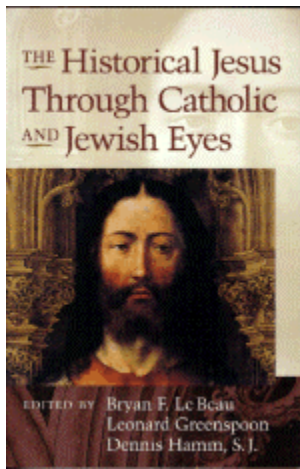


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Le Beau, Bryan F., Leonard J. Greenspoon, and Dennis Hamm, eds.

The Historical Jesus Through Catholic and Jewish Eyes

Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000. Pp. xviii + 171, Paperback, \$18.00, ISBN 1563383225.

Gary H Gilbert
Claremont McKenna College
Claremont, CA 91711

In 1997 and 1998 Creighton University sponsored two colloquia, one involving Catholic scholars and the second Jewish scholars of Christian origins, on historical-Jesus research. Seven of the nine essays in this collection are products of these meetings. Two additional essays, situating the discussions within a historical and ideological context, bracket this core. The volume delivers a solid introduction to the current state of the research and a rich display of how this information has influenced theological understanding, ecumenical dialogue, and artistic interpretations of Jesus. Each author, to varying degrees, has taken seriously the title's injunction, to see Jesus through Catholic or Jewish eyes, and has not only made a significant scholarly contribution but has also provided for nonspecialists an accessible entree into the dense and oftentimes conflicted world of Jesus scholarship. As the essays make clear, the study of the historical Jesus bears importance far beyond the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and touches very concretely on the ways in which Christians and Jews imagine both themselves and each other. The colloquia's organizers are to be thanked for putting together these gatherings and making the

results available to a wider audience. The book deserves a place not only in academic bookshelves but also in the classroom and church and synagogue study groups.

In the first of the seven conference essays, Luke Johnson (Emory University) employs the same clear and polemical voice that he developed in his book, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). Here as there Johnson assesses the impact of recent research, much of which he considers to be the “shoddiest sort of scholarship,” and asks what value the preoccupation with historical investigation and media manipulation have for understanding the “real Jesus.” The answer is, very little. For Johnson, it is not historical knowledge as pursued by these scholars but knowledge based on faith that discloses the “real Jesus.”

While Johnson delivers a valuable lesson on the limits of historical reconstruction, his position turns back the clock to an earlier era by revisiting Schweitzer’s warning about the self-referential nature of constructions of Jesus’ life, instantiating Kähler’s division between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, and, reminiscent of Bultmann, lifting up the existential meaning of Jesus. In so doing, he leaves unresolved the question of how contemporary research might profitably go about studying the man Jesus. Perhaps such an enterprise is doomed to fail, given the paucity of our sources. Most scholars, however, would prefer to proceed with due caution. Within the context of a volume that includes Jewish scholars, Johnson’s piece raises a delicate issue. If Johnson is correct that knowledge of the “real Jesus” comes primarily through faith, where does that leave the work of Jewish scholars who do not apprehend Jesus in this way? Is their work somehow less valuable for understanding the “real” Jesus?

Daniel Harrington (Weston School of Theology) highlights the ways that first-century Judaism has become the dominant context in which to reconstruct the historical Jesus. First he notes the major contribution that the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has made to understanding Judaism in Jesus’ time and the influence these documents have had in the appraisal of the Jewish Jesus. Harrington touches on some of the more

controversial fragments, such as 4Q285, which speaks about a piercing or pierced messiah, and invites us to think about the relevance of this material for determining the “proper background for studying the Jewishness of Jesus.” Second, he points to Jewish wisdom traditions as being important for understanding both the context of Jesus’ teaching and the ways in which those ideas were interpreted among his followers. The study of Jewish wisdom traditions not only tells us about Jesus but also, because of the universal nature of wisdom thought, can “facilitate the mutual understanding and respect that are the goals of interreligious dialogue” and expand christological language to include feminine imagery.

Harrington’s third topic concerns the interest in the death of Jesus, particularly why Jesus was put to death and who was responsible. Finally, Harrington turns to the question of Matthew and Judaism and examines the irony that the same book could be considered the most Jewish and the most anti-Jewish. He explains the apparent contradiction by describing the Gospel of Matthew as a response to the traumatic events of 70 C.E. that produced an “intense religious family feud.”

The third Catholic voice in this volume is that of Monica Hellwig, systematic theologian from Georgetown University. Hellwig explores how research on the historical Jesus can contribute to the creation of a systematic Christology that is “intelligible to the contemporary believer and consistent with the research findings, but also in continuity with the traditions of the faith.” Her paper focuses on three topics. Regarding sources for Christology in the twentieth century, she notes that it is the task of the Catholic theologian to integrate the results of biblical scholarship with the collection of nonbiblical sources, including doctrines handed down by church councils, personal insights derived from discipleship, and assumptions based on liturgy, iconography, and other experiences. She then explains the factors that have prompted the interest among Catholic theologians (particularly those working with liberation theologies) in biblical scholarship, and in so doing she explores the fascinating dynamic between critical scholarship and religious communities. The emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus has forced a reevaluation of how Catholic theology understands

Jesus as a human person. In the final portion of her essay, Hellwig asks what the historical research means for Christian believers. Such work should be a “support to faith because it helps understanding.” She calls upon the ordinary, nonspecialist believer to be open to and conversant with the new findings of biblical scholarship, while at the same time continuing to study and reflect prayerfully and listening to theologians who can “integrate new findings into traditional Christology.”

Michael Cook (Hebrew Union College) opens the section of Jewish scholars. He identifies common Jewish perspectives on Jesus gleaned from his many years working with rabbis, rabbinical students, and well-read Jewish laypersons. Like any good rabbinic mind, Cook not only describes the perspectives themselves but also offers a critique and then proposes objections to his own critique. The five perspectives are: (1) Jesus was largely faithful to Judaism, but later Christian traditions developed attitudes of regret and hostility toward Jews and Judaism; (2) Pauline theology greatly influenced the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels; (3) the Gospels contain many traditions that are not historically authentic but reflect responses to later Jewish claims; (4) later writers, Matthew and Luke, intensified the anti-Judaism present in earlier traditions; and (5) Christian tradition modeled Jesus in conformity with scriptural imagery. In general, Cook points out, Jewish readers tend to want to spare Jesus the responsibility for the Gospel’s anti-Judaism and thus allow Jesus to be understood as a devout Jew.

Amy-Jill Levine (Vanderbilt University) offers a stimulating and insightful analysis of Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce and how these traditions have been (mis)used in theological arguments. Levine begins by noting that in order to present Jesus as “the savior, particularly of women,” Christian feminists have often caricatured Judaism’s treatment of women as dehumanizing. She demonstrates that such portrayals of Judaism should be recognized as Christian apologetic and as “both bad history and bad theology.” Levine recognizes that, although Jesus gave noticeable attention to women, several aspects of his ministry, such as his all-male inner circle of disciples, complicate the assessment of Jesus as feminist. Presenting a judicious analysis of the

Gospel traditions, Levine argues that the passages should be read within the context of Jesus as eschatological prophet. Cross-cultural studies suggest that those espousing forms of millenarian piety have a tendency “either to intensify marital relationships by forbidding divorce (thereby recreating the golden age), or to erase all law and live in sexual freedom. Jesus chose the former.”

Adele Reinhartz (McMaster University) explores the nexus between scholarly trends in Jesus research and contemporary cinematic treatments of Jesus’ life. She finds the portrayal of an eschatological Jesus (e.g., Sanders, Vermes, Freyne, and Fredriksen) in the Zeffirelli film, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Alternatively, Scorsese’s film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, downplays the apocalyptic outlook and focuses on the “universal human dilemma rather than a particular historical conflict or its theological ramifications.” In so doing, it shares certain perspectives with those who depict Jesus as wisdom teacher and itinerant philosopher. Finally, the constructions of Jesus as social critic can be seen most forcefully in the Arcand production of *Jesus of Montreal*. Reinhartz notes that in a post-Holocaust era most films downplay conflicts between Jesus and Jewish authorities and their role in Jesus’ execution.

Reinhartz concludes with a personal assessment on the problems these films pose to her as a scholar and as a Jew. While she is attracted to Zeffirelli and his interest in the historical context, she is troubled by his heavy dose of supercessionist theology. Finding those films that “attenuate the Jewishness of Jesus by drawing an explicit analogy to a contemporary situation” to be more congenial, she turns a favorable gaze to the work of Arcand and Scorsese. Reinhartz has nicely woven together the two perspectives, Catholic and Jewish, represented by this book. Here we have a Jewish scholar interpreting the work of filmmakers who are Catholic or come from areas (e.g., Italy, Quebec) where the Catholic Church occupies a strong cultural presence.

Alan Segal (Barnard College/Columbia University) reminds us that in studying the historical Jesus we must be willing to be satisfied “with inferences and degrees of surety much less than we would like.” He comes to the partial defense of the often maligned criterion of dissimilarity, noting that the methodological tool was developed

not to create a full biography of Jesus but to uncover those elements of the Gospel tradition about which we can be most sure. Once “we leave the area of securely known facts and enter an area where we know much less, have less confidence.” He then proceeds to outline what elements of the Gospel tradition he thinks are virtually assured: Jesus lived and died as a Jew for his Judaism; he was the leading figure in a small movement of Jews who saw his death as martyrdom; the earliest disciples interpreted the Easter event as a sign that Jesus had been resurrected and ascended to heaven to sit next to God; his identification as Son of Man is early and important; Jesus became identified with the figure prophesied in Dan 7:13 and visions that speak of the promise of resurrection to martyrs; Jesus preached repentance for the coming end of the world and recommended a radical change of behavior as the only way to cope with these events; “although Jesus accepted the Jewish law, he occasionally indulged in symbolic actions designed to provoke questions about the purpose of the Torah”; and his act of “overturning tables of moneylenders in temple at Passover ... brought him to the attention of the authorities.”

Framing these seven pieces are two essays that survey the past and present scholarship on the historical Jesus. Bernard Brandon Scott offers a sweeping overview of two hundred years of scholarly investigations, focusing on the past twenty-five years and the work of Vermes, Smith, Sanders, Borg, Crossan, Meier, Wright, and the Jesus Seminar (of which Scott has been an active participant). He clearly explains the basic thesis and methodological approaches of each, then offers a brief critique. Anyone unfamiliar with this scholarly terrain will profit from his review, although one must read it with the understanding of Scott’s own affinities, which tend to be sympathetic toward those who emphasize the role of the sayings traditions and against those who understand Jesus to be an eschatological prophet.

Instead of providing a comparable historical survey of Jewish scholarship on Jesus, Brumberg-Kraus reflects on what he perceives as a new form of Jewish scholarship, one that acknowledges the religious authority of Jesus and then attempts to explain this new interest. “Jewish scholarship on Jesus,” he proposes, “is part of a

process of the secularization of Jesus' religious significance." In coming to this conclusion, Brumberg-Kraus travels over some questionable terrain. Can one speak, as he does, of "Jewish scholarship" as a monolithic enterprise? How might other elements of social location—movement affiliation (e.g., Reform, Conservative, Orthodox), gender, institutional base (university divinity school or secular college)—affect the research of this diverse set of scholars? Second, are Jewish scholars as ideologically driven as Brumberg-Kraus depicts them (e.g., "Jewish scholars have studied Jesus to defend Jews from proselytization")? His analysis omits other, perhaps more prosaic but no less significant factors that have informed Jewish scholars in their research on the historical Jesus. Jews, like Christians, wish to know more about a figure who stands as one of the Western culture's most profound figures. In addition, by studying the historical Jesus, Jews, as Levine correctly points out, gain a better understanding of first-century Judaism.

I also question some of the language Brumberg-Kraus uses to describe Jewish scholarship on Jesus. At one point he writes, "Our [i.e., Jewish] motivation to interpret Jesus is not solely to further Christians' understanding of their central religious symbol, unless that too serves us in our situation as Jews in America." The wording suggests, intentionally or not, a mildly ominous conspiracy among Jewish scholars. Have Jews collectively suppressed all ideas about Jesus except those that benefit them (e.g., to defend against proselytization or as "an antidote to Christian antisemitism")? At most, it appears Brumberg-Kraus has given us a much too narrow and ideologically driven portrayal of Jewish scholars.

In an epilogue Leonard Greenspoon (Creighton University and co-organizer of the conferences) offers insight into the conferences that sparked the volume and reflects on the difficulties in fostering a productive Jewish-Christian dialogue. Greenspoon begins his essay by noting that the concept of Jesus the Jew has proven to be fruitful for strengthening Jewish-Christian dialogue. He is certainly correct, and the essays in this volume bear out his statement. Harrington, for instance, points out that, for many Jews and Christians, speaking of Jesus as a faithful member of the Jewish community of his

time “has been a positive and welcome development.” It should be noted, however, that neither Greenspoon nor any of the essayists reflect on the potential dark side of this identification. What effect will this development have on groups such as Jews for Jesus and other Christians (e.g., the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention) who are intent on missionizing to Jews and already brandish Jesus’ Jewish identity as a weapon in their battle to persuade Jews that they can maintain their own ritual practices while also acknowledging Jesus as the true Messiah and universal savior? Scholars not only need to recognize that they view Jesus through their own particular set of eyes but also to be on guard for how their interpretations might be (mis)perceived by others.