

The New Jewish Reclamation of Jesus in Late Twentieth-Century America: Re-Aligning
and Re-Assessing the Misunderstood and Crucified Jew

(draft)

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I

In the previous chapter I examined a series of American Jewish intellectuals who wrote about Jesus in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There I suggested that two basic approaches emerged. The first I called the American polemical Jesus that in large part followed the Jewish Jesus of European Jews, in particular Abraham Geiger and Henrich Graetz. The second I called the post-polemical Jesus, what I consider to be a more indigenous American phenomenon. I suggested that, at least to some degree, this Jesus was initiated by Felix Adler (1851-1933), a reform rabbi who abandoned Judaism to found The Society for Ethical Culture. It became more well-known in the works of Rabbis Emil Hirsch and Hyman Gerson Enelow, among others, who broke from the more polemical positions of Isaac Mayer Wise and Kaufmann Kohler, each of whom also contributed moving the American Jewish Jesus beyond the more intolerant views of their European predecessors. Yet, as we will see this post-polemical American Jesus is not void of a polemical content altogether. Jesus is used by the contemporary American Jews discussed below to simultaneously to bring Judaism and Christianity closer together *and* keep them apart. What disappears in America is that the Judaization of Jesus is no longer used as a means to claim that Judaism is superior to Christianity, a move that is born from the context of an American religious ethos that American Judaism has a significant investment.

Jewish writing about Jesus in America, with a few exceptions, ended after the “Jesus Controversy” in 1925. This controversy erupted in light of a sermon delivered by Rabbi Stephen Wise at Carnegie Hall in Manhattan on the occasion of the 1925 English publication of Joseph Klausner’s Hebrew volume *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*. American Jews began writing about Jesus again in the 1960’s around the same time post-Holocaust theology began to emerge. Samuel Sandmel’s important work *We Jews and Jesus: Exploring Theological Differences for Mutual Understanding* was first published in 1965 and inaugurated a new era of the American Jewish Jesus.¹ This chapter treats the new engagement with Jesus in the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century in an American religious culture informed by pluralism and multiculturalism as fundamental American values coupled with an American Jewish community more confident about its place in American society than ever before. Moreover, America at this time was no longer dominated by progressive and liberal Protestantism (Unitarianism was no longer the force it once was, even among

¹ See, Samuel Sandmel’s important work *We Jews and Jesus: Exploring Theological Differences for Mutual Understanding*, with a new introduction by David Sandmel (r.p. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths and Jewish Lights, 2006). Richard Rubenstein’s *After Auschwitz*, perhaps the first systematic statement of post-Holocaust theology was published in 1966 and Emil Fackenheim’s first extensive post-Holocaust publication *God’s Presence in History* was published in 1970 but was taken from the Charles F. Deems lectures delivered at New York University in 1968. The proximity of the new American writing on Jesus and post-Holocaust theology is worth further examination.

intellectuals) and therefore questions of Christology and other doctrinal matters could not be ignored.

Yet the picture is more complicated. As much as Americans may be becoming *more* religious this is not a return to any unreconstructed traditionalism.² New Age Religion is implicated in this religious revival even for those who have no allegiance to the New Age. Moreover, Jefferson's moral Jesus and Emerson's subversive message of "spirit" *contra* "religion" retain at least some cache in this period. Yet this religious individualism and moralism now shares company with the miraculous Christ figure of evangelicalism as well as what Stephen Prothero argues is a Jesus who is a secular/cultural icon, that is, a post-Christian Jesus.³ Jews have to grapple with all these new American Jesus' in order to come up with one of their own. As American Christianity simultaneously experiences a born-again renaissance coupled with becoming unchurched, post-Protestant or post-Christian, American Jews must confront their new status in a complicated multicultural society.⁴ As has been throughout Jewish modernity, Jesus plays a crucial role in American Jewry's own self-fashioning especially living in a country that increasingly defined itself as "Judeo-Christian."⁵

Toward the end of the twentieth century, numerous Jewish scholars and theologians, mostly in North America, began to articulate new approaches to the question of a Jewish Jesus.⁶ In the first section of this chapter I examine two approaches voiced by four individuals. These are decidedly non-academic approaches whose intent is to reach a wide swath of the American Jewish and Christian public. While the individuals in question are rabbis and theologians, these approaches were not developed for, or

² See, for example, in Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), pp.15-17. Fox cites a 2003 survey that claimed four in ten Americans consider themselves "born again" and seventy percent consider "Jesus son of God and not just a founder of a great religion like Muhammad or Buddha." "Over two-thirds of the adults in one of the most modernized and industrialized countries on the world believe that a first-century Palestinian Jewish teacher and healer is the incarnation of God." (17). Cf. James B. Twitchell, *Shopping for God: How Christianity Went From in Your Heart to In Your Face* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), esp. pp. 1-60.

³ See, for example, in Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 13-44, 123-154; Robert Wuthnow, *After Spirituality: Spirituality in America Since the 1960's* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 9-18, 142-198.; Mark Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counter-Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003) pp. 95-129; and *Beyond New Age*, S. Sutcliffe and M. Bowman eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2000).

⁴ On post-Protestant America see Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth-Century Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 1-22. and R. Lawrence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 2003), pp. 31-48. For a post-Christian America see Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 21-76

⁵ On a critique of the Judeo-Christian construction see Arthur Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Myth* (New York and Evanston, ILL: Harper and Row, 1957). Cf. my "The Judeo-Christian Tradition, the American Holocaust, and the American Jewish Dilemma," *Zeek Magazine* (forthcoming).

⁶ Since my interest is the American Jewish Jesus I exclude scholars such as Geza Vermes (UK) and David Flusser (Israel) who have made important contributions in the post-Klausner era to the Jewish Jesus phenomenon. Vermes and Flusser are both widely read, albeit mostly by scholars, and their influence on the American Jewish Jesus is readily apparent. For example, see Vermes, *Jesus in His Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

delivered on, the pulpit as was largely the case in the pre-war period. By the 1970's the sermon was no longer the main form of communicating Jewish ideas. Publishing houses such as the Jewish Publication Society, Jewish Lights, Aronson Press, Menorah Press, Feldheim Books and Artscroll among many others who published book-length popular studies in Judaism for the general public began to dominate the dissemination of Jewish ideas in America.⁷ Moreover, by this time Jews began to publish in the various ecumenical journals (mostly edited by Christians) already in existence. Finally, the emergence of Jewish Studies in the American academy will prove to have had a tremendous, and creative, affect on the contemporary Jewish Jesus, as we will see in the final sections of this chapter.

Much of the most important work on the Jewish Jesus in this period appeared in books of constructive Jewish theology (Yitz Greenberg and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi) or in theological journals such as *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* or ecumenical collections such as *Jesus through Jewish Eyes* (Byron Sherwin and Daniel Matt).⁸ The purpose of these essays appears to be an attempt to renew the place of Jesus for post-war American Jews who, in some sense, no longer need him. For American Jews at this time, Jesus is no longer needed as a tool of acculturation for a fully Americanized Jewish audience. But in the wake of the counter-culture, Vatican II, and New Age Religion, Jesus returns, no longer the epitome of morality but in a new role as spiritual master, personal savior or cultural icon. Hence, the late twentieth-century Jewish Jesus' will reflect that sentiment and respond with its own re-construction. The continuing project of Jewish Americanization (also called Jewish identity) requires a new Jewish Jesus that can address the changing nature of Jesus in American Christianities.

In his review of Donald Hagner's *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*, G. David Schwartz claims that "The Jewish authors have, almost exclusively, limited themselves to historical questions. By concentrating on the Jesus of history, Jews categorically reject the claims of Christology."⁹ While the last part of this claim may be correct, I argue here that the first part is mistaken. In this section I explore various Jewish responses to Jesus that are not purely historical, that is, not solely concerned with the historical "Jewishness" of Jesus. And this is not new. Predecessors such as Emil Hirsch, Felix Adler, and Hyman Gerson Enelow and, more recently, Susannah Heschel, are not exclusively interested in Jesus' historical Jewishness but also – or perhaps more so - engage the Jewishness of his teachings and message for Jews. By this time, Jews are no longer hiding behind the veil of history to justify Jesus as a Jew. For example, in Susannah Heschel's case, she examines the 'figure' of Jesus as a cultural construct, a tool that informs, and problematizes, both Jewish and Christian identity.

The first approach assumes that the fundamental break between Judaism and early Christianity rests on the question of Jesus' messianic vocation. Based on a historical approach but moving beyond it, the more doctrinal claims such as Jesus' divinity are deemed marginal to the messianic claim and, for some, already outside the purview of his

⁷ Other publishers in the traditional world such as Feldheim Books, Artscroll, and Chabad's Kehot Press, published many books for general interest as well. These presses, however, did not have much interest in subjects like the Jewish Jesus.

⁸ Another notable example is *The Historical Jesus Through Catholic and Jewish Eyes*, B. LeBeau, L. Greenspoon, and D. Hamm eds.(Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2000).

⁹ G. David Schwartz, "Exploration and Responses: Is There a Jewish Reclamation of Jesus?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24:1 (Winter, 1987): 105.

Jewishness. If a new Jewish Jesus can be forged, this argument goes, it must squarely confront his very Jewishness, that is, the claim that Jesus is not only claiming to be the messiah but the “Jewish” messiah. The two figures representing this first case are rabbis Irving (Yitz) Greenberg and Byron Sherwin who argue in different yet overlapping ways that while Jews *must* reject the Christian claim of Jesus as the ultimate messiah, they *can* accept some form of his messianic vocation without subverting Jewish theological principles.¹⁰ This breaks new ground from previous adaptations of Jesus where Jesus as messiah was marginalized and replaced with Jesus as moral hero.

The second approach, represented largely by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, rejects outright that the messianic claim is the fundamental issue at hand. In fact, he challenges early (Jewish) Christianity’s decision to focus on messianism as a description of their master. Schachter-Shalomi makes what I take to be quite a daring move by entering into the doctrinal arena with Christians by offering a Jewish version as transcendent personhood that he claims coheres with Jewish mystical doctrine. Along similar lines, Daniel Matt suggests a rendering of Jesus as a Hasid, or Zaddik, not a moral compass but an *axis mundi* around whom followers can gather and be enlightened by his example.

In both cases (Greenberg/Sherwin and Schachter-Shalomi/Matt) we have moved well beyond the earlier Jewish Jesus’ that are intrinsically bound by the historical Jesus of an eighteenth-century Jeffersonian ethos and nineteenth-century Protestantism. Jesus as moral teacher, or more polemically, (Reform) Judaism as the true religion of Jesus, is abandoned in the post-war period.¹¹ On this Sherwin echoes the attitudes of all four positions when he writes, “The present endeavor is to formulate a new Jewish theology of Jesus grounded in the framework not of contemporary historical scholarship but of classical Jewish theological rubrics.”¹² The reasons for this will be discussed below as this surely differs from the *fin de siècle* Jewish Jesus’ of Susannah Heschel, Paula Frederickson, and Amy-Jill Levine where history ostensibly dominates but does so not to promote Judaism nor expose Christianity’s deviation from the historical Jesus.

Suffice it to say that the various post-war Jewish Jesus’ (and more pointedly the post 1960’s Jewish Jesus’) are products of post-assimilationist and multicultural Jewish America.¹³ Jesus is no longer a vehicle for assimilation or the quest for religious normativity in American Judaism. Judaism is no longer only an “acceptable” religion in American because it resembles liberal Protestantism.¹⁴ I agree with Stephen Prothero that

¹⁰ The question of Jesus as Messiah is a focal point of earlier scholarship as well. See, for example, Bernhard Felsenthal, *Why do the Jews Not Accept Jesus as Their Messiah* (Chicago, 1890). An excerpt of this pamphlet can be found in Berlin, *Defending the Faith*, pp. 142-153. Interestingly, while Greenberg deals with many Christian theological positions, past and proximate, he rarely mentions the many discussions on this same subject by earlier American rabbis and theologians.

¹¹ There may be various reasons for this. For example, Reform Judaism may have lost some of its luster or, alternatively, its may have become so accepted that it no longer needed Jesus to confirm its American credentials.

¹² Byron Sherwin, “Who Do You Say That I Am (Mark 8:29): A New Jewish View of Jesus” in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, Beatrice Bruteau ed. (MaryKnoll, NY, Orbis Books, 2001), p. 31.

¹³ For example see Nathan Glatzer and Daniel Moynihan *Beyond the Melting Pot* and the important sequel Glatzer’s, *We are All Multiculturalists Now*

¹⁴ On this we can consider the origins and meaning of the mainstreaming of the term the “Judeo-Christian Tradition” in post-war America. The term has its origins in Europe and more decisively in early twentieth century America but it becomes as more commonly used term in the post-war period. Many

Jefferson's theological project severed Jesus from Christianity long ago in America and I extend that to suggest this, in part, enabled Jews in America in the latter part of the twentieth-century to experiment more freely with an adaptation of Jesus that is more deeply informed by their own theological tradition.¹⁵ Alternatively Jews can, and do, ignore Jesus completely without paying much of a price. Except, that is, if one believes that Jesus has something to offer American Judaism's self-fashioning. Perhaps this is what distinguishes the late twentieth-century Jewish Jesus from the past: in the past Jews *needed* Jesus to be American. In the present, Jews *want* Jesus (or want to understand him in less than a negative light) because he adds something to Judaism that is lacking thereby strengthening Judaism's distinctive place in the multicultural world in which they live. Jewish leaders no longer fear American Jews will convert to Christianity in any significant numbers. The danger, rather, is apathy toward the Jewish tradition, replacing it with no religion at all.¹⁶ Thus the competitive spirit between Judaism and Christianity (as earlier Jews envisioned it) has largely disappeared in this later period.

Greenberg and Sherwin base their positions on a more nuanced view of "the messiah" in Judaism that distinguishes between a pen-ultimate and ultimate messianic figure, each serving a crucial role in the messianic process. Instead of simply rejecting the claim of Jesus as the Jewish messiah each offers a more nuanced view, not of Jesus, but of the nature of the Jewish messiah. The bifurcated messiah is a notion that was developed in early rabbinic culture. The reasons for this dual messiah doctrine remains in the realm of conjecture. The dual messiah principle assumes that the messianic drama unfolds in two distinct stages: the first is the culmination of the necessary wars that create the conditions for messianic peace. The second is the inauguration of the messianic age through the re-establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem and the in-gathering of Jewish exiles. These periods correspond to the prophetic position that the messianic age is preceded by "birth pangs" (*hevlei mosiah*) or "footsteps" (*ikvei de'moshiah*), a period of turmoil that serves as the final stage of purification before the redemptive era.¹⁷ While some prophets speak of this proto-redemptive period without a messianic figure at the helm, the rabbis add to this prophetic vision a pen-ultimate messiah descended from the House of Joseph who will lead Israel through the final stage of exile.¹⁸

Jewish intellectuals were highly critical of the term. For example, see Arthur Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, (Evanston, ILL; Harper and Row), pp. ix-xxi, 85-94.

¹⁵ See Prothero, *The American Jesus*, pp. 13, 14 and see 19-32.. For another discussion of Jefferson's Jesus, see Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), pp. 160-172

¹⁶ On apathy and no religion as the overarching challenge of contemporary Jewish theology see Arthur Green, "New Directions in Jewish Theology in America," re-printed in *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, E. Dorff and L.E. Newman eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 486-493.

¹⁷ For some examples, see, b. Talmud Megillah 2a; Midrash Tanhuma 58:3; and Yalkut Shemoni to Jeremiah 3:310.

¹⁸ For an examination of sources on the Joseph messiah see Joseph Klausner, "The Jewish and the Christian Messiah," in *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishna*, W.F. Steinspring trans. (from the 3rd Hebrew edition) (New York: MacMillan &Co., 1955), pp. 519-531.

Rabbinic and post-rabbinic culture is generally divided between two distinct messianic visions; the apocalyptic and the naturalistic (with various gradations).¹⁹ In the first case, the Messiah will institute a spiritual transformation of the world, including the transformation or even erasure of the law and, perhaps, mortality itself. This is based on various inter-testamental books and the concluding chapters of the biblical book of Daniel. It became popular in various works of Kabbala from the anonymous *Sefer Temunah* and *Sefer Peliah* to the Zohar, Sabbateanism, and beyond.²⁰ In the second scenario, the Messiah's entry into human history will not result in anything other than "the Jewish liberation from servitude to the nations,"²¹ usually interpreted as political and religious autonomy in a sovereign polity.²² In the rabbinic imagination, the first messiah comes from the lineage of the House of Joseph, the second from the House of David.²³ Both exhibit values intrinsic to the Jewish vision of redemption and both are dependent upon one another. In many versions the Joseph messiah will die (in some cases in the final battle of the apocalyptic wars) to make way for the Davidic messiah to enter human history and bring it to its conclusion.

Both Greenberg and Sherwin use this model of a bifurcated messianic in different ways to suggest that Jews could, perhaps, accept Jesus as a "messiah" without agreeing with the Christian demands that he is the ultimate messiah. I will suggest that such a move is indicative of an American Jewish trajectory that seeks reconciliation with Christianity through a shared Jesus, not solely for the social benefit of Jewish acceptance into American society (which had largely been achieved by the time Greenberg and Sherwin were writing) but in order to re-orient American Judaism in an era where the assimilatory project had largely run its course. That is, each in different ways view their social context as an opportunity to revise Jewish attitudes toward Christianity that had been corrupted as a result of centuries of persecution and exclusion. The fear of persecution and the competitive nature of liberal Christianity no longer colored the ways contemporary American Jews understood the relationship between Judaism and Jesus.

II

The Holocaust, Religious Pluralism, and a (Jewish?) Jesus: Irving (Yitz) Greenberg:

Greenberg's thoughts on Christianity have been recently collected in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, published in 2004. This volume contains essays published over three decades on three interlocking themes: the Holocaust, Israel, and Jewish-Christian relations. Greenberg's basic thesis is that the Holocaust was an "orienting event" that should evoke in both Christians and Jews a new sense of urgency regarding their tortured

¹⁹ See and overview in Gershom Scholem's, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 1-36; and an alternative view in Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 1-37.

²⁰ See Gershom Scholem, *On the Origins of the Kabbala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 460-475. Cf. Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp.101-125..

²¹ See b.T. Berakhot 34b, Shabbat 151b, and Sanhedrin 99a.

²² See for example in Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* "Laws of Repentance" 9:2 and "Laws of Kings" 12:2.

²³ Source

relationship. The Holocaust serves both as an occasion and a rupture in western civilization for both traditions to own their own failures in coming to terms with one another.

Both religions have a major task at hand in the generation after the Holocaust. Both religions need to take up the charge of correcting their own deviations from the covenantal way. They need to overcome the denials of the Image of God in the other, which erode the religious power of each faith tradition...Both communities need the humility of learning from secularism and from each other.”²⁴

The premise in Greenberg’s project is founded on the irony that the Jews most extreme experience of powerlessness in the concentration camps produced a world where Jews have unprecedented power in a Jewish State. The danger, of course, is to use the Holocaust as a justification *for* power, thereby maintaining the rights of powerlessness and power, using the former to justify the latter. Alain Badiou articulates this danger in his depiction of the contemporary Jew as situating herself too deeply inside the Shoah-Israel-Talmud (S.I.T) triad. While Greenberg would not accept Badiou’s call to sever the Holocaust and thus the “holy signifier” of the “Jew” from state politics, he would be sympathetic to the danger of using the Holocaust to curtail the responsibility inherent in Jewish power.²⁵ Greenberg would like to see the Jews’ return to power as a call for religious pluralism whereby each tradition can confront its own demons. Along the lines of Emil Fackenheim’s post-Holocaust theory of the “voice of Auschwitz and the voice of Sinai” but extending the argument beyond the Jews, Greenberg posits the Holocaust “was a revelatory event in at least two religions (Judaism and Christianity).”²⁶ This revelatory moment requires a renewal of the Jewish covenant, part of which is a re-assessment of its relationship to Christianity.²⁷ My interest in Greenberg is quite narrow in that I am only concerned with one part of this larger project: his assessment of Jesus as a “failed” as opposed to “false” messiah, the coherence of that claim and whether it contributes anything to the trajectory of the Jewish Jesus in American Judaism.

Greenberg begins by echoing something written in a letter from Franz Rosenzweig to Hermann Cohen that messianism in general is a sign of health for Judaism. “If Judaism did not generate messianic expectations, and did not generate a messiah, it would be a sign that it was dead. As long as Judaism is generating messiahs, it is faithful to its own calling.”²⁸ It is not clear what work this statement is doing. On the one hand it sends a message to Jews that the original Jesus Movement among Jews that subsequently morphed into Christianity was not only integrally Jewish but a sign of the health of the tradition, even if the messiah chosen was a mistake. Hence, the roots of Christianity are an expression of a robust and passionate belief in the messiah in concert

²⁴ Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, p. 183.

²⁵ See Alain Badiou, *Polemics* (London: Verso, 2006), pp.157-247. For another articulation of this see Avrum Burg’s *Defeating Hitler* [in Hebrew].

²⁶ See Fackenheim, *God’s Presence in History* (New York: Harper TorchBooks, 1970), pp. 67-104; and Greenberg, *For the Sake*, p. 15.

²⁷ On this see Hayyim Yerushalmi cited on page 7 of *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*.

²⁸ Greenberg, *For the Sake*, p. 149. On Rosenzweig’s comments see *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, N. Glatzer ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp.350-351.

with the principles of Judaism. To Christians it could be saying that however Christianity moved away from Judaism in subsequent generations, the disciples of Jesus were acting in accord with Jewish principles and ideals. In this light, it is not merely that Jesus was “Jewish” but that the Jesus Movement was a healthy expression of Jewish yearning. Here Greenberg places the messianic impulse of Jesus’ disciples, and not merely the ambiguous claims Jesus makes about his own messianic vocation, at the very center of the movement’s Jewishness.

Greenberg asks Christians to recognize that Jews simply cannot accept Jesus as a successful messiah on historical grounds. “Given the facts on the ground, this person was no messiah. As open and anxious as they were for a new age, they heard no new signal of revelation. They were not deaf, but they hear a different call – to a greater level of participation is a new covenant.”²⁹ This largely echoes earlier positions from I.M. Wise to Enelow. He then claims both Jews and Christians undermined the possibility of some form of reconciliation between “belief” and “history” at the outset by mistakenly positing a zero-sum game. That is, that the irreconcilability of nascent Judaism and what would become Christianity that has caused so much anguish to Jews over the centuries was the fault of uncompromising positions on both sides.

Unfortunately, Christians failed to reconcile their souls-searching fervor in generating a new covenantal movement with the dignity and continuing vitality of the traditional people of Israel. And Jews were so enthused by the Rabbinic renewal of their covenant that they could not imagine that a spin-off vanguard could be a second channel of God’s blessing for the world.³⁰

Setting aside the fact that Jewish-Christianity in the early period did, in fact, claim to hold both precepts together (the law and Jesus as messiah),³¹ Greenberg implies that a post-Holocaust world contains the requisite conditions to correct the error of Jews and Christians in the first century without undermining either tradition’s fundamental commitments and principles.

While I sympathize with Greenberg’s attempt to create conditions for pluralism as a foundation for a new Jewish-Christian relationship and commend his willingness to use Jewry’s new-found power in the nation-state as a tool to cede ground to Christianity, both theologically and historically, I think that the false messiah theory fails on two interrelated counts. First, it presumes that the messianic claims about Jesus constitute the very epicenter of Christianity, one that Jews must respond to with something more than outright rejection. Second, he maintains that Jews cannot accept the premise of Jesus as messiah yet can posit (a) the Jesus Movement that became Christianity was a healthy expression of Jewish messianic yearning; and (b) that Jesus was *a* messianic figure who preached “truth” according to Jewish principles yet ultimately was *not* the messiah

²⁹ Ibid. p. 65.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See, for example, in Oskar Skarsaune, “Jewish Believers in Jesus in Antiquity – Problems of Definition, Method, and Sources,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, O. Skarsaune and R. Hvalvik eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 2007), pp. 3-21; and Matt Jackson-McCabe, “What’s in a Name? The problem of ‘Jewish-Christianity’” in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered*, M. Jackson-McCabe ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 7-38.

because he did not usher in a new era in accord with Jewish belief. Hence, those who believed in Jesus as messiah in his lifetime (and, perhaps, Jesus himself) acted in concert with core Jewish values and beliefs and were not deviant in any way. This moves beyond the nineteenth century and pre-war rabbis and theologians in America who largely ignored the messianic question and focused on Jesus' ethical teachings in line with the historical Jesus school among Protestants.

It is worth asking here if according to Greenberg Jesus (the little we know of him historically) was truly preaching messianic Torah (that is, he *could* have been the messiah), how can he justify those Jews who rejected him in his lifetime? That is, if Greenberg's justification for rejecting Jesus as messiah is solely on the criteria of history (i.e. his death and the unchanged nature of the world) shouldn't those Jews who rejected him be held accountable? Shouldn't the proper stance have been to accept him as messiah until his death?

Greenberg sets the stage for his failed messiah position by suggesting that Jesus' ministry and the crucifixion took place in times so tumultuous that sound judgment was almost impossible, making the Rabbinic (and perhaps early Christian) error understandable, if not excusable. Ancient Israelite society was experiencing the dramatic collapse of its entire civilization. The prophetic promises of return after the first exile were proving to be false. Hellenism had infected the very core of Israelite society; culturally, socially, religiously. In short, history as the verification of the Israelite covenant was being undermined. The covenant was failing and in dire need of renewal or re-interpretation. This is the stage that Greenberg sets to posit the Rabbinic historical error and the Christian hermeneutical error. Regarding the Rabbinic accusation of Jesus as "false messiah" Greenberg writes,

The Rabbis *perhaps* erred here (my italics). Understandably, they did not do greater justice to Jesus because they were surrounded by an enemy (i.e. Christians) one hundred times larger than Jewry, aggressively proselytizing and persecuting the Jews in the name of Jesus claims. Out of defensiveness, the rabbis confused a "failed" messiah (which is what Jesus was) and a false messiah. A failed messiah is one who has wrong values... a flailed messiah is one who has the right values and upholds the covenant, but does not attain the final goal.³²

This acknowledges the rabbinic error and offers a historical justification. This contextualization works to create space for the correction Greenberg offers given the changed environment in which Jews now live (in America). But there is something fundamentally troubling here. First of all, the sages (call them Pharisees) who rejected Jesus as messiah in his life-time (and even afterward) were not threatened by Christianity (which did not yet exist). And even if Greenberg is referring to the rabbinic sages in Babylonia and Erez Israel in the third to fifth centuries, they were not living under Christendom either. Peter Schaefer's study *Jesus in the Talmud* argues that while there are no overt references to Jesus in the Talmud there are enough suggestive puns and world-plays in rabbinic literature about Jesus to argue that they were aware of New Testament material in some (written or oral) form and, not feeling very threatened,

³² Op. Cit., p. 153.

covertly mocked its messianic claims.³³ But these sages in Babylonia were also not living under Christendom. Greenberg's comment can only apply to medieval Jewry which did not initiate this false messiah position but inherited it from their rabbinic ancestors. And if we use Moses Maimonides (who lived his entire life under Islam) as an example, Jews in Islamic lands supported the false messiah argument just as stridently as Jews living in Christendom. Hence if Greenberg wants to maintain the false messiah error, it is an error that is not justified by the means he suggests. The failed messiah "mistake" needs to be explored more deeply inside the rabbinic construction of political theology.³⁴

Greenberg suggests further that Jesus is better depicted as a "failed" messiah because he died before completing his messianic task. He qualifies this by suggesting that "failure" is an attribute that applies to many well-meaning Jewish heroes including Moses, Jeremiah, and Bar Kokhba (and R. Akiva who supported Bar Kokhba as messiah). He then deploys the notion of the Joseph messiah and another example of a "failed" messiah. It is significant that while Greenberg uses the Joseph messiah model he never claims, as Sherwin does, that Jews can envision Jesus *as* the Joseph messiah. Not without its problems (as we will see below), this step would be more of a substantive gesture to Christianity than Greenberg wants to make for various reasons. First, it would place Jesus solidly *inside* Judaism to this day; and second, it would require contemporary Jews to consider Jesus as an authentic voice in determining its covenantal future. Rather, Greenberg posits that the notion of messianic failure is an acceptable, even normative, category in Judaism that could include Jesus among its ranks. Jesus is legitimate for Judaism only in *potencia* but never in *actu*.

There are three points regarding the other characters on Greenberg's list as sharing Jesus' failed vocation. First, while it may be true Moses did not succeed in his mission accompanying the children of Israel into Canaan, he did get them to the very border, and his failure (if we can call it that) was divinely decreed (surely according to rabbinic tradition) long before his demise. It may be that his personal aspirations were never achieved but his collective responsibilities surely were. Second, while Jeremiah may have failed to convince Israel to repent, he did not fail to fulfill his obligations as a prophet which is to convey God's word, not necessary to convince his audience. Third, I am not convinced the Joseph messiah fails in his task because he is killed. In fact, his death may be the completion of his task as it makes room for the Davidic kingdom. Greenberg writes, "In the Messiah ben Joseph idea, you have a messiah who comes and fails – indeed is put to death – but paves the way for the final redemption."³⁵ If Greenberg would claim, as Sherwin does, that Jesus can be seen *as* the Joseph messiah, I would feel less uncomfortable with his argument. But he does not do that, at least not explicitly. For Greenberg Jesus fails because he does not complete what the messiah is supposed to do. He is thus *not* the messiah and, as such, is written out of Judaism because others believed he was. I submit that this is quite different than Moses, Jeremiah, or even the Joseph messiah in the rabbinic imagination.

³³ See Peter Schaefer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 95-129.

³⁴ On Maimonides, see his *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Kings," 11:4. Cf. Naomi Goldfeld, "The Laws of Kings, Wars, and the King Messiah According to Maimonides *Mishneh Torah*," [Hebrew] *Sinai* 91 (1983): 67-79; and Joel Kraemer, *Maimonides* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), pp. 252-256.

³⁵ Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, p. 153.

Given that my focus is limited to the Jewish Jesus and not the larger question of Jewish-Christian relations, I ask what Greenberg has provided for us in his failed messiah model. He does not focus on the superior moral nature of Jesus' teachings as does I.M. Wise, Hirsch, Kohler, Enelow, and Stephen Wise. He does acknowledge the shared or at least overlapping qualities of his teachings and Judaism. For Greenberg Jesus is a Jew and even a heroic Jew. But in the end he is Jew who failed, failure defined in honorary and not derogatory terms. Yet Greenberg's attempt to soften Jesus' failed status by comparing him to other failed Jewish heroes in my view comes up short. While Greenberg claims Jesus shares this fate with the likes of Moses, Jeremiah, Rabbi Akiva and Bar Kokhba, he does not, from my reading, follow through with that assertion. For example, according to Greenberg, should Jesus' teachings like the Sermon on the Mount be taught in American Jewish Hebrew schools the way Harris Weinstock suggested?³⁶ Should he be part of the canon of Hebrew heroes like Yosef Hayyim Brenner wanted?³⁷ That is, should Greenberg's Jesus become a *part* of Judaism (like Moses, Jeremiah, and Akiva)? Many nineteenth-century American rabbis thought so as their projects were, in part, a reclamation of Jesus not only for Jews but also for Judaism. As I read him, Greenberg has something else in mind. He is seeking to open lines of communication between Jews and Christians as two sovereign and distinct religions by enabling each to re-assess their attitudes toward the other in order to produce a less contentious and even pluralistic relationship. In that I believe he succeeds. But Greenberg's Jesus remains outside Judaism. The failed messiah is a tool to soften the edges of the more offensive false messiah, thus enabling Jews and Christians to talk to one another on less contentious soil. Fair enough. On the question of Jesus' Jewishness and contemporary American Judaism, however, I do not see how Greenberg's failed messiah, who is then excluded from Judaism due to his failure, does much theological or, as important, corrective work for twenty-first century America Judaism. However, what Greenberg represents if we read him in the larger context of earlier American Jewish writings on Jesus is a move inside the arena of Christian doctrine that his predecessors intentionally avoided. For Greenberg Jesus is a tool of ecumenicism, a means to cultivate a new relationship between Judaism and Christianity in a post-Holocaust world. He is not trying to re-claim Jesus as much as complicate the very notion of the messiah in order to meet his Christian interlocutors half way.

³⁶ Harris Weinstock was a mercantilist in California who, in 1899, presented a petition to institute the study of the New Testament in Jewish educational programs because he believed Jewish ignorance of Christianity prevented the flourishing of Judaism in America. Almost a century later Roxanne Schneider-Shapiro, a graduate student at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, developed a survey she distributed to Jewish schools in the US regarding the teaching of Jesus in Jewish schools. For a brief discussion of both Weinstock and Schneider-Shapiro see Michael Cook, *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2008), pp. 7-11. Cf. Prothero, *American Jesus*, pp. 244-247.

³⁷ On the Brenner affair see, Nutit Govrin, *Meora Brenner: Ha-ma'avak al hofesh ha-biyui* (Jerusalem, 1985). Cf. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi*, pp. 90-116.

III

Jesus as the Joseph Messiah or Bringing Jesus to the Center of Judaism: Byron Sherwin

Byron Sherwin's essay "*Who Do You Say That I Am (Mark 8:29): A New Jewish View of Jesus*" originally appeared in 1994 in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. It was subsequently re-printed in an edited volume by Beatrice Bruteau *Jesus through Jewish Eyes* in 2001. In many ways Sherwin's essay traffics between Martin Buber's assessment of Jesus as "a great brother" in his *Two Types of Faith* and Greenberg's attempt to re-envision a messianic vocation for Jesus that does not subvert Jewish theological teaching. Writing in a late twentieth-century American context as both a rabbi and a scholar Sherwin digs deeper than Greenberg, I believe, in searching for a Jewish Jesus that can address the new American Judaism in the fin de siècle.

The venue of the original publication of his essay suggests it is written for a Christian audience even as Sherwin writes, "the recovery of the Jewishness of Jesus may offer more of an opportunity for Jewish theologians than for Christian theologians (36)." Unlike Greenberg, for whom Jesus is a small part of larger project, and for whom the "Jewishness" of Jesus seems to matter little, Sherwin is committed to offering a Jewish Jesus that not only smoothes the edges of the conventional Jewish "error" of positing Jesus as a "false messiah" but he more forcefully advocates for a contemporary "reclamation" of Jesus that implies an invitation for Jews to re-consider Jesus as part of their Judaism. In some sense, this echoes back to Jewish adaptations of Jesus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Sherwin does not rest on the historical assumption of Jesus' "Jewishness" and the universal depiction of him as a master of universal morality. Like Greenberg, he attempts to justify Christianity's messianic claim within the confines of Jewish theological teaching. In my view, the weakness of Sherwin's argument is that he leans too heavily on Greenberg's failed messiah model. Yet in his advocacy of the failed messiah he writes, "my radical suggestion is that he may be considered a Jewish messiah, a failed rather than false messiah, *part of rather than apart from the life of his people and their messianic hope.* [my italics]." This last clause may take him beyond Greenberg in that for Greenberg the failed status of Jesus combined with his disciple's belief in his success excludes Jesus from the theological Jewish narrative, and thus excludes him from Judaism. Sherwin suggests this need not be the case. For Sherwin, "failure" is better understood as incompleteness, that is, Jesus' messiahship was "true" but he did not live to see its completion. As an incomplete messiah he could still remain a legitimate messiah.

This is argued in Sherwin's central thesis that Jesus was the Joseph messiah who begins the messianic process that will be fulfilled after his death. While Greenberg alluded to the Joseph messiah in his essay as an example of a "failed" messiah, he did not identify Jesus *as* the Joseph messiah. The difference here is crucial. While Sherwin claims his interests are purely theological and not historical, he justifies his suggestion by citing the opinions of some historians (he does identify them) that "the idea of a Messiah son of Joseph was developed as an attempt to give Jesus a place within Jewish messianic theology. In this view, the idea of a Messiah son of Joseph was developed in order to try to convince Jews in the first few centuries who believed in the messiahship of Jesus that

he was indeed a Jewish messiah though not the final Jewish Messiah.”³⁸ Without entering into a discussion about the accuracy of such a historical claim, Sherwin deploys it to suggest that the Joseph messiah was *invented* as a tool to attract Jewish-Christians back into Judaism – just as Paul was pulling the other way – by acknowledging Jesus’ unique role but arguing that it did not require breaking with the Mosaic Law. In this sense, the doctrine of the Joseph messiah could be viewed as a rabbinic gesture to Jewish Christians.

By claiming Jesus to be the Joseph messiah, Sherwin suggests that he has a positive role to play in the continuation of that messianic process in contemporary Judaism. Citing Buber, he writes,

The Jewish community will recognize Jesus...not merely as a great figure in Jewish history, but also in the organic context over a Messianic development extending over millennia, whose final goal in the Redemption of Israel and the world. But I believe equally firmly that we will never recognize Jesus as Messiah Come, for this would contradict the deepest meaning of our Messianic passion.³⁹

Sherwin concretizes Buber’s notion of an “organic context” or Jesus as a “great brother” to refer to Jesus as an embodiment of the Joseph messiah (and idea Buber does not invoke), a Jewish pre-requisite for redemption. This places Jesus solidly inside Jewish theology bringing Sherwin to suggest that his theory “is virtually unprecedented in Jewish theological discourse.” He may be correct. Although American Jews examined in this study made similar gestures earlier on they largely did so without invoking theological categories.

I want to examine Sherwin’s theory and try to view it in its American context around three questions: First, if Jesus is the Joseph messiah, how should Jews today relate to him (separate from the circle of Jewish-Christian dialogue)? Can one argue for the revival of a neo-Jewish-Christian movement whereby Jews believe Jesus was the Joseph messiah who inaugurates the redemptive process yet also remains bound to the law because that process is not complete? That is, can normative Judaism today bear the weight of a neo-Jewish-Christianity that would (1) not advocate Jesus’ divinity and (2) accept Jesus’ messianic status as pen-ultimate, that is, as a Joseph messiah? Second, can Christians accept this notion by positing that the Joseph messiah and the Davidic messiah, the messiah of Jesus’ second coming, are really the same person (the genealogical incongruities can be worked out through creative interpretation)? Third, can Jesus be used by Jews today as a model of spiritual critique and renewal for their own Judaism and use him, as some Reform rabbis did over a century ago, to subvert the legalism and parochialism of their more traditional brethren?

If we follow Sherwin’s view of Jesus as the Joseph messiah (he claims, with some others, that the Davidic lineage in Matthew is a later interpolation) it essentially means that while the person may not have completed the mission, the mission is true and lives on, or should live on, among contemporary Jews (and Christians). In that case, one could

³⁸ Sherwin, “*Who Do You Say That I Am* (Mark 8:29): A New Jewish View of Jesus” in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, p. 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 43.

ask two things: First, should contemporary Judaism consider Jesus' criticism of the nascent Judaism of his time as still relevant and efficacious today? That is, should contemporary Jews view Jesus and his message as a legitimate critique of their own yet incomplete Judaism (the assumption here is that Judaism in exile is still incomplete in some substantive way and that exile is not simply the product of deficient observance). This would in some way echo Kaufmann Kohler's Jesus as one of the early Hasidim who offered a critique of mainstream Pharisaism. Second, should contemporary Judaism view Christianity and the embodiment of Jesus' message as true on Jewish theological grounds and, if so, how should that alter or revise the trajectory of Jewish theology? While we can, and should, scrutinize both religions in terms of deviations from Jesus' central message, the radicalism of Sherwin's claim is that, as Joseph messiah, Jesus and his message should become the central pillar of both religions? Sherwin acknowledges that his theory "offers Jesus and Christianity not only a place but a messianic role within Jewish theology."⁴⁰ Echoing Buber but going beyond Buber's more circumspect and romantic assertion, Sherwin is suggesting not only bringing Jesus back into the Jewish fold (as was done by American Jews earlier) but giving him a messianic – that is, a central – role in the construction of Judaism for the future. This is more than re-claiming Jesus as the carrier of a Hillelite message and surely far beyond Greenberg's use of Jesus as a tool of religious pluralism. It is also, in my view, beyond Franz Rosenzweig's view of Christianity as sharing a messianic vocation with Judaism. It is, rather, a call for the acceptance of Christianity's messianic role and the figure of Jesus as (a) messiah in contemporary Jewish theology. The consequences of this regarding the serious study of the Gospel's in Jewish educational institutions remains a desideratum.

IV

The Doctrinal Jewish Jesus, Revelation, and the Hasidic *Zaddik*: Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Daniel Matt:

I argue below that the radical nature of Byron Sherwin's thesis is matched, if not outdone, by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's doctrinal Jewish Jesus. Schachter-Shalomi and, to a lesser extent, Daniel Matt present us with a significant development in the Jewish Jesus that has not fully emerged in popular Jewish writing in America until the end of the twentieth century: the use and adaptation of the Jewish mystical tradition as a template for the Jewish Jesus. While scholars have offered detailed studies looking at the historical depiction of Jesus among Kabbalists and the nexus between Kabbala and Christian doctrine – including, of course, Christian Kabbala⁴¹ – few have deployed kabbalistic categories to offer a popular, and positive, Jewish Jesus that can be appropriated by American Jews.⁴² This indicates the way in which Kabbala and Jewish mysticism have

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See, for example, Gershom Scholem, "The Beginning of Christian Kabbala," in *The Christian Kabbala*, J. Dan ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Library, 1997), pp. 17-54.

⁴² For some relevant scholarly studies that relate to the question of Jesus, incarnation, and Judaism see Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992); Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia on the Jewish Messiah and Jesus," in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), pp.45-62; idem. *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Continuum, 2007); and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity*

become part of the American Jewish mainstream due to various internal and external factors: the aftermath of the American counter-culture, the Americanization of Buddhism,⁴³ the success of Habad to alter the ideational landscape of American Judaism, and the commodification of Kabbala through the Kabbala Center and all its affiliates.⁴⁴ The deployment of kabbalistic and Hasidic rubrics to the question of Jesus enables Schachter-Shalomi, and to a lesser degree Daniel Matt, to engage the doctrinal principles of Jesus' divinity through a Jewish mystico-theological lens. In some sense, Schachter-Shalomi is offering a neo-Philonic rendering of Jesus. Philo described the Logos as the immanent dimension of the transcendent God. Although he was a Hellenized Jew living in Alexandria immediately before the Common Era, his writings were thought to be Christian until they were revealed as Jewish by the Italian historian Assaria de-Rossi in the sixteenth century. One reason for this is that his Logos theology in many ways conforms to early Christologies, even as those Christologies may have mis-represented what Philo may have meant (Philo, of course, wrote before Jesus).⁴⁵

In any event, here I argue that what Schachter-Shalomi offers is a kind of Logos theology newly refracted through the lens of what he calls the new Paradigm "hasidic-kabbalistic" perspective. New Age religion equips Schachter-Shalomi to construct a Jewish Jesus who can be supernatural without being unequivocally parochial. He begins by criticizing two existing tropes of the Jewish Jesus. First, Jesus as moral teacher or, in his words "a teacher of aggadic (homiletic non-legal) Pharisaism who differed from other teacher of halakhic Pharisaism" undercuts Jesus' greatness.⁴⁶ Second, he considers the focus on Jesus as messiah as a category error in Christianity's own understanding of Jesus' great worth and value. The questioning of Jesus as messiah is not new but has a history in New Testament scholarship. What is distinctive here is that Schachter-Shalomi wants to erase the messianic component of Jesus while retaining, and emphasizing, the doctrinal dimension of Jesus as the embodiment of the divine. Reversing the centuries-old attempt to give us a human Jesus without miracles (beginning in American with Thomas Jefferson) Schachter-Shalomi offers us a supernatural Jesus in line with his "kabbalistic-hasidic" new-Paradigm Judaism and very much in concert with the New Age religion of his day.⁴⁷

(Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), esp. pp. 89-147. Elliot Wolfson has written numerous groundbreaking studies on this question. Most recently and perhaps most comprehensively see his *Language, Eros, Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 190-260. Cf. my "Ethics Disentangled from the Law: Incarnation, the Universal and Hasidic Ethics," *Kabbalah: A Journal of Jewish Mysticism* (fall, 2006): 31-75.

⁴³ See, for example, in Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, third edition (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1992), esp. pp. 168ff; Amanda Porterfield, *The Transformation of American Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2001), pp. 125-162; and Diana Eck, *A New Religious America* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. 142-221.

⁴⁴ See Jody Meyers, *Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest: The Kabbalah Center in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), esp. pp. 1-32; Boaz Huss, "All You Need is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (Fall 2005): 611-624.

⁴⁵ Boyarin argues that the Talmudic rabbis also adopted a kind of Logos theology, albeit one that is incompatible with any incarnationism. See Boyarin, *Border Lines*, pp. 128-147 and Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God*, pp. 11-21; 82-100; and 165-198.

⁴⁶ Schachter-Shalomi, "Jesus in Jewish-Christian, Muslim Dialogue" in *Paradigm Shift* (New Jersey: Aronson Books, 1990), p. 33.

⁴⁷ Schachter-Shalomi is not without support for his position that the messiah dimension of Jesus is overplayed. The question of whether Jesus considered himself the messiah is, of course, a huge issue in

His first point exhibits his fin de siècle context. Whereas earlier (per-war) Jewish Jesus' were formed largely in light of liberal Protestantism's disbelief in the divinity of Jesus as Christ, Schachter-Shalomi writes at a time when the liberalism of Christianity has to some extent been eclipsed by a turn toward a more devotional, spiritual, Christological, and pietistic approaches. Schachter-Shalomi himself was a very much influenced by the Carmelite monastic order in Winnipeg Canada in the early 1960's and was a colleague and friend of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk whose monastic humanism spurned a whole new approach to Catholic spirituality and activism.⁴⁸ In this light, Schachter-Shalomi writes, "But if the believer cannot assign the special unique creedal significance to his or her Christ who pales into one of the many teachers in the *Sitz im Leben* that the historian gives, then why bother believing? I cannot believe that just another rabbi teaching aggadah to fisherfolk would excite the regular Christian to participate in a Mass dine in Jesus' 'memory.' So who is Christ?"⁴⁹ This sentence could have easily been written by Merton. This question, "who is the Christ" is markedly different than the Jews who ask "who is Jesus?" It seems Schachter-Shalomi is subverting the entire project of Jesus' humanity as the template of his Jewish reclamation. He cannot accept the humanization of Jesus as the exclusive avenue of his Judaization because he rejects the fully humanized Jesus as the primary focus of Christian worship embodying, I believe, a new Christian spiritualism that comes from figures such as like Merton. Jews must come up with a Jewish "Christ" or they will be hopelessly bound to a particular liberal depiction of Jesus that will not constructively confront the Christian believer or the new Jewish pietist, both of whom have moved beyond the belief in folding religion into ethics. This new paradigm Jesus not only breaks with Schachter-Shalomi's Jewish predecessors but with the entire Jefferson-Emerson trajectory of American religiosity. He is not returning to any fundamentalist model. Far from it. He is, like many other serious New Agers, trying to re-capture a pietistic, and even doctrinal, past and re-write it to conform to his humanistic and universal sensibilities.

Regarding Jesus' messianism, Schachter-Shalomi gestures toward the Joseph messiah espoused by Greenberg and more forcefully by Sherwin but he ultimately rejects the entire trajectory as unproductive. He admits that if (Jewish) Christians had designated Jesus as the Joseph messiah "Jews would have been able to join Christians in the Good Friday lament and Jesus would have been one of the ten martyrs of the State and included his death with that of Rabbi Aqiba in the dirges of the Yom Kippur martyrology."⁵⁰ That is, Jesus as Joseph messiah may have enabled Jewish-Christians to more easily remain inside the fold of Judaism. While this may be an exaggeration that does not consider how

New Testament scholarship. In 1901 German scholar William Wrede makes a case that Jesus never considered himself the messiah in his *Das messiasgeheimnis*. Cf Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, pp. 330-348. Isaac Mayer Wise also skeptical as to whether Jesus ever considered himself the messiah or simply went along with the idea posed by his disciples. See Wise *The American Israelite*, August 13, 1869 cited in Sandmel, "Isaac Mayer Wises' 'Jesus Himself'" p. 341.

⁴⁸ See Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); and Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's' American Prophecy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), esp. pp. 63-70, 101-114, 131-140. On Schachter-Shalomi and Merton, see the interview with Schachter-Shalomi in *Merton and Judaism: Holiness in Words*, B. Bruteau ed. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003), pp. 301-324.

⁴⁹ Schachter-Shalomi, "Jesus," p. 33.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 35.

utterly marginal Jesus was in his time outside his small circle of disciples, it rhetorically works to criticize the audacity of Jesus' followers in their unwillingness to be more judicious in their evaluation of their teacher. In making such an absolute claim, they presented an either/or scenario to the Jewish authorities leaving them little choice other than to react they way they did (all based, of course, on historical conjecture). Schachter-Shalomi posits that Jesus' disciples were "prisoners of hope" and chose to push their savior up to heaven, likening him to a New Adam and then interpreting him through his ostensible apotheosis while reality did not conform to the Jewish vision of redemption. Salvation was personalized and internalized to justify its unhistoricity. The greatness of Jesus, and here he means Jesus as "Christ" was not his humanity (moralism) or messianic vocation (as savior) but, according to Schachter-Shalomi, his being an incarnate of Torah.

Loosely gesturing to Franz Rosenzweig's tripartite model of creation, revelation, and redemption as the paradigm of all Jewish (and Christian) theological reflection, Schachter-Shalomi suggests that Jesus is better understood (for Jews? for Christians?) as "revelation" as opposed to "redemption." History simply does not conform to Jesus as messiah (redemption) and yet to reject Jesus by rejecting him as messiah is to miss a crucial opportunity to understand the deep idea of divine embodiment in the Jewish kabbalistic tradition.⁵¹ What Schachter-Shalomi offers is not simply an affirmation of Jewish incarnationalism but a particular notion of incarnation as the embodiment of Torah, a Jewish Logos theology, the fusion of person and book, that he holds stands at the very center of kabbalistic and Hasidic *zaddikism*. The *zaddik* as *axis mundi*, the exemplar of God's word in a human body, "the *zaddik* as the archetypal model for behavior and anyone who will follow the *zaddik* – in the older sense of imitation – can also become a *zaddik*."⁵² Here he seems to gesture toward the Eastern Orthodox notion of *theosis*, a process of individual divination through the sacraments. Except for Schachter-Shalomi this divinization, this becoming the *zaddik*, is (also) an act of *imitatio dei* inhabited via *imitation christi*. This notion of the *zaddik* as "God's possibility for humanity in a physical body" can make sense for "Jews of a mystical, aggadic, kabbalistic-hasidic persuasion," that is, for Jews whose Judaism is infused with the post-counter-cultural religiosity of the New Age or perhaps the (neo) Hasidic approach of Habad. "True," he writes, "this aspect is far from the ken of the exoteric Jew but close to the esoteric one who is a hasid or one who follows the Kabbala." For Schachter-Shalomi, architect of the phenomenon in contemporary American Judaism known as Jewish Renewal, the kabbalistic world-view refracted through the universalist nature of New Age spirituality and in celebration of religious experimentation in ritual and thought

⁵¹ On the question of divine embodiment in Jewish rabbinism and mysticism see Alon Goshen Gottstein, "Judaisms and Incarnational Theologies: Mapping out the Parameters of Dialogue," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 39:3-4 (Summer-Fall, 2002): 219-247. idem. "The Body as Image in Rabbinic Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 82-7 (1994): 171-195; Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Tampa, FL: The University of South Florida, 1992); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp.112-150; Elliot Wolfson, "The Body in the Text: A Kabbalistic Theory of Embodiment," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (3) (2005): 479-500; idem. Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 190-260; idem "Inscribed in the Book of the Living: *Gospel of Truth* and Jewish Christology," in *Journal of the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 234-271; and my "Ethics Disentangled from the Law: Incarnation, The Universal, and Hasidic Ethics," in *Kabbalah* 15 (2006): 31-75.

⁵² Op. Cit. p. 35.

argues that the Jewish mystical tradition, arguably the most xenophobic, insular, and Judeo-centric dimension of Judaism, provides the tools to reclaim Jesus not as messiah but as an dimension of revelation. His ability to do this is rooted in his adaptation of a form of Jamesean pragmatism regarding matters of the spirit.⁵³ Schachter-Shalomi gives us perhaps the first New Age American Jewish Jesus. Knowledge, practice, doctrine, and religious “truth” are products of the human struggle to articulate the experience of the world around her. His pragmatism comes through in the following:

What this calls for is a willingness to admit that all our formulations about God are nothing but tentative stammerings of blind and exiled children of Eve responding to the light deeply hidden in the recesses of their nostalgic longing for the untainted origin in which one needed not to look through the glass darkly but could hardly see.⁵⁴

The mistake of what he calls the religion of the old paradigm is that it took “the ecstatic exclamations of the overwhelmed souls and [made] them numbered articles of creeds instead of acts of faith made in fear and trembling.”⁵⁵ For Schachter-Shalomi this is as true for the early Christian impatience regarding salvation and the Jewish rejection of Jesus as an exemplar of a *zaddik* as the embodiment of Torah. Truth is created using the tools of traditions and, in this case, he attempts to create a non-messianic Christology that enables Jesus to be at the apex while not being the end.

Daniel Matt’s contribution here is more modest and to some extent an extension of Schachter-Shalomi’s more audacious project.⁵⁶ He offers a Galilean portrait of Jesus (not unlike many Jews before him), the product of a syncretistic and rebellious society, one that had animus toward Rome and was not under the watchful eye of the Pharisaic or priestly authorities. He claims Jesus’ relationship to the law, as depicted in the Gospels, reflects a spiritual critique waged from within the Pharisaic context. This takes us back to Kohler and Hirsch. However for Matt Jesus was not a moralist but a pietist who shunned convention, one who sought to “correct” the general Pharisaic world he belonged to in the spirit of the prophets. In many ways, Matt repeats much of Kohler’s argument of Jesus as one of the early Hasidim except that Matt drops the moralist dimension that was so relevant when Kohler live and wrote.

Matt’s depiction of Jesus is largely drawn from the scholar of early Christianity E.P. Sanders who makes two observations relevant to the issue at hand. First, Sander’s writes, “we have previously observed that explicit anti-law statements are hard to accept in view of the conflicts over the law after Jesus’ death. *But the same arguments apply to explicitly pro-law statements.* If Jesus was really on record as saying that absolutely all the law must be kept, Paul could hardly have persuaded James and Peter to sanction his mission.”⁵⁷ Second, “we have found one instance in which Jesus, in effect, demanded

⁵³ On Schachter-Shalomi’s adaptation of Jamesean pragmatism see my, “Pragmatism and Piety: The American Spiritual and Philosophical Roots of Jewish Renewal,” to appear in *Kabbalah and Modernity* (Leiden, Brill, 2009).

⁵⁴ Schachter-Shalomi, “Jesus,” p. 37.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Daniel Matt, “Yeshua the Hasid,” in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, pp. 74-80.

⁵⁷ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 266.

transgression of the law: the demand to the man whose father had died. Otherwise, the material in the Gospels reveals no transgression of Jesus. And, with the one exception, following him did not entail transgression on the part of his followers. On the other hand, there is clear evidence that he did not consider the Mosaic dispensation to be final or absolutely binding.”⁵⁸

Sanders’ position is that Jesus was an internal critic of the law and, through his critique, injected a notion, not uncommon in some Pharisaic literature of the period, that redemption presented the possibility of the transformation, or even erasure, of certain elements of the law but not the law itself. Matt draws from Sanders’ historical analysis, translating it into the idiom of the modern pietism of Hasidism. Hasidism, especially as depicted by Martin Buber (who also serves as the source of the Jewish Jesus as pietist and not moralist) personalized and internalized the notion of redemption such that redemption was an existential rather than historical state, what Rivka Shatz-Uffenheimer called “self-redemption.”⁵⁹ Matt suggests that Jesus was not claiming historical redemption in his Kingdom of Heaven as much as an internalized state of salvation. He argues that for Jesus the kingdom was “an immediate reality that could not be denied or evaded.” The “here and now” of Jesus’ kingdom was an ancient form of self-redemption that emerged later in Hasidism as it re-drew mystical sources (rightly or wrongly) in partial response to the rigid legalism of its spiritual antagonists, the *mithnagdim*. The historical accuracy of the portrait of Hasidism is not at issue here. We are concerned only with Matt’s construction of a Jewish Jesus and not the true nature of the Hasidic critique of rabbanism.

Matt builds on Sanders second observation that the Mosaic dispensation (in modern parlance, *halakha*) was not “absolutely binding” in the following way. “Like later Hasidim, Jesus felt it was not enough to follow the Torah: One must become Torah, living so intensely that one’s everyday actions convey an awareness of God and evoke this awareness in other.” This, of course, conforms with Hasidic depictions of their leader the Baal Shem Tov in two regards: (1) that Hasidism’s polemic against the *mithnagdic* position (real or imagined) was that the law as an end and not a means, and (2) early Hasidism’s doctrine of *zaddikism*, that a holy person can absorb the Torah such that his will and the divine will (though Torah) become fused.⁶⁰ Thus, one reading of Hasidism (in line with a Buberian trajectory) could, perhaps, accept the legitimacy of Sanders rendering of Jesus as “not consider[ing] the Mosaic dispensation to be final or absolutely binding.” Given that Hasidism was living in a well-honed and well-tested orthodox environment highly suspicious of such claims as a result of the Sabbatean heresy that still loomed quite large at the time, this would need to be articulated in a more nuanced way. But the core argument that the law can be altered through spiritual practice without

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 267. A similar opinion is expressed by Henry Cadbury in his *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* when he writes, “Of Jesus’ ultimate view of Jewish law, two things must be said in this connection. The first is that the problem did not present itself to him in the abstract but in the concrete. He did not work out from an independent principle to its practical application. He worked rather from individual cases which came to his attention; he formed a judgment on those alone.

⁵⁹ Rivka Shatz-Uffenheimer, “Self Redemption in Hasidic Thought,” in *Types of Redemption*, R.J.Zwi Werblowsky and C.J. Bleeker (London, 1970).

⁶⁰ For some examples of this see Arthur Green, *Devotion and Commandment* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press), 1989; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995) esp. 189-209.

undermining its centrality exists in both. Jesus is presented here as a Hasid in the full sense of the word, articulating the ideational center of the early movement.

Matt also offers us a slightly different use of *zaddikism* than Schachter-Shalomi.⁶¹ For Schachter-Shalomi the notion of divine embodiment in *zaddikism* exceeds what normative rabbinic Judaism could tolerate. It is one of the cornerstones of what he calls a “hasidic-kabbalistic” approach to Judaism that could bear Jesus as “revelation” but not “redemption.” The embodiment of Torah in a human becomes, for him, a shared idea that can then be deployed to understand the central focus of the “others” perspective.

Schachter-Shalomi implies that if Christianity can accept the notion of Jesus as revelatory embodiment of Torah, Judaism can accept Jesus as one of the greatest exemplars, perhaps even the quintessential exemplar, in their tradition. Jesus as a *Zaddik* – in the ideational and not (merely) corporal sense – fits into his “hasidic-kabbalistic” Jewish paradigm.

The embodiment of the Torah in the *Zaddik* is an idea that extends at least back to the Zohar and Abraham Abulafia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But it congeals in Hasidism in a particular way. Consider the following from Abraham Joshua Heschel’s essay “Hasidism as New Approach to Torah.”

Many aspects of Jewish existence which seemed petrified he suddenly made almost ethereal, or at least liquid; he liquefied them. To many Jews the mere fulfillment of regulations was the essence of Jewish living. Along came the Besht and taught that Jewish life is an occasion for exultation. Observance of the Law is the basis, by exaltation through observance is the goal.

In other words, the greatness of the Besht [Baal Shem Tov] was that he was the beginning of a long series of events, a long series of moments of inspiration. And he holds us in his spell to this very day. He who really wants to be uplifted by communing with a great person whom he can love without reservation, who can enrich his thought and imagination without end, that person can meditate about the life and being of the Besht. There has been no one like him during the last thousand years.⁶²

This seems to capture Matt’s use of the term *zaddik* or *hasid* (which in Matt’s essay amounts to the same thing) in his essay. What Heschel writes above about the Besht could, for some, describe Jesus quite well. In both cases (Jesus and the Besht) an individual arises and in a very short time fundamentally alters everything. He embodies a kind spiritual “event” that changes the very nature of all that comes before.⁶³ And the

⁶¹ For a precedent to Matt’s connecting Jesus and Hasidism see S.A. Horodetzky, “Rabbi Yisrael Besht,” [Hebrew] *He-Atid* 1 (1908): 123-125 cited in Stanly Nash, *In Search of Hasidism: Shai Hurvitz and his Polemic in the Hebrew Press* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), p. 298. Cf. Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi*, p. 109.

⁶² Heschel, “Hasidism as a new Approach to Torah,” in *Spiritual Audacity*, S. Heschel ed. (New York: FSG, 1996), p. 34.

⁶³ The notion of the “event” as a truth category that alters all previous understanding stands at the center of the work of the contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou. Close to our interests Badiou uses this category to describe the resurrected Jesus in Paul’s vision. See Badiou, *Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Ray Brassier trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

“personhood” of both live on to this day – and this is what really matters – to be the object of desire, not only admiration but, as Heschel writes, “[one] whom he can love without reservation.” This is not speaking about memory. This Hasid can “meditate about the life and being of the Besht.” “Unintentionally,” Matt writes, “Jesus the Jew founded a new religion.” This is in opposition to the Besht who, for Heschel, founded “a new approach to Torah.” In some fundamental way, the two are not categorically different even as they are historically distinct.

The attempts by Schachter-Shalomi and Matt to take on these areas of Christianity that few before them would grapple with expresses a kind of confidence about the stature of American Jewry as the century (and millennium) came to a close. Moreover, introducing the “hasidic-kabbalistic” lens into the Jewish Jesus project opens new avenues of inquiry that offers new interpretive possibilities. The underlying assumption here is that the mystical tradition of Judaism often came, perhaps unwittingly, quite close to certain dimensions of Christian doctrine. Its focus on divine embodiment, the centrality of the *Zaddik* as both transcendent being and mediator between the disciple and God, and its depiction of ritual as a kind of sacrament, all present potential areas of commonality. Some of these commonalities have already been fleshed out in recent scholarship on Kabbala and Hasidism. What Schachter-Shalomi and Matt accomplish here is the creative adaptation of these ideas, now ground into an interpretive lens in order to re-read, yet again, a Jewish Jesus who reflects the sensibilities of a religious America that has entered a New Age.

V

The “Jewish” Jesus in the Contemporary American Academy: Amy-Jill Levine, Paula Fredriksen, and Susannah Heschel

One of the most important developments in American Jewish self-fashioning in the past half century has been the emergence of Jewish Studies as an academic discipline in the academy. The study of Judaism (mostly the Judaism of Late Antiquity or, as Christian scholars used to refer to it, Late Judaism) has been taught in American universities since the nineteenth century (Emil Hirsch is perhaps the first Jew to receive a permanent appointment in Judaism at the University of Chicago in 1892). In most cases, these subjects were taught by non-Jewish professors who specialized either in early Christianity or Oriental Studies, e.g. George Foot Moore, W.F. Albright, or Frank Cross. The origin of the field of Jewish Studies (as opposed to the study of Judaism) is often viewed as beginning with Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887-1974) who taught at Harvard for almost half a century, the various scholars who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College (both rabbinical seminaries who only added graduate schools after mid-century), and the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University that opened its doors in 1948.

As an academic discipline integrated into the secular university in America, Jewish Studies is largely a outgrowth of the Identity Politics of the 1960’s creating, among other programs, African-American Studies, and later on, Latino Studies, Women’s

Studies, and Gender Studies (the study of Asian and Indian religions, a branch of Oriental Studies, has a history that stretches back to Europe).

One of the consequences of Jewish Studies in the academy is that it is the first time in America that Jews trained as academics (and not rabbis, essayists, or journalists) are given the opportunity, and responsibility, to teach Judaism in a non-partisan way to both Jews and non-Jews alike. The Jewish academic's allegiance is to the academy where he or she is trained and works and not to the Jewish community or the survival or defense of Judaism. As many second generation Jewish academics who teach Jewish Studies either have some religious training or at least come to the subject because of some stake in their Jewish identity, the scholarly requirement of objectivity is often complex (the same could be said of other Identity Politics disciplines, especially in Religious Studies). And yet the rigorous criteria expected of good scholarship mandates academic detachment. Moreover, the important works of these scholars have contributed greatly to the (re) education of many Jews whose assimilated American experience and lack of any direct link to the pre-war traditionalism of Europe leaves them bereft of any significant understand of their past. Books by scholars published with university presses now compete with books published in more popular Jewish presses for American Jewish attention. Scholars are often invited to present their work in synagogues or Jewish community centers thereby competing with rabbis and other parochial leaders.

Another curious outgrowth of the rise of Jewish Studies is the emergence of Jews (who maintain a strong attachment to their Jewish identity) who teach or research other religious traditions. Perhaps one of the most well-known examples is Bernard Lewis, the British Jew who, as professor of Islam at Princeton, became one of the most celebrated Islamic scholars of his generation. Lewis was not trained in Jewish Studies but identifies strongly as a Jew and some of his work, for example his *Semites and Anti-Semites*, explicitly addresses questions of the nexus between Judaism and Islam.⁶⁴ Other contemporary Jewish scholars (or scholars who are Jewishly identified) such as Mark Cohen of Princeton, Steven Wasserstrom of Reed College, Reuven Firestone of Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, and David Nirenberg of the University of Chicago, teach either Islam or Christianity (or both) as identified Jews. Hence the study of Judaism is not limited exclusively to those who are trained in Jewish Studies programs or departments but extends to those who identify as Jews and teach other religious traditions.

My interest here is to explore the work of three contemporary Jewish women all of whom are university professors writing for a scholarly audience, and all of whom write extensively about Jesus. One works in New Testament, one in New Testament and Church Fathers (specifically Augustine) and one is a scholar of modern German Jewish intellectual history. All three come from diverse Jewish backgrounds who bring their own "histories" to their scholarly writing but do so with the subtlety appropriate for rigorous academic work. The first is Amy-Jill Levine who teaches early Christianity at Vanderbilt University. The second is Paula Frederickson who teaches at Boston University and writes primarily on Jesus, Augustine, and early Christianity. The third is Susannah Heschel who teaches Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College. Below I will explore how these three women, one who identifies as Orthodox and two who embody

⁶⁴ See Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999).

more liberal, yet still traditional, Judaisms offer Americans in general and American Jews in particular a new engagement with Jesus, as a Jew, and as the founder of Christianity.

All three write about Jesus in America yet none of them, to my knowledge, see themselves as part of a “history” of the Jewish Jesus in American Judaism. Their work does not engage American Jewish thinkers such as Isaac Meir Wise, Isaac Lesser, Emile Hirsch, Joseph Krauskopf, Kaufmann Kohler, Stephen Wise, Bernard Felsenthal, Hyman Endlow, Felix Adler, Shalom Asch, Samuel Sandmel or many others who wrote about Jesus in America from the mid-nineteenth-century to the present. Nor do they seriously engage contemporary writers such as Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, Jacob Neusner, Byron Sherwin, David Novak, or Zalman Schachter-Shalomi who write constructively about Jesus today. The reasons are clear enough. None of them see themselves as part of that history because each one is situated in the academy and committed to the discourse of either historical or cultural studies. While they often lecture to Jewish (and Christian) audiences around the world (Levine in particular is quite frank about her experiences lecturing in churches in her book), they see their role largely as historians and not constructive theologians. I will argue that while their work indeed can be classified as “historical” they are, in fact, opening a new chapter in the American Jewish Jesus.

These three women represent a significant shift in the American Jewish discussion about Jesus in post-war America. The discourse about Jesus among American Jews has shifted from the pulpit to the academy where Jews now play a role, as do other minorities, in the construction of America’s intellectual discourse about religion. It is here, I argue, where some of the most interesting, and creative, work is being done in contemporary Judaism and it here where Judaism as an American Religion is being forged. Not in synagogues but in seminar rooms and journals. Not with Jewish but with academic presses. Not by rabbis but by professors. Not in the context of parochial education but in the full light of the public square in conversation with Christians, Muslims, secularists and others who are interested and can contribute, critique, and evaluate this work in progress.⁶⁵

I suggest that Jewish Studies in the American Academy is the latest phase of American Jews’ assimilatory project, another phase of Americanization, an opportunity to open Judaism to the larger world and, in doing so, alter how Judaism is construed and lived in its parochial context.⁶⁶ The final sections of this chapter are an attempt to explore this project through the test-case of a new, still emerging, Jewish Jesus in twenty-first century America by individuals who do not think this is what they are doing (or do they?) and at a time when most American Jews are no longer interested nor need a Jewish Jesus to be “American.”

Amy-Jill Levine’s book on the Jewish Jesus, *The Misunderstood Jew*, combines historical analysis, gentle polemics, personal anecdotes, and a breezy style that is made for the general reader. While not an academic book in the strict sense of the term (it is published by a trade press and not a university press), *The Misunderstood Jew* does

⁶⁵ For a recent contribution to this literature of note see David Novak, *Talking to Christians: Musings of a Jewish Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. pp. 1-25; 167-183; 203-217.

⁶⁶ There is a large body of literature written on Jewish Studies in the academy. For a provocative and important essay relevant to our questions see Susannah Heschel, “Jewish Studies as Counter-History,” in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, D. Biale, M. Galchinsky, and S. Heschel eds. (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 101-115.

incorporate academic research and is thus different than the more popular books published by Jews about Jesus and Christianity. It is *not* written for Jews. In fact, it is written with a Christian readership in mind. Of the three women under examination, Levine is the most open about her larger (non-academic) agenda, both in her work and in her teaching. She is an identifiable Jewess who teaches Christianity at Vanderbilt University, a school that was founded (as many older private universities were in America) as a Christian college. This very much informs her work. In her capacity as a professor she mostly teaches early Christianity to Christians. She also regularly serves as an expert on early Christianity in television documentaries about Jesus and his period.

In some sense she fulfills the desire of many Jews who wrote about Jesus in the past. Geiger hoped that his writings would be read and taken seriously by Christians and were, in part, written with the hope it would land him an academic appointment (it did not). Kaufmann Kohler wanted his essays on Christianity and Jesus in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* to be read by Christians (they were not). Some of Emil Hirsch's essays on Jesus, some of which were collected in his book *My Religion* were intended for a Christian readership (as implied in the title of the book). Moreover, some of these essays that originated as sermons were delivered in his synagogue in Chicago that was regularly frequented by Christians. Levine (as well as Fredriksen and Heschel) has thus succeeded in achieving what Jews for more than one hundred years wanted to do: teach Judaism and Christianity, or Christianity through Judaism, to Christians. This is all made possible by the rise of Jewish Studies in the American academy.

Levine's major objective in her work is two-fold. First, to get Christians to understand that they cannot understand *their* religion unless they view it as emerging from Judaism. "Consequently to understand the man from Nazareth, it is necessary to understand Judaism." This is pretty standard, extending back as far as Joseph Salvador and we have seen this sentiment expressed in numerous ways in the figures examined in the previous chapter. But she takes it a bit further.

Moreover, it is necessary to see Jesus as firmly within Judaism rather than as standing apart from it, and it is essential that the picture of Judaism not be distorted through the filter of centuries of Christian stereotypes; a distorted picture of first-century Judaism inevitably leads to a distorted picture of Jesus. Just as bad: if we get Judaism wrong, we'll end up perpetuating anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic teachings, and thus the mission of the church – to spread a gospel of love rather than a gospel of hate – will be undermined.⁶⁷

While this appears to be a re-hashing of older themes in the Jewish Jesus repertoire there is something that comes through here that is new, surely in tone, and perhaps even in substance. First, that in some way Christianity, or early Christian writing, is insufficient to understand Christianity. This could be viewed as a damning criticism (what would Jews think if Christians claimed Jews could not understand Judaism from the large corpus of Jewish literature) but it is presented in a very tolerant way. While the Gospels give us a glimpse of Jesus' context, his Jewishness, his audience, his surroundings, Levine suggests the Gospel picture of Judaism is not sufficient, that Christians need Jews

⁶⁷ Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, p. 7.

(or those who know this period of Jewish history) to teach them more about first-century Judaism so that they will not misunderstand it, and thus misunderstand Jesus and the religion they believe in. And further, that if they “get Judaism wrong” they will perpetuate the anti-Jewish teachings and sacrifice the truth and beauty of the Gospel’s message and “the mission of the church – to spread the gospel of love...” that stands at the very epicenter of Christianity. Here Levine reflects the ideas of Emil Hirsch discussed in the previous chapter.

There is no attempt here to use Jesus to make a claim about the superiority of Judaism, no attempt to claim Judaism is closer to the religion *of* Jesus as opposed to the religion *about* him, no attempt to re-claim Jesus for Jews, and surely not at the expense of Christianity. At most, Levine is simply claiming Jews needn’t be afraid of Jesus because a deeper understanding of Jesus will make Christians better Christians and that will make them more open to Jews and Judaism. Her point is that an understanding of Judaism will enable them to avoid the pitfalls of anti-Judaism that plagued historical Christianity. This sentiment is one that assumes openness on the part of Christians to re-visit the anti-Jewish stereotypes of their own religion, an openness that also requires Jews like Levine to believe, as Enelow argued in 1920, that Christians in America want a Christianity that is not anti-Jewish. That is, that American Christians have largely absorbed a multicultural ethos that has a price: it requires them to separate the wheat from the chaff of their own sacred beliefs. For Levine this is not a sacrifice but an opportunity to correct the socio-political layers of Christian hostility toward Jews and, as a result, enable Christians to become more like Jesus.

This multiculturalism comes through in various ways, the most prominent being that one find no desire to create some unified religion of the spirit, a universal church, the likes of which we find in I.M. Wise, Kohler and Hirsch. Levine is committed to the distinct sovereignty of both religions, even arguing that Jews and Christian should avoid sharing rituals and entering into syncretistic forms of worship, even for the sake on mutual understanding.

Sharing Psalms is one thing: sharing rituals is something else entirely. Jesus of Nazareth lived and died a faithful Jew. That does not mean, however that his followers today should see themselves as ‘faithful Jews,’ or even that the members of the Pauline churches of the 40’s and 50’s of the first century should see themselves as such. There are certain elements of Jesus’ Jewishness that the church, today a gentile institution, should not claim....Once the differences between church and synagogue are acknowledged, Christians and Jews are in a better position to determine how far their mutual relations can go.⁶⁸

It is interesting to contrast this with Jews who lived in the heyday of Unitarianism and were involved in the Free Religions Society where Jews and Christians preached at one another’s churches and synagogues. It is true that they likely did not engage in ritual-swapping but many of the Jews involved did believe in the eventual establishment of a universal (Jewish/Christian) church. Or, in I.M. Wises’ case, that Christians would eventually become de-nationalized (Reform) Jews. And this is also quite different from

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 206, 210

Schachter-Shalomi's Jewish Renewal approach which celebrates mutual worship and encourages a limited exercise of religious syncretism as a way to bridge the gap between spiritual traditions. Schachter-Shalomi is himself an ordained Sufi master (the name Shalomi was added as a result of that ordination) and also regularly partakes in Native American ritual practices such as sweat houses, Sufi *dikhr* etc.

Levine's reticence regarding shared rituals also spills over to sharing one another's interpretations. While advocating that "Jews certainly can learn Christian biblical interpretation,"⁶⁹ she argues that Christians may have an easier time accepting Jewish interpretation than *visa versa*. In part this is a consequence of living and working in a country, and an academic environment, that remains dominated by Christianity, even a tolerant Christianity. In fact, for Levine, Christianity's tolerance may be part of the danger. Having abandoned requisite conversion for entry into mainstream society, Christianity in America must not ignore the benefits of cultural dominance, even in its desire for tolerance. As an identified Jew, Levine is invested in protecting Judaism from the pitfalls of its own feeling of security. If we thin the boundaries between the two religions too much, only Judaism has something to lose. Hence she wants Christians to become better (and truer) Christians by understanding Judaism and Jesus in that context, and she wants Jews to be open to that by becoming more enlightened about their own religion and about Christianity. But she holds no hope, nor desire, for any universal church or even attenuating Judaism to conform to a tolerant Christian gesture. She can embrace commonalities only the extent to which Judaism retains its sovereign and distinctive identity, both in theory and in practice. In this sense I think Levine is actually *less* confident about her own American Judaism than Wise (I.M. and Stephen), Kohler, Hirsch, or Enelow all of whom had optimistic, perhaps inflated, visions of the potential of Judaism's success in America.

Levine openly acknowledges that for her the issue of Jewish-Christian understanding through an understanding of Jesus (as a misunderstood Jew) is not solely a historical or academic exercise but has "political implications."⁷⁰ By that she means at least two things. First, that the new tolerant Christianity or even multicultural society in which she lives and works still contains resonance of anti-Judaism that is born from historical readings of Christian Scripture. Second, that the Middle East conflict that has taken on global significance plays into stereotypes cultivated by anti-Semitism, in this case mostly Muslim anti-Semitism, that emerges in large part as a refracted rendering of Christian anti-Judaism.

She offers a strong, and I think well-placed, distinction between anti-Judaism that exists in some Christian Scripture and anti-Semitism as a cultural phenomenon. There are clearly anti-Jewish sentiments in the New Testament, even as some of those are voiced by Jews. For example, recent scholarship has argued that the Gospel of John, the most "anti-Jewish" Gospel was likely the product of Jewish and not Gentile Christians and Paul's diatribes against the Pharisees and Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem must be seen as a polemic against a certain community of Jews (perhaps even certain and not all

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 212.

⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 181-190.

Pharisees) and not Jews generally.⁷¹ Christian Anti-Semitism is a corrupt use of these more complicated polemics in first-century Jewish civilization. For example, she writes, "...any prejudicial commentary that divorces Jesus from Judaism and then uses the story of Jesus to condemn all Jews is not a 'Christian' message. It is, rather, a recycled anti-Judaism that depicts Israel as a country of Christ Killers. The goal of Palestinian statehood is a good: these particular means of achieving it are not."⁷² Christians can contribute to the diminishing of anti-Semitism more generally by severing itself from the anti-Jewish interpretations of its own tradition.

Here Levine's arguments are the weakest. She offers apologetic and in many ways flattened responses to anti-Jewish accusations in the New Testament that have become proof-texts for contemporary anti-Semitism. Her rendering of Jewish attitudes toward non-Jews, conversion, universalism etc. echo what we saw from Hirsch in the previous chapter. Like Hirsch, perhaps less so, she must be aware that her readings are not accurate. And yet, like Hirsch, perhaps accuracy is not all that is at stake, although given her perch as an academic and not a preacher from the pulpit, perhaps it should be. In any case, first it is worth citing part of Levine's understanding of history and theology as two dimensions of her educational program, something that gives us a more nuanced view of her larger project.

Further, historical arguments risk being compromised, because they presume the 'original' audience or the 'original intent' determines the meaning. To restrict the question of anti-Judaism to a text's author, let alone to claim to know the author's intent, and not to consider the audience is bad method, as any homilist knows...To suggest that the text cannot take on new meanings but must be interpreted only in the context of its original setting dooms both the church and the synagogue, because this argument precludes people from finding their own meaning in the text. Theologically speaking, a fully historicized focus threatens to put the Holy Spirit out of business.

The only resolution to the question of New Testament anti-Judaism cannot come from historians. The elimination of anti-Jewish readings must come from the theologians, from those members of the church who conclude that anti-Judaism is wrong and who insist on Christian sensitivity to the issue.⁷³

This is one of the few purely methodological statements in Levine's book and deserves some attention. From a historical perspective she argues two things. First, that as historical documents the anti-Jewish texts in the New Testament may be just that. Second, what the author meant by "Jew" (*Joudais*) in those texts is not at all clear.⁷⁴ To

⁷¹ For example, see Raimo Hakola, "The Johannine Community as Jewish Christians?: Some Problems in Current Scholarly Consensus," in M. Jackson-McCabe ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 181-202.

⁷² Op. Cit. p. 185.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 116.

⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 159-161 and Shaya Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

interpret *Ioudais* as “Jew” in the modern sense of the term is simply bad reading and bad history. So here we have a situation with two bad choices: either to reject the anti-Jewish statements in Christian Scripture, or to accept them. Regarding the “political implications” of Levine’s project, history hits a brick wall. The only help can come from contemporary theologians whose predecessors had a hand in extending these anti-Jewish statements to modern anti-Semitism. It is the theologian who must assert that a true Christian interpretation, one that authentically embodies the spirit of Jesus, must read those anti-Jewish statements “otherwise” that is, in a way they can no longer be used to foster anti-Semitism. In other words, to undo the historical work of previous theologians. This is not to deny that these texts can be read as anti-Jewish. Rather it is to affirm that they can also be read in another way. For Levine history can only go so far at which point theology must take over. This would also require the contemporary reader to speculate as to why these texts were read as anti-Jewish in the first place in order to contrast one’s own situation with the audience of the text thereby justifying one’s own reading. We will see below that Paula Fredriksen’s discussion of history and theology is quite different. Yet as academics and not theologians Levine and Fredriksen seek to utilize both disciplines to create a Jewish Jesus that is both historically viable and theologically usable. It is thus appropriate to view Levine’s comments as perhaps directed at nineteenth-century historian/theologians such as Renan, Bauer, and Harnack (among many others) who used history as a theological tool to promote anti-Jewish sentiment that, in some cases, resulted in heinous anti-Semitism.⁷⁵ If nineteenth-century German theologians can use history to promote anti-Semitism, contemporary Christian and Jewish theologians can use history to undermine it.

In terms of Levine’s overly apologetic rendering of Jewish ideas, this surfaces in numerous ways. For example, on the question of conversion, Levine argues that “they [Jews] welcomed converts but did not seek them.”⁷⁶ This is because, according to Levine, in ancient Judaism gentiles do not need to convert because Judaism does not limit salvation to Jews. While this may be true, in part, there is ample evidence that (1) Jews did at certain times proselytize and (2) there are many Jewish sources that deny salvation to the non-Jew or at least offer an attenuated form of salvation even for the righteous gentile. For example, Maimonides’ comment that righteous gentiles have a share in the world to come is not unequivocally accepted and may even be considered a minority opinion (*da’at yahid*).⁷⁷ And Maimonides definition of a righteous gentile who achieves a share in the world to come is one who recognizes the truth of revelation of the covenant God makes with Israel. That is, he or she must accept the Jewish notion of the divine election of Israel.

Conversion is a complicated matter in the history of Judaism and it surely is not as central as it is in Christianity. But to state the matter in such simple and unambiguous terms does not do justice to Judaism. Other examples, such as her claim that the Galilee was “fully

⁷⁵ On this, see Susannah Heschel’s, “When Jesus was an Aryan: The Protestant Church and Anti-Semitic Propaganda,” in *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth-Century* Omer Bar Tov and Phyllis Mack eds. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), pp. 79-105

⁷⁶ Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, p. 68.

⁷⁷ See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, vol. 3, “Laws of Shmittah ve Yovel,” 13:13. And Maimonides definition of a righteous gentile who achieves a share in the world to come is one who recognizes the truth of revelation of the covenant God makes with Israel. That is, he or she accepts the divine election of Israel.

Jewish” in Jesus’ time ignores a lively scholarly debate about this issue and is no better than Christians who use the “mixed thesis” of the Galilee as a proof that Jesus was not Jewish.

More striking is her apologetic rendering of divine election.

For example, the prayer recited before a Torah reading speaks of how God ‘chose us from among the nations and gave to us His Torah.’ The language of chosenness signals the Jewish response to the offer of the Torah; rabbinic stories recount that it was offered to all the other nations, but only the Jews – whether through religious fidelity or divine coercion – accepted it.⁷⁸

While this explanation is not uncommon, it ignores the very real problem of divine election that has plagued modern Jewish thinkers from the time of Mendelssohn onward. Scholarly books have been devoted to the topic and the Reconstructionist Movement in America was so unnerved by the language of the blessing cited above that it changed it from “chosen us *from among* the nations” to “chose us *with* the nations.”⁷⁹ While this arguably does not solve the problem it surely underscores how Jews viewed it as a problem. And the midrash about God offering the Torah to other nations may, in fact, be justificatory and illustrate the anxiety even the ancient rabbis felt about this and not, as Levine implies, a gesture to the Gentile world. One early twentieth-century Hasidic master reads the midrash in the following way: “The nations were not fit to [receive] the Torah which is why they refused to accept it.”⁸⁰ In short there is plenty of anti-Christianity in Judaism, from the custom not to study Torah on Christmas because its holiness will be kidnapped by the demonic that has dominion on that day, to various rabbinic edicts forbidding Jews from entering a church because it is a “place of idolatry.”⁸¹ Like Levine I abhor this attitude but if we are to make progress we must confront our own demons and not whitewash them for non-Jewish consumption.

Levine is correct when she states that Christians are still teaching their children from books that express an overt bias against Jews and Judaism even though these educators no longer believe them.⁸² What she does not mention is that traditional Jews are being educated with materials that show an overt bias against Christianity. It is quite amazing that the medieval fabrication *Toldot Yeshu* (also in Yiddish translation) is still being read by contemporary Jews or that Jews in more progressive Hebrew schools children learn almost nothing about Jesus or Christianity and thus continue to hold the most outdated and, in some cases, offensive views about both. In general Levine falls into the Hirschean trap of complicating Christianity while simplifying Judaism in order to undo anti-Jewish bias. But in a country where Jews are no longer the maligned minority they once were, we might be better served with a more balanced approach to the matter.

⁷⁸ Op. Cit. p. 115.

⁷⁹ For example, see Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 3,-24, 25-52, 173-182; and David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸⁰ R. Shmuel of Sokochoy, *Shem me-Shmuel*, to Exodus, vol. 2, p. 172.

⁸¹ On studying Torah on Christmas, see Marc B. Shapiro, “Torah Study on Christmas Eve,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8-2 (1999): 319-353.

⁸² *Ibid.* p.167.

Elsewhere Levine does challenge Jews to learn more about Christianity and to see that what Jews today sometimes view as absurd (e.g. a divine human, a dead and risen messiah, transubstantiation) was actually quite reasonable to many first-century Jews.⁸³ That is to say that there were good reasons why so many Jews at that time followed Jesus and subsequently became part of the Jewish-Christian movement that initially dominated the first generation of Christianity. She writes, “In Sunday schools and adult education programs, peoples in these groups and others are continuing to learn about and therefore appreciate Judaism. It is time for the synagogue to reciprocate.”⁸⁴ Levine is certainly on to something and historians of American Judaism could, and should, revive Harris Weinstock who more than one hundred years ago made a similar plea that went unheeded. Weinstock, a Jewish businessman from California and author of the 1902 *Jesus the Jew* introduced a proposal (in 1900) to teach about Jesus the Jew in the Hebrew school curriculum across the United States.⁸⁵ This is all to say that Levine believes that both Judaism and Christianity have much to gain by engaging in a deeper understanding of Jesus, not just to understand the other but to better understand themselves. But my reading suggests that for her Christians have more to gain by knowing the Jewish context of Jesus’ life.

In sum, Levine has offered us an interesting example of the Jewish Jesus in an age of multiculturalism, one that acknowledges a post-polemical era, optimistically views contemporary Christians as desiring a more balanced and less anti-Jewish Christianity, and invites Christians into the world of Judaism not only to know more about *their* religion but in order to help them become better Christians. In an earlier period the pedagogical agenda was about Christians realizing the truth of Judaism (I.M. Wise) or at least its spiritual grandeur. For Levine, this is not necessarily the primary purpose of her project. She wants to make Christians better Christians which means, for one thing, erasing the anti-Judaism from Christianity. Her view of Christianity, even Pauline Christianity, is quite positive. She is not living in world of Unitarianism or a world where a universal (Jewish/Christian) church is a desideratum. But she is banking on the fact that the multicultural ethos tempers the rise of fundamentalism and enables Christians to enjoy their Christianity without an anti-Jewish bias. Understanding “the misunderstood Jew” and, by extension, misunderstand Judaism is one part piece of a much larger historical puzzle.

The move from Levine to Paula Fredriksen is jarring. Whereas Levine argues that history cannot ultimately provide the necessary answers for a contemporary Jesus but must give way to theological creativity – in a sense, to subvert the anti-Jewishness theology first produced – as a committed historian with positivist inclinations, Fredriksen believes that history must drive theology, that history sets the boundaries of where theology can go. Answering some of her nonspecialist critics in the second edition of her *From Jesus to Christ*, she writes,

Many of the nonspecialist Christian readers of *From Jesus to Christ* have expressed their unease to me about the theological consequences of the

⁸³ Amy-Jill Levine, “Jesus Who?: They Don’t Get Us, but Do We Get Them? What Jews Don’t Know About Christianity,” *Moment Magazine*, August 2002): 49-54, 74-75.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 75.

⁸⁵ Discussed in Prothero, *American Jesus*, p. 145-147.

quest for the historical Jesus. They feel that a Jewish Jesus leaves the modern believer with no place, theologically, to go. It seems a high price to pay for critical thinking... I repeat: the fear of false familiarity is the beginning of historical wisdom. If we insist that Jesus make immediate sense to us, the past hardens into a mirror, a reflecting surface that reveals only ourselves...History requires the acknowledgement of difference and the priority of ancient context...But if modern believers require that Jesus be morally intelligible and religiously relevant to them, then it is to them that the necessary work of creative reinterpretation falls. Such a project is not historical – the critical construction of an ancient figure. It is *theological* – the generation of contemporary meaning within particular religious communities...Historical research can only strive to reconstruct what Jesus meant to his first-century contemporaries...Theological creativity must strive to construct what Jesus *means* now to those who gather in his name. The two enterprises are related but distinct.⁸⁶

It is, of course, the case that in the historical Jesus school many, perhaps almost all, participants viewed themselves as both historians and theologians (sometimes simultaneously) and believed that they were able to draw the appropriate boundaries between the two disciplines. As critical readers of their work it is our job to problematize those claims and unearth the theological agenda that drives their historical research. This is what I take to be Levine's implication that history and theology cannot be so easily distinguished, especially in this case. It is hardly a coincidence, for example, that Bruno Bauer's anti-Semitism happened to square with his historical claim of Jesus' non-Jewish pedigree. Or that Isaac Mayer Wise and Emil Hirsh just happen to offer us a "historical" Jesus who looks very much like a Reform Jew in the nineteenth century. Or that Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's Jesus conforms to categories deeply informed by modern Hasidism (to which he once belonged). The above citation is an appropriate introduction to Fredriksen's historical Jesus if only because it reveals a positivistic belief in the work of history, that is, we can, in fact, construct the past (here the very confusing, and confused, first century) in a way that is not already tainted by the historian's own proclivities. Or, perhaps more baldly, that the past is there for us to discover, and only then interpret. And that good theology is a second-tier *re*interpretation of historical reality. In short, the historian must remain in control.

This brings me to my final point, on method and history. The methods of other fields refresh and challenge our work in our own, and I think this is all to the good. But we need to be sensitive to the utility of the method; and we can never let the method control the evidence. We – the historians – must control both. If we relinquish control, or fail to exercise it, or so enjoy where the method is taking us that we fail to direct our work in our own, we risk wandering in a past exclusively of our own imagining,

⁸⁶ Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: Second Edition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. xxvii, xxviii.

distant not only from our time, but also from the reality of the ancient persons whose lives and works we seek to understand.⁸⁷

It is easy to agree that historians must try to distinguish between the evidence and the contemporary context in which it is being analyzed. It is quite another to believe we can actually achieve that goal as unequivocally as Fredriksen believes.⁸⁸ She believes the historian can cut through the ideological morass of centuries of pseudo-historical “theology” and give us who Jesus *really was* (that is, to *his* audience and not to us) at which point theologians can roll up their sleeves and go to work. To be fair, her positivistic inclinations are more nuanced than that. She writes, “In the end history itself is more a descriptive than an explanatory enterprise. It runs more on coherent narrative than on strictly testable propositions...No historical reconstruction can be proven to be true. The best it can do, once interpretation has woven as much of the evidence as it can into a meaningful coherent, and plausible, pattern, is persuade.”⁸⁹ What Fredriksen wants to do in her work is precisely to distinguish between history and theology in order to (1) give us a clearer historical picture; and (2) de-historicize the “historical” depictions of Jesus largely made by modern Christians in the past 150 years.

Levine suggests otherwise. Given that so much of the evidence here is itself theologically determined, the historian and the theologian must work together to construct a Jesus who is both historically viable (albeit not definitively so) and theologically usable given our multicultural environment. That is, a Jesus who undermines the anti-Jewish nature of historical Christianity. Here we have two contemporary Jewish agendas: Levine wants Jews and Christians to work together to construct a Jesus that can meet the needs of both communities. Fredriksen wants to offer a historical Jesus that is neither Jewish nor Christian, at least in the contemporary sense of those terms, but a Jesus from the perspective of his audience who, in the end, is quite a conventional Jew (in his time, not ours), an apocalyptic prophet and *not* a messianic figure, and not one who intended to openly subvert the Jewish norms of his day.

Like any good historian, given the paucity of reliable evidence Fredriksen significantly limits her questions. According to her we can historically ascertain a few things. First, the anomaly that Jesus was killed while his followers went free. Second, that he was killed in such a public manner without any real explanation. She posits that if we can determine these issues with some clarity various other issues, Jesus’ larger agenda and even, perhaps, to what sect he belonged, may be forthcoming. As a historian she is not interested in the theological claims of his Christhood, although she is interested in the trajectory whereby a crucified Jew who never openly made a messianic claim becomes a risen Christ and subsequently a divine incarnation so quickly. She rejects, of course, the historical veracity of the latter, not because it is false but because it is not provable. She is also not overly concerned with his teachings of morality as told in the Gospel because there too, much of what is claimed can be deemed conjectural given the evidence and what was at stake. But she is interested, and makes certain claims, regarding his daily life

⁸⁷ Fredriksen, “What You See is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus,” *Theology Today* 52-1 (1995): 97.

⁸⁸ In a review of *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews*, William Arnal makes a similar point. See his review of Fredriksen’s *Jesus of Nazareth* in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 90-3/4 (April, 2000): 441.

⁸⁹ Fredriksen, *Jesus Christ: King of the Jews*, p. 267.

and belief, that is, where can we place him in an era rife with contentious sectarianism. Finally, she is also intrigued by Paul as a historical figure and, unlike many American Jews that precede her, she places Paul very much inside the Pharisaic tradition he seems to loath.⁹⁰

In her recent book *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Judaism* she extends her thesis further to claim that Augustine's infamous comments defending the Jews are not merely pragmatic but point to a deeper and more theological sophisticated Christian defense of *Judaism*.⁹¹ Much of this work is based on a lengthy reading of Augustine's treatise *Against Faustus*, a polemic against the Manichaeism of Augustine's youth. Her larger project is to argue on historical grounds that a Christianity that rejects Jews or Judaism cannot be true to itself (and even into the fourth century Augustine knew that). This is not because, as we saw with many nineteenth-century American Jews, Jesus' ethical teachings cohere with (a Reform interpretation of) Judaism, but because his social agenda was not subversive of the Jewish mainstream of his day.

My point here is not to rehearse the detailed nature of Fredriksen's claim nor enter into the contentious debates of New Testament scholars about the veracity of her arguments. Rather, I will offer a reading of the general trajectory of her argument in light of her context, that of late 20th and early 21st century America. That is, what kind of American Jewish Jesus is Fredriksen offering us and how does that compare with the other version we have seen.

Fredriksen's overarching question is 'what would history be here without theology.' Only by distinguishing the two can we hope to understand the true nature of Christianity. As she writes, "Only ancient evidence, not modern agendas, can reveal what might have mattered to ancient people."⁹² This, of course, is the question asked by everyone from Renan through Harnack and up the present. But Fredriksen argues that we can ask this question in a new way because (1) we know more about the period than before and (2) as scholars in a secular academy, we are better able to distinguish between history and theology. One is surely true, two may be less so. That is, just as she claims we must understand Jesus in light of *his* audience, we can also only understand Fredriksen in light of *hers*. In any event, the basic contours of her argument suggest the following: (1) Jesus was not a messianic figure in his day (although he became one very quickly after his death); (2) Jesus was part of the mainstream Pharisaic community; (3) Jesus did not reject the purity laws, the Temple cult, or the practices of his fellow Pharisees;⁹³ (4) Jesus was a believer in the immanent redemption and functioned as a kind of apocalyptic prophet to a small group of followers;⁹⁴ (5) Pilate did not think Jesus was dangerous; (6) Jesus was killed because he was arousing the Passover crowd, some of whom claimed he was the Messiah;⁹⁵ (7) Pilate did not kill Jesus' close followers because once Jesus was killed the crowds largely dispersed; (8) His ostensible subversive acts against the Judaism

⁹⁰ Ibid. pp. 125-136. Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), esp. pp. 13-38, 136-157.

⁹¹ Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Judaism* (New York: Doubleday Books, 2008).

⁹² Op. Cit. p. 202.

⁹³ Ibid. pp. 104, 107.

⁹⁴ Ibid. pp. 95-98.

⁹⁵ Ibid. pp. 234, 253.

of his day as recounted in the Gospels (including some of his ethical teachings) were invented *post mortem*.

In short, Christianity is a particular lens reinterpreting Jesus' life and the episode of this death created by Jesus' (Jewish) disciples and their Gentile progeny inserting a theological frame onto what was a fairly uneventful historical episode. This is not to denigrate Christianity. Fredriksen is not following in the footsteps of Geiger, Graetz, or even Isaac Mayer Wise and Kaufmann Kohler here. There is no attempt in her work to argue for a hierarchy when it comes to contemporary Judaism of Christianity. She readily acknowledges that Christianity, like Judaism, is a product of (intentionally) confusing theology with history. But she is offering what I would call a non-polemical critique of Christianity's anti-Judaism but giving us a Jesus who was not only a mainstream Jew of his time but one who accepted the basic components of the Jewish practices of his day. His subversion of the Pharisees was only in predicating the coming of the Kingdom of God (was that subversive?) and *not* in attempting to bring that about by subverting Jewish practice. And, in her work on Augustine, Frederiksen attempts to show that rejecting Judaism (also illustrated in the Church's rejection of Marcion and Manicheanism) was always a complex matter in the (Gentile) Church.

In Fredriksen's reconstruction Jesus was simply "a prophet who preached the coming apocalyptic Kingdom of God."⁹⁶ This, of course, included the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which he preached as well. From the Jewish perspective, he was both right and wrong. He was right that the temple would fall (in the 30's this might not have required much prophecy). He was wrong, however, in preaching that its demise would inaugurate the Kingdom of God, that is, redemption. It is redemption reconstrued that becomes the hallmark of Christianity, but not of Jesus' life. The connection between destruction and redemption was not new and it is highly likely he was not the only one to preach this publicly. But the convergence of a series of events (i.e. his having been in Jerusalem before and thus having some recognition, his choice to come "out" during the Passover festival, Pilate's growing impatience with Jewish sedition more generally etc.) brought the Roman magistrate to decide that things were getting out of hand and had to be brought under control.⁹⁷ Fredriksen argues that as long as the Temple stood, Jesus abided by its ritual laws including the laws of purity.⁹⁸ Thus Jesus coheres with what is in Fredriksen's historical reconstruction a fairly monolithic view of Jewish life at that time, one where there was almost a consensus on matters of "the Land of Israel, Jerusalem, the Temple, and Torah."⁹⁹ Such an assessment depends on a fairly simplistic, and perhaps even anachronistic, view of life in first-century Palestine.

In any event, this brings us to perhaps the most significant contribution Fredriksen makes to the American Jewish Jesus. As mentioned above, most pre-war Jews almost ignored Jesus' messianism and focused almost exclusively on his ethical teachings. In the post-war period, Jesus' messianism emerged as the dominant motif among Jews. This is in part the result of the rise of fundamentalism and evangelicalism in America (affecting even more mainstream Christianity) replacing the more ethically-minded Unitarianism of

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 266.

⁹⁷ Ibid. pp. 253-257.

⁹⁸ She argues against the historicity of Romans 14:14 and Mark 7: 18, 19 that Jesus was uninterested in the purity laws.

⁹⁹ Op. Cit. p. 62.

the past. Yitz Greenberg and Byron Sherwin offer their version of the failed verses false messiah. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi suggested the centrality of messiah was a mistake for early Christianity which would have been better served viewing Jesus as a divine manifestation of revelation, a kind of Logos theology, rather than as a redemptive messiah.

Fredriksen confronts the messiah doctrine head-on by claiming that Jesus' followers were not focused on him as a messianic figure as much as on his prophecy of the immanent coming of the Kingdom of God or a messianic "era." That some may have viewed Jesus as messiah is surely possible – even probable - but this was not the focus of Jesus' message nor was it the reason he was crucified.¹⁰⁰ Thus, according to Fredriksen, historically Jesus was neither a failed nor a false messiah, he was not a messiah at all. Rather, he was an (informal) prophet preaching the end of days. And this vocation has a long history in Israelite/Jewish society reaching back to the Hebrew prophets, many of whom were also persecuted for their message. By confronting the messianic doctrine and taking it out of the historical Jesus, Fredriksen suggests that Jesus as messiah/savior is an invention that, while itself rooted in Jewish doctrine of the time, eventually took Christianity away from the Judaism Jesus espoused.

She does not revive the "religion *of* Jesus versus the religion *about* Jesus" that played such a central role in the polemical period. I would conjecture that she would claim that the Jewish Jesus of most Jews (American, European, and Israeli) is just as anachronistic and unhistorical as the historical Jesus of Renan, Bauer et al. Present-day Judaism (in all its forms) is not the same as late Second Temple Judaism just as present-day Christianity (in all its forms) is not the same as the Jewish/Christianity of Jesus disciples or the Gospels. This is obvious. For Fredriksen, however, this is crucial to her distinction between theology and history. For her Jesus is neither Jew nor Christian in any contemporary sense. He as a member in fairly good standing of the Pharisaic sect (widely construed), a law abiding Jew who chose for himself a prophetic role of preaching the end of days and, largely the result of circumstances beyond his control, he was used by the Romans as an example to disperse the unruly crowds on Passover in Jerusalem.¹⁰¹ He was a Hebrew prophet and not a messiah (true, false, or failed), his prophecy only half true. The Temple was indeed destroyed but the kingdom of God Jesus prophesied did not come about.

For Fredriksen, what Jesus becomes in Christianity and what he eventually becomes in Jewish depictions of him in Jewish modernity is largely the work of theology and *not* history and this point needs to be stressed. The historian contributes to this only the extent to which she can control historical claims thereby attenuating theological declarations. And here she gives her final word:

To drape him in garments borrowed from current agendas while asserting that these agendas were actually his own only distorts and so obscures who he was...If modern believers seek a Jesus who is morally intelligible and religiously relevant, then it is to them that the necessary historical work of creative and responsible *re*interpretation falls. Such a project is not historical but theological...But this theological *re*interpretation should neither be mistaken for, nor presented as, historical description...It is

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 256.

¹⁰¹ For her de-bunking of various kinds of anachronistic Jesus' see *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 210-212.

when we renounce the false familiarity proffered by the dark angels of Relevance and Anachronism that we see Jesus, his contemporaries, and perhaps even ourselves, more clearly in our common humanity.¹⁰²

There is much to say as to whether such a positivistic vision of history can stand the test of contemporary postmodern critiques from Foucault through de Certeau, Hayden White, Stephen Greenblatt, among many others. However, this is not my issue. I am interested only in how this all contributes to a new Jewish Jesus in contemporary America. Fredriksen's warning of not mixing history with theology is not *only* a warning to Christians but *also* to Jews. In the nineteenth century Jews used historicism to "reverse the gaze" and give us a "Jewish" Jesus to show how Judaism was closer to Jesus' religion than Christianity. In contemporary America, Jews have interpreted Jesus in a way that Jews and Judaism can absorb avoiding an overt critical appraisal of Christianity but also being quite conscious of the importance of maintaining, and even re-affirming, categorical distinctions between Judaism and Christianity. Fredriksen would add here that we should know that *any* contemporary Jesus (Jewish, Christian, or otherwise) is a figment of the author's imagination. Why? Because the Jesus of history was not, and cannot be, anything other than what he was; a figure who lived far outside most of the concerns of any contemporary believer or reader. A reader should, however, wonder the extent to which her own historical assessment is part of her perspective, her own Jewish life, and her intended audience. In this sense her historical Jesus may still yet be one more chapter in the American Jewish Jesus she tries to avoid.

By this I mean the following. Throughout modernity Christian and Jews have used Jesus to criticize or apologize for their religion and criticize the religion of the other. The contemporary period has seen Jews alternatively try to use Jesus to bring Jews and Christians closer together, to "correct" Judaism, to view Jesus through Jewish theological lenses, or to make Christians better Christians (by being more sympathetic to Judaism). Fredriksen seems to be saying, leave Jesus alone! The historical Jesus cannot do any of things mentioned above. And more importantly, theology must be very careful because now we know that Jesus was neither Jew nor Christian. This is all for the sake of co-existence and a non-polemical stance toward the other. But it is not because of what Jews and Christians *share* that they can let the other live peacefully; it is because of what each *does not* own and *cannot* share. And that thing that is strange to both of them is the historical Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 270.