

Some Jewish Views of Jesus

I couldn't help writing on Jesus. Since I first met him he has held my mind and heart. I grew up, you know, on the border of Poland and Russia, which was not exactly the finest place in the world for a Jew to sit down and write a life of Jesus Christ. Yet even through these years the hope of doing just that fascinated me. For Jesus Christ is to me the outstanding personality of all time, all history, both as Son of God and as Son of Man. Everything he ever said or did has value for us today and that is something you can say of no other man, dead or alive. There is no easy middle ground to stroll upon. You either accept Jesus or reject him. You can analyze Mohammed and...Buddha, but don't try it with him. You either accept or you reject....¹

Sholem Asch

Yiddish Author

1880-1957

He was a Jew among Jews; from no other people could a man like him have come forth, and in no other people could a man like him work; in no other people could he have found the apostles who believed in him.²

Leo Baeck

Rabbi and Theologian

1873-1956

The New Testament is also our book, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.³

Y.C.H. Brenner

Israeli Writer

1881-1921

From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Savior has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which, for his sake and my own, I must endeavor to understand...

I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories.

Martin Buber

Philosopher

1878-1965

Israeli Teacher and Author

If the prophet Elijah has ridden in a fiery chariot into heaven, why should not Jesus rise and go to heaven?

Cited by Pinchas Lapide, p. 138 in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983).

John Cournos

Novelist and Essayist

1881-1966

Jesus was a Jew -- the best of Jews....

Jesus was not only a Jew. He was the apex and the acme of Jewish teaching, which began with Moses and ran the entire evolving gamut of kings, teachers, prophets, and rabbis -- David and Isaiah and Daniel and Hillel -- until their pith and essence was crystallized in this greatest of all Jews....

For a Jew, therefore, to forget that Jesus was a Jew, and to deny him, is to forget and to deny all the Jewish teaching that was before Jesus: it is to reject the Jewish heritage, to betray what was best in Israel....

I know a number of Jews who believe as I do, who believe it is time that the Jews reclaimed Jesus, and that it is desirable that they should do so...To take three examples among them, one is a novelist, whose books are about Jews and read by Jews; one is an educator, whose work is among Jews and who knows Jews exceptionally well; and one is a scholar interested in Jewish Sunday schools--if he were permitted by the elders he would include among his readings of "gems" of Jewish literature the Sermon on the Mount.

In *An Open Letter to Jews and Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938).

Norman Cousins

Former Editor of the Saturday Review

Born 1912

There is every reason for Judaism to lose its reluctance toward Jesus. His own towering spiritual presence is a projection of Judaism, not a repudiation of it. Jesus is not to be taxed for the un-Christian ideas and acts of those who have spoken in his name. Jesus never repudiated Judaism. He was proud to be a Jew, yet he did not confine himself to Judaism. He did not believe in spiritual exclusivity for either Jew or Gentile. He asserted the Jewish heritage and sought to preserve and exalt its values, but he did it within a universal context. No

other figure -- spiritual, philosophical, political or intellectual -- has had a greater impact on human history. To belong to a people that produced Jesus is to share in a distinction of vast dimension and meaning....

The modern synagogue can live fully and openly with Jesus.

"The Jewishness of Jesus," *American Judaism* 10:1 (1960), p. 36.

Albert Einstein

Physicist and Professor, Princeton University

1879-1955

As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene....No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.

Jesus is too colossal for the pen of phrase-mongers, however artful. No man can dispose of Christianity with a *bon mot*.

George Sylvester Viereck, "What Life Means to Einstein," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929.

Hyman G. Enelow

President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis
and Rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, New York City (Reform)

1877-1934

Jesus was not only born a Jew, but conscious of his Jewish descent.

Jesus realized the spiritual distinction of the Jewish people, and regarded himself as sent to teach and help his people.

Jesus, like other teachers, severely criticized his people for their spiritual short-comings, seeking to correct them, but at the same time he loved and pitied them. His whole ministry was saturated with love for his people, and loyalty to it.

Jesus, like all other of the noblest type of Jewish teachers, taught the essential lessons of spiritual religion -- love, justice, goodness, purity, holiness -- subordinating the material and the political to the spiritual and the eternal.

Who can compute all that Jesus has meant to humanity? The love he has inspired, the solace he has given, the good he has engendered, the hope and joy he has kindled -- all that is

unequaled in human history.

"A Jewish View of Jesus", pp.441-442, 509 in *Selected Works of Hyman G. Enelow, Volume III: Collected Writings* (privately printed, 1935).

Solomon B. Freehof

Author and Professor at Hebrew Union College

1892-1990

All this vast diversity of opinion has not lessened the vividness of the personality of Jesus. The opposite opinions have not balanced each other into immobility. All the opinions are still staunchly held and ardently defended. The years have not diminished the urgency of the question: "What do you think of Jesus?"

...The significant fact is that time has not faded the vividness of his [Jesus'] image. Poetry still sings his praise. He is still the living comrade of countless lives. No Moslem ever sings, "Mohammed, lover of my soul," nor does any Jew say of Moses, the teacher, "I need thee every hour."

In *Stormers of Heaven* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931).

Paul Goodman

British Zionist and Author

1875-1949

The charm of his personality has sent its rays all over the world, and infused countless human hearts with the spirit of love and self-sacrifice....Yet the roots of the life and thought of Jesus lie entirely in Jewish soil.

In *The Synagogue and the Church* (1908), quoted in *Jewish Views of Jesus: An Introduction and Appreciation* by Thomas T. Walker (New York: Arno Press, 1973 [reprint of 1931 ed.]), p. 25.

Samuel Hirsch

German and American Reform Rabbi and Chief Rabbi of Luxembourg

1815-1899

In order that Jesus' power of hope and greatness of soul should not end with his death, God has raised in the group of his disciples the idea that he rose from death and continues living. Indeed, He continues living in all those who want to be true Jews.

Cited by Pinchas Lapide, p. 137 in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983).

Joseph Klausner

Historian and Professor, Hebrew University

1874-1958

Jesus of Nazareth...was a product of Palestine alone, a product of Judaism unaffected by any foreign admixture. There were many Gentiles in Galilee, but Jesus was in no way influenced by them. In his days Galilee was the stronghold of the most enthusiastic Jewish patriotism...In all this Jesus is the most Jewish of Jews...more Jewish even than Hillel.

Jesus of Nazareth (New York: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 363, 374.

Gottlieb Klein

Chief Rabbi of Stockholm

1852-1914

The background [of the Synoptic Gospels] is definitely Jewish. The odor of the Palestinian earth which streams up from these pages is so strong that only unbridled fantasy could transform this historical Jesus into a myth....

Here is a fact which rests on so firm a foundation that no philosophy can shake it: Jesus of Nazareth is a historical personality.

In "Is Jesus a Historical Personality?" cited by Pinchas Lapide, pp. 116, 118 in *Israelis, Jews, and Jesus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979).

Kaufmann Kohler

Rabbi and Educator

1843-1926

The times of Jesus were ripe for a social upheaval, for the Messianic Age, when the proud will be brought low, and the humble will be lifted up. Jesus, the most lowly of all men, the despised, beyond comparison, of the despised Jewish nation, has ascended the world's throne to become the Great King of the whole earth.

In *Judaism at the World's Parliament of Religions* (Cincinnati: Clarke, 1894).

Pinchas Lapide

Orthodox Jewish Scholar, Germany

Born 1922

I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as a historical event.

If the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on that Easter Sunday were a public event which had been made known...not only to the 530 Jewish witnesses but to the entire population, all Jews would have become followers of Jesus. To me this would have had only one imaginable consequence: the church, baptism, the forgiveness of sins, the cross, everything which today is Christian would have remained an inner-Jewish institution, and you [Gentiles], my dear friend, would today still be offering horsemeat to Wotan on the Godesberg. Put in other words, I see in the fact that the Easter experience was imparted to only some Jews the finger of God indicating that, as it says in the New Testament, "the time is fulfilled."

Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine: A Dialogue by Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 59, 68.

Maimonides (Moses Ben Maimon)

Philosopher and Legal Codifier

1135-1204

All these matters which refer to Jesus of Nazareth...only served to make the way free for the King Messiah and to prepare the whole world for the worship of God with a united heart, as it is written: "Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord" ([Zeph. 3:9](#)). In this way the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become a widespread heritage of faith -- among the inhabitants of the far islands and among many nations, uncircumcised in heart and flesh.

"Mishneh Torah" (Hilkhot Melakhim XI, 4), cited by Pinchas Lapide, p. 143 in *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983).

Isaac Joseph Poysner

Yiddish author

Christianity is bone of our bones, and flesh of our flesh. The bearers of the Christian message were Jews, and they hailed from Judaism.

In *The Kingdom of the Messiah* (Warsaw, 1925).

Hans Joachim Schoeps

Professor of the History of Religion at Erlangen

Born 1909

The church of Jesus Christ has preserved no portrait of its lord and saviour. If Jesus were to come again tomorrow, no Christian would know his face. But it might well be that he who is

coming at the end of days, he who is awaited by the synagogue as by the church, is one, with one and the same face.

In *The Jewish-Christian Argument: A History of Theologies in Conflict* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

Dr. Elie Soloweyczuk

Orthodox Rabbi

19th C.

Jesus had no other end in view than to animate men with faith in the one God and to urge them on to the practice of all the neighborly virtues and love for everyone, even enemies. May God grant us all, Jews and Christians, that we may follow the teaching of Jesus and his shining example, for our well-being in this world and our salvation in the next. Amen.

Kol Kore o Ha-Talmud Wehabrith Hachadasha III: 9; published 1875; cited in Pinchas Lapide, *Israelis, Jews and Jesus* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 112-13.

Samuel Umen

American Reform Rabbi

Born 1917

If what Jesus said or did in his time among his people, appear strange to the Jew of our day, it is only because we are removed from the thoughts and life of his period by twenty centuries. We read his life, we judge his acts and his views, by our own present day knowledge and understanding of religion generally, and Judaism in particular. The misjudgment we oft-times impute to Jesus is completely that of our own.

Pharisaism and Jesus (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963), p. 110.

Geza Vermes

Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies, University of Oxford

Born 1924

...No objective and enlightened student of the Gospels can help but be struck by the incomparable superiority of Jesus....

Second to none in profundity of insight and grandeur of character, he is in particular an unsurpassed master of the art of laying bare the inmost core of spiritual truth and of bringing every issue back to the essence of religion, the existential relationship of man and man, and man and God.

Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 224.

Harris Weinstock

American Businessman, Synagogue President, and Author

1854-1922

His wisdom and gentleness, his unselfishness of spirit and his love for humanity, his desire to live in the spirit of the early Jewish prophets, and to practise in his daily life the ethics of Judaism, are becoming better understood, so that the modern Jew looks upon Jesus as one of the greatest gifts that Israel has given to the world, and he is, therefore, proud to call Jesus his very own: blood of his blood, flesh of his flesh.

Had there been no Abraham, there would have been no Moses. Had there been no Moses, there would have been no Jesus. Had there been no Jesus, there would have been no Paul. Had there been no Paul, there would have been no Christianity. Had there been no Christianity, there would have been no Luther. Had there been no Luther, there would have been no Pilgrim fathers to land on these shores with the Jewish Bibles under their arms. Had there been no Pilgrim fathers, there would have been no civil or religious liberty....Without Jesus or Paul, the God of Israel would still have been the God of a handful.

Jesus the Jew and Other Addresses (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902).

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise

American Reform Rabbi

1874-1949

Neither Christian protest nor Jewish lamentation can annul the fact that Jesus was a Jew, an Hebrew of the Hebrews....

Jesus was not only *a* Jew but he was *the* Jew, the Jew of Jews...

In "The Life and Teaching of Jesus the Jew," *The Outlook*, June 7, 1913.

Ferdynand Zweig Scholar and Visiting Professor at Hebrew and Tel Aviv Universities

Born 1896

The Book and the Land have become sanctified to the world and this was not the work of the Diaspora Jews who, in spite of the injunction, did not become "a light to the Gentiles," but was the work rather of a single Jew and his band of Jewish followers, all of them Sabras. They were all born and bred in the Land, which is in this sense the most fruitful land on earth.

In *Israel: The Sword and the Harp*, (Cranbury, NJ: Associated U. Presses, 1969).

1. Ben Siegel, *The Controversial Sholem Asch: An Introduction to His Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976), p. 148, quoting an interview with Asch by Frank S. Mead in *The Christian Herald* in 1944.
2. Quoted by Shalom Ben-Chorin in "The Image of Jesus in Modern Judaism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1974), p. 408.
3. Kol Kitve, *Ha-Poel Ha-Mizrachi*, Vol. VI (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1927), pp. 103-4.
4. *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), pp. 12-13.