

The New Testament in Jewish-Christian Dialogues

Zev Garber,
Los Angeles Valley College

Abstract: *The Christian biblical canon consists of the Old Testament (referenced as the Hebrew Bible by Jews), New Testament, and Apocrypha for some denominations (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church). The name “New Testament” is associated with, but misapplied with the Berit Hadasha/“New Covenant” which the Lord was to make with the Houses of Israel and Judah, not with Nations (Jer 31:30). A more accurate association/understanding is “new covenant in my (Jesus) blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25); “new covenant not of the letter but of the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:6); “the veil remains when the old covenant (Torah) is read” (2 Cor 3:14); and so on. The New Testament embraces 27 separate books of different size, composition, and focus. They include the Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), the Acts of the Apostles, 13 Epistles by Paul, the Epistle to the Hebrews, Epistles by Peter, James, John, and Jude, and John’s Revelation (the Apocalypse). This article discusses the teachings and person of Jesus, as well as events in first-century Christianity (primarily spelled out in the Gospels and Pauline literature), evaluated from the perspective of Jewish-Christian polemics, apologetics, and respectful co-existential dialogue.*

Keywords: Jesus, Narratology, Teaching of Contempt, Dual Torah, Lex Talionis, Golden Rule, Biblical Theology. Nizzahan Vetus

In the context of our time, Pope John Paul II challenged members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission to help Christians understand that the Hebrew Scriptures are essential to their faith (1997). That is to say, Catholic mysteries, including annunciation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and redemption, are derived from the Hebrew biblical *Weltanschauung*. To speak of Jesus in the context of Judaism is affirmed by the Church’s acceptance of the Jewish Hebrew Bible as the Christian Old Testament, and this presents distinctive challenges to the visions of the other. When Jewish and Christian savants interweave the narrative and teachings of Jesus into the cultural and social life of first-century Judaism in the Land of Israel under the rule of Caesar, they pinpoint the evolving Christology of the Jesus believers, which conflicts with the viewpoints of the Rabbis and jurisdiction of Rome. Second, Christians and Jews committed to reading scripture together are deeply motivated by an

academic and reverential disposition toward rabbinic Judaism and the desire to correct the malign image of Jews and Judaism that emerges from erroneous readings of the Gospel sources. Arguably *contra Iudaeos* biases happen when historicity (Pharisaic kinship of Jesus, Peter, and Paul) is conflated with apologetic (“Give unto Caesar”) and polemic depictions (Jews are a deicidal and misanthropic people), and theological innovation (Christ replaces Torah).

The *desideratum* is neither extreme skepticism nor full faith acceptance but rather a centralist position, somewhat contrary to an ecclesiastical tradition which teaches that truth is bounded and restricted to New Testament and early Christian *kerygma* (preaching) and *didache* (apologetics). Exploring the place of Jesus within Second Temple Judaism means to apply *drash* (insightful interpretation) to *peshat* (plain meaning of the text). Why so? Because Jesus the historical being, that is to say, the Jesus before the oral and written traditions, is transformed and transfigured into a narrative character that appears in the canonized New Testament. The Jesus in narratology is a fluid figure of creative, idyllic, and dogmatic imagination, whose realness cannot be fixed in any given episode, teaching, or telling.

Thus, on reading the Gospel of John’s account of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the trial before Pilate, and the sentence of death, one may project that the Evangelist’s Jewish opponents are the reason for the virtual negativity of the *Ioudaioi* towards Jesus in his teaching and trial. Also, the cry of the mob, “His blood be upon us and on our children” (Matt 27:25) is neither an acceptance of guilt nor perpetual pedigree of damnation for the death of Jesus but can be seen as an expression of innocence that says if we are not innocent of this man’s blood then may the curse be fulfilled (see Acts 18:6 and *b. Sanh.* 37a).

Jewish-Christian Encounters

The ground rule for Christian-Jewish scriptural reading and discussion is simple but complex. Let the Christian proclaim the core Christian dogma (Easter faith) and dicta (e.g., Jesus “the living bread that came down from heaven” [John 6:51] is the savior of Israel) without a hint or utterance of anti-Judaism. Likewise, the Jewish observant needs be aware and sensitive of the claims of Christian identity. The objective in the quest for the rediscovery, and possibly reclamation by Jews, of the Jewish Jesus is to penetrate the wall of separation and suspicion of “law and grace” and enable the believer in the Second Testament to appreciate the saga and salvation of Israel experientially in terms of Judaism, that is to say, in accordance with the teaching of Moses

and the exegesis of the Sages of Israel. Reciprocally, the follower of the Torah way learns the how and why of the Christian relationship to the Sinai covenant as presented in the Christian spirit of scriptural inspiration and tradition, a strong sign that the centuries-old “teaching of contempt” is not doable for Christians and Jews in dialogue, where a shared biblical tradition is the surest sign that the stumbling blocks of religious intolerance can be overcome. Take *lex talionis*, for example.

Three times the Pentateuch mentions the legislation of *lex taliones* (the law of retaliation, of an “eye for an eye” (Exod 21:23–25; Lev 24:19–20; Deut 19:18–21). Though the law of “measure for measure” existed in the Ancient Near East, there is little evidence that the Torah meant that this legislation should be fulfilled literally except in the case of willful murder. “Life for life” is taken literally in cases of homicidal intention, and fair compensation is appropriate when physical injuries are not fatal. Equitable monetary compensation is deemed appropriate by the Oral Torah in the case of a pregnant woman whose unborn child’s life is lost and when animal life is forfeited. Indeed, the Written Torah casts aside all doubts regarding the intent of the biblical *lex talionis* injunction: “And he that kills a beast shall make it good; and he that kills a man shall be put to death” (Lev 24:21).

Rejecting the literal application of *lex talionis* puts an end to the mean-spirited charge that Judaism is “strict justice.” Similarly, the words of Jesus on the Torah (“For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” [Matt. 5:18]) beckon interpretation. The Christian citing Matt 5:38–39a (“You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil”) to teach that “Jesus cancels the law of revenge and replaces it with the law of love” is wrong on two accounts: 1) syntactically, the Greek text of Matt 5:39 reads *and* not *but*, thereby removing the onus of change; and 2) scripturally, the text in context (see Matt 5:21–26, 27–30, Jesus on murder and adultery) instructs not cancellation but affirmation of the commandments. Thus, Jesus, like the Sages, focuses on the significance of the Teaching and its cautionary warning about wrongdoing in “thoughts, words, and deeds.”

Nonetheless, there are significant differences in retaliation between Jesus and the Rabbis. In Matt 5:38–39, Jesus addresses *‘ayin tachat ‘ayin* (“eye for eye”) in terms of personal revenge and related implementations, but the Rabbis’ understanding is *mamon tachat ‘ayin* (“value of an eye”), and this is seen as remedial justice for the guilty and concern for the injured. Also, a Christian interpretation of the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) preceded by the prohibition, “You shall not take

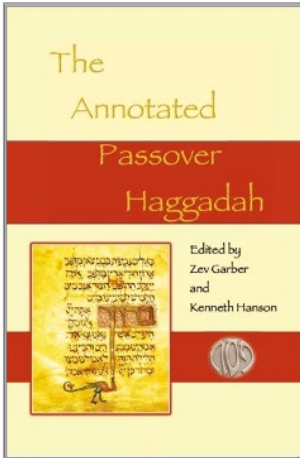
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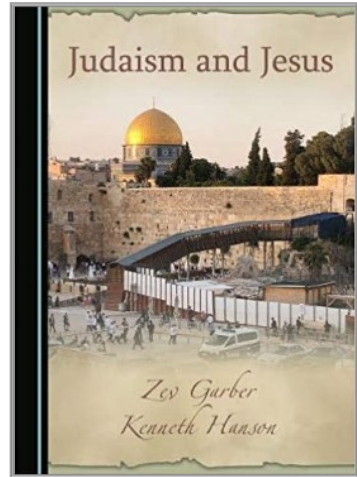
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zev Garber is Professor Emeritus and Chair of Jewish Studies and Philosophy at Los Angeles Valley College, and is Co-Head of Global Jewish Studies, GCRR. He has served as Visiting Professor of Religious Studies at UC Riverside; Rosenthal Professor of Judaic Studies at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland; and as President of the National Association of Professors of Hebrew. He served as Editor of *Shofar* (1996–2017), now Editor Emeritus, Editor of *Iggeret*, and Book Review Editor of JES (2022 ff.). He has presented and has authored hundreds of articles and reviews, and his publications include 16 books, including his most recent co-written volume, *Judaism and Jesus* (Cambridge Scholars, 2020) and co-edited volume, *The Annotated Passover Haggadah* (GCRR Press, 2021), Finally, *Maven in Blue Jeans: A Festschrift in Honor of Zev Garber* was published by Purdue University Press in 2009.

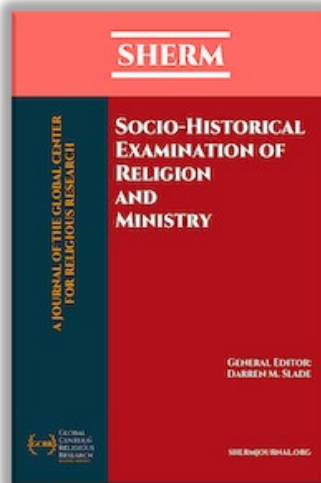
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