

Introduction

The Jewishness of Jesus as a Theological Challenge

What is theologically important about Jesus being a Jew? This book is about the theological implications of Jesus' Jewish identity as well as philosophical questions raised by the ongoing presence of Jewishness within Christian ethical and dogmatic discourse. Unlike many of the historical accounts of Jesus the Jew, which focus on Jesus' Judean context, this book is an inquiry into the meaning and theological consequences of Jesus' Jewish belonging.¹ Specifically, this study explores the theological and philosophical questions raised by his Jewishness as understood in terms of memory. Memory is not usually included among the core theological categories. But precisely with the intersection of revelation and history in the human life of Jesus, memory becomes a helpful term for the theological assessment of the historical Jesus. The Jewishness of Jesus is well described as a memory precisely because it is a historical fact that has never been completely forgotten but has often been neglected or suppressed in Christian tradition and self-understanding.

So why should the historical fact of Jesus' Jewishness be any more important than the other basic biographical facts of him being a man, of Galilean upbringing, with Mediterranean culture, and a carpenter by trade? I intend to show that Jesus' being a Jew is not just a historical detail informing Christology, but a significant factor for Christian theology as such. Both terms, "theology" and "Christology," will be used respectively for discourse and questions about God and Christ rather than

¹ I deliberately use the word "belonging" instead of "origin" so as to refer not just to the past. My wording seeks to allow inquiry into various features, memories, narratives, and practices that express and detail how a person belongs to a certain group or tradition.

as systems of answers. Thus, theology and Christology provide frameworks for the discussion of teachings about God and Christ. Theology is not a discipline limited to Christianity, but a discipline shared with thinkers of Islam and Judaism. David Ford's deliberately expansive definition of theology as "thinking about questions raised by and about the religions" stakes out a wide field.² I add to this broad theological discourse philosophical horizons as well, since I will show that Jesus' being Jewish bears not just historical but also philosophical – as well as interreligious – meaning.

While Jesus the Jew is at the center of my inquiry, I assume that the Jewishness of Jesus does not in itself solve theological problems nor does it automatically lead to a new closeness between Christianity and Judaism. Since the second half of the twentieth century, Christians throughout the world have proclaimed and confessed Jesus' Jewishness in numerous Church declarations.³ Even when the statement "Jesus was a Jew" is formulated in the past tense, it is usually not intended as a historical statement but as a Church confession and a theological pronouncement, although this has not always been made explicit. The Jewishness of Jesus is indeed not a new discovery and does not at all reflect a change in Christian belief. This is why I find "memory" a helpful category to explain the Christian awareness of Jesus' Jewishness. This memory, this knowledge, has been present but dormant throughout Church history, like a well-hidden treasure, though without a conscious understanding of its true worth. Christians have always known that Jesus was a Jew. The fact was never explicitly denied (the exception being the so-called Aryan Christianity of Walter Grundmann and other Nazis),⁴ but was often suppressed, neglected, and overlooked. Correspondingly, the intention to remember Jesus' Jewishness actively and explicitly is usually connected to repairing Jewish–Christian relations. Since the end of World War II, theologians and engaged lay people have been reminding others and

² David F. Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³ For an overview, see the website of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ): www.jcrelations.net/Statements.65.o.html.

⁴ The Nazi Walter Grundmann came to the conclusion that Jesus was not a Jew but an "Aryan." This perspective was not based on scholarly research but on the ideology of German National Socialism. It should be noted that this view is not within the spectrum of the Christian creed. Walter Grundmann, *Jesus der Galiläer und das Judentum* (Leipzig: Georg Wigand, 1940). See also Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

themselves of Jesus' Jewishness in order to bring Judaism and Christianity into closer communication with one another. At the same time, today closeness is no longer an unquestioned priority in the Jewish–Christian conversation; rather, the current prevailing objective in interreligious relations may be best described as respect for difference.⁵

Historically, the Jewishness of Jesus has been pointed out in order to counteract antisemitism, and to this day there remains a prevailing expectation that the consciousness of his Jewish belonging would have an immediate effect on elevating Christian respect for Judaism. But it is important to recognize that an emphasis on Jesus' Jewishness does not automatically preclude a Christian attitude of spiritual superiority vis-a-vis Judaism. In fact, a missionary approach toward Jews can even emphasize and exploit Jesus' Jewishness, the classical example of which is Luther's early non-antisemitic writing "*That Jesus Christ was born a Jew*."⁶ Supersessionism, that is, thought patterns that suggest or imply that Christianity has superseded Judaism, is not necessarily diminished by means of the general notion of Jesus' Jewishness.

Still, I am convinced that the traces and implications of Jesus being a Jew can help us discover a Christianity that is not based on a de-evaluation of Judaism. More than that, I hope to show how an in-depth study of Jesus being a "non-Christian" opens the Christian mind to deeper insights into Christian belief and a closer awareness of its original, or, perhaps, its potential truths. In the early stages of post-Shoah Jewish-Christian dialogue, emphasizing Jesus' Jewish identity may have had the flavor of reductionist Christology, that is, of reducing the notion of Christ's divinity. Instead, I seek here to examine the significance of Jesus Christ being Jewish in terms of the complexity of dogmatic discourse. For example, I ask whether and how Jesus's Jewishness is reflected in twentieth-century interpretations of the early church creeds.

The acclamation of Jesus' Jewishness has been central to most of the Church declarations on the revised Christian approach to Judaism promulgated at least since the late 1960s. But that the Jewish Jesus entails an affirmation of today's Judaism has mainly been implied rather than

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

⁶ Martin Luther, "Daß Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei (1523)" in D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe) vol 11, 314–336. See also the recent critical commentary of Matthias Morgenstern, *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborener Jude sei: und andere Judenschriften. Bearbeitet und kommentiert von Matthias Morgenstern* (Berlin: Berlin University Press, 2019).

explained in recent Christian theology. Only a few systematic theologians have thus far built their Christologies on affirming *both* Jesus' Jewishness *and* present-day Judaism. The Anglican-rooted Paul van Buren is the most important American theologian to be mentioned in this regard; he pioneered the topic with a Christology embedded in a three-volume systematic theology.⁷ In Europe, the Lutheran-based German theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Marquardt produced a Christology of Jesus the Jew that is at the heart of a comprehensive theology, a seven-volume dogmatics.⁸ More recently, Catholic theologians have taken the lead in the theological exploration of Jesus' Jewishness, among them Mary Boys, Philipp Cunningham, and Hans Hermann Henrix.⁹ Karl Barth has pointed out that the historical truth of Jesus being a Jew is not accidental but necessary.¹⁰ Although Jesus' being a Jew was not explicitly regarded as a necessary truth until the mid-twentieth century, all Christian theologies that are based on the ecumenical creeds and scripture are bound to this verity.

I intend to look at the encounter of history and reason embedded in the Jewishness of Jesus Christ. I will explore the theological meaning of his Jewishness in rites of passage to which little attention has been paid, such as birth and circumcision. The interpretations of his death and their shadowing legacy for Jewish–Christian relations have been comprehensively analyzed by Mary Boys.¹¹ Consonant with the title of her major study, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story*, Boys has done serious work on the Christian narrative in greatest need of redemption. Yet, beyond Luther's reminder that Jesus was born a Jew and the more recent critical emphasis that he also died a Jew, my focus is rather on his living as a Jew. This leads

⁷ Paul M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality: Part I: Discerning the Way* (1980), *Part II: A Christian Theology of the People Israel* (1983), *Part III: Christ in Context* (1988) (San Francisco: Harper&Row).

⁸ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Von Elend und Heimsuchung der Theologie: Prolegomena zur Dogmatik*, 1988; second revised and expanded edition (1992); *Das christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden: Eine Christologie* (1990 and 1991). *Was dürfen wir hoffen, wenn wir hoffen dürften? Eine Eschatologie* (1993, 1994, and 1996). *Eia, wärm wir da – eine theologische Utopie* (1997) (Munich: Kaiser).

⁹ Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, Hans Hermann Henrix, and Jesper Svartvik, eds., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 76.

¹¹ Mary C. Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013).

to the historical question of what Jewish life meant in the Second Temple period, a question that has garnered much attention in recent years. Even more difficult is the inquiry into first-century Torah observance and discussions of Jewish law before their canonization, beginning only at the end of the second century.

The Jewishness of Jesus has so far been mainly an issue to look back to: a topic for historical investigation and a question of the Church's memory. But Christology is not just an intellectual discipline reflecting on the past. Rather, it is an inquiry into Jesus as the Christ in present understandings and interpretations. Jesus was a Jew, and it is correct for Christians to say that Jesus Christ is Jewish and will always remain Jewish. Yet historical Jesus research and Christology remain at odds. My intention here is not to harmonize them artificially but rather to show how historical reference to early church dogmatic discourse can reveal their fundamental connectedness. The historical fact of Jesus' life became part of the Christian creed – first and foremost in Nicaea (325) and in a highly sophisticated way again in Chalcedon (454). Thus, drawing on historical research to advance dogmatic discourse should not be mistaken for reductionist theology. In late twentieth-century theologies committed to a revised Christian approach to Judaism, Jesus' Jewishness has often been understood as a critique of dogma. In this book, I argue for the Jewishness of Jesus as a key corrective of Christology, as a means of conversing with historical research and underscoring the critical capacities of the early Church's dogmatic discourse.

Christologies developed in the context of the Jewish–Christian dialogue in the 1980s show an inverse relationship between the humanity and the Jewishness of Jesus Christ. Instead of perceiving his humanity as the more inclusive category, as was traditionally the case, the Lutheran theologian Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt began to understand his true humanity precisely as true Jewishness: “The true Human is the true Jew.”¹² While it has been common until recently to discuss Jesus' Jewishness as a topic connected mainly to his humanity, since the 1990s we have also seen attempts to relate Jewishness to Christ's divinity. Paul van Buren deliberately writes about “Christ in his Jewish context” instead of the

¹² Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Das christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden: Eine Christologie I* (Munich: Kaiser, 1990), 138f. Compare Marquardt here with the famous 1781 statement by the champion of Jewish civic emancipation Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, that “the Jew is more man than Jew.” See Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28.

more common “the Jew Jesus.”¹³ But it is only from the start of the twenty-first century that we find explicit discussion of how Jesus’ Jewishness is expressed in terms of his divinity. While the dogmatic Church tradition has been typically regarded by critics as silencing Jesus’ Jewish belonging, the Catholic theologian Hans Hermann Henrix has recently pointed to the traces of Jesus’ Jewishness in the ecumenical creed of Chalcedon.¹⁴ The theological interest in Jesus the Jew is ecumenical also in the contemporary use of the term; that is to say, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and other Protestant theologians alike contemplate his Jewishness as key to a self-critical Christology. I would even propose the thesis that the re-discovery of Jesus’ Jewishness constitutes the greatest ecumenical commonality of late twentieth-century Christology.¹⁵ The American Methodist Roy Eckardt, the German Protestant Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, the American Anglican Paul van Buren, the Dutch Reform Simon Schoon, the American Catholic John Pawlikowski, and the German Catholic Hans Hermann Henrix – all of these theologians share an emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus in their Christological works.¹⁶ There is also no difference in the main line of argumentation: for all of them, the Jewishness of Jesus is not a new discovery, due to interreligious encounter or reconciliation, but a fundamental historical and religious truth.

Christian and Jewish scholars alike have regarded the Jewishness of Jesus as a link between Judaism and Christianity. Jewish scholars have typically stated that the “belief in Jesus” divides Jews and Christians. Both statements belong to the early phase of Jewish–Christian dialogue, when the Christian side’s foremost aspiration was to establish a sense of closeness to Jews and Judaism. But since the 1990s, some Christian scholars have begun to value difference as a desirable component of the interreligious situation. This is due largely to the influence of the great French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who created a language for an

¹³ Paul van Buren, *Christ in Context*.

¹⁴ Hans Hermann Henrix, “The Son of God Became Human as a Jew: Implications of the Jewishness of Jesus for Christology,” in Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, Hans Hermann Henrix, and Jesper Svartvik, eds., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 114–143.

¹⁵ Karl Barth famously described Jewish–Christian relations as the “great ecumenical question” of the twentieth century. See Michael Weinrich, *Karl Barth. Leben-Werk-Wirkung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2019), 278.

¹⁶ See for example A. Roy Eckardt, *Reclaiming the Jesus of History. Christology Today* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992) and John T. Pawlikowski, *Christ in the Light of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

ethics of otherness.¹⁷ While the Jewish tradition carries a deep knowledge of difference as a generally positive value, Christian theologians have usually seen commonalities as key to interfaith understanding. Also here we can see how both Protestant and Catholic theologians have similarly begun using the language of otherness that was made famous by Levinas.¹⁸ The Talmud scholar Daniel Boyarin has gone so far as to identify the notion of difference with Judaism and the striving for closeness with Christianity.¹⁹ Yet this view of Boyarin depicts the traditional missionary attitude as essentially Christian but does not take into account the recent Catholic withdrawal from missionary activity toward Jews since the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, Boyarin and others have overlooked the fact that “difference” is a major component at the very heart of the Christian faith. To Christians of Gentile descent, Jesus is and remains different. This interruption of identification does not need to estrange Christians from the Jesus they feel committed to. Rather, this experience of difference needs to be further explored interreligiously – both in its theological and spiritual dimensions.

Although the acclamation that Jesus was a Jew is central to most of the recent Church declarations that aim to revise the Christian approach to Judaism, his Jewishness has been more declared than elaborated on or explained. A lack of in-depth reflection on Jewish identity is also characteristic of many academic presentations of these shifts in interpreting Christian text traditions and doctrine. Even in contemporary Christologies, the Jewish context of Jesus has been dealt with more in a descriptive than a discursive, analytical, and constructive manner. What has usually been missing is an effort to show how the Jewishness of Jesus interacts with Christian dogmatic discourse. Only a very few systematic theologians, such as Paul van Buren, Roy Eckardt, and Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, have built their Christologies on affirming Jesus’ Jewishness along with the ongoing legitimacy and vitality of Judaism. At first sight,

¹⁷ Among his many books, see especially Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Phil Cunningham describes the learning within Jewish-Christian encounters as the “sacrament of otherness”; compare Philipp A. Cunningham, “Celebrating Judaism as a ‘Sacrament of Every Otherness,’” in Kristen Colberg and Robert Krieg, eds., *The Theology of Cardinal Walter Kasper: Speaking Truth in Love* (St. Johns, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 223–240. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt has described God as protector of otherness. See Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Was dürfen wir hoffen, wenn wir hoffen dürften? Eine Eschatologie*, 1993, 191ff.

¹⁹ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 232–236.

the notion of Jesus' Jewishness seems primarily to be an issue of history and memory. Christology, though, prioritizes the present, as the Christian faith refers to an ongoing connectedness of Christ with the world. Moreover, post-Shoah theologies present not the past but the future as the main field of Christian reinterpretation. Along these lines, several of this book's chapters refer specifically to the constitutive Christological temporal modes of Jesus's Jewishness, past, present, and future. Another chapter, "Between Jesus, the Jew and the Other," opens up an interreligious perspective, one which entails looking for Jesus "between the times and the intellectual spaces." Here I listen not only to Jewish but also to Muslim interlocutors and suggest taking interreligious discourse seriously as a mode of theological introspection.

I begin my study by outlining a Christian theory of memory that serves as an intellectual framework to explore the historical and theological crossing of Jesus' Jewishness. Jesus the Jew is a key example of the interreligious quality of Christian memory. I develop my concept of Christian memory in conversation with Yosef Yerushalmi's and Avishai Margalit's respective theories of Jewish memory and historiography, their discussions of the imperative to remember and the concept of communities of memory. I will show that Christian memory – in the broad sense of comprising not just basic narratives but also legal, social, and theological reflections of those stories – is, to a large extent, textually shared with Jews. The discipline of memory will provide a framework to look at different ways of remembering and transmitting the same texts. Memory in a narrower sense will serve as the prism for an intellectual discourse highlighting, enacting, reviving, and criticizing stories and thought traditions in the present. In the second chapter, I explore the theological implications of the more recent historical research on the Jewish Jesus. In the Historical Jesus research of the last few decades, two new phenomena have come to the fore: first, the cooperation between Jewish and Christian historians and New Testament scholars in academic research, and second, the so-called Third Quest for the Historical Jesus, emphasizing "context" and focusing on Jesus's integration into Second Temple Judaism. Historical research has come a long way since World War II; interpreting Jesus within his Judaic context has now become mainstream in academia.²⁰ Building on this research I examine the specifically

²⁰ The most comprehensive work has been done by Wolfgang Stegemann, who combines historical accuracy with theological reflection. Wolfgang Stegemann, *Jesus und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010).

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theological implications of Jesus' observance of contemporaneous Jewish law. I develop a theory that presents Jesus' Jewishness in opposition to Docetism (the heresy that Jesus was not a real human being) as well as to Marcionism (the proposition of a previously unknown God – rather than the God of Israel – having sent Jesus). I thus show Jesus's Jewishness as constitutive of key early church dogmatic decisions.

While this assessment of the theological implications of Jesus as a Second Temple Jew principally reflects historical research, the third chapter opens a conversation with an entirely different genre of intellectual literature. I discuss Jesus' present-day Jewishness in conversation with the African American theologian James Cone's remarkable formulation that while Jesus *was* Jewish, he *is* black.²¹ It is not the tension but rather the connection between Jewish and black identity that catches my attention here. In tandem with the notion of a Jewish/black Jesus, I also look at understandings of Jesus the Jew among Palestinian Christians. What does it mean for Palestinian Christians to confront the Judaic roots of the Christian faith amid day-to-day political struggle? This juxtaposition, at the same time, begs the question of ancient and modern Jewish continuity. Hence, my subsequent exploration of the allusive category "Jewishness" leads to a conversation with Jewish philosophers about aspects of Jewishness that connect the first with the twenty-first century. I agree with contemporary Jewish scholars that there is no simply defined and eternal "essence of Judaism," but I dare to sketch out what I regard as Judaism's continuous "textual frame of reference." I argue that characteristics of Torah and prophetic texts, such as collective self-criticism embedded in narrative and an ethics considerate of the socially disadvantaged, are constitutive for Jesus' as well as today's Judaism. It is more the polyphony than the actual content of these texts that I regard as a consistently shaping feature of Jewish hermeneutics.

After discussing the ongoing relevance of Jesus' Jewishness for Christological languages that typically prioritize the present tense, in the fourth chapter I look toward the future. Interestingly, the future has emerged as the main context for post-Shoah thought – manifest, for example, in the title of a major conference project of the end of the twentieth century, "Remembering for the Future." Rosemary Radford Ruether has powerfully criticized Christianity's tendency toward "realized eschatology," the idea that the promised future of reconciliation has already been

²¹ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975), 123.

accomplished with Christ. Responding to the post-Shoah philosopher Emil Fackenheim's question "Has Good Friday overwhelmed Easter?," I focus here on what might be called the future of the human spark after the Shoah, engaging in the process with the writings of both Primo Levi and Hannah Arendt. Fackenheim's questions to Christian theologians and Ruether's Christian self-criticism converge in the task of delaying or questioning the Christian tradition's idea of Christ's past victory over "sin." What we see instead is that Christian theologians have begun to emphasize the mode of promise and make its fulfillment conditional on human ethical responsibility. Fackenheim's painstaking questions about the physical vulnerability of Jesus as being fully human remain a challenge to a contemporary Christological thinking committed to post-Shoah responsibility as well as to dogmatic discourse. In this vein, I examine the meaning of Jewishness for a Two-Natures Christology in discussion with the latest publication on this question by the theologian Kayko Driedger Hesslein, who, like me, considers Jewishness as meaningful regarding Christ's divinity as well as his humanity.

Both notions of "humanity" and "divinity" are challenged by thinking of Jesus' suffering as Jewish suffering. Despite a strong tradition of connecting positively the notions of suffering and salvation, remembering the Jewishness of Jesus effectively challenges Christian talk of agony and pain. I discuss this central Christian topic in the fifth chapter in conversation with some contemporary Israeli philosophical (Adi Ophir) and radically revised Christian (Alice Eckardt and Johann Baptist Metz) approaches. Since Levinas' powerful essay "Useless Suffering" (1982), philosophers have been rethinking the distinction between unavoidable suffering and the forms of pain and misery that can actually be reduced or prevented. Christian theologians have only just begun to revise understandings of suffering that have long been paralyzed by fixed Christological thought traditions. When Jesus' suffering is discussed in connection with other Jews' suffering, as represented for instance by Paul van Buren, traditional Christian thought is most seriously challenged. I show how the Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir's moral philosophy provides a language for Christians to move from explaining ("Christ-splaining") suffering to instead prioritizing the search for resisting human-caused suffering. Levinas' major statement of explaining the Other's pain as source of all immorality leads to my in-depth reflection on the language of otherness for contemporary Christological thinking.

In the sixth and final chapter I trace the roots and the changing meaning of the term "otherness" within twentieth-century philosophical