

The Jewish Jesus and the Israel-Palestine Conflict
Palestinian Liberation Theology, Anti-Judaism, and
Jewish-Christian Relations

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The most important achievement of Jesus scholarship in the last century is the acknowledgement of the foundational significance of Jesus being a Jew, appreciated and supported not only by those interested in the historical Jesus but also by followers of the biblical Jesus who is venerated by Christians around the globe.

— Roland Deines¹

AS THE OPENING STATEMENT of Roland Deines's recent article suggests, Jesus's Jewishness is not just an area of importance for New Testament scholars, but is increasingly of interest to a much broader religious community. Popular Christian theologians such as N. T. Wright have often tried to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus not only in scholarly work, but also in books for a lay audience,² and recent works such as *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*³ are expressly concerned with informing a broader lay audience (both Jewish and Christian) about the relationship between the New Testament and Judaism. In a 2008 article in *Time* magazine, David Van Biema listed "Re-Judaizing Jesus" as a "future revolution."⁴ Van Biema may have been a little late, for both popular

¹ Roland Deines, "Jesus and the Jewish Traditions of His Time," *Early Christianity* 3, no. 1 (2010), 344.

² For instance in N. T. Wright's popular New Testament For Everyone series (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001–2011).

³ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ David Van Biema, "What's Next 2008: Future Revolutions: Re-Judaizing Jesus," *Time*, Mar 13, 2008, http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1720049_1720050_1721663,00.html.

and scholarly writings on Jesus's relationship to Judaism have been steadily produced for the last four decades. However, it is clear that the question of Jesus's relationship to Judaism is still a hot topic, as evident from popular works such as Shmuley Boteach's *Kosher Jesus*⁵ and scholarly works like Daniel Boyarin's *The Jewish Gospels*⁶ being just a couple of recent examples.

The contemporary social context in which the Jewish Jesus has risen to popularity is certainly not simple. On the one hand, research into the social world of first-century Palestine, aided and spurred on by archaeological research and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in particular, has contributed vitally to our understanding of Jesus's Jewish context. On the other hand, the political culture in recent years in which the Jewish Jesus has grown from strength to strength must be noted. It was arguably after the so-called Six-Day War and a significant increase in American support of the state of Israel that interest in the Jewish Jesus really grew.⁷ Although there was certainly some discussion of Jesus's Jewishness before this time, it is clear that Jesus scholarship since the 1970s has involved a huge increase in discussions about the Jewishness of Jesus.⁸ In this respect, it could be said that support for the idea of Jesus being Jewish coincided with American support for the state of Israel to some extent—although I hasten to add that this need not *necessarily* detract from historical-critical scholarship that has highlighted the importance of Jesus's relationship to Judaism.

In *The Symbolic Jesus*, William Arnal made the suggestion that the Jewish Jesus “can become... a symbolic justification for the state of Israel.”⁹ For Arnal, this was seemingly more of a “hunch,” based on “symbols, attitudes, and general ideological suggestions,” than a developed argument. In this paper I suggest, in effect, that there is evidence to support Arnal's hunch. The following represents the beginnings of an examination of the relationship that claims about the Jewishness of Jesus can have with claims about the Israel-Palestine conflict. A vast amount of writing on the Jewishness of Jesus, no doubt, demonstrates no interest in the contemporary state of Israel and its politics and is far removed from such debates. I argue, however, that in Amy-Jill Levine's *The Misunderstood Jew*, concerns about the Jewishness of Jesus have become problematically intertwined with interests relating to the Israel-Palestine conflict.¹⁰

⁵ Shmuley Boteach, *Kosher Jesus* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2012). See also Adam Gregerman's response, “It's ‘Kosher’ To Accept Real Jesus? Boteach Book Seeks To Strip Away Distortions of Christ,” *Forward*, Feb 9, 2012, <http://forward.com/articles/151028/its-kosher-to-accept-real-jesus/>.

⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012).

⁷ James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London: Equinox, 2008), 145–72.

⁸ See James G. Crossley, “Jesus the Jew Since 1967,” in *Jesus beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity*, ed. Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton, and James G. Crossley (London: Equinox, 2009), 119–37.

⁹ William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (London: Equinox, 2005), 55.

¹⁰ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

Jews, Palestinians, and Questions of Continuity

Notions of continuity between “ancient Israel” and the contemporary state of Israel are fundamental to Jewish claims on the land of Palestine. As Keith Whitelam has highlighted,¹¹ the notion of continuity between “ancient Israel” and the contemporary nation state has, in fact, fundamentally shaped biblical studies as a discipline, as well as broadly shaping Western understandings of the history of the region in general. It is hardly surprising that related questions have arisen in the field of New Testament studies; in particular, I refer to what is now known as the *ioudaios* debate. In the past two decades there has been some debate over whether *ioudaios*—the term most frequently translated in the New Testament as “Jew”—would be better translated as “Judean” (or even, as John Elliott has argued, “Israelite”).¹² While “Judean” has been favoured by a minority as an historically accurate term,¹³ it is clear that such a term does not adequately convey the cultural and religious meanings associated with the terms “Jew” and “Jewish,” and hence the framing of the recent *Marginalia* debate with the question, “have scholars erased the Jews from antiquity?”¹⁴ In *The Misunderstood Jew*, Amy-Jill Levine linked the Jew-Judean debate to questions of continuity between ancient and modern Jews in an interesting way:

The translation “Jew”... signals a number of aspects of Jesus’s behaviour and that of other “Jews,” whether Judean, Galilean, or from the Diaspora: circumcision, wearing *tzitzit*, keeping kosher, calling God “father,” attending synagogue gatherings, reading Torah and Prophets, knowing that they are neither Gentiles nor Samaritans, honoring the Sabbath, and celebrating the Passover. All these, and much more, are markers also of traditional Jews today. Continuity outweighs the discontinuity.¹⁵

This is all very well, and I believe that Levine is correct on the *ioudaios* issue. However, she problematically goes on to use this idea of “continuity” to strengthen Jewish claims to land today. Levine states:

¹¹ Initially in Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996) and most recently in *Rhythms of Time: Reconnecting Palestine’s Past* (Sheffield: BenBlackBooks, 2013).

¹² John H. Elliott, “Jesus the Israelite Was Neither a ‘Jew’ Nor a ‘Christian’: On Correcting Misleading Nomenclature,” *JSHJ* 5, no. 2 (2007): 119–54. For a review of the debate, as it stood until recently, see Michael Kok’s article in the present volume. The debate has since continued in *Marginalia*. See “Jew and Judean: A Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts,” *Marginalia Review of Books*, Aug 26, 2014, <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jew-judean-forum/>.

¹³ E.g., Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 460–80.

¹⁴ Adele Reinhartz, et al, “Jew and Judean: Have scholars erased the Jews from Antiquity?” *Marginalia* (Aug 26, 2014), <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jew-judean-forum/>.

¹⁵ Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, 162.

The argument that Jesus is not a Jew but a Galilean and then the severing of *Jews today* [my italics] from any connection to the people of Israel in the late Second Temple period lead to the inevitable conclusion *that Jews have no connection—historically, ethnically, spiritually—to the land of Israel* [my italics]. Jesus the Jew becomes Jesus the Galilean, and Jesus the Galilean becomes Jesus the Palestinian.¹⁶

When Levine writes here of Jesus's Jewishness, it is apparent that she has one eye on present-day claims to the land. It is not problematic in itself that Levine discusses the question of Jesus's Jewishness in relation to contemporary claims to the land; she is, arguably, only making explicit those implicit questions that may lie beneath the surface of the aforementioned *ioudaios* debate.¹⁷ But Levine's statement here seems rash, and unhelpfully suggestive in the connections that it draws between Jesus as a Galilean, the "severing of Jews today" from "the land of Israel," and the notion of Jesus as a Palestinian.

Another statement that Levine makes about Jesus's relationship to contemporary Palestinians is also worded in a problematic way. Levine states:

Any writing that separates Jesus and his first followers from Jewish identity, associates these proto-Christians with the Palestinian population, and reserves the label "Jew" for those who crucified Jesus and persecuted the church is not only historically untenable but theologically abhorrent.¹⁸

Levine is certainly right that reserving the label "Jew" for those who crucified Jesus is misleading and completely indefensible. But Levine's statement could easily be interpreted as conflating "any writing that associates these proto-Christians with the Palestinian population" with the worst kind of theological anti-Judaism. Moreover, Levine could also be interpreted as saying that the association of Jesus and his first followers with "the Palestinian population" is theologically abhorrent. Levine is unclear here. In a certain sense, it seems relatively natural to make some connections between the Palestinian population and the people who once occupied the very same space as them. There is potentially a question of continuity and discontinuity here, as well. If it is acceptable to highlight Jesus's connection to Jews today because of certain shared beliefs and practices, is it not reasonable to allow some association between Jesus and Palestinians today because of their connection to the land, or their culture?¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 165.

¹⁷ Elliott, I presume, was also gesturing towards the contemporary situation with his ominous closing comment that "so much is at stake." Elliott, "Jesus the Israelite," 154.

¹⁸ Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, 183.

¹⁹ I pursue such questions at length in my article "Is Jesus Palestinian? Palestinian Christian Perspectives on Judaism, Ethnicity, and the New Testament," *HLS* 13, no. 2 (2014): 123–38.

Stereotyping of “Palestinian” in *The Misunderstood Jew*

I find further issues with Levine’s treatment of the Israel-Palestine conflict in the section of *The Misunderstood Jew* which deals with Palestinian Christian theologians. To be sure, Levine makes some very reasonable statements on the subject. She states, for instance, that for effective inter-faith dialogue, a person should “not dismiss the suffering that they face,” and that, ultimately, the “goal of Palestinian statehood is good.”²⁰ Yet while Levine warns that her readers should not be dismissive of Palestinian suffering, I find her treatment of Palestinian Christian concerns dismissive; her section on “The Palestinian Jesus” is dedicated to critiquing Naim Ateek’s theology as anti-Jewish. I would suggest that Levine’s critique might be fairer if Ateek were a North American or British New Testament scholar making the same statements. But Ateek writes from a context in which violence against Palestinians is all too often justified in the name of Judaism. The peculiarity of his perspective ought to be acknowledged. Levine makes no concession for the negative effects that certain aggressive forms of religious Zionism may have had upon Ateek and his theology, or upon any other Palestinian’s view of the Bible and of Judaism. I do not mean to disregard Levine’s critique of Ateek’s work entirely—and I will highlight the importance of her concerns later—but her portrayal of Ateek’s work here as wholly negative is unhelpful. Considering the breadth of her readership and the popularity of this book, her treatment of such a delicate issue is insufficiently nuanced, where a proper and thorough engagement is warranted. It could be noted that Levine’s comments on Ateek fall within a chapter that is concerned with a variety of cases of Christian anti-Judaism within liberation theology more broadly, and that a discussion of the positives of Ateek’s work would not have fitted in that particular chapter. Nonetheless, Levine’s portrayal of Ateek furthers the negative portrayal of Palestinians in general in *The Misunderstood Jew*.

Aside from Levine’s presentation of Ateek, the overall picture of Palestinians that she paints draws heavily on negative stereotypes. Levine makes warnings in her “guidelines for successful inter-faith dialogue” that the reader should “not state that all Palestinians left their homes in 1948 ‘voluntarily,’ ...not equate all Palestinians with the violent few,” and “not dismiss the suffering that they face.”²¹ Yet, unfortunately, Levine herself goes on to uncritically reinforce negative stereotypes of Palestinians. “On the positive side,” she advises, readers should

seek suggestions on how Israeli citizens might be secure from terrorism.... The Gaza pull-out has occurred, and bombers are still trying to blow up Israelis. Participate in this conversation, but also obtain information about Palestinian teaching and textbooks where not just anti-Israeli but anti-Semitic comments abound.²²

²⁰ Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, 185, 225.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

²² *Ibid.*

In this statement Levine suggests to her readership that it is not only Ateek who is anti-Jewish, but that the whole of Palestinian literature is in fact rife with not only anti-Israeli sentiments but antisemitism. Levine could state: “obtain information about Palestinian teaching and textbooks,” or indeed, she could advise: “*read* Palestinian textbooks” (although this would of course entail some practical difficulties). Instead Levine highlights that Palestinian literature contains “anti-Semitic comments,” a statement which is undeniably true of some Palestinian authors, but a statement which, in the context of Levine’s other comments, continues to serve to present all Palestinian literature as antisemitic. This is not to deny that antisemitism exists in Palestine, for it certainly does. But a problematic image of Palestinians begins to emerge in Levine’s book, in which Palestinians are very consistently equated with Christian anti-Judaism, antisemitism, or terrorism.

Presentation of Israeli State Violence in *The Misunderstood Jew*

I find further issues arising from Levine’s discussion of the World Council of Churches’ stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Levine notes that “the wcc praised the Presbyterian Church USA for its decision to put economic pressure on Israel and hailed its ‘process of phased, selective divestment from multinational corporations involved in the occupation,’ ”²³ which one might call a partial implementation of the Palestinian call for international boycott, divestment, and sanctions for Israel. Levine’s comments on the wcc’s call for divestments are remarkable. She states:

The targeted companies make equipment the Israeli army used to demolish homes belonging to the families of homicide bombers and by the Israeli government both to build what the churches consider illegal settlements and to construct the “security fence” designed to block off terrorist access to Israel.²⁴

Levine’s statement amounts to a defence of housing demolitions, for her statement suggests that the only homes that are demolished belong to “the families of homicide bombers,” making her comments severely misleading.²⁵ Furthermore, her use of the past tense “used” suggests that housing demolitions are a thing of the past, when in fact they were happening when she was writing and have been happening up to this day. Despite the fact that Israeli settlements are illegal according to international law, Levine speaks of “*what the churches consider illegal settlements*” (my italics). And finally, she states that the function of what she euphemistically terms the “security fence” is “to block off terrorist access to Israel,” a questionable claim considering that thousands of Palestinians live on either side of the wall.

²³ Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, 171.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See the research and work of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions at <http://www.icahd.org/>.

Despite the issues that I have highlighted with Levine's *The Misunderstood Jew*, Levine continues to participate in dialogue on these issues, and expressed support for, and willingness to be involved with the Bible, Zionism, and Palestine conference. Although unable to come, Levine helped greatly, suggesting numerous different scholars whom she felt could fulfil a similar role to her at the conference, namely, to discuss the issue of Christian anti-Judaism. As it happened, none of these scholars, the vast majority of whom are based in North America, could attend either; although Adam Gregerman, who has also written critically about Palestinian liberation theology and Christian anti-Judaism,²⁶ would have attended if the conference did not clash with the Shabbat and the Shavuot holiday. Both Levine and Gregerman have challenged Palestinian liberation theology in their written work, but both demonstrate a warm willingness to participate in dialogue. It is only unfortunate that Levine's work, which is so popular, influential and excellent in so many ways, has been marred by an uncritical and ultimately ostracizing portrayal of Palestinian theologians and their work, which warrants further engagement, rather than hasty dismissal.

Christian Anti-Judaism

Levine's and Gregerman's critiques, on the other hand, should also not be dismissed. The Jewishness of Jesus, whilst increasingly acknowledged and discussed in Christian communities around the world, continues to be an issue of some concern and of some sensitivity, as demonstrated throughout Levine's book. Levine is not alone, however, for there remains a sense of caution amongst numerous New Testament scholars—both Jewish and gentile—about the possibility of minimizing Jesus's Jewishness; a fear no doubt rooted in the efforts of certain Nazi theologians in fairly recent decades. Furthermore, Christian anti-Judaic discourses, which have influenced Christian theology for centuries, continue to influence many strands of Christian theology.²⁷

Some of the biblical language and metaphors that Ateek and others have used have clearly proven offensive to Levine and others. Levine gives three examples of such texts from Ateek. First, "Israel has placed a large boulder, a big stone that has metaphorically shut off the Palestinians in a tomb. It is similar to the stone placed on the entrance of Jesus's tomb." Second, "In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around Him.... The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily." And third,

Palestinians have been condemned as a nation by Israel, and sentenced to destruction. The accusations of people in power are strikingly similar throughout history to the charges levelled against Jesus in this city—terrorist,

²⁶ See Adam Gregerman, "Old Wine in New Bottles: Liberation Theology and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no. 3/4 (2004), 313–40.

²⁷ See, for example, Amy-Jill Levine, et al, "Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (2004): 91–132.

evildoer, or rebel and a subversive person. Palestinians are being crucified today for refusing to succumb to Israel's demand for greater concession on land.²⁸

Western theologians today must demonstrate awareness of and sensitivity towards Christian anti-Judaism, and we can expect that their work will rightly be criticised, should they fail to do so.²⁹ I would suggest that a slightly more sympathetic approach, however, could arguably be afforded to the Palestinian Christian community. As Levine has commented herself, Christian anti-Judaism is a "colonial product,"³⁰ transported around the world by Western missionaries and academics; anti-Judaism can be found all around the world, and a Palestinian whose discourse becomes infected with it is no worse than anyone else. I am not saying that Palestinian Christians, as an oppressed minority, ought to be allowed to say whatever they like without repercussions. I am saying, however, that considering the ubiquity of anti-Judaic discourse, it is not a surprise that it surfaces in Palestinian literature. This is then exacerbated by the fact that Judaism, unfortunately, has been used to justify violent actions of the Israeli state.

If we bracket, for a moment, the concerns expressed about Palestinian Christian anti-Judaism by Levine and Gregerman, postcolonial biblical critic R. S. Sugirtharajah's concept of "heritagist" reading offers a different perspective on the way in which Ateek's hermeneutical methods may operate. Sugirtharajah describes heritagist reading as

an attempt by the colonized to find *conceptual analogies in their high culture and textual traditions* and philosophies, and also in their oral and visual art forms. It is an attempt to retrieve cultural memory from the amnesia caused by colonialism. This retrieval takes place sometimes in the form of *reinterpretation of stories, myths, and legends* as a remembered history of a region, class, caste, gender, or race, sometimes as *intertextual interpolation of quotations, allusions, and references* [my italics].³¹

It is not surprising that Christians in the Occupied Territories turn to their sacred texts for images and metaphors with which to describe and understand their situations. This is not to say that comparing the Israeli government's actions to those of Herod the Great, or describing Palestinians as "crucified today" are particularly sensitive metaphors to use,

²⁸ Ibid., 183. Levine states that some of these examples come from Michael C. Kotzin's essay, "The Continuing Challenge of Anti-Semitism," presented at the meeting of the International Council of Christians and Jews, Chicago, IL (July 26, 2005), <http://d11840.u26.azkihosting.com/article.asp?article=1512>.

²⁹ Indeed I have argued that a growing awareness and understanding of Christian anti-Judaism is among the most important developments in New Testament studies. See Michael J. Sandford, "On the Past and Future of New Testament Studies: A Response to Larry Hurtado," *Religere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 4, no. 2 (2014), 236.

³⁰ Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, 169.

³¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 55.

when seen in a centuries-long history of Christian anti-Judaism; this is to say, however, that a keen awareness of the context from which the interpretation arises is necessary. I do not believe that the statements of Ateek and certain others which have proven offensive to Levine (and others) result from a wilful desire to offend, but, more likely than not, from a heritagist mode of reading. The concern of Ateek and other such theologians, I believe, has often been simply to use biblical texts—that is, “conceptual analogies in their high culture and textual traditions”—to come to terms with their present situation, and to draw upon these texts in the hope of changing this situation.

Conclusion

My analysis of Levine’s *The Misunderstood Jew* seems to go some way to supporting Arnal’s suggestion that the Jewish Jesus can function as a “symbolic justification” for the state of Israel. I have demonstrated that this “misunderstood Jew” has been drawn into debates about the Israel-Palestine conflict not only by Palestinian theologians, and politicians like Shmuley Boteach, but also by biblical scholars such as Levine.³² Questions surrounding the identity of Jesus—his Jewishness, his Palestinianness—are clearly pertinent to Jewish-Christian dialogue; as is, of course, the Israel-Palestine conflict in general. I hope that this piece therefore opens up some latent questions about the connection between the Jewishness of Jesus and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

³² I am grateful to Amy-Jill Levine for responding to this article in the present collection. I have made some minor revisions to the manuscript since Levine’s comments, but the essence of my critique and argument remains the same.