Judaism who hadn't undergone full conversion. As a Jewish leader, his goal is to provide security for local God-fearers who were unsure whether Gentiles should be allowed to join a sect they understood to be, and which understood itself to be, the true Israel. Luke's purpose is to prove his local congregation is authentically Jewish, and to convince God-fearers they may become members of this authentically Jewish congregation. An additional theme, that with the messiah's arrival Israel had become divided, allows Luke to address the issue of Gentile prominence in his local congregation and why other Jews weren't flocking to join it. To establish the congregation as a legitimate continuation of Israel, Luke organises his narrative as if it comprised two of three volumes in a three-volume history: the Hebrew Bible, the life of Jesus (in Luke), the story of Israel in the messianic age (in Acts). This three-part scheme allows Luke to construct a seamless story running from Abraham and Moses, through Jesus and his disciples, all the way to Paul.

The Acts of the Apostles is the only extant account of the years immediately following Jesus' death. The first seven chapters demonstrate the ways in which the followers of Jesus became the core rump of "faithful Israel", recapitulating the life of Jesus, performing miracles like his, suffering persecution like his. In Chapter 8 Luke turns to a discussion of what to do about God-fearers. His conclusion is that, as God has made no distinction between Gentile and Jew, God-fearers may be included in "faithful Israel" without formal conversion to Judaism. The final section, Chapters 16–28, recounts Paul's journeys throughout the Roman Empire. Paul speaks in local synagogues throughout the Diaspora but his message is accepted by greater numbers of Gentiles than Jews. Thus the Acts of the Apostles takes us from a Jewish sect struggling to make sense of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to something that's beginning to look a Christian a church. As he does in his gospel, Luke continues to reassure his Gentile readers; his reassurances are so deftly argued they've remained definitive in shaping the Christian worldview to the present day.

Paul was once considered a Hellenised Jew who brought Jesus' message, physically and metaphysically, to the Gentiles. In recent decades his Jewishness has been reclaimed. Thirteen books

of the New Testament are attributed to him. Acts is his biography. In his letters Paul stresses his independence from Jerusalem but in Acts he's a bold and eloquent delegate of Jerusalem. Born in Tarsus a few years after Jesus, he came to Jerusalem as a young man, studied with the Pharisaic teacher, Gamaliel the Elder, and was a zealous Pharisee. Not long after Jesus' death, he persecuted Jesus' followers, for reasons that are unclear, but after his conversion he became an apostle to the Gentiles who always stressed his credentials as a Jew. His conversion was a departure from his Pharisaic allegiance not from Judaism as such. In Acts he offers sacrifice in the Temple and circumcises his Jewish assistant Timothy. In Romans he defends the Jewish people against the developing notion that the followers of Jesus have replaced them as God's people. His entire work derives from the proposition that the inclusion of Gentiles has taken place as part of the messianic age. In these last days, Gentiles have been grafted into the great tree of Israel. They are newcomers to, not supplanters of, the Jewish nation. Paul continually sought the common ground between Jews and Gentiles, and between anti-Jewish and anti-Gentile tensions.

John's gospel is fundamentally different from Mark and Matthew and Luke, because of its origins in a congregation in Asia Minor. Important in shaping Christian self-consciousness, it's also the most painful gospel for Jewish readers. Where Matthew's Jesus excoriates the Pharisees, John's Jesus calls the Jews children of the devil. Why is this so? The Johannine congregation is angry and bitter at having been rejected by a local Jewish group; beyond this, little is known and attempts to read the gospel as evidence of the definitive break between the followers of Jesus and Judaism are over-reading. That John's gospel continues to generate controversy is anything but coincidental. Consummately sectarian literature, it was written to be obscure, arcane, and occasionally offensive. Composed for insiders, it was equally written against outsiders. Long centuries of Christian theology have domesticated John's original shock value. Who are "the Jews" in this gospel? Some suggest the term refers to Jewish officials of various kinds, thus creating the division seen in Luke's gospel between bad rulers and innocent people, but this definition can't be applied consistently. In some instances he means Judeans, which could refer to people who live in Judea, or to the Jewish nation; in other instances he simply means neighbours; in most instances, he's referring to those who don't accept Jesus and therefore can't see the light. The greatest irony here, though, is the likelihood that the

Jews John condemns were once members of his own local congregation in Asia Minor; Jews who followed Jesus but weren't willing to affirm the Johannine view of him. In this Johannine world of absolute light and dark, which is dualistic and almost Gnostic, there's no middle ground.

Galambush ends her book with an epilogue; the first paragraph is salutary:

The New Testament is a book written by Jews but not read by Jews. This seemingly trivial point is crucial to understanding its meaning for modern readers. Regardless of its origins, the New Testament is no longer a Jewish book. Technically, it never was one, since the collection of twenty-seven writings into a single canon was undertaken long after Jews and Christians had parted company ... The New Testament's journey from a set of Jewish books to a sacred collection used exclusively by non-Jews has fundamentally changed—and distorted—its authors' portrayal of Jews. In order to discuss the New Testament image of the Jew, one must first distinguish between the ways in which the ancient Jewish writers saw and depicted Jews and the ways in which modern, non-Jewish readers perceive the Jews portrayed in the text. One might hope that a sensitive reader could come close to hearing what the authors intended to say, but in the case of the New Testament the barriers to an ideal reading are very high indeed. First, the texts are nearly two thousand years old and from a culture whose norms, customs, and idioms are only partially understood today. Second, what the New Testament authors say about Jews, they said about members of their own group—other Jews. For modern Christians, Jews are most definitely not members of the same group, but always the Other. Finally, and perhaps most important, whereas the New Testament authors originally wrote words of guidance for beleaguered congregations, today those writings are scripture; most Christians do not read them as merely the advice of ancient teachers. Because of the New Testament's status as scripture, what it says about Jews matters more today—and it matters differently—than it did in the first century.

The Misunderstood Jew

The sub-title of Amy-Jill Levine's book, *The Misunderstood Jew* (2006), "The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus", highlights her focus on Jesus from a Jewish perspective. This focus is important because, regardless of their differences, Christians and Jews should at least agree over Jesus' connection with Judaism in the first century CE. The separation of Jesus from his original context has had dangerous consequences, and both Christian and Jewish attempts to understand Jesus within that context are provisional and incomplete. It's difficult to hear what was heard in the first century CE; especially since local congregations, scattered throughout ancient Palestine and the Roman Empire, had different sets of ears adapted to particular cultural situations.

It's misleading to pit a liberating Jesus against an oppressive Jewish Law. The extent to which Jesus agreed with the Rabbis—that is, with the teachings recorded in the Mishnah, codified around

200 CE but preserving much earlier material, as well as the Talmud, a commentary on the Mishnah completed around 600 CE but also preserving much earlier material—is a complex topic. We don't know what was spoken by Jesus himself, what came from oral tradition, or what came from the gospel writers themselves. Similarly, as we can't be certain what rabbinic material ascribed to a particular teacher was spoken by that teacher, caution is needed when positioning Jesus against a Law that hadn't been codified and around which there was great debate and much flexibility.

Similarly, there's no indication Jesus had a systematic interpretation of Torah. The gospels suggest he responded to questions as they were posed to him, either by circumstances or by those seeking either to learn from him or to test him. Therefore Jesus is neither part of the rabbinic tradition nor clearly antithetical to it. In some cases he agreed with the majority views; in other cases he'd side with the minority; in a few cases he would have been well outside of it. He expected to be challenged and issued his own challenges. That he was willing to discuss how to follow the commandments shows he cared about them deeply. For example: As far as the Sabbath is concerned, Jesus didn't change the way it ought to be observed. The fact that he healed on the Sabbath didn't dishonour the Sabbath. Also, changing the day of the Sabbath as altered its emphasis. A Saturday Sabbath focuses on a Jewish vision of the creation of the world and liberation from slavery; a Sunday Sabbath focuses on a Christian vision of the resurrection, the creation of a new people, and the conquering of death.

Jesus is to Christians what Torah is to Jews and he doesn't have to be unique to be profound. Example one: Mark and Matthew and Luke each record Jesus' summary of the Law, which is affirmed by a scribe: a Jewish expert in Torah interpretation. The first part combines texts from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, beginning with the Shema, a major part of the synagogue liturgy. The second part is a central verse in Jewish thought found in the Jerusalem Talmud, the *Testament of Dan*, and the *Testament of Issachar*. The third part is similar to Rabbi Hillel's summary of Jewish teaching found in the Babylonian Talmud, a sixth century CE commentary on the Mishnah. Example two: Jesus dresses like a Torah observing Jew. He wears *tzitzit* (fringes), which the woman with the twelve-year haemorrhage touches in the hope of healing. He wears *tefillin* (phylacteries), and, since he criticises the Pharisees and scribes because “they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long” we assume his phylacteries were narrow and his fringes were short. Example three: Jesus eats like a

Torah observing Jew and keeps kosher. While one verse in Mark states that Jesus declared all foods clean, this is Mark's editorial comment not something Jesus said himself. Had Jesus actually declared all foods clean, the story in Acts about Peter's trance-vision, and the argument between Peter and Paul over table fellowship in Galatians, wouldn't make sense.

In addition to his direct teachings, Jesus made heavy use of parables, a style of indirect teaching known to his fellow Jews. Rabbinic parables often reflect on the meaning of scriptural texts. Jesus' parables are closer to those of the Prophets in that they reflect on the kingdom of God. The parables have lost their punch along with their Jewish context in the first century CE. To recover their punch, they need to be heard with first-century ears. That's not easy, as each gospel writer uses parables differently, depending on the proportion of God-fearers in his local congregation, and his local congregation's relationship with the local Pharisees. There's also a problem with translation, as we miss out on whole levels of meaning generated by wordplay in the original language. Example one: Matthew and Luke both contain the Parable of the Leaven, which would get more of a rise from Matthew's Jewish listeners, to whom leaven had positive and negative associations, while Luke's God-fearers may have found these associations more remote. Example two: Luke is the only gospel with the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which has a particular resonance. No one likes paying taxes, regardless of the congregation one lives in, but being a tax collector who works for the Roman enemy in a local congregation of God-fearers wouldn't have the same shock value as being a tax collector who works for the Roman enemy in a more Jewish congregation. Luke's listeners would have little difficulty hearing about righteous tax collectors—just as we have little difficulty hearing about clerks at the Australian Taxation Office who go to church—but a first-century congregation that was predominantly Jewish would have been seriously challenged to hear of a righteous tax collector who works for the Roman enemy *and* worships in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In addition to his direct teachings and parables, Jesus prayed like a Torah observing Jew. Although scholars continue to argue over which lines of the Lord's Prayer are original to Jesus, which translation is closer to the hypothetical Aramaic tradition, or which verses were adapted to church needs, there's no reason to think Jesus taught only one version of the prayer, and all versions fit within a Jewish context. Each line is found elsewhere in the scriptures, the teachings, or the

commentaries. Likewise, while it was fashionable in the late-twentieth century to believe Jesus was unique in referring to God as Father—and to believe the original Aramaic word for Father, *Abba*, really means Daddy, thus proclaiming a new kind of relationship between Father and Son, and by analogy between Creator and creation—the belief has been proven false. Even Joachim Jeremias, the scholar who first proposed the translation Daddy, along with its unique attribution to Jesus, retracted his thesis and called it “a piece of inadmissible naïveté”.

The identification of Jesus with Judaism isn't universally desired. Through a chic apologetic, which seeks to make Jesus politically relevant to the twenty-first century, Christians find an answer in Jesus to whatever ails the body politic, whether it's war, ethnocentrism, capitalism, an institutional religion entwined with the state, misogyny, or homophobia. In order for Jesus to serve this liberationist role, he has to have something concrete to oppose. The bad “system” then becomes, in scholarship and pulpit, Judaism in the first century CE. The problem wasn't theological until the Enlightenment, when Jesus lost his uniqueness and became comparable to other figures in antiquity whose biographies recounted divine births, healing powers, wise teachings, and survival after death. The problem wasn't educational until literary-critical theory displaced historical and textual evidence, the interpreter became the sole determinant of what texts mean, and voices from the margins bullied their way to the moral high ground. The problem wasn't pathological until the many overstatements about, misperceptions of, and slanders against Judaism in the first century CE began appearing consistently in classroom and church. The goals of many of these overstatements and misperceptions and slanders are commendable but their methods are deplorable.

Levine ends her book with an epilogue; the final paragraph is hopeful:

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document states: “In the past, the break between the Jewish people and the Church of Christ Jesus could sometimes, in certain times and places, give the impression of being complete. In light of the Scriptures, this should never have occurred. For a complete break between the church and the synagogue contradicts Sacred Scripture.” The connections church and synagogue share, not only in the recognition of the same sacred stories, but also in the similar interpretive understandings, necessarily hold the two movements together. If Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau, can learn to live together in peace, there is hope not only for the responsible and the prodigal; there is hope for church and synagogue as well. And if the church and synagogue both could recognise their connection to Jesus, a Jewish prophet who spoke to Jews, perhaps we'd be in a better place for understanding.

The Way Forward

WHAT DID I learn from these two books? That Judaism didn't have a monolithic identity in the first century CE, or even the second century CE, and neither did the followers of Jesus. That some of what I was taught during my seminary training in the 1980s, while the best available and most ecumenical and outward looking at the time, has dated badly and unintentionally re-enforced negative Jewish stereotypes. That when church hierarchies decide the pendulum has swung too far in one direction, and needs to swing back a bit, it isn't necessarily a sign that right-wing agendas are trying to turn back the clock; sometimes decisions which appear reactionary at the time are based on sound reasoning. That if Christians really do care about understanding the Jewish context of the New Testament, and the Jewishness of Jesus, they'll listen to what Jews have to say on the subject. That the New Testament preserves a great deal of Jewish history, as a primary source (and often the only source) of information about Jewish life in Galilee and Judea in the first century CE.

Remember what Rabbi Apple said about the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*: we all mean our words in our own way. Truth claims revolve around language and the meanings attached to words and phrases over time and in cultural contexts; for example, when it comes to Christology, or the doctrine of the Trinity, how will Christians in the twenty-first century avoid projecting metaphysical meanings formulated during and since the fourth century CE back into the first and second centuries CE? How will they honour the views of Jesus' early followers?

If all the participants in the dialogue are Mad Hatters, whether they're Christians or Jews, it's reasonable to offer one rule of conduct: the truth of what one Mad Hatter believes should never be a lie about what other Mad Hatters believe.

~ THE END ~