

**RECOVERING A JEWISH JESUS:  
AN IMPERATIVE FOR THE CHURCH  
The 2024 Jerusalem Lecture  
In Remembrance of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (1928-1996)**

We gather this evening in unsettled and fractious times. Yet we do in remembrance of a man who, despite considerable criticism and evidence to the contrary, nevertheless kept hope alive, a hope that reconciliation and peace-making were always possible. So even as we acknowledge the difficult and complicated realities that weigh on us, including deeply felt, distinctive perspectives that threaten to divide us from one another, may this evening enable us all to have hope renewed.

In his 1995 Jerusalem Lecture at the Hebrew University, Cardinal Bernardin addressed “Antisemitism: The Historical Legacy and the Continuing Challenge for Christians.” Twenty-nine years later amid the fault lines exposed by the Hamas-Israel War and the resurgence of global antisemitism, we may be tempted to despair. So may the memory of Cardinal Bernardin’s life of commitment to reconciliation be for us a blessing, not only this evening but for our lives together in this unsettled and fractious time.

In the initial section of my lecture, I will speak to what I consider to be among the most important developments in Christian theology today: *integrating* knowledge of the Jewishness of Jesus into our lives as Christians. It is this renewed recognition that allows us to experience aspects of the depths of Jewish life, not only in the past but in the present. This renewed recognition also enables us to better understand our distinctive religious journey as disciples of Jesus Christ, the Jew from Nazareth. I will develop this topic in three brief sections: (1) recognizing the Jewish Jesus of the Gospels; (2) understanding why and how the church lost sight of the Jewish Jesus; and (3) recovering the significance of the Jewish Jesus.

In the concluding section, I turn directly to the topic of antisemitism as, Cardinal Bernardin said, is a “continuing challenge for Christians,” and how the memory of the Jewish Jesus speaks to the current moment.

I. The Jewish Jesus

1. *Recognizing the Jewish Jesus (4 BCE–30 CE) of the Gospels (ca. 70 CE-95 CE)*

According to Luke’s gospel (2:21), Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day, the ritual by which males entered the people of the covenant.

Jesus was born at a particular time and place, that is, the diverse world of Second Temple Judaism (ca. 515 BCE-70 CE) and lived in the Galilee in the village of Nazareth. He kept sabbath—that is, he observed a weekly time when he ceased from working. Perhaps his mode of sabbath observance differed in some respects from some others, but there was no uniformity of practice in this regard. He lived by a calendar of fasts and festivals that structured his days and weeks. Jesus seems to

have been so immersed in his Jewish world that we have relatively little indication of extended interaction with gentiles. And when he did encounter gentiles, it sometimes led to new insights about the meaning of Torah, such as his encounter with the Syro-Phoenecian woman (Mark 7:24-30; cf. Matthew 15:21-28). The gospels bear witness to his passion for pursuing Torah's meaning in a new time, a fervor that fueled his debates with contemporaries. Like some of his Jewish near-contemporaries, he was a charismatic, itinerant preacher and healer, like Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the Circle-drawer (see *m. Ta'anit* 3.8). It is in his discussions and disputes about interpreting Torah that we see Jesus engaging in a characteristically Jewish mode: contending with others who understood Torah differently. To debate Torah was to honor its significance for daily living.

And memorably for us Christians, Jesus identified the heart of Torah: When a scribe asked him which commandment was "greatest of all," he cited both Deuteronomy and Leviticus: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29-3; // Matthew 22:32-40 and Luke 10:25-28).

To understand how these first-century CE texts resonate in our time, consider this formulation: "... Jesus is the 'living torah of God' .... Torah and Christ are the locus of the presence of God in the world as this presence is experienced in the respective worship communities" ["The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable \(Rom. 11:29\)"](#) (Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, 2015).

## 2. *Losing Sight of the Jewish Jesus*

In the second and third centuries, however, educated followers of Christ gave little, if any, attention to the Jewishness of Jesus. We can only infer some of the reasons, particularly their perceived need to differentiate themselves from (some) Jews, whose holy texts they shared but whose lack of acceptance of the Way of Jesus they judged as erroneous.

A case in point comes from the most extensive document of nascent Christianity, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, dated in mid-second century—a tumultuous time for Jews, whose temple had been destroyed in 70 CE and whose hopes had been crushed in the Bar Kokhba uprising in 135, ultimately resulting in the expulsion of Jews from Judea. Some Christ-followers, Justin included, interpreted these defeats as the end of Judaism, not realizing the way in which Jewish life was flourishing in the Diaspora.

In retrospect, we can see that Justin established grounds for argumentation that has had a lasting effect on the church, though he had no authority beyond his own writings. Nevertheless, traces of the borderline he drew linger in many Christian theologies today, particularly in his audacious assertion that "your Scriptures" [the Jewish Bible] are no longer "yours, but ours. For we believe and obey them, whereas you, *though you read them, do not grasp their spirit*" (29.2).

Justin's primary argument with Trypho was that Jews do not regard Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Trypho's teachers, he says with *chutzpah*, are "ignorant of the meaning of the Scriptures" (9.1), and so are responsible for having led him astray. They—and therefore Trypho—simply do not grasp the meaning of Scripture, failing to see how the prophets speak of Christ: "The Lawgiver has come, and you do not see him; the poor have the gospel preached to them the blind see, yet you do not understand" (12.2). In other words, Christ as Lawgiver has, in effect, replaced Moses.

It is apparent from this text that Justin knew relatively little about how Jews actually observed Torah. Those observances he was aware of, circumcision and Shabbat, he harshly criticized. "What you really need is another circumcision, though you prize that of the flesh" (12.3). Circumcision, the philosopher opined, was given as a "distinguishing mark, to set you off from other nations and from us Christians." Alluding to the devastating effects of the Bar Kokhba war, Justin saw circumcision as the effect of that war on Judaism: that "you and only you might suffer the afflictions that are now justly yours, that only your land be desolate, and your cities ruined by fire" (16.2). Circumcision, moreover, was merely a "type" (or foreshadowing) of the "true circumcision by which we are circumcised from error and wickedness through our Lord Jesus Christ..." (41.4). The followers of Christ, in contrast, "have the salutary circumcision," namely, that of the heart.

"God commanded circumcision, Sabbath, sacrifices, oblations and festivals because of "their [Jews'] hardness of heart"(41.3). God "issued his ordinances about the Sabbaths and oblations" so that they might not worship idols and forget God, becoming "impious and godless, as indeed, you always seem to have been" (92.4). In effect, the cultic dimension of Torah is irrelevant and in Christ its ethical demands are fulfilled. As a result, Justin claimed: "The law promulgated at Horeb is already obsolete" and was only intended for Jews. In contrast, Christ is the "everlasting and final law" and it is Christ's law that is in "opposition to an older law" and "abrogates" it, just as the "trustworthy covenant" offered in Christ voids the earlier covenant (11.2). So, Justin concludes, "we are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham" (11.5). Rabbi Dr. Rachel Mikva aptly frames such claims as movement from "We are Israel also" to "We are Israel instead" (*Dangerous Religious Ideas*, 2020; 95).

In essence, his disputation with Trypho was a lengthy argument that Christianity had displaced Judaism. In effect, his rhetoric constituted a *theological takeover* (J. Lieu, *Image and Reality*, 1996:136-140). He "constructed" what he thought Judaism was and then "deconstructed" it by contrasting it with what he believed to be the "only sure and useful philosophy," the Way of Christ. Moreover, the philosopher Justin seems to regard Judaism as an abstraction, a disembodied philosophy against which he asserts the "only sure and useful philosophy." He evinces no interest in how actual Jews in the diversity of Jewish life in the second century CE understood their beliefs and practices. Rather, he regarded Judaism as an intellectual construct, a belief system against which Christian self-identity was articulated.

How much influence Justin exercised in his own day is difficult to assess. But the text of his *Dialogue* survived. Moreover, amidst the polyphony of voices in the patristic writings, similar patterns of thought are evident—and became even more problematic in the fourth century when a number of Christian thinkers, most

infamously John Chrysostom (344-407), inveighed against Jews themselves, sometimes in harsh and callous ways, thereby contributing to a new genre of Christian literature: *adversus Judaeos*—or as we might call it, *theological antisemitism*.

These early texts have contributed a deficient understanding of Judaism to the church over the ages. This has seriously undercut the significance of Jesus's Jewishness. He may have been born a Jew... but in practical effect in the view of most he became a Christian, as did the early disciples and Paul. Historically, however, the term "Christian" here is anachronistic, as there was not yet institutional Christianity.

In my experience in the church, there is a disconnect: that Jesus is Jewish is sometimes acknowledged but the Judaism into which he was born—and circumcised and lived and taught—is more often portrayed as mired in the "old Law" and thus obsolete. As a result, Judaism is generally referred to only in the past, Christianity in the present and future. Jesus is too often depicted as directing his teaching *against* the Judaism of his day.

This is especially evident in how passages about the Pharisees are interpreted. For example, consider this commentary from a parish bulletin dated February 12, 2023 from a Catholic church in the metro New York area where I occasionally participated in the Eucharist. The pastor wrote:

The scribes and Pharisees were masters of the Old Law. Now that the Messiah had arrived, they were unwilling to go deeper and move beyond the Old Testament teachings that they often misrepresented. They preferred a black-and-white approach to morality that had been with them for centuries and did not want to change when presented with Jesus' new and higher calling.

Today's Gospel [Matthew 5:17-37] continues the Sermon on the Mount, which began with the Beatitudes. In today's portion of Jesus' sermon, we are taught about anger, adultery, and oaths. In every case Jesus refers to the Law as it was taught in the Old Testament but then elevates it to an entirely new level. The quote above makes it clear that to accept these new teachings of Jesus, one had to surpass the "righteousness" of the scribes and Pharisees. And the dire consequences of not surpassing their righteousness would be the loss of the Kingdom of Heaven.

.... It is helpful to understand these new teachings in the context of the approach that the scribes and Pharisees took in regard to the Old Testament. About that, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Thus, the primary problem with the scribes and Pharisees is not that they failed to teach the Old Testament properly. The primary problem is that now that the Messiah has arrived and has ushered in a new time of fulfillment and righteousness, they would not go deeper and would not embrace the fulfillment of the Law of God. They are not willing to grow in holiness and embrace the fulfillment of all that had been taught before.

The pastor ended with a summons to “live in His New Law of grace,” and to become “truly radical in your faith.” He exhorted his parishioners to “commit to surpassing the old and limited righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and God will do glorious things in your life.”

So, to say Jesus is Jewish and then to imply, as did this pastor, that Judaism was then and remains moribund empties his Jewishness of any significance for Christians. A Jewish Jesus? A fact of his birth, yes. As a present and meaningful claim, no; once the Messiah had arrived, Jesus seemed to have left his Jewishness behind.

### *3. Recovering the Significance of the Jewish Jesus*

Scripture scholars initiated the recovery of a Jewish Jesus in the 1980s. The primary factor in their rediscovery of his Jewishness lay in their profound knowledge of and appreciation for early Judaism—a corrective to what has too often been at best oversimplified and at worst simply wrong judgments about Judaism. (Among the many elements of this reorientation were studies offering dramatic rethinking of the Pharisaic movement, including that of the late Anthony J. Saldarini, who gave the 1999 Jerusalem Lecture, “Christian Anti-Judaism: The First Century Speaks to the Twenty-first Century.” Tony, a Catholic rabbinic scholar, was a beloved colleague and friend during my years at Boston College. He died all too young in 2001.)

Today we continue to learn from Jews, particularly three outstanding books that have exercised considerable influence on Christian understandings of Jesus: Paula Fredriksen’s *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (1999); Amy-Jill Levine’s *The Misunderstood Jew* (2006) and Pamela Eisenbaum’s *Paul Was Not a Christian* (2009). Less well known but vital for grasping the diversity of early Judaism is Malka Z. Simkovich’s *Discovering Second Temple Literature* (2018). Every Christian serious about understanding the New Testament should have a copy of *the Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Levine and Marc Brettler and now in a second edition. Would that every homilist had these books—and read them.

It's not just about books. Collaboration among those invested in Jewish-Christian issues and friendships between Jews and Christians enable learning about the other's tradition in ways that transcend ideas. It's experiencing aspects of the other tradition's breadth and depth. It's lingering long over a Shabbat table, being privy to intense debates about the meaning of Israel, witnessing the procession with the Torah scroll in a Shabbat service, taking the note of the seriousness with which Jews enter into the high holy days, and sitting shiva with mourners.

In short: being brought into Jewish life. These experiences illumine Judaism in a way no book can—and shed light on Jesus' Judaism. Of course, Judaism has developed in diverse ways since the early first century CE. But the continuity is profound, above all the persistent desire interpret Torah in the messiness of lived experience—to lead Torah-directed lives. “The question of who Jesus Christ is today cannot sufficiently be given by Christians alone” (Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory 2020*; 68).

A year or so ago I read a remarkable essay by the late German theologian Johann Baptist Metz in which he writes: “Christian Theology after Auschwitz must—at long last—be guided by the insight that Christians can form and sufficiently understand their identity only in the face of the Jews.” He clarifies that Christian identity is *not* “to be established and ascertained in the ‘face of Judaism,’ but in the face of ‘the Jews.’” (“Facing the Jews: Christian Theology after Auschwitz,” in *The Holocaust as Interruption*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and David Tracy, 1984; 26-33).

The early church writers, for all their insight, were unable to truly see the *face of the Jews* because Judaism was the religious/philosophical other—a “contrast figure”—against whom they argued, not a people striving to live Torah-directed lives.

## II. Antisemitism

It is precisely the obligation to formulate and understand our Christian identity “only in the face of the Jews” that leads directly to the topic of antisemitism.

I begin with an image. Several weeks ago, I was walking home from doing errands when I ran into a rabbi I know principally because a number of my friends belong to his *shul*. In the course of our conversation, I asked him how his congregants were doing in this tumultuous time. “They are lacerated,” he said, drawing his hands across his chest—not only in the wake of October 7<sup>th</sup> but also mindful of the continuing devastation in Gaza.

Lacerated. Ripped apart. Not only by the unspeakable violence and death, but also by the bitter divisions within and beyond our communities, rifts I imagine exist here in this space as well.

Yet whatever serious differences we may have with regard to the war, to the status of Israel, to the longstanding tensions between Israelis and Palestinians (some of whom are Israeli citizens), to the context of the Middle East, we cannot be but shaken by the vitriolic and virulent antisemitism that has emerged with new intensity. And yet, too many remain unmoved by the vitriol and virulence.

What is it we Christians now have to say *in the face of Jews*?

We might begin by acknowledging that we have no high moral ground from which to speak. Antisemitism, no matter how we define it, was without doubt a tragic—and I believe, an unintended—consequence of the development of Christian identity. Christianity alone does not bear the entire responsibility for antisemitism, but neither can it shirk responsibility for denigrating, even demonizing, Jews with such tragic consequences.

The responsibility Christians must assume for antisemitism over the generations does not mean Christians must keep silent about, for example, Israeli government policy or its conduct of the war in Gaza. Neither should be equated with antisemitism. It does imply, however, that whatever criticisms are addressed to Israel should include recognition of its moral quandary: that is, its right as a nation state where half of the world’s Jews live to defend itself against Hamas, a militant

organization expressly committed to the destruction of Israel, yet is hidden among Gazans, for whose safety and flourishing they have little regard.

Moreover, we need to beware of the ways in which timeworn anti-Jewish tropes have resurfaced, such as:

- The *lex talionis*: “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exodus 21: 23-27)
- Jews as “stiff necked, uncircumcised of heart” (Acts of the Apostles 7:51)
- Jews as “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14) and whose love of money seemingly lay behind Judas’ betrayal of Jesus (Mark 14:10-11;// Matthew 26:14-16; Luke 22:3-6; John 13:22-23)
- Jews as hypocrites (Matthew 23: 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

To consider the significance of the Jewish Jesus means in the first instance to do justice to Jews and their Judaism in the past and in the present.

### *A Concluding Word*

In her recent essay posted on the website of the national Jesuit monthly *America*, Karma Ben-Johanán, an Israeli Jew and professor in the department of comparative religion at Hebrew University, makes clear her differences with the current Israeli government; she also rejects the equation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism. Her poignant perspective speaks to this moment:

My stomach turns when thinking about the hunger experienced by Gazan civilians. It keeps me up at night. It is truly hard to breathe. Indeed, my own “Jewish fears” and “historic traumas” worsen this stomachache—I feel that my Jewish and human integrity is at stake in the conduct and implications of this war. But I also realize for the first time the gravity of the threat posed to Israel.... What we learned on October 7 is that Israel cannot guarantee the safety of its citizens, and that it is fragile....

Many of my friends, Jews and non-Jews alike, in Israel and abroad, from the right and from the left, are, however much more certain than I am about how all of this should be handled. As for me, I am eaten by doubts, trying to reason my way out of this impasse. What I do believe is that some moral and intellectual modesty will not hurt any of us ... in evaluating the complexity of the situation ([There Is a Right and Wrong Way for Catholics to Criticize Israel](#)).

“In the face of the Jews,” and in our fidelity to Jesus as the “living Torah of God,” we Christians have much reason to practice moral and intellectual modesty—and to recognize that through the Way of Jesus we, too, are asked to live Torah-directed lives, loving God with all that is in us and our neighbors as ourselves.

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