

# Christians and Jews: Between Story and History

In February 2013, the New South Wales Council of Christians and Jews hosted a lunchtime meeting between the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, and the Rabbi of Sydney's Great Synagogue, Jeremy Lawrence. The meeting focused on their remarkable friendship. Considering the tragic history of misunderstanding between Christians and Jews, their friendship seemed even more remarkable, given the conservative character of Sydney Anglicans.

During question time, someone asked Jensen and Lawrence their views on the documentary hypothesis, proposed by Wellhausen in the nineteenth century. According to Wellhausen, the first five books of the Bible—what Jews call the Torah and Christians call the Pentateuch—are redacted versions of originally independent sources: Jahwist, Elohist, Priestly, Deuteronomist. Lawrence believes the redactions were divinely inspired. Jensen hopes for evidence of a historical Moses, the attributed author of all five books.

Notice how Lawrence avoids Jensen's dilemma—what happens if there is no historical Moses—by drawing attention to more important questions: How is the Hebrew Bible inspired? If it is a literary artefact, redacted over nine centuries, how is God its author? Is extra-biblical proof necessary? Can it interpret itself? Is it its own proof?

The idea of a self-interpreting Bible is counter-intuitive to an enlightened West now habituated to Wellhausen's demythologising. It challenges powerful cultural assumptions about story as fiction

and history as fact. Parents used to warn children against telling stories, a caution against telling lies, but the Bible is a collection of canonised stories.

Traditionally, Christians and Jews approach the question of authorship differently. Christians have been more influenced by a Greek context where the author's creation—philosophical, rhetorical, aesthetic—is regarded as an artefact of the author's personal genius (or mediocrity). Jews have been more influenced by a Hebraic context where individuality is downplayed and authorship revolves around scribes (*sopherim*) transmitting their shared cultural message. In the latter case, the emphasis is not on Moses as an individual but on his role in the larger story of God's relationship with his people.

The Christian approach became a tradition of apologetics (*apologia* = answer, reply), defending Christological truth claims against non-Christians. In apologetics, the focus is what the Bible means rather than how it presents itself as a complex unity of canonical scripture, cultural history and literary artefact. It is critical here to distinguish between exposing what the text is saying and doing (exegesis) and projecting assumptions onto it (eisegesis).

For Christians, the Hebrew Bible is a collection of stories leading to Jesus as Messiah. However, knowing that interpretation of the story—its theological meaning—does not mean one has understood how the story has been heard by other ears. Regrettably, Christian apologetics has often involved eisegesis, thus violating the commandment against bearing false witness.

Take, for example, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* (155–160 AD), a foundational text in apologetics. Martyr was a Gentile convert trained in Greek philosophy. In the *Dialogue*, he invents an imaginary Jew—Trypho, a rabbi—for rhetorical purposes. His aim is to demonstrate how biblical revelation is compatible with Greek philosophy. He uses Greek ideas to interpret Old Testament theophanies as manifestations of Christ as the pre-existing *Logos* (Word, Reason, Text). He assumes

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*The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*  
by Robert Alter  
W.W. Norton, 3 volumes, 2019, US\$120

*The Other Side of the Story: Essays on Jews, Christians, Cults, Women, Atheists and Artists*  
by Rachael Kohn  
ATF Press, 2021, 460 pages, \$41.20

Trypho does not know what he knows about the *Logos*. (According to Heraclitus, *Logos* is something we must learn about if we are to understand the world's true significance.)

Martyr's assumption in the second century—still current when I was a seminarian in the twentieth—was that Judaism suffered from the lack of systematic theology. Its insularity, its reliance on Rabbinic interpretation, prevented it from benefiting from Greek philosophy. The syncretisation of biblical revelation and extra-biblical philosophy was regarded as necessary to proclaim the Gospel in non-Jewish cultures. Yet Martyr's *Dialogue* is not dialogical. It uses circular logic to conduct a straw-man argument. Christ is the *Logos*, a Greek idea. Martyr believes Trypho is unaware of Greek ideas.

This kind of rhetoric became an early source of anti-Semitism, or false witness, leading inevitably to the trope of Jew-as-other. The dialogue might have been more dialogical—and less anti-Semitic—had Martyr appreciated the *Memra*, the Jewish counterpart of the *Logos*. The trajectory of Western history might have been different had Christians been more sensitive to Jewish cultural awareness of their culture in relation to other cultures, revealed in the Hebrew Bible itself. Long before the Torah was finally redacted, and the canon was closed, there were Jewish communities all over the Mediterranean and Near East. The diaspora was culturally distinct, wherever it existed, but it was never culturally unaware.

The best way of approaching the Hebrew Bible, as a complex unity of canonical scripture, cultural history and literary artefact, is to keep attending to it without bearing false witness. This is difficult, given the human inability to tell a truth that is not simultaneously a lie about something or someone else. Those who take the Bible seriously do not need to ground it in anything extra-biblical. The Bible provides its own ground.

As Robert Alter suggests in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), the Bible is literary as well as historical:

The author of the David stories stands in basically the same relation to Israelite history as Shakespeare stands to English history in his history plays. Shakespeare was obviously not free to have Henry V lose the battle of Agincourt, or to allow someone else to lead the English forces there, but, working from

hints of historical tradition, he could invent a kind of *Bildungsroman* for the young Prince Hal; surround him with invented characters that would serve as foils, mirrors, obstacles, aids in his development; create a language and a psychology for the king that are the writer's own achievement, making out of the stuff of history a powerful projection of human possibility.

The stuff of history—the characters and events of Israel's story—includes Adam, an expulsion from the Garden, Abraham, a sojourn in Egypt, Joseph, Moses, an Exodus, a theophany on Sinai, an entry into the Promised Land, Judges, David, Solomon, a first Temple, many Prophets, a Babylonian Exile, a return from Exile, a second Temple, and many predictions of messianic redemption. The story's psychological complexity, its verisimilitude, its projection of human possibility, depend on what part of the story is being redacted. The Jewish ordering of the Hebrew Bible—Law, Prophets, Writings—reveals this better than the Christian ordering of the Old Testament.

The redactors studiously encoded their sources and retained any gaps and anomalies, including many “undesigned coincidences”, all of which give the text its ring of truth. Long-lost written sources—like the Book of the Wars of the Lord, the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and Judah, and the Scroll that inspired Josiah's reform—give a powerful historical sense to the establishment of the Hebrew Kingdom, and the role of the prophets during the Divided Kingdom and later periods. If there seems less scope for psychological complexity when redacting the oral traditions of primeval history—Genesis 1 to 11—even there the redactors give powerful accounts of human agency.

Understanding the Hebrew Bible's literary sense enhances its status as sacred scripture and cultural history, provided the principles of hermeneutics are respected and applied. Among these are the insistence that the parts should be understood in relation to the whole and the whole should be understood in relation to the parts. This open-ended process is meant to be dialogical. It requires the reader or hearer to keep reading and hearing rather than relying on—or hiding behind—pre-digested interpretations. Instead of following the dogmas of Wellhausen's demythologising, searching for what

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is behind or beneath the text, it is more fruitful to focus on its canonical shape.

In a companion study, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985), Alter introduces the ways in which the redactors were exemplars of poetic technique. He uses comparative Semitic philology and continuing archaeological excavation to develop the concept of semantic parallelism, first discovered by Bishop Lowth in the eighteenth century. His work is informed by his reading of the American New Critics, his acquaintance with Russian Formalism and Soviet semiotic theorists of poetry, and his appreciation of the wit and subtlety of the English Augustan heroic couplet. His passionate attachment to biblical Hebrew since adolescence—its powerful rhythms—has impelled him to strive for a better account of its poetic power than the ones in circulation. His goal is to describe how “biblical poetry is organised and how that organisation enables certain kinds of meaning”.

Alter introduces his award-winning translation, *The Hebrew Bible* (2019), by noticing that English translations of the Bible are problematic—“more problematic, perhaps, than most readers may realize”. The problem is the abuse of biblical philology, which, in its Anglo-American applications, comes down to “lexicography and the analysis of grammar”. This is wrong, because there is a difference “between philology as a tool for understanding literary texts and philology as an end in itself”, and because literature and philology work with “different concepts of what constitutes knowledge”.

According to Alter, modern English translations are about explaining the Bible’s meaning rather than “representing it in another language”. At worst, “this amounts to explaining away the Bible”. In their zeal to uncover the meaning of the text, modern translators:

... frequently lose sight of how the text intimates its meaning—the distinctive, artfully deployed features of ancient Hebrew prose and poetry that are the instruments for the articulation of all meaning, message, insight, and vision ...

One of the most salient characteristics of biblical Hebrew is its extraordinary concreteness, manifested especially in a fondness for images rooted in the human body. The general predisposition of modern translators is to convert most of this concrete language into more abstract terms that have the purported advantage of clarity but turn the pungency of the original into stale paraphrase.

In other words, when embodied metaphor is turned into disembodied metonymy, the results lack imagination. A culture that has lost its ear for the Augustan heroic couplet cannot appreciate artfully deployed Hebrew prose.

Take, for example, the Hebrew noun *zera* (“seed”) which denotes both agricultural seed and human semen. By metaphorical extension, semen begets children, but modern translators render it as offspring, descendants, heirs, posterity, thus creating disembodied metonymies. Another example is the difference between biblical syntax and modern English syntax:

between a system in which parallel clauses linked by “and” predominate (what linguists call “parataxis”) and one in which the use of subordinate clauses and complex sentences predominates (what linguists call “hypotaxis”) ... the characteristic biblical syntax is additive, working with parallel clauses linked by “and”—which in the Hebrew is not even a separate word but rather a particle, *waw* (it means “hook”) ... prefixed to the first word of the clause ... the general practice of modern English translators of suppressing the “and” when it is attached to a verb has the effect of changing the tempo, rhythm, and construction of events in biblical narrative.

Alter illustrates this with his translation of Genesis 24:16–21, which preserves the original repetition and rhythm of the Hebrew “hook”:

**And** the young woman was very comely to look at, a virgin, no man had known her. **And** she came down to the spring **and** filled her jug **and** came back up. **And** the servant ran toward her **and** said, “Pray, let me sip a bit of water from your jug.” **And** she said, “Drink, my lord,” **and** she hurried **and** lowered her jug onto her hand **and** let him drink. **And** she let him drink his fill **and** said, “For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill.” **And** she hurried **and** emptied her jug into the trough **and** she ran again to the well to draw water for all his camels. **And** the man was staring at her, keeping silent, to know whether the Lord had granted success to his journey.

By contrast, modern English translations remove as many instances of “and” as possible, to fulfil the imperatives of hypotaxis.

As Alter observes in a footnote, there are ten camels, each drinking several gallons of water, so “Rebekah hurrying down the steps of the well

would have had to be a nonstop blur of motion in order to carry up all this water in her single jug". Miraculously, this young woman is robust enough to become a matriarch, thus fulfilling her role in Israel's story, its history.

In January 1995, Rachael Kohn gave a keynote address, "Messiah on the Bus: Idolatry and the Torah", at a conference on Religion, Literature and the Arts at the Australian Catholic University (North Sydney). Her address focused on a paradox. While the resurrection of the righteous is a Jewish belief, "the perdurance of Jewish messianism is precisely in believing in it without actualising it".

If this paradox famously applies to the messianic claims Christians attach to Jesus—which Jews reject—Kohn was applying it to something else, the messianic claims some Jews attach to the Rebbe of Judaism's Lubavitch sect: Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94). For many Lubavitchers, the Rebbe is identified with "characteristics and achievements which a candidate for messiahship would need to fulfil". Kohn mesmerised her audience with an account of the canonical tensions between Jewish rationalism (the Haskalah) and Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah). In a broader Western context, those tensions are ancient and modern. Scholars in the Humanities might link them with the canonical tensions between Classicism and Romanticism (or between the Enlightenment and what Isaiah Berlin has called the Counter-Enlightenment).

*The Other Side of the Story* (2021) is a collection of essays about Kohn's career at the national broadcaster. In the introduction, she is candid about her "refusal to give permanency to the perjorative uses to which the term Jew has been put by anti-Semites of any background". Her passionate desire is to "reclaim the noble tradition" to which she belongs. The title of her MA thesis was "Joseph Klausner on Why Israel Rejected Jesus". Her doctoral research included studying "a group that was an offshoot of the missionary effort to convert Jews".

Jewish antipathy towards Christian missionary activity is famous. According to Kohn, the Hebrew Christian movement—relabelled Messianic Judaism in the 1970s on the back of novel scholarship on the Jewishness of Jesus—was part of the large number of new religious movements and cults challenging the status quo, which present "clear and present

dangers to their hapless followers". According to Kohn, Messianic Judaism "attempted to replicate a hybrid belief system which it averred was closer to Jesus's own first century experience". This made it a fitting subject for her research. In drawing an analogy with the People's Temple, whose members were forced to drink poisoned punch at gunpoint, she suggests Jews exploring the Jewishness of Jesus are at risk of cult-like behaviour.

Having been candid about the lens through which she views the world, Kohn's essays intend to provoke deeper engagement with the issues and ideas they discuss. They remain relevant to our time:

whether the subject is Jewish Christian relations, the study of cults and the new age, the popularity of atheistic critiques of religion, the reformative experiences of women, the distinctive Jewish mindset and its approaches to science and spirituality, and finally art as the last refuge of the spiritually inclined yet traditionally challenged.

Kohn tells "the other side of the story" to challenge views usually propounded or popularly assumed about each subject. She hopes to add "to the record of understanding of religion as lived in the light of historical and current events, scholarship and the spiritual aspirations of our time".

Readers following Kohn's career might think "Messiah on the Bus" a glaring omission from a collection about "the other side of the story", given its challenges to Jewish messianism. Kohn must have had good reasons for omitting it. Including it might have compromised her editorial vision (or at

least complicated it).

The world contains an infinite number of stories, each many-sided. If the side you are telling relies too heavily on the sins of other people's fathers—noticing what is hypocritical about their histories or scandalous about their traditions—false witness becomes impossible to avoid. You just slide into it. The side you are telling is never the whole story. There are always other sides to tell.

After Justin Martyr invented Trypho the Rabbi for rhetorical purposes, the trope of Jew-as-other remained a feature of Christian apologetics until the late twentieth century, always in the

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background, occasionally in the foreground. Kohn describes how this has played out. In Australian history, there is her survey of the Catholic and Anglican presses in New South Wales during the Nazi period, which reflect the emblematic responses of two ecclesial polities. In the conclusion of her survey of Lutheranism in South Australia during the same period, she notes that, later in his life, Karl Barth admitted his mistake in not including the Jewish problem in the Barmen Declaration (1934), because “it would not have been acceptable to the confessing way of thinking at that time”.

In her review of Thomas Kaufmann’s book *Luther’s Jews* (2017), Kohn discusses why Luther’s anti-Semitism became a cultural norm. If the anti-Jewish sentiments of some early Church Fathers were known only to a small proportion of clerics, “Luther’s every word was published in large print runs, illustrated with graphic woodcuts”. They were written in the vernacular, “in order that his attitude towards Jews would become normative to a large part of the German population”. His translation of the Bible made him a hero and progenitor of the social improvements Protestantism unleashed in the early modern period, but he also wrote *The Jews and Their Lies* (1643), which became a playbook for the Nazis.

Kohn begins her review of Homolka’s *Jesus Reclaimed* (2015) with an admission:

For many years I have been struck by the enthusiasm that Christian theologians and members of liberal “progressive Christianity” show for the Jewish Jesus. With confidence they refer to his loyalty to the Jewish people, his opposition to the Roman Empire, and his “rabbinical” thought patterns and social justice ethics that compare to Hillel’s teachings.

Towards the end of the review, Kohn notes the divide between the knowledge of scholars and the pious statements of church leaders (like Benedict XVI) who read the Bible through their faith in Christ:

While Jesus has become familiar to and even accepted by Jews as a Jewish figure, the Bible read through Christian eyes has not. Homolka rejects the Christian retrospective reading of the Torah that not only distorts this quintessentially Jewish work, but also sidesteps the legitimate historical quest for Jesus.

So, the uniqueness of the historical Jesus—his “unprecedented ability to turn men’s hearts towards justice, compassion and righteousness”—should be

balanced by the question of whether “he was the first or last man to do so”, for “these are quintessentially the Jewish values extolled in the Torah”.

In the chapter “Is There a Distinct Jewish Way of Thinking?”, Kohn suggests the Jewish mind is “unusually self-aware”, because it is not inclined, as is the Christian mind, “to synthesise its holy text into an overall smooth narrative”. She claims “the four synoptic gospels” (*sic*) were chosen “from a large number of competing versions at the Council of Nicaea in 325” and these “were edited to largely agree with one another, despite the gaps, variations and even contradictions where they do not”. Because of this inconsistency, “which could prompt troublesome queries or interpretation”, the Bible “was kept well away from the laity for 1500 years” until Vatican II in the 1960s.

Kohn believes the Jewish mind has always been more democratic, because the people, not the rabbis, read the scriptures during services. Also, the Jewish mind is more inquiring, because it has always been encouraged to question the Bible’s disturbing aspects rather than shy away from them. In waxing eloquent about the pillars of Rabbinic interpretation—the Mishnah and the Gemarah, the written and oral components of the Talmud—Kohn poses a question:

How could scientific thinking be incorporated into Jewish thought so early, given that the same thought posed such a monumental threat to the Roman Catholic Church, and also to a lesser extent, the Protestant Church?

An answer is provided by Maimonides (1138–1204), who taught that science and the Torah are always in agreement. If this is not apparent, it is because neither the science nor the Torah are properly understood: “Intelligence is the basis of the Torah,” Maimonides asserts. “The Torah was not given to ignoramus.”

There is truth in *The Other Side of the Story*, offered with Kohn’s signature tact, grace and beauty. The habit of reading the Old Testament solely as a prefigurement of Jesus made Christians tone deaf and allowed the trope of Jew-as-other to emerge. For that we must apologise unequivocally and ensure it never happens again.

Yet other tropes have emerged to replace Jew-as-other. The Catholic philosopher and polymath René Girard developed a theory of “mimetic desire”, using Leviticus 16 to explain the scapegoat mechanism in the formation of group identity. In an increasingly secular West, progressives seek to remake the Church according to the diktats of

Cultural Marxism, full of diversity and inclusion, free from inequality and inequity. Those who take their creeds seriously—conservatives and those who believe in the “fundamentals” of biblical belief—frustrate the mimetic desires of progressives and are therefore assigned the role of scapegoats. In global Anglicanism, for example, there is division over issues such as same-sex marriage. Among progressive Anglicans, the “teaching of contempt” once reserved for Jews, for most of Christian history, is now transferred to conservative Anglicans.

Progressive Christians seek to construct a liberationist Jesus to solve whatever they think ails the body politic. They are enthusiastic about the Jewish Jesus only if his Jewishness suits their agenda. Admittedly, when Christians began exploring the Jewish Jesus, they did so clumsily. Yet admitting the clumsiness does not detract from the Jewishness as a historical fact. I make a few observations about this, here, to question some of Kohn’s.

Christians and Jews must focus on how their antithetical religious identities developed after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD and they parted ways. Christianity was shaped by the Patristic tradition. Judaism was shaped by the Rabbinic tradition. Jewish academics like Daniel Boyarin consider how both traditions developed with an eye on each other. Did the Rabbis need the certainties of the Church Fathers as opposition?

Both traditions existed within the Second Temple Period, in some form. The question is, to what degree? Kohn’s instincts seem to suggest Judaism’s “noble tradition” was more fully formed in the first century, compared with Christianity’s. Is that true?

I am unsure what Kohn means by sidestepping the “legitimate historical quest for Jesus”, or what is implied by distinguishing between scholarly knowledge and the pious statements of church leaders who read the Bible through faith in Christ. While they are methodologically different, and have different audiences, Kohn seems to suggest

Christianity is less scientific than Judaism. Is that true?

Christians are disadvantaged here. By definition, they have “faith” in Christ—whatever that means—while Jews have the advantage of approaching “faith” differently. Jews can be atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, anti-Jewish (and anti-Israel) and still be Jews.

Memo to Kohn: There are three synoptic gospels, not four, and the Council of Nicaea did not choose from “a large number of competing versions”. There is no record of the Council discussing canonicity at all. The idea that it did was popularised much later, perhaps by Voltaire in the eighteenth century. As for the New Testament texts being “edited to largely agree with one another” despite their gaps, variations and contradictions, it would be useful to compare what the editors did to the New Testament with what the redactors did to the Hebrew Bible and see what the comparison looks like.

The messianic claims attached to Jesus are specific rather than universal. They are assigned “according to the Scriptures” as he understood them. More important for Christians, the highest Christology is found in the Bible itself, pre-eminently so in John’s gospel and Paul’s letters. Any syn-

cretisation of biblical revelation and extra-biblical philosophy is interesting but unnecessary. The only thing necessary is interpreting the entire Bible in its final canonical shape.

Jesus is to Christians what Torah is to Jews. Leaving faith aside, the Bible cannot be rewritten. Our ability to interpret it to suit ourselves is limited.

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