

Misusing Jesus: How the church divorces Jesus from Judaism

by [Amy-Jill Levine](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

The fact that Jesus was a Jew has not gone unrecognized. Libraries and bookstores are replete with volumes bearing such titles as *Jesus the Jew*, *The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus*, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, *Jesus in His Jewish Context*, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*, and three volumes (and counting) of *A Marginal Jew*. The point is more than simply a historical observation. Numerous churches today acknowledge their intimate connection to Judaism: connections born from scripture, history, theology and, as Paul puts it, Christ “according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:5).

Nevertheless, when it comes to the pew, the pulpit and often the classroom, even when Christian congregants, ministers and professors do acknowledge that Jesus was Jewish, they often provide no content for the label. The claim that “Jesus was a Jew” may be historically true, but it is not central to the teaching of the church.

The problem is more than one of silence. In the popular Christian imagination, Jesus still remains defined, incorrectly and unfortunately, as “against” the Law, or at least against how it was understood at the time; as “against” the Temple as an institution and not simply against its first-century leadership; as “against” the people Israel but in favor of the gentiles. Jesus becomes the rebel who, unlike every other Jew, practices social justice. He is the only one to speak with women; he is the only one who teaches nonviolent responses to oppression; he is the only one who cares about the “poor and the marginalized” (that phrase has become a litany in some Christian circles). Judaism becomes in such discourse a negative foil: whatever Jesus stands for, Judaism isn’t it; whatever Jesus is against, Judaism epitomizes the category.

This divorcing of Jesus from Judaism does a disservice to each textually, theologically, historically and ethically. First, the separation severs the church’s connections to the scriptures of Israel—what it calls the Old Testament. Because Jesus and his earliest followers were all Jews, they held the Torah and the prophets sacred, prayed the Psalms, and celebrated the bravery of Esther and the fidelity of Ruth. To understand Jesus, one must have familiarity with the scriptures that shaped him (or, as a few of my students will insist, that he wrote).

Second, the insistence on Jesus’ Jewish identity reinforces the belief that he was fully human, anchored in historical time and place. This connection is known as the “scandal of particularity”: not only does the church proclaim that the divine took on human form, it also proclaims that it took on this form in a particular setting among a particular people. The church claims that divinity took on human flesh—was “incarnated”—in Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore the time and the place matter. Christianity follows Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus of Cleveland or Jesus of Mexico City; the incarnation dates to the first century, not the 21st.

Further, the Jewish tradition into which Jesus was born and the Christian tradition that developed in his name were “historical religions,” that is, their foundational events took place in history and on earth, rather than in some mythic time and mythic place; they have a starting point and a vision for the future. To disregard history, to disregard time and place, is to be unfaithful to both Judaism and Christianity.

Historically, Jesus should be seen as continuous with the line of Jewish teachers and prophets, for he shares with them a particular view of the world and a particular manner of expressing that view. Like Amos and Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah, he used arresting speech, risked political persecution, and turned traditional family values

upside down in order to proclaim what he believed God wants, the Torah teaches and Israel must do. This historical anchoring need not and should not, in Christian teaching, preclude or overshadow Jesus' role in the divine plan. He must, in the Christian tradition, be more than just a really fine Jewish teacher. But he must be that Jewish teacher as well.

Further, Jesus had to have made sense in his own context, and his context is that of Galilee and Judea. Jesus cannot be understood fully unless he is understood through first-century Jewish eyes and heard through first-century Jewish ears. The parables are products of first-century Jewish culture, not ours; the healings were assessed according to that worldview, not ours; the debates over how to follow Torah took place within that set of legal parameters and forms of discourse, not ours. To understand Jesus' impact in his own setting—why some chose to follow him, others to dismiss him and still others to seek his death—requires an understanding of that setting. If we today have difficulty fathoming how our grandparents could function without the Internet and cell phones, let alone without television, how can we possibly presume to understand the worldview of Jesus and his contemporaries without asking a few historical questions?

When Jesus is located within the world of Judaism, the ethical implications of his teachings take on renewed and heightened meaning; their power is restored and their challenge sharpened. Jews as well as Christians should be able to agree on a number of these teachings today, just as in the first century Jesus' followers and even those Jews who chose not to follow him would have agreed with such basic assertions as that God is our father, that God's name should be hallowed, and that the divine kingdom is something ardently to be desired. Jesus does not have to be unique in all cases in order to be profound.

Jesus' connection to Judaism can be seen not only in his general comments about Torah but also in his practice of its commandments. For example, Jesus dresses like a Jew. Specifically, he wears *tzitzit*, "fringes," which the book of Numbers enjoins upon all Israelite men, which a number of Orthodox Jewish men still wear, and which can be seen today most readily in the *tallit*, or "prayer shawl," worn in the synagogue during worship. Numbers 15:37-40 reads: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God.'"

These *tzitzit* may be compared to WWJD bracelets. Just as the bracelets remind their Christian wearers to ask, "What would Jesus do?" so the fringes remind Jewish wearers of all 613 commandments, or *mitzvot* (Hebrew; singular, *mitzvah*). The Gospels do not shy away from the fact that Jesus wore these fringes: it was these fringes that the woman with the 12-year hemorrhage affliction touched in hopes of being healed, according to the account in Matthew.

Similarly, Mark 6:56 says: "And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed." The fact that Jesus, according to Matthew 23:5, criticized the Pharisees and scribes because "they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long" suggests that his phylacteries were narrow and his fringes shorter. Jesus does not dismiss Torah; to use modern idiom, he wears it on his sleeve.

The reminder of the fringes has a practical payoff for Christians. The Gospels' preservation of this detail indicates that the Old Testament must be acknowledged as more than just an anticipation of the coming of the messiah—as more than a book that can now be discarded or, more respectfully, put on the shelf next to the other antiques, to be admired but not used. By preserving the fact that Jesus wore fringes, the New Testament mandates that respect for Jewish custom be maintained and that Jesus' own Jewish practices be honored, even by the gentile church, which does not follow those customs.

Not only did Jesus dress like a Jew; he ate like a Jew as well. He kept kosher; that is, he kept the dietary requirements established in Torah. Leviticus 11:3 is explicit about what animals are permitted for human consumption: “any animal that has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud”; thus the pig, the camel, the rock badger and the hare are not kosher. Jesus would never have consumed a ham sandwich. Nor, by the way, would the occasion often have presented itself—archaeological investigation finds few pig bones in Galilee.

The only contact Jesus had with pigs is described in its most complete form in Mark 5:1–20. Following their expulsion from a severely possessed man, a group of demons so numerous that their former host identified himself as “Legion, for we are many,” requested that Jesus send them into a herd of swine. Jesus agreed, “and the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about 2,000, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.” Mark’s narrative anticipates the mission to the gentiles, for the city of Gerasa, where the story is set, was part of the Decapolis, a league of ten predominantly gentile cities, and the presence of the pigs is a less than subtle clue to the non-Jewish composition of the population. The story also allows a political dig against Rome, given that the “unclean spirits” identify themselves as *Legion*, the Latin term for an army cohort. But as for Jesus’ Jewish identity, neither he nor his Jewish associates would have mourned the loss of a herd of hogs—animals that are not kosher and that represent conspicuous consumption in that they cost more to raise than they produce in meat.

A critically aware, historically informed study of Jesus is also crucial to prevent the anti-Semitism that tends to arise when the history is not known. The concern to recover Jesus’ Jewishness is particularly urgent these days. In churches and in the academy, in pronouncements made by Mexican Americans and Palestinians, women from Benin and men from Korea, the World Council of Churches and Catholic liberation theologians, Jesus’ Jewishness is frequently erased. As Jesus continues to be the symbol for all that is socially good, many Christians depict his Jewish background as the epitome of all that is wrong with the world.

If Jesus preaches good news to the poor, so the common impression goes, “the Jews” must be preaching good news to the rich. If Jesus welcomes sinners, “the Jews” must have pushed them away. If Jesus speaks to or heals women, “the Jews” must have set up a patriarchal society that makes the Taliban look progressive.

In the academy, certain schools of thought have managed to distinguish Jesus, whether implicitly or explicitly, from any sort of “Judaism.” The popular push to depict Jesus as a Galilean and see Galilee as religiously and ethnically distinct from Judea winds up conveying the impression that “Judaism,” with its Temple and its leadership, is quite distinct from the Galilean Jesus. The popular image of Jesus as a peasant often serves not to connect him to his fellow Jews but to distinguish him from them, since “the Jews” remain in the popular imagination not peasants but Pharisees and Sadducees or, in academic terms, members of the retainer and elite classes. Worse, the lingering view that Jesus dismissed basic Jewish practices, such as the laws concerning Sabbath observance and ritual purity, turns Jesus away from his Jewish identity and makes him into a liberal Protestant.

Another case of divorcing Jesus from Judaism arises in the case of liberation theology—that form of religious thought proclaiming that God has a “preferential option for the poor” and seeking to put biblical pronouncement in service to political and economic ends: Jesus is the pedagogue of the oppressed, the redeemer of the underclass, the hero of the masses.

The problem is not the use of Jesus for political ends; the biblical material has always been (and should continue to be) used to promote a more just society. The problem is that the language of liberation all too often veers off into anti-Jewish rants. Jesus becomes the Palestinian martyr crucified once again by the Jews; he is the one killed by the “patriarchal god of Judaism”; he breaks down the barriers that “Judaism” erects between Jew and gentile, rich and poor, male and female, slave and free, and so he can liberate all today. The intent is well meaning, but

the history is dreadful, and the impression given of Judaism is obscene.

The poison is there in the founding documents of liberation theology. One of the fathers of the movement, Gustavo Gutiérrez, states in *A Theology of Liberation* (1973), an Orbis Books publication, that the “infidelities of the Jewish people made the Old Covenant invalid.” Leonardo Boff writes in *Passions of Christ, Passions of the World* (1987), another Orbis publication: “In the world as Jesus found it, human beings were . . . under the yoke of absolutization of religion, of tradition, and of the law. Religion was no longer the way in which human beings expressed their own openness to God. It had crystallized and stagnated in a world of its own, a world of rites and sacrifice. Pharisees had a morbid conception of their God.”

This rhetoric should sound familiar: it echoes standard New Testament scholarship of the 1970s. Yet these works, classics in their field, are still being assigned to students of theology and still being read across the globe. In their wake comes anti-Judaism. I have myself recommended these early works to my students in part because there is much of value in what Gutiérrez and Boff have to say, and I would not want to throw out the baby with the bathwater. But, sadly, when I ask my students whether they have any critique of the theology itself, not all notice the anti-Jewish rhetoric.

These anti-Jewish obscenities are still produced by those who know better. The presses that publish such materials—the World Council of Churches press in Geneva; Fortress Press, which is connected to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America; the Catholic (Maryknoll) Orbis Books and so on—are all affiliated with groups that have splendid statements on Jewish-Christian relations. But the evil of anti-Jewish biblical and theological interpretation is so pernicious, so omnipresent, that it affects even those who seek its eradication. Just as racism and sexism and the host of other human sins affect us all, so too anti-Judaism is promoted even by the best of institutions, the most progressive of theologians, and the most sensitive of those who work for justice and peace.

The old Western feminist argument that Jesus redeems women from Judaism and eliminates Jewish “taboos” that create outcasts takes on a particularly ugly form in WCC publications. For example, in a 1995 essay, “Challenges for Feminist Theology in Francophone Africa,” Marguérite Fassinou, identified as the “president of the Union of Methodist Women of Benin and a member of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order,” states: “Two thousand years ago Jesus Christ gave women their rightful place despite the heavy yoke of the Jewish culture weighing on them. For women in general and Jewish women in particular the coming of Jesus meant a revolution.” She goes on to insist that “being a Christian cannot mean relinquishing our culture; we must remain genuinely African while still being good Christian men and women.”

Similarly, Ruth M. Besha, a professor of linguistics at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, writes in “A Life of Endless Struggle: The Position of Women in Africa” that “Christ never compromised with injustice and acted and spoke against the oppression of women in traditional Jewish society.” In a collection from 1986, *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, Grace Eneme, a Presbyterian and representative of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Cameroon, writes, “Christ was the only rabbi who did not discriminate against the women of his time.” And in this same volume, Bette Ekeya, a Kenyan Roman Catholic, states, “In his own relationship with women, he [Jesus] chose to ignore the traditional Jewish attitudes and instead treated women with compassion and complete acceptance.”

Phrases such as “the heavy yoke of Jewish culture” presume that for women Judaism was oppressive and repressive and suppressive. The argument follows from the Western academy’s early feminist steps. It does not follow, however, from the Bible itself, in which the New Testament records numerous rights that Jewish women had in the first century: home ownership, patronage positions, access to their own funds, the right to worship in synagogues and in the Temple, freedom of travel and so forth. Women did not join Jesus because “Judaism” treated them poorly; nor did they stop being Jews, any more than did Jesus himself, once they joined.

The most common Gospel text cited to prove Jesus' anomalous views of women is the account of the hemorrhaging woman and the framing narrative of the dead girl, which appear in all three synoptic Gospels. Matthew's version begins as Jesus is teaching; suddenly a "ruler" (Mark, Matthew's source, specifically identifies the man as Jairus, a "synagogue ruler") "came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.'" Matthew intensifies the situation, for in Mark's version the girl is only ill. "Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples."

Then, interrupting the story of the dead girl, Matthew recounts that "a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak" in hopes of receiving a healing. Jesus turns, sees the woman and says, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." Matthew provides the happy announcement: "And instantly the woman was made well." Resuming the story of the desperate father and the dead daughter, the narrative picks up with the notice that "when Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district."

Christian feminists tend to love this story for, selectively interpreted, it plays perfectly into the argument that Jesus rejected any religious practice that would keep women from being equal to men. The problem with the argument is that it rests on faulty historical reasoning, and bad history cannot lead to good theology. Although no version of the story cites Leviticus, mentions impurity, expresses surprise at a bleeding woman in public, finds odd Jesus' touching a corpse, or portrays Jesus as abrogating any law, New Testament scholars import all this and more.

For example, Teresa Okure writes of the "woman's courage in breaking with crippling cultural taboos imposed on her so as to reach Jesus directly and be fully restored and integrated as a person with full rights in her society" (see her essay in *Searching the Scriptures, Vol. 1*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza). The inevitable conclusion of this reading is its practical payoff for women in the church today: "To continue to exclude women from certain Christian ministries on the basis of outmoded Jewish taboos is to render null and void the liberation that Jesus won for us" (Teresa Okure, "Women in the Bible," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*).

The term *taboo* is already loaded; "crippling cultural taboos" much more so. Both terms are unwarranted. There is no reason why the woman would not be in public and no reason why she should not seek Jesus' help. No crowd parts before her with the cry, "Get away, get away, hemorrhaging woman!" No authorities restrict her to her house or require her to proclaim herself "Unclean, unclean." And, finally, Jesus abrogates no laws concerning any "crippling cultural taboos," for there is no law forbidding the woman to touch him or him to touch her.

Another problem arises when forms of Palestinian liberation theology appropriate Jesus for political ends. 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.

A few comments from Naim Ateek, an Anglican priest and founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, are indicative of this rhetoric. At Notre Dame in 2001, Ateek preached on "The Zionist Ideology of Domination Versus the Reign of God." He identified "Jesus Christ, living in our country as a Palestinian under occupation," and declared that "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' tomb." That same year, for his Easter message, Ateek proclaimed: "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.”

At a worship service in Jerusalem in April 2002, he stated: “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 leveled against Jesus in this city—terrorist, 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.”

The rhetoric is overblown. Jesus did not advise his followers to blow up Romans (and Ateek is not advising his followers to blow up Jews, but by lumping all Palestinians into one category, he risks that impression); Palestinians have not been sentenced to destruction. Ateek is hardly silenced. On the contrary, he continues to hold international conferences at his center and give talks and sermons at Notre Dame, the Center for Jewish-Christian Relations at Cambridge University, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and elsewhere.

Ateek’s rhetoric is also slippery, since its anti-Jewish impact is often more a matter of perception. For a convocation at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he preached concerning Jesus’ messages: “They reflect an inclusive commitment to one’s fellow humanity and a ministry that has depth and breadth of scope—a commitment to the poor, a commitment to the ministry of healing, a commitment to justice and liberation of the oppressed, a commitment to jubilee which involves economic justice for all. I believe that these words constituted a paradigm shift at the time of Jesus, and they provide us with the basis of a paradigm shift for ministry in the twenty-first century.” In making this claim, he erases Jesus’ Judaism. If concern for the poor originated with Jesus, then the church might follow that ancient heretic Marcion and jettison the entire “Old Testament.”

In the respected series *Reading from This Place*, Ateek’s article begins with the standard, and false, view that Judaism is particularistic and Christianity is universal: “Membership was no longer seen as confined to one ethnic group of people, but rather in terms of a renewed covenant that included people of all races and ethnic backgrounds.” Given his social location, it becomes both particularly pernicious and particularly ironic. Israeli citizens are by no means just of one ethnic group; on the contrary, Israel is the most multiethnic and indeed multicultural state in the Middle East. The article then focuses on John 20, an account describing how the followers of Jesus hid “for fear of the Jews.” In this piece, the “Jews” seeking the lives of Jesus’ followers become the Israeli army. Ateek goes on to compare the intifada to Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Christians. Needless to say, the series does not include a piece by an Israeli Jew describing how Lamentations is understood by parents in Jerusalem or by Natanya whose children are killed by Palestinians.

My point is not to play the obscene game of “who is most victimized,” and it is not to dismiss the legitimate claims of the Palestinian people. Nor am I arguing that there is no comparably ugly rhetoric on the part of those who would oppose the Palestinian state. My point is that any prejudicial commentary that divorces Jesus from Judaism and then uses the story of Jesus to condemn all Jews is not a Christian message. It is, rather, a recycled anti-Judaism that depicts Israel as a country of Christ killers. The goal of Palestinian statehood is good; these particular means of achieving it are not.