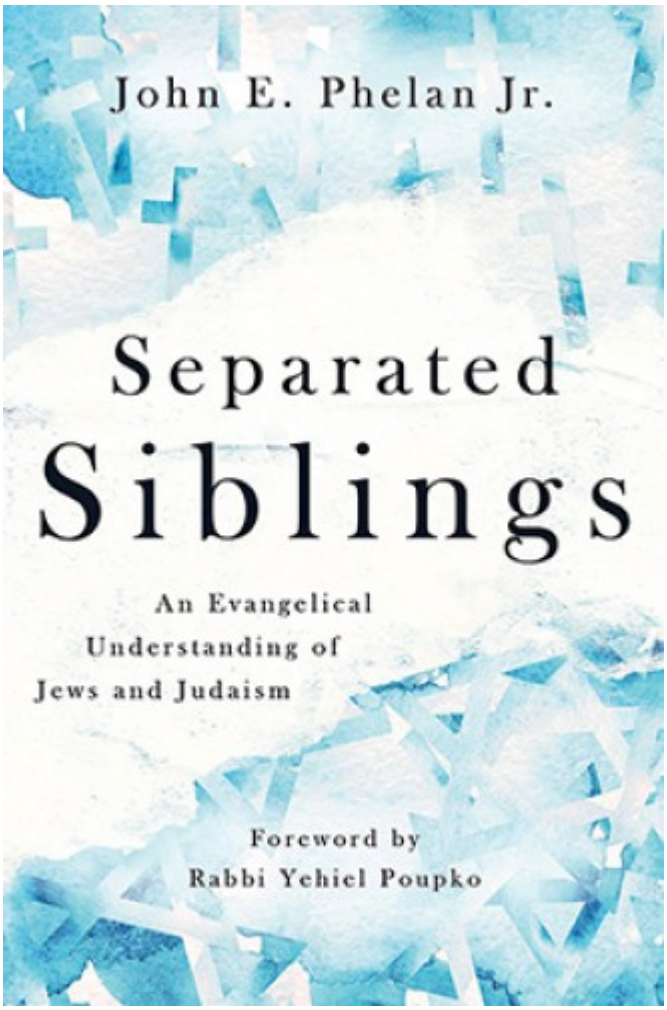
Christians have struggled to understand Judaism on its own terms

John Phelan’s book helps us unlearn what we thought we knew.

by David Heim in the November 4, 2020 issue

In Review



Separated Siblings

An Evangelical Understanding of Jews and Judaism

By John E. Phelan Jr.
Eerdmans
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In recent decades many Christians have begun to appreciate the integrity and genius of Judaism on its own terms rather than as the negative foil for Christianity. Old characterizations of Judaism as a religion of law not grace, or of legalism not love, have been recognized as caricatures—impediments to understanding Jews of the first century or of today.

Yet such caricatures retain power in parts of the church and continue to seep into Christian sermons. Even for those who want to resist the caricatures, the spiritual proximity of Jews and Christians—the fact that we share sacred texts and histories—in some ways makes the task of understanding more difficult. What look like obvious differences can turn out upon investigation to mask important agreements, and what have seemed important commonalities can turn out to contain significant differences. It takes a sustained, patient conversation with the other tradition to begin to understand its inner logic.

John E. Phelan Jr. has undertaken that patient conversation with Jewish colleagues and Jewish texts. A pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church and former president of North Park Theological Seminary, Phelan has absorbed the recent work of Christian scholars on Judaism and immersed himself in Jewish writings.

The result is a book that does two things remarkably well: it sympathetically explains aspects of Judaism about which Christians are apt to be ignorant or misinformed, and it offers a Christian portrait of Judaism in which Jews are likely to recognize themselves. I can’t think of any book that treats this topic for a Christian audience with such breadth, depth, and theological accessibility. As Phelan shows, the effort to understand Jews and Judaism requires Christians both to unlearn things we thought we knew and to learn things we didn’t know we didn’t know.

The work of unlearning includes revising the harshly negative portrait of the Pharisees given by the New Testament. Viewed in historical and religious context, the Pharisees were not the rigid legalists presented in the Gospels. Rather, they were engaged in the same task Jesus was: bringing holiness to everyday life. (If God’s command is to keep the sabbath holy, the Pharisees’ question was: How exactly does one do that?)

Jesus was not so much arguing against the Pharisees as joining the discussion already going on among the Pharisees about how to observe the commandments. The disputes were part of an intra-Jewish quarrel, and as Phelan says, “family feuds are often the worst: the closer you are, the more bitter the conflict.”

It was by building on the work of the Pharisees that the rabbis of the first centuries after Jesus’ life reinvented Judaism in a form that could be sustained outside Jerusalem and in the absence of a temple. (Which is why a rabbi friend could proudly tell Phelan, “I am a Pharisee.”) The rabbis produced the Mishnah, or “oral law,” a collection of legal interpretations and commentaries on the first five books of the Bible, which in turn became the basis for further commentaries known as the Gemara, codified in the sixth century. Together these two works constitute the Talmud, the canonical text of rabbinic Judaism.

Talmudic writings are almost completely unknown to the average Christian, including the average minister. Yet it is this set of writings that has defined the religious practice and intellectual style of mainstream Jews for the past 1,500 years. These are the writings that have shaped how Jews read what Christians call the Old Testament. As Phelan notes, citing a Jewish scholar, “it is impossible to approach Jewish exegesis . . . without knowledge of the Talmud.” Phelan is richly informative on these matters as he chronicles the main chapters of rabbinic Judaism from ancient times to the modern era.

But the heart of the book is Phelan’s dialogical way of engaging classic points of contention between the two faiths, including the place of the law and the commandments, the nature of righteousness, and the theology of Paul. For each topic, he takes a deep dive into the Jewish perspectives and intersperses his own Christian reflections, looking for areas of theological alignment as well as tension.

Consider the issue of righteousness—how humans are made right before God. A typical way of contrasting the two faiths might go like this: Jews believe they are made righteous by observing the commandments, whereas Christians believe they are made righteous by God’s grace, shown in the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross.

That formula captures something real. Yet Phelan notes that obedience to the law is by no means discarded in Christianity; injunctions to obey the law of God are strewn throughout the New Testament, including in the writings of Paul, the presumed

advocate of salvation by grace through faith. For Christians, no less than Jews, righteousness entails obedience.

On the Jewish side, the belief that God is always eager to receive the penitent sinner is, Phelan suggests, a kind of functional equivalent of the Christian concept of God's grace. He cites a parable from Talmudic literature that closely parallels Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. God in the rabbinic story is just as much a loving father as the one in Jesus' parable, who runs to embrace the lost son. In both Christian and Jewish stories, God's embrace of the sinner depends not on correct performance of the law but on the sinner's act of repentance.

Of course, Jesus still marks a dividing line. For Christians, it is Jesus' righteousness that is the basis of human righteousness, and it is through Jesus that reconciliation and atonement with God are achieved. Rather than simply press this difference, however, Phelan further complicates the issue by considering what this difference looks like through Jewish eyes. He engages the analysis of Reform rabbi Eugene Borowitz, who made his own comparative study of the two faiths.

Borowitz argues that the God invoked by Jews is actually more approachable for sinners than the God invoked by Christians. The God of Judaism is always close at hand for Jews, ever ready to accept the penitent sinner, whereas in Christianity, humans and God are profoundly estranged, reconciled only through the death of Jesus in a dramatic act of divine sacrifice.

As Phelan points out, Borowitz's reading of Christianity reverses the widespread Christian assumption that the God of the Old Testament is a far-off, fierce God, who demands adherence to the commandments, while the God of the New Testament, on the other hand, is a gracious and forgiving God, intimately engaged with humanity. For Borowitz, it's the opposite: "the God of Judaism is a loving Father, eager to forgive his children, while the God of Christianity 'is so holy and pure that the human being cannot stand in intimate relationship with the divine.'" This discussion neatly shows how Jewish-Christian dialogue can upend simple oppositions and reshuffle theological categories.

In the end, Phelan concludes that in both traditions God displays elements of holiness and intimacy, judgment and forgiveness. While they disagree about the significance of Jesus, "both Jews and Christians worship a God who longs for us to be righteous, individually and corporately; a God eager to respond to our repentance,

eager to forgive, eager to love, eager to save."

Interestingly, Phelan adds yet another twist to the discussion by pushing back, on Christian grounds, against Borowitz's description. He thinks the rabbi overstates the contrast between the two faiths by mistaking Augustine's doctrine of sin and Anselm's doctrine of atonement for the whole of Christian thinking on the subject. The combined legacies of Augustine and Anselm have stressed the idea that humans are so infected by inherent sin that they cannot be reconciled to God on their own, and only through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is God in a position to cancel the debt of sin. Phelan insists that not all Christians subscribe to Augustine's doctrine of original sin and that the New Testament offers ways of understanding Jesus' death that are different from Anselm's penal substitutionary theory, in which Jesus' death is what makes God's forgiveness possible. Once again, contrasts formulated at a distance from actual believers are bound to miss some important nuances of the faith, especially when each tradition contains a variety of emphases within it.

Phelan does a good job giving a flavor of some of this variety within Judaism as well as Christianity. As for his own perspective, the label *evangelical* in the subtitle is a bit misleading. Phelan speaks to a broad Protestant audience, and he only occasionally has a conservative evangelical audience specifically in mind. He himself is by no means intent on defending a classic evangelical perspective—witness his resistance to the penal substitutionary theory of atonement, the traditional evangelical position on the subject.

Regarding the other terms in the subtitle, *Jews* and *Judaism*, the book is more about Judaism than about Jews—that is, more about Judaism as a system of religious belief and practice than about Jews as an ethnicity and a nationality. One of the profound differences between Judaism and Christianity is that being Jewish is about being part of a people and a nation before it is about being religious. "Your people will be my people, your God, my God," says Ruth, the Moabite, to her mother-in-law Naomi in the book of Ruth. Peoplehood comes first.

One can be ardently Jewish while being largely indifferent to religious claims—a situation that doesn't quite compute in the Christian universe. Questions about Jewish peoplehood—Who defines it? What does loyalty to it entail?—shape much of the public debate among contemporary Jews in both Israel and the United States, especially in arguments about the state of Israel.

Phelan is perfectly aware of this dimension of Judaism, and he takes note of it at appropriate places throughout his survey. But his primary interest lies elsewhere. He wants believing Christians to stand alongside believing Jews and see themselves as siblings in faith. Shorn of the old disabling sibling rivalry, they can respect and understand their differences and appreciate the distinct ways they both worship and serve the God of Israel. This book is a major step toward that end.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Understanding Judaism.”