

JESUS
through Jewish Eyes

RABBIS AND SCHOLARS
ENGAGE AN ANCIENT BROUILLER
IN A NEW CONVERSATION

Compiled and edited
by
BEATRICE BRUTEAU

 **ORBIS BOOKS**
Maryknoll, New York 10545

support. Anyway, many have thought that Jesus himself was a kind of Pharisee, though it seems to me better to think of him as an *os lepra* carrier, a peasant with a genius for religion.

In what way was Jesus unique, or, at least, unusual?

He practiced celibacy and had no family, nor did most of his apostles. He took a hard line on divorce, absolutely forbidding it, according to one source. He ignored the strictures on personal purity and went out to lepers and outcasts. He fraternized with sinners and apparently did not require repentance before admitting them to fellowship. He assumed a kind of personal authority that classical Judaism believed had given way to collegiality and debate among rabbinic authorities. Thus, for example, he revised Sabbath legislation according to his own interpretation of Scripture.

He was said to have healed the sick and (like Elijah and Elisha in earlier times) to have resurrected the dead and given hope to many. It is far from clear whether or not he believed himself to be the promised Messiah, but if he did, he would not be the first Jew (or the last) to claim the title. All of these add up to the image of a somewhat unusual first century Jew, but clearly one within the bounds of the possible.

“Who Do You Say That I Am?” (Mark 8:29)

A New Jewish View of Jesus

BYRON L. SILVERWIN

MOST CLASSICAL JEWISH theological teachings express a negative view of Jesus. Though the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called Jesus his “brother,”¹ much of classical Jewish theological teaching considered Jesus an “other” (*orev ha-ayb*, literally, a derogatory term for “that man”), that is, an apostate who subverted the teachings of Judaism, a Jew whose teachings were internalized by his followers as a justification for the persecution of the Jewish people in many lands over many centuries, and as the paradigmatic false Messiah. Jews, in effect, excommunicated Jesus from the Jewish faith and from the Jewish people. What is proposed in this essay is a radical reassessment of the place of Jesus in Jewish theology.

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. Such a new Jewish theology of Jesus cannot be evaluated primarily in terms of its

¹ Martin Buber's description of Jesus as “my great brother” is found in the “Piercing Word” in his study of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity, *Two Types of Faith*, written in 1948. Probably the most positive view of Jesus and of Christianity among classical Jewish thinkers is found in the writings of the eighteenth-century German rabbi Jacob Emden. See, e.g., Harvey Park, “Jacob Emden's Views of Christianity,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 19, winter 1982, 106-11.

confluence with modern *Wissenschaft*, but rather with regard to these two criteria: (1) Is it defensible within the framework of Jewish theological teaching? Specifically, does it violate any belief fundamental to Judaism? Does it negate any established Jewish religious legal decree (*halakha*)? Is it inconsistent with any critical Jewish religious belief or practice? (2) Is the view offered inconsistent with contemporary Jewish theological self-understanding? Specifically, can it and would it be accepted, at least by some segment of the contemporary "faith community" of Jews?

To be sure, for reasons that will become apparent, some Jews will consider the view put forth below to be a viable theological option, though not necessarily one that they might be willing to accept. Others will dismiss it outright. Nonetheless, my position is that the Jewish theological view of Jesus offered below meets the criteria we set out above: it is not inconsistent with the rubrics of Jewish theological discourse; it offers a theological reformulation of Jewish views of Jesus that recognizes the many recent courageous theological reformulations of Christian views of Jews and Judaism; and it provides a reduction of barriers for *abrogated* discourse between Jews and Christians regarding that which is most important for Christians, that is, the person of Jesus. Before offering my specific proposal, it is first necessary to delineate five premises upon which this Jewish theological view of Jesus is based.

FIVE PREMISES

1. The first premise is that Jewish theological teachings about any subject must be understood within the context of Jewish theological discourse. Consequently, it would be inappropriate for us to use here categories, assumptions, or theological topics and issues proper to Christian understandings of Jesus.³ The Jewish theological question is, who can Jews believe Jesus is?

³ On Christianity and Judaism, see a fine summary of recent scholarship in John L. Paoletkowski, "New Trends in Catholic Religious Thought," in *Twenty Years of Jewish-Catholic Relations*, ed. Eugene J. Fisher, A. James Rudin, and Marc H. Tanenbaum (New York/Rahway, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1986), 186-90. See also, e.g., Allan R. Brockway, "Learning Christianity: Uncoiled Dialogue with Jews," *Jewish Theological Studies* 25 (Summer 1988): 317-57.

2. The second premise is that, while Christian claims about Jesus do not constitute an issue on the Jewish theological agenda, they must be an issue on the social agenda of the Jewish people, because these claims have led to the mistreatment and persecution of Jews. The Jewish interest therefore relates to how claims affect Christians' attitudes and actions toward Jews. As Rabbi Eugene Borowitz put it,

We have been so hurt by past Christian teaching and practice, we are so worried about the terms on which the world (still so strongly influenced by Christian opinion) will permit us to survive, that our first question to any Christian is likely to be: "What do you believe is your Christian obligation to the Jews and what will you be doing about it?"⁴

3. The third premise is the affirmation of and the commitment to religious pluralism, which assumes that no religion has a monopoly on truth; that theological diversity reflects the divine will, and that more than one faith plays a role in God's plan for human redemption. This is a stance developed by Jewish theologians in the Middle Ages, enhanced in the sixteenth century by Eliezer Ashkenazi's interpretation of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel—God divided the people into different languages to prevent the absolutism that inevitably stifles free and creative thought and authentic religious expression⁵—and insisted upon in our own time by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who held that the Torah is not the only way of serving God, and that "human faith is never final, never arrival, but rather an endless pilgrimage."⁶

⁴ Eugene J. Borowitz, *Contemporary Christianity: A Jewish Response* (New York/Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1983), 23. The recovery of the Jewishness of Jesus may pose a problem for the formulation of contemporary Christianologies for Christian theologians; see, e.g., Philip L. Culbertson, "What Is Left to Believe in Jesus after the Scholars Have Done with Him?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 28 (Winter 1991): 1-17.

⁵ Eliezer Ashkenazi, *Yeshu Ma'aseh ha-Nivon* (Venice, 1883), sec. "Ma'aseh Bavel"; Day, 81 (my translations, as are all other translations throughout), from Hebrew, French, and German).

⁶ See Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion Is an Island," *Esquire* 32 (January 1966): 117-33. Reprinted in *My Religion Is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Harold S. Kaminow and Byron L. Sheerwin (Mahwah, N.J.: Orbis Books, 1991), page references are to *No Religion Is an Island* (p. 1-3, 18-19, 16).

In this connection, I would like to draw special attention to an idea advanced by the fifteenth-century Italian Jewish scholar Rabbi Abraham Farissol. It is unique in Jewish literature and virtually unknown, but is particularly deserving of our consideration in the present context. Farissol made the creative—and the distinctly pluralistic—suggestion that, while Jesus did not meet the Jewish definition of the expected Messiah, there is a sense in which even Jews could say that Jesus has in fact functioned as a redeemer for Christians. He wrote:

Let us assume that their Christ is a Messiah for them, and we [Jews] shall neither deny nor affirm that which befall their Messiah. But to my mind it is distinctly feasible that they be justified in designating him as their rightful redeemer. For they have declared—and it is in fact true—that since he came and imparted his doctrines, they have been redeemed and cleansed of the pollution of idol worship.⁵

4. The fourth premise is that with regard to Jewish theological teachings on Jesus, an innovative way should be found to incorporate a positive view of Jesus into Jewish theological teachings. The main reason for this, simply put, is that Jesus was a Jew. Despite attempts of Christian historians and theologians to deny that Jesus was a Jew—for example, the efforts of some German theologians to demonstrate that he was an Aryan—Jesus was indisputably a Jew. Indeed, almost every Christian nation has tried to expropriate Jesus from his own people—the Jews. It is time for Christians to accept Jesus as a Jew. It is also time for Jews to reclaim him as a legitimate and honored member of the Jewish people—as a brother.⁶

⁵Quoted from manuscripts of Abraham Farissol's *Maqam Arabaim in Sarnud Lavangeri. Shichreches au Presence apologetique d'Abraham Farissol*, *Revue des Etudes Juives* n.s. 5 (1940): 38.

⁶For a succinct summary of positive views of Christianity and Jesus by Jewish scholars since the 1950s, see, e.g., John I. Zayidovick, *Was Jesus Their Son? A Christian-Jewish Dialogue?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), chaps. 3, 4. The article on "Jesus" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* states that the Synoptic Gospels "present a reasonably faithful picture of Jesus as a Jew of his time . . . as a Jew who was faithful to the entire practice of the law" (Goshel Beeri, ed., *Jerusalem: Keren Publishing House, New York: Mesadim, 1971*), vol. 10, cols. 16, 17). Even the earlier Jewish *Encyclopaedia*, in its entry on "Jesus of Nazareth," stated, "in many ways his [Jesus'] attitude was specifically Jewish, even in discussions which are usually regarded as agnos-

The sainted Rabbi Leo Baeck, who was the most important Jewish leader in Nazi Germany and who survived the horrors of the Holocaust, wrote that in beheading Jesus,

we beheld a man who is Jewish in every feature and trait of his character, manifesting in every particular what is pure and good in Judaism. This man could have developed as he came to be only on the soil of Judaism; and only on this soil, too, could he find his disciples and followers as they were. Here alone, in this Jewish sphere, in this Jewish atmosphere . . . could this man live his life and meet his death—a Jew among Jews.⁷

And about the Gospels, Baeck wrote:

The tradition of the Gospel is, first of all, in every [respect], simply a part of the Jewish tradition of that time. . . . It is a Jewish book . . . because a Jewish spirit and none other lives in it; because Jewish faith and Jewish hope, Jewish suffering and Jewish distress, Jewish knowledge and Jewish expectations, and these alone, resound through it—a Jewish book in the midst of Jewish books. Judaism may not pass it by, nor mistake it, nor wish to give up all claims here. Here, too, Judaism should comprehend and take note of what is its own.⁸

Recent Jewish and Christian scholarship of the New Testament and of Judaism in the first century demonstrates that Jesus was much more a part of than apart from Jewish life and thought in his time and place than had previously been assumed. Jesus lived, taught, and died as a Jew. Indeed, one cannot fully understand the life and teachings of Jesus when separated from the Jewish context from which they derive. This realization has led some contemporary scholars to maintain that it is precisely because earlier Jews and Christians failed to

of Jewish narrowness" (*Judaea Suscepit pro. ed.* [New York: London: Funk & Wagnell, 1904], 7:162). More recently, see, e.g., writings of Jewish scholars such as Gershom Scholem, David Flusser, Ellis Rivkin, Abba Segal, and others. See also the essays in *Jesus: Jewishness and Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), Ch. G. Livshitz, Schwartz, "Is There a Jewish Reclamation of Jesus?" *Jewishness International*, *Spring 1987*: 112, 9.

⁷Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity*, translation and introduction by Walter Kaufman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1958), 101.

⁸Ibid., 62, 102.

appreciate Jesus' rootedness in the Judaism of his time and place that led them to believe that Jesus' teachings are anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish. For their scholars, an appreciation of the Jewish nature of Jesus' life and teachings can serve as the basis for a more sympathetic view of Judaism by Christians and for a more sympathetic view of Jesus by Jews. For both Christians and Jews, understanding Jesus as a Jew can serve as the basis for removing barriers between Christians and Jews, and for establishing a foundation for fraternal dialogue. It may be observed, however, that the recovery of Jesus' "Jewishness" poses new problems for the formulation of contemporary Christologies. However, that concern is beyond the scope of this essay. The concern here is with the meaning Jesus may have for Jews today. In that regard, the recovery of the Jewishness of Jesus may offer more of an opportunity for Jewish theologians than for Christian theologians.

5. The *ffff* premise is that Jewish theology cannot grant Jesus a status greater than it might grant any of his contemporaries. Judaism cannot consider him to be greater than, for example, Moses or the prophets of Israel. Even the greatest rabbis of Jesus' time and place are not considered prophets by Judaism. Nor can Jews consider Jesus the final Messiah, Messiah son of David. For Jews, the final Messiah is yet to come. For Judaism, neither Jesus nor anyone else is yet the finally awaited Messiah. Though Jesus is called "rabbi" by his disciples, this designation of him is nowhere accepted in the rabbinic canon. Just as Jews cannot accept Jesus as *the* Messiah, or as a prophet, they cannot accept him as a rabbinic authority.

While classical Jewish sources consider Jesus as a *fa*ir messiah, I believe a Jew can affirm that Jesus was not a false messiah but a *fa*iled messiah.¹⁹ Let us consider the concept of failure and then the concept of messiah.

A FAILED MESSIAH

Failure simply means not reaching one's ultimate goal. In this sense, the Hebrew prophets were failures, because they did not achieve their ultimate goals of convincing the people to repent and to obey God's

will. Moses was a failure, because he did not enter the promised land, and he did not guide the people into the land. Even God failed, for according to Jewish tradition the reign of God was supposed to begin with the revelation of the Torah at Sinai, but the people built the golden calf and God's expectation was not realized. Indeed, God failed so badly in creating the human race that he had to erase it with a flood and start again, like an artist who makes a mistake and must erase it, accept failure, and begin again. Indeed, the greatest individuals are always failures, because their goals are so exalted. Not all failures are great people, but in a sense—all great people are failures. Precisely because their goals exceed their abilities, they are not able to accomplish more than reasonably can be expected.

In his study of biblical leadership, Martin Buber observed:

The Bible knows nothing of the intrinsic value of success. On the contrary, when it announces a successful deed, it is duty-bound to announce in complete detail the failure involved in the success. When we consider the history of Moses, we see how much failure is mingled in the one great successful action. . . . True, Moses brought the people out of Egypt; but each stage in this leadership is a failure . . . and yet his work survives also in a hope which is beyond all these failures. . . . This glorification of failure culminates in the long line of prophets whose existence is failure through and through. They live in failure; it is for them to fight and not to conquer. This is the fundamental experience of biblical leadership.²⁰

As a final and ultimate messiah, Jesus was a failure because he did not bring about the final and complete redemption of the world. If he had completely succeeded, a *g*rossin—a second coming—would not be necessary. Summarizing earlier Jewish traditions regarding failed messiahs, Maimonides wrote, "If he does not meet with full success, or is slain, it is obvious that he is not the (final) Messiah promised in the Torah. He is to be regarded like all the other whole-hearted and worthy kings of the House of David who died and whom God raised up to test the multitudes."²¹

¹⁹ Martin Buber, "Biblical Leadership," *Uchi's Witness and the World: Essays in a Theology of Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 125-26.

²¹ Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah: Book of Judges*, "Laws of Kings and Wars," 11:4 (in unnumbered editions).

Having discussed failure, let us discuss the messianic idea. For Christians, Jesus was *not* a failed messiah because he brought complete spiritual redemption. Jews do not accept this. But, even if Jews would accept it, Jesus would still not have been a successful messiah. According to Jewish theology, messianic redemption is not limited to the spiritual realm. The dominant motif in Jewish messianism is that messianic redemption occurs in time and space, in history, in the sociopolitical realm. For messianic redemption to be complete, it must take place in the physical as well as the spiritual realm. For Judaism, the physical and the spiritual are interrelated, interlocked. The Jews could not accept Jesus as the Jewish Messiah because he did not bring the type of redemption anticipated by Jewish teachings about the messianic age.¹² For example, Jewish messianism anticipated a messianic era that would fulfill the prophetic dream of a world without war—a world at peace, a world where “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall anyone experience war anymore” (Isa. 2:4), a world ruled by justice and compassion, a world devoid of prejudice and physical oppression. As Martin Buber wrote, shortly after the Holocaust, “we [Jews] communicate with the bloody body of our people the unredeemedness of the world.”¹³

Until peace, justice, and compassion reign, Jews will continue to view God's kingdom as *yet to come*. Jews will continue to view our world as pre-messianic, as unredeemed. However, while our world cannot be viewed by Jews as a redeemed world, and while Jesus cannot be viewed by Jews as the ultimate and final Jewish Messiah, my radical suggestion is that he may be considered a Jewish messiah, a *faïssâ* rather than a *faïss* Jewish messiah, part of rather than apart from the life of his people and their messianic hope.

THE MESSIAH SON OF JOSEPH

Classical Jewish theological literature speaks of a failed messiah. In most texts, he is named Messiah son of Joseph (or Messiah son of Ephraim). He is a preliminary messiah, coming in anticipation of and

paving the way for the final Messiah, the Messiah son of David. It is a messiah who dies to prepare the way, to provide the opportunity for the final redemption to take place.¹⁴ This idea of a suffering messiah is native to Jewish messianism. According to some Jewish historians, the idea of the Messiah son of Joseph was developed by the students of the greatest rabbi of the second century, Akiba, to justify their master's claim that Bar Kochba, who led a revolt of Jews against Romans, was the Messiah. When Bar Kochba was defeated and killed, it was clear that Akiba was wrong; he was not the final Messiah. Wars still occurred; political oppression continued. As was noted before, Jews could not accept as a final messiah anyone who did not bring an end to war and oppression. So Akiba's students concluded that their teacher could not be wrong; that is, Bar Kochba was a messiah, but not the final messiah. He was the Messiah son of Joseph, not the Messiah son of David.¹⁵

According to other Jewish historians, the idea of the Messiah son of Joseph was developed as an attempt to give Jesus a place within Jewish messianic theology. In this view, the idea of the Messiah son of Joseph was developed to try to convince those 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. This attempt, it was hoped, would prevent a separation of such Jews from the Jew

¹² For sources about Messiah son of Joseph, see the Talmud, *Sotâ* 47a. The classical text in unadorned literature is *Pesqet Rabbari*, chap. 36, 37. In this text, one also finds the idea of the Messiah as a suffering messiah. The idea of a suffering messiah is an early view, native to Jewish messianism. The idea of Messiah son of Joseph was developed in mid-second of the rabbinic period, i.e., immediate post-Tannaitic period, seventh to ninth centuries. See these collected by Esheluh Ezer Samuel Karfman; *Me'asotê Grašôš* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1954), especially 90-112, 133-42, 213-22. See the discussion and sources collected in Klausner, “The Jewish and Christian Messiah,” 483-502. An attempt to demonstrate the significance of the idea of Messiah son of Joseph for Christianity is found in Richard von der Alm in his *Die jüdische Bräutigams- und Messiaslehre Schilfer der vier ersten christlichen Jahrhunderte über Jesu und die Lehrsätze* (Leipzig: Wigand, 1864).

¹³ For Bar Kochba as a messiah, see, e.g., Adelman Talmon, *Treasures* 4-5; and Levenson, *Rabbi* II, 2, no. 4. Akiba's colleague said, “Akiba, great will grow on your cheeks if Bar Kochba is the Messiah.” The idea that the Messiah son of Joseph was developed by Akiba's students was the theory of Joseph Klausner. It was also noted that Rabbi Abba cited a martyr's death and that Akiba's name was Joseph. On Jewish and Christian perceptions of the alleged messiahship of Bar Kochba, see, e.g., Adiel Ruzic, “Rabbi Akiba's Perception of Simon bar Kosiba,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 20 (December 1989): 171-92.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Joseph Kharary, “The Jewish and the Christian Messiah,” in *The Messiah: His Life in Israel: From Its Beginning to the Completion of the Millenial Goals*, W. L. Simonson (Ed.) (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 519-51.

¹⁵ Quoted in Janet Sussan, “Martin Buber: His Way Between Thought and Deed,” *Jewish Frontier* (February 1948): 26.

ish community. Those who build this view argue further that the claim that Jesus descended from David and was the Davidic Messiah was ascribed to Jesus by the Gospels long after his death, and without any basis. In fact, they claim, Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph; hence, the name "Messiah son of Joseph."¹⁷

The idea of the Messiah son of Joseph developed throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Important Jewish leaders and thinkers, such as the great sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, were considered to be the Messiah son of Joseph.¹⁸ According to one tradition, a Messiah son of Joseph comes in each generation to prepare the way for the final redemption. If the generation is unworthy, he is not followed by the Messiah son of David. If the generation is worthy, the Messiah son of David comes.¹⁹ According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah son of David has not yet come, but a number of Messiahs son of Joseph may already have come.

JESUS AS A MESSIAH SON OF JOSEPH

What I would propose is that Jesus be considered a Jewish messiah; that is, a Messiah son of Joseph. This would give Jesus a place within Jewish theological discourse and would end the centuries-long tradition of his virtual excommunication from the faith, community of which he was a part. Further, it should provide him not only with a

¹⁷ A good summary of the views of a number of scholars regarding the origin of the idea of the Messiah son of Joseph may be found in Joseph Heinemann, "The Messiah of Ephraim and the Promeraz Esavite of the Tribe of Benjamin," *Harvard Theological Review* 68 (January 1975): 1-15. See also Charles C. Jewey, "The Messiah Son of Ephraim," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 66, no. 3 (1947): 253-77. Through most texts regarding the Messiah son of Joseph, positive (and/or subordinate) use of the title of Christaucter, Torrey claims that "his doctrine antedated the Christian era by several centuries" (p. 286). I agree that the idea predated Christianity and is unique to Jewish associations rather than being an "aberration." See George Reiser Meeks, suggested in his *Insolation in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tertullian*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1927), 376.

¹⁸ On Isaac Luria as Messiah son of Joseph, see, e.g., Marc Brechman, ed., *Sefer Thirteen ha zari* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1967), 199; see also p. 258. While Luria is described as dying for the sake of others.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Haysim Virel, *Sefer Pei Tem Hagaram* (Kornik, 1784). "Seder ha zari" (ibid., chap. 19, p. 52b. Note also on that page the reference to Isaac Luria as the Messiah son of Joseph.

role, but with a *secondary* role within Jewish theology. This role would acknowledge the life and teaching of Jesus as *preparatio messianica*, consistent with the tradition of the Messiah son of Joseph, thereby including him in the divine plan for human redemption.

While the church regarded ancient Judaism as *preparatio evangelica*, prominent medieval Jewish authorities such as Judah Halevi and Moses Maimonides acknowledged Christianity as *preparatio messianica*. While Christian doctrine often regarded Judaism as being an obsolete faith, this Jewish attitude acknowledges the presence of a divine plan for the role of Christianity within the history of human redemption.²⁰ Judah Halevi described Christianity as "the preparation and the preface to the final Messiah we expect."²¹ Maimonides described Jesus as one who "served to clear the way for the King Messiah, to prepare the world to worship God with one accord."²²

Already in the Middle Ages, Jewish theological texts mention Jesus in the context of discussions regarding the Messiah son of Joseph, while most of these texts do not accept Jesus as a Messiah son of Joseph—that is, as a Jewish messiah—this may be because they were reacting to Christian persecution of Jews at that time. Perhaps today, however, we can affirm an identification of Jesus with the Messiah son of Joseph. One may further assume that it would not have been necessary for medieval Jewish thinkers to reject this identification of Jesus with the Messiah son of Joseph unless such an idea already had been proposed within Jewish circles.

Identification between Jesus and the Messiah son of Joseph is already alluded to in the writings of the thirteenth-century Spanish Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia.²³ It is explicitly stated in the writings of the sixteenth-century Jewish official and commentator Isaac Abravanel. Abravanel considered the tradition about the Messiah son of Joseph to have been the source that influenced the formulation of the "historical Jesus." In Abravanel's view, the earliest Christians accepted the idea of the Messiah son of Joseph but

²⁰ See Hechler, "No Religion Is an Idol."²¹

²² Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, 4:23.

²³ Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah—Book of Judges*, "Laws of Kings and Wars," 10:4:1; uncorrected editions.

²⁴ See, e.g., the discussion in Moshe Idel, "Abraham Abulafia on the Jewish Messiah and Jesus," in *Las Sepulchras de San Geronimo* (Alhambra, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988), 53-55, 69, 101, and sources noted therein.

changed his name to Jesus.²⁵ Furthermore, as is well known, Christian tradition often identifies and compares Jesus with the prophet Jonah (e.g., Matt. 12:40; Luke 11:30). In Jewish mystical texts, including some of those composed in seventeenth-century Poland, Jonah is identified with and compared to the Messiah son of Joseph, with clear references to the further identification of Jesus with a particular portrayal of the Messiah son of Joseph.²⁶

The final Messiah, Messiah son of David, is often compared by Jewish texts to the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, because the messianic era is described as the sabbatical age that comes at the end of human history. The day before the Sabbath is "the sixth day," in Hebrew—*Yom ha-Shešit*. In Hebrew, each letter is also a number. The Jewish mystical tradition put great value in numerology, that is, in the numerical value of Hebrew words. The numerical value of *Yom ha-Shešit* is 671. The numerical value of *Yom ha-Nogez*—Jesus of Nazareth—is also 671.²⁷ Here is a numerological description of Jesus as

²⁵ See also Isaac Abravanel, *Machazin Yehonatan* (Amsterdam, 1644), 14; *Me segenot ha-Yehonatan* (1607), pp. 45, 74. See discussion of this text in Itzhak Abulafia, *Abulafia*, 62, and Joseph Szackel, *The Doctrine of the Messiah in Medieval Jewish Literature* (New York: Hermon Press, 1968), 263. The death of the Messiah son of Joseph is already mentioned in the Talmud (see Bavaḥra 52a). Besides the identification of Jesus with the Messiah son of Joseph in Abulafia and Abravanel, we also find such an identification in Blavatsky's *Theosophy* (a fifteenth-century Jewish convert to Christianity) and the Sabbatian Alshich's *Cardozo*. See Marcus M. L. Rabinovitch, *Sefer de Yehonatan* (Dovner ed. Chaim Weizmann Institute, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1965), 121 n. 4. On Cardozo, see the manuscript published by Gerald S. Scholem in his Hebrew work, *Sefer Qadmoniyot* for History of Sabbatianism and its Antecedents (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1986), 269-318. As might be expected, the particular portrait of Messiah ben Joseph with which Jesus is identified is not a very positive one, e.g., in the writings of the seventeenth-century Jewish mystic Sarason Qutepoler, who died a martyr's death in 1648.

²⁶ This numerology is noted by Eiel, "Abraham Avichai," 59, referring to Abulafia. On Abulafia's identification of Jesus with the sixth day, see p. 51, quoting from many sources. New York, 118, 845, fol. 80a. It is interesting that a number of medieval Jewish thinkers described Jesus and his disciples as Jewish mystics, that is, as Kabbalists. See, e.g., the text of a fourteenth-century Spanish Jewish work quoted by Gershom Scholem in his essay "Zur Geschichte der Anfänge der christlichen Sabbata," in

A NEW VIEW FOR JEWISH THEOLOGY

Though the view of Jesus presented here may have been anticipated by classical Jewish theological literature, it is virtually unprecedented within Jewish theological discourse. It goes far beyond whatever has been suggested until now. It offers Jesus and Christianity not only a place but a messianic role within Jewish theology. Jews will uncannily find it much too bold. Christians may consider it not a great enough leap.

It was Martin Buber, the first Jewish thinker to refer to Jesus as "brother," who foresaw the time when

the Jewish community, in the course of its renaissance, will recognize Jesus; and not merely as a great figure in its religious history, but also in the organic context of a Messianic development extending over millennia, whose final goal is the Redemption of Israel and of the world. But I believe equally firmly that we will never recognize Jesus as the Messiah Come, for this would contradict the deepest meaning of our Messianic passion.²⁷

Having offered a Jewish theological view of Jesus, permit me to conclude with a personal view of Jesus. Jewish children do not spend much time thinking about Jesus, but as a child, I did. Growing up in the years after the Holocaust and knowing the fate of the Polish Jews, it is perhaps not surprising that I thought of Jesus as a Polish Jew. As a young child, I knew that Jesus died a terrible death, and I knew that millions of Polish Jews died horrible deaths. As a child, I even heard Hitler called the "anti-Christ," and he was compared to Pontius Pilate. Therefore, since I was a child I have pictured Jesus dressed like and living like a Polish Jew. Such a view of Jesus as a Polish Jew is also found in the artwork of two of the greatest Jewish artists to come from Poland: Marc Chagall and Maurice Gottlieb.

I picture Jesus as a tortured, wandering, wounded Polish Jew crawling in pain into the doorway of a Polish Catholic home during

²⁷ *From Promised to Lay Back on the Occasion of the Eightieth Birthday of Professor Isaac and Mrs. Libovitz*, 177 n. 2. This idea was popular among the Christian abolitionists of the Renaissance period, e.g., Phaultrau's *Alchymia*.

²⁸ See Buber quoted in Sarason, "Kabbala Buber," 26. This citation is also quoted more accurately in Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Hasidim* (New York: Harper, 1955), 279.

the Nazi occupation and asking for refuge. A small child finds him and calls his parents: "Mommy, Daddy," says the child, "there is a wounded Jew at the door asking for help and he says his name is Jesus." The parents come to the door and ask: "Are you a Jew? Are you Jesus?" And the man replies, "Who do you think that I am?"

4

Talking Torah with Jesus

HERBERT BRONSTEIN

Two who sit together, and between whom are words of Torah—the Divine Presence (*Sh'khinah*) suffuses them.
—Hamaniah ben Teradion (rabbi ca. 100 C.E.)

IF JESUS WERE AMONG US TODAY, he would be most comfortable, not in a church, but in a Reform Jewish synagogue.¹ This was the view, spoken half a century ago, of the then president of the Reform Jewish Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath. I remember thinking at the time that Jesus, a first century Galilean Jew, on the contrary, might very well be most comfortable not in a Reform but in an Orthodox Jewish synagogue. He would at least understand the Hebrew language of prayer. But in any synagogue, given an understanding of the vernacular, Jesus would recognize various phraseologies of the prayers and would be at home with much of the content, metaphors, and ethos of synagogue prayer as it exists today. But because, at least according to some Jewish followers of Jesus, he believed in short simple prayers (Matt. 6:7), he might be taken aback by the length and repetitions of many of the services today. This would be true also, by the way, of many of the rabbinic founders of Judaism in Jesus' time and in the decades after (see *B. Berachot* 61a; *Meg. Avot*, 105).

On what basis did Rabbi Eisendrath make his particular claim? As does everyone, he looked at Jesus through particular prisms or lenses in his case, the biblical scholarship he knew in his time and his own understanding of Judaism. Eisendrath, an ardent exponent of Reform Judaism, construed the moral consciousness of the prophets and