

seek newer ways of piety. If it was truly God we connected with, we will want to build on and enhance that experience.

Something similar can be said of a third indicator, that we will want to know more of what the Jewish tradition has taught about what defines a worthy relationship with God. One important feature is to be open to what contemporary Jewish religious teachers are saying. God being so great, there is considerable variety in not only the views of the teachers but also in their ways of expressing their personal meetings with the Sacred. Music and poetry, new rituals and reinterpreted old ones, may deepen their and our own realizations of the Presence.

In such matters, it is good to have a learned Jew as your guide. In most cases, this will be a trusted rabbi; however, it could be any Jew whose character, actions, and knowledge of Judaism significantly exceeds your own. If you don't have such a spiritual companion, let me urge you to begin the process of finding one.

All this will, I hope, help you find your Jewish religious way, yet there are no fail-safe guarantees whenever the heart or the soul is involved. Though you may bring high emotion and deep searching to your critical decisions about love, marriage, divorce, or other life-shaping matters, you can never be sure you have not gone wrong.

A religious ceremony performed during the Jewish Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, may bring comfort to our disturbing inability to find complete certainty. Rabbinic traditions recount what the high priest had to do in the Temple each *Yom Kippur* before he acknowledged to God the transgressions of the people. At this climactic religious moment, in front of everyone, the high priest had to first confess his and his family's "sins, iniquities, and transgressions." Similarly, today at the beginning of the *Yom Kippur* evening service, the clergy come before the open ark and first plead for forgiveness of their sins before leading the congregation in our own confessions.

Of course it would be nice to live a risk-free life, but Judaism teaches that no one, not

Moses, not the high priest, ever lived flawlessly. No one can guarantee that what we have experienced with God is with the One God of the universe. But situating ourselves within the Jewish people's vast experience with God should provide the best available direction.

Excerpt is from A Touch of the Sacred: A Theologian's Informal Guide to Jewish Belief ©2007 by Eugene B. Borowitz & Frances W. Schwartz (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing). Permission granted by Jewish Lights Publishing, P.O. Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091 www.jewishlights.com



Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-Being in a Christian Environment

Michael J. Cook, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008

The New Testament has been the most powerful external determinant of Jewish history, yet Jews overwhelmingly *opt* to remain ignorant concerning it. Yes, the Talmud declared the Gospels off-limits for Jews; but is this advice, by ancient sages, still sage advice for modern Jews living in a culture deeply Christian?

Dr. Michael J. Cook's new book, *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament*, argues that Jews' avoidance of the New Testament has undermined their well-being on communal as well as individual bases. Further, this posture runs counter to

the time-honored Jewish approach to problem-solving, namely to amass *not shun* knowledge.

Dr. Cook's concern is less that Jews read the New Testament than that they learn how to recognize the "Gospel Dynamics" underlying it – the term he has coined for those skillful problem-solving techniques by which early Christians, decades after Jesus' death, *remolded* his image to address needs of *their* day, not his. Countless powerful but *fictional* traditions – including Jesus' Sanhedrin trial and the infamous blood curse ("his blood be on us and on our children!") – have cost innumerable Jewish lives.

If these and so many similar traditions are only fictional, *what* then brought them into being, and *why* did they gain inclusion in Christianity's sacred texts? Only by spotting the operation of the "Gospel Dynamics" involved, articulating and explaining them to their children, and enlightening Christian friends regarding them can Jews exchange their sense of *victimization* by the New Testament for confidence that they now *control* this literature and can become freer of its impact in the future.

The aims of Dr. Cook's volume, then, are both to jump-start a revolution by most Jews and to accelerate one already underway by increasing numbers of others. For, indeed, gradually – and for the first time in history – significant numbers of Jews *are* now admitting the wisdom of the approach Dr. Cook is urging.

Besides allotting individual chapters to examining Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, John and Paul's epistles (especially Romans), Dr. Cook explores what underlies presentations of the last supper (historically *not* a Passover meal); of Jesus' Passion (with special focus on Judas' betrayal, and the Sanhedrin and Barabbas episodes); and of "virgin birth" and empty tomb traditions. He also analyzes the roots of the "Christ-killer" motif, of modern missionary encroachments, and of millennialist end-time scenarios that draw on the Book of Revelation. Additional topics are whether the New Testament is antisemitic, and whether recourse to rabbinic literature helps or hinders Gospel study.

Accessible to lay people, scholars and clergy of all faiths, this book's innovative teaching aids make it all the more ideal for rabbis, ministers,

and other educators. Structured for weekly adult education sessions in synagogues, churches, and centers for Jewish-Christian learning, it is also suitable as a text for course offerings by Christian as well as Jewish seminaries, and by university religious studies departments.

On Gospel Dynamics:

Some Gospel traditions, although ostensibly focusing on Jesus, were actually adjusted, or even created, to address problems that had nothing to do with his time.... [Later] exigencies ... induced alterations in how events, persons, and teachings became reported. The *processes* by which such results have emerged are what I mean by Gospel Dynamics....

For most Christians, the historical details of Jesus' ministry may not particularly matter to them as long as Gospel materials radiate existential meaning for their lives today. Jews need to understand this. In turn, Christians might consider that, for most Jews, it *does* matter what did or did not happen on the historical level if it is *fictional* material that incited or otherwise facilitated murder of untold numbers of Jews over later centuries....

On the issue of whether Gospel Dynamics genuinely underlie New Testament texts, Christian friends will offer Jews their own answers as befit *their* faith, so there will be here a learning experience for Jew and Christian alike. But the particular concern of this book is that gaining facility in Gospel Dynamics will give Jews confidence not to win debates but simply to feel that they have something of substance to contribute, enabling them to come across as thinking persons, instead of blindfolded ones. It is ironic, of course, that I now ask Jews to master a new technique of reading Gospel texts when in reality most Jews have never read the Gospels in any manner at all!

On Jesus:

When we are told that "Jesus said" anything about the Jewish people or to the Jewish people, we should substitute: "the *Gospel writer* says that Jesus said." *Whatever the Evangelists put into the mouth of Jesus constitutes no evidence that Jesus himself said this....*

A later *vindictive* image of Jesus, disparaging

of Jews and Judaism, became superimposed on an earlier, actual figure – with this later anti-Jewishly *adjusted* image ... being that to which Jews of subsequent generations inevitably responded, feeding a spiral of negative interchange within the troubled history of Christian-Jewish polemics.... Thus, reminiscent of a painting repeatedly overlaid by later retouches, what we have discovered in the Gospels are disparate Jesus images superimposed one on another, making it hard to accept that the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels were one and the same.... Whenever we have good reason to suspect that a tradition is not about Jesus, but rather enlists him to deal with any of these or other matters arising decades after he died, then we are *on the trail of Gospel Dynamics*....

On Paul:

Paul played a more determinative role than did the historical Jesus in the emergence of the Christianity that exists today. But Paul also distanced Jesus' image from the actual historical figure so much that he thereby opened the way for Gentiles *to remove Jesus from Judaism*, both to co-opt this Jew as their own and also, eventually, to be in a position – should the need arise, as it indeed did during the 60s – to denigrate the very people from whom they had removed "Christ-Jesus" from the start.

On the Last Supper and Church "Seders":

Neither the earliest Christians nor Jesus ever practiced the kind of full-fledged Seders that many churches stage today to "re-enact" the Last Supper. The mature Seder, and the Haggadah¹ to accompany it, evolved only much

later than Jesus' time, and were, moreover, *rabbinic* in creation, not derived from the biblical Israelite religion that Christianity professed to co-opt and supersede. Further, since early rabbinic Judaism seems distinctly anti-Christian in orientation it raises the question: did the Passover Seder itself reflect, in some respect, an anti-Christian animus?... The following analysis demonstrates that the Last Supper was originally understood by the earliest Christians themselves as an ordinary, non-Passover meal....

On Judas' Betrayal:

Judas' deed seemed so dastardly that either mode of death appeared too good for him, leading Papias² to propose that Judas' flesh became "so swollen that where a wagon could pass with ease he was unable to ... not even ... his head.... He died on his own property, which ... remained ... deserted because of the stench, and not even to the present day can one walk by ... without holding fast his nose ... so great had been the efflux from [Judas'] flesh upon the ground." Worse still, in Dante's *Inferno* Judas appears frozen at the very bottom, head first in Lucifer's central mouth, clawed, bitten, and chewed for eternity (34.58–63)....

A *fictionally* altered Judas would have made it easier for Mark to affix the blame for Jesus' death onto the Jewish nation whose name Judas bore [Judas = Jew], as if to say that not only Judas the Jew, but Judas *as the Jews*, betrayed Jesus.

On Blaming Jews for Jesus' Death:

Most Jews have never hit upon any effective response to "Christ-killer" accusations.



Dr. Michael J. Cook

Dr. Michael J. Cook is Professor of Intertestamental and Early Christian Literatures, and holds the Sol and Arlene Bronstein Professorship in Judaean-Christian Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Renowned for his expertise in the sweep and history of Jewish-Christian relations, he lectures frequently to audiences of many faiths and denominations. His publications include innumerable essays and articles as well as two books: *Mark's Treatment of the Jewish Leaders* (Brill Publishers) and *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-Being in a Christian Environment* (Jewish Lights Publishing). He also constructed *A Manual for Managing the Millennium*, and has produced with his students the acclaimed video, *Missionary Impossible*. Dr. Cook was one of the seven scholars invited by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to assess the advance-script of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. He has served on many advisory boards in Jewish-Christian relations.

Notions to be countered are that: (1) the Jews were to blame for Jesus' death; (2) this involvement requires that Jews be held accountable as a people; and (3) such "corporate" accountability is transmissible to all subsequent generations....

The Jewish predilection is to address this problem only on the *historical* plane, because that is where the battle is usually waged. By the end of this chapter, we will need to engage the *theological* plane, too, in all its traumatic dimension....

If it was indispensable for the world's redemption that Jesus die, and if the Jews were a vital cog in effecting that "benefit," then why "blame" the Jews for Jesus' death rather than praising them for their key role in effecting it? This paradox [which I call "the hybrid riddle"] generates the most frequently asked question by Jews concerning the New Testament.... So vexing is it that it appears, unresolved, even in the Second Vatican Council's landmark *Nostra Aetate* declaration!³ But the puzzle fades when we assign each component to a different time frame....

On the Empty Tomb:

Mark [ca. 72 CE] ends his Gospel by telling us that the women, discovering the tomb empty, "said nothing to any one for they were afraid." Matthew [ca. 85 CE] – likely finding this preposterous – overrules Mark by showing the women running "to tell the disciples" (28:8). In my view, Matthew fails to spot the Dynamic underlying Mark's statement: Having himself introduced (created?) the empty tomb story, Mark must *account for why no one else before his day had heard it!* His answer? The women kept it secret....

How, then, might the very notion of the empty tomb tradition have arisen? Potentially, by a quite natural deduction: if Jesus, after death, was reported sighted, then whatever the place where his corpse had lain became presumed *vacant*. And where specifically was that place? In all likelihood no one knew – especially since neither Jesus' followers nor enemies were expecting his resurrection.⁴

On the Book of Revelation:

Instead of [Jesus'] Second Coming we have

[in Revelation 19:15] a First Coming of a mechanistic warrior-king on a white horse...: "his eyes ... like a flame of fire ... clad in a robe dipped in blood ... a sharp sword" issuing from the mouth – the diametric opposite of the teacher of Nazareth who warned: "all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). If this is his Second Coming, then the Jesus of antiquity is a victim of his successor's success!

On Missionizing:

There will always be attempts to convince Jews to join Christian ranks. Jews who react by feeling offended should also recognize that many a Christian is simply baffled that Jews appear to forgo what they have always most wanted: salvation from the Messiah who came expressly for *them!* Were Jews to accept Jesus as the *Christian* definition of who the Messiah was supposed to be, many Christians would not gloat but feel thrilled.

But the ordeal for Jews of losing a family member from the faith can be heartrending, with the pain intensified if proselytizers *per se* were involved.... Lack of awareness by most Jews concerning the talents and tactics of these operatives only facilitates missionary advances....

On "Proof-Texting":

[Missionaries practice] recourse to ... Jewish scripture as a tactic to persuade Jews to accept Jesus. Many of those Jews who have converted to Christianity pinpoint proof-texting as having been *the* determining factor.... The knowledge that Jews need involves not that about passages but, rather, mastery of *broad conceptual principles* that will invalidate proof-texting as unworthy of thinking persons, thereby calling its practitioners into intellectual disrepute. And even if Jews cannot manage to do this in the public arena, all that is called for is their ability to do this for their own satisfaction, thereby making themselves, including children, immune to missionary encroachment.... Jews are certainly able to reframe the proof-texting game....

[Consider, e.g.] the "*Bull's-Eye*" Approach: A farmer once arrayed his barn wall with bull's-eyes, with an arrow piercing the center

of each. But appearances differed from reality: he had shot the arrows first and only thereafter painted a bull's-eye around each! The end result looked the same but not to someone who knew the underlying process. The Jews' task is to reveal that, often, so-called predictions from Jewish scripture are "arrows shot first," with Jesus' Gospel image a bull's-eye made to surround each one. This is a classic Gospel Dynamic....

On Brief Answers for Complex Questions:

This sample listing, suitable for religious school discussion, attempts to explain Jewish positions ... within the framework that reasonable people may, and often do, differ on the great themes of religion, and accepting that candor is an indispensable tool in that effort. [Following each question a succinct sample answer is proposed.] Why will you Jews not accept Jesus as the Messiah? ... Is not Jesus predicted in your (Jewish) Bible? ... Did not Jesus die for your sins? ... Why won't you observe Christmas? ... Doesn't the empty tomb prove ... Jesus was resurrected? ... Why did you Jews kill Jesus? ... Why not become an authentic Jew by accepting Jesus?...

On Trespassing Upon Others' Sacred Texts:

Does a volume entitled *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament* constitute trespassing beyond proper boundaries, since – in this case – it brings along Jews willing to venture into another faith's hallowed domain? No, not if the sacred texts that are being newly explored have themselves intruded into the Jews' own preserve by becoming *the* prime external determinant of all of Jewish history. Jews might have no inducement to explore the New Testament's terrain if these writings had not irreversibly dislodged Jewish life from any of the courses that Jews would have wished to set for themselves. Moreover, when a younger religion co-opts the scriptures of its elder and interprets them to the elder's detriment, the new writings that do this – later themselves canonized as sacred – at the least stand open to examination and scrutiny.

There is the additional element that, to varying degrees among New Testament writers, Christians are claiming to explain to Jews what the Jews' own Bible means and even to *be* the