

What Are Recent Jewish Scholars Saying about Jesus and the New Testament?

Rich Robinson

LCJE-NA, March 4–6, 2013

Ever since the Enlightenment, for approximately the past 260 years, Jews have increasingly approached Jesus as a fellow Jew, or as a teacher of Jewish ethics, or as a martyr—even as the first Reform Jew! While Jesus has been rehabilitated in Jewish thinking, the New Testament generally has not fared as well, except for the Synoptic Gospels, while Paul has largely continued to be relegated to the role of inventor of Christianity and importer of pagan ideas.

Christian theologians have been speaking more and more of “post-supersessionist theology.” The postmodern environment has affected the shape of Jewish-Christian dialogue and Jewish-Christian relations. In what is seen as an increasingly safe environment, Jewish writers have renewed their commentary on Jesus and the New Testament, and even on Paul. This paper reviews selected highlights of this conversation over the past decade or so, which I have divided into six areas as follows. There is overlap between some categories but this is a handy way to focus the discussion:

1. The New Testament as a Book
2. The Person of Jesus
3. Paul
4. Theology
5. Jewish-Christian Relations
6. Counter-Testimonies

For this paper, I will only include the first four groups. Within each group, if there is more than one book I will present them in chronological order. At the end, I will offer some reflections or take-aways. This paper offers a synopsis, with in-depth reviews of many of the books mentioned available separately to those interested.

1. The New Testament As a Book

Let's start with the branch of Judaism I grew up in, Reform. **Michael D. Cook** teaches at Hebrew Union College, the training school for Reform rabbis in Cincinnati. According to the HUC web site, “he is possibly the only rabbi in the U.S. with a professorial Chair in New Testament.” In 2008 Cook authored *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-Being in a Christian Environment* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights).

The subtitle says it all. In this book Cook encourages Jews to learn the New Testament in order to feel empowered rather than tongue-tied in dealing with texts that have contributed to anti-Semitism and ill feeling towards Jews. In other words, study of the New Testament will reduce the Jewish fear factor of an unknown religion perceived as hostile to Jews. Cook really deals with only the synoptic gospels, and he approaches them with the presuppositions of mainstream/liberal Christianity: namely, that the gospels are about theology, not history; and that they rework the story of Jesus to meet the needs of a community several decades removed from the original. Cook is a minimalist regarding the historicity of the New Testament and a maximalist regarding the presence of anti-Judaism in its pages. By way of evaluation, it is not clear how teaching Jews to read the New Testament in his way will “enhance Jewish well-being.” Cook’s approach is more defensive than that of many other Jewish writers on the subject; it ends up more as an exercise in keeping the New Testament at arm’s length than in appreciating it as a Jewish book.

A year after Cook’s volume came *The Mind behind the Gospels: A Commentary to Matthew 1–14* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press) by **Herbert Bassler**, Professor of Religion at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Like Cook, Bassler believes that Matthew reflects a later anti-Jewish, pro-Roman stance. More positively, though, he also believes that the author of Matthew—whom he asserts was not Jewish—was a preserver of traditions, though they were traditions that he himself did not often understand. So while Matthew’s gospel unwittingly preserves Jewish traditional *rhetoric and thought*, it also encompasses extreme anti-Jewish *history and theology*. Despite a somewhat more positive assessment of Matthew, it is hard to see how, at the end of the day, Bassler’s uneasy juxtaposition of the positive and the negative has much cohesion.

With a much more positive cast than either Cook or Bassler, and definitely with more publicity, **Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler** have co-edited *The Jewish Annotated New Testament (JANT)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Levine teaches New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School while Brettler is Professor of Biblical Studies at Brandeis. *JANT* represents the first time the entire New Testament has been presented by mainstream Jewish scholars to Jews and Christians. The book consists of the NSRV version together with copious explanatory notes and introductory essays by some fifty “all-star” scholars who would easily be at home in a set of Jewish theologian trading cards. The book’s goal is to encourage mutual understanding between two faith communities, both for its own sake and with a view to improving relationships. While the contributors admit that passages in the New Testament have been used in anti-Jewish ways, the main thrust is to explicate the Jewishness of the New Testament rather than its supposed anti-Jewishness. The reception by the Jewish community has ranged from

generally welcoming (“The Jewish Annotated New Testament: A Perfect Gift for the Holidays!”¹) to sometimes hostile (“It is evil for Christians to try to convert Jews with this dreck. Why don’t you people leave us in peace?”²). *JANT* is a landmark volume, though its no bedside book; the notes and essays will likely not be user-friendly for many lay people without the guidance of a teacher.

¹ www.reformjudaism.org/blog/2012/12/09/jewish-annotated-new-testament-perfect-gift-holidays

² http://www.amazon.com/The-Jewish-Annotated-New-Testament/product-reviews/0195297709/ref=cm_cr_pr_hist_1?ie=UTF8&filterBy=addOneStar&showViewpoints=0

2. Jesus

Geza Vermes—Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies at Wolfson College in Oxford, U.K.—has long written on the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as on Jesus as a Jew. His recent trilogy consists of *The Passion* (2005), *The Nativity: History and Legend* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), and *The Resurrection: History and Myth* (2008). I looked at the second two volumes.

Vermes has an unusual story for a Jewish scholar. Early in life he escaped anti-Semitism by being baptized as a non-practicing Catholic along with his parents. Thereafter he served as a priest before coming to re-identify as Jewish. His wife is Catholic. Like Cook and others, Vermes draws from liberal Christianity: the gospels are theology *as opposed to* history. He seems disposed to see “obvious” contradictions in the New Testament where others do not. One value is that his writing contains a great deal of interesting and useful background information, such as the presence of *two* kinds of virginity in ancient Judaism. However, when he writes in *The Resurrection* that Jesus lives on “in the hearts of men,” he sounds very much like a 1960s liberal Protestant pastor! These books are useful primarily to acquaint readers with the views of a leading Jewish scholar. Skeptics will nod their head in agreement; believers will find alternative explanations. What Vermes brings to the table is the Jewish background and concise summaries of a position held by many as well as a window into his own personal views.

Amy-Jill Levine, mentioned above, authored *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006). Personably written, this book has a bridge-building goal, focusing on identifying and correcting misunderstandings of both Jesus and of the Jewish people. Levine goes beyond American evangelical Christianity to find examples of misunderstandings about the Jewish people in places as diverse as the World Council of Churches and in African Christianity. Negative portrayals of Judaism as “legalistic, purity obsessed, Temple dominated, bellicose, greedy, anything distasteful to Christians” remain frequent in Christian preaching and teaching. Nor are Jews free of their own biases. Levine concludes with a chapter of practical suggestions on how Jews and Christians can avoid pitfalls in communicating with and about one another. Her book is actually quite enjoyable to read.

Where Vermes tackles the Jesus-story as found in the New Testament, and Levine covers contemporary misunderstandings about Jesus, **Matthew Hoffman** explores the Jewish use of images of the crucified Jesus. Hoffman teaches Judaic Studies and History at Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, PA (an undergrad liberal arts school). His 2007 volume

is *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press). Most of the content concerns 20th-century modernist Yiddish literature of Eastern Europe, some of which has been translated for this volume. Especially in Eastern Europe, Yiddish-writing Jews embraced Jesus as a fellow Jew and martyr in order to re-appropriate him from perceived Christian misinterpretation. Yet the very fact that they used *Jesus* in this way also reflected the desire for these Jews to connect with the larger European/Christian social world. It's a quite fascinating look at a little-known world. Hoffman's research even suggests that Messianic Jewish christology could fruitfully develop the theme of "martyr" as one of the roles of Jesus.

Zev Garber has edited a potpourri of essays titled *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011). Garber is Professor Emeritus at Los Angeles Valley College. In a festschrift written in his honor entitled *Maven in Blue Jeans*, he is described as having "long hair, beard, customary blue jeans, turtleneck-style shirts, casual jackets, and ever-present pipe," the "quintessential 'child of the '60s' long after the sixties have passed." This collection expands the material from a 2009 symposium at Case Western Reserve University on "Jesus in the Context of Judaism and the Challenge to the Church." The essays, by both Jewish and Christian scholars, are very wide-ranging, and are grouped into essays on Jesus and the early period C.E.; Jesus and Judaism over the centuries; and contemporary Jewish views. Discussion questions follow each essay. As often with such collections, there is no central thesis—other than that "Jesus lived and died as a faithful Jew" — but it offers insight into a wide range of contemporary views on Jesus and Jewish-Christian relations. An online interview with Garber can be found at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SAOF-4pFzE

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention **Shmuley Boteach's** *Kosher Jesus* (Jerusalem; Springfield, NJ: Gefen, 2012). It's not bad on Jewish history and on Jewish values. But as a critique of the New Testament, it's awful. Boteach wants to reclaim Jesus as a first-century Jewish Rambo who stood up against Rome and suffered for doing his part to bring in world peace. He proceeds to deconstructs the New Testament with his Clue-ometer™ (my term, not his) to find a thick overlay of anti-Semitism and paganism over the original Jesus. Far too much of his argumentation is by insinuation. The fact is that Boteach's views are outdated; he relies on 20th century Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby for many of his talking points. Much of the book seems like a rehash of older works like Trude Weiss-Rosmarin's *Judaism and Christianity: The Differences*, which dates back to 1943 and was less concerned to find common ground than to keep Judaism and Christianity far apart from one another. This is probably why *Kosher Jesus* was a flash in the pan; the feel is "been there, done that." But, hey, it's Shmuley.

3. Paul

Next up is the Apostle Paul. **Pamela Eisenbaum**, who teaches biblical studies and Christian origins at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, offers the 2009 volume *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York : HarperOne). Her point is that Paul's Jewishness must be taken seriously; if we do so, we will clarify much that has been perceived as inconsistent or confusing in Paul's writings. For her research she relies on Paul's undisputed letters (that is, the letters scholars of all persuasions agree were authored by Paul). She does not include Acts, maintaining that it is not always reliable as a historical source for Paul.

Eisenbaum wants to find a new paradigm for understanding Paul. The old paradigm is that Paul "converted from Judaism." That, she maintains, is simply wrong; rather, Paul was "prophetically called," not "converted." The "New Perspective" on Paul is one such new paradigm that has come front and center in the past quarter-century, a perspective that seeks to understand Paul in the environment of Second Temple Judaism rather than through the lens of Martin Luther and the Reformation. But, says Eisenbaum, the New Perspective still misrepresents the Judaism of Paul's time. Therefore a *post*-New Perspective paradigm is needed. (In truth much of Eisenbaum's view of Paul's theology is in fact taken from the New Perspective which, to simplify, focuses more on ecclesiology (how can Gentiles be redeemed and included in God's people?) than on soteriology (how can Jews and Gentiles be saved?)) Here is Eisenbaum's paradigm: Paul's experience of the risen Jesus caused him to "move up the apocalyptic clock" and formulate a theology of the inclusion of Gentiles in Jewish monotheism in view of the short time left. Paul was not about conversion or about salvation for Jews; as in the New Perspective, Jews are already in God's covenant. Rather, Paul is all about the Gentiles; what Jesus did, he did for the Gentiles. The resurrection meant the end was near; hurry up and incorporate the non-Jews.

This is a "Jewish reclamation of Paul" that opens the door to a conversation. It contains good historical background on Judaism vis-à-vis Paul. Whether her paradigm correctly understands the "misunderstood Apostle" is another question. We can agree that Paul did not "convert from Judaism to Christianity" without jettisoning previous understandings of the apostle.

While Eisenbaum mines the New Testament for her new approach to Paul, **Daniel R. Langton** explores Jewish intellectual history vis-à-vis Paul. The professor of the History of Jewish-Christian Relations at the University of Manchester, U.K., gives us *The Apostle Paul in the Jewish*

Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2010). Langton explores the many ways Jews have approached Paul in modern times in fields as diverse as music, journalism, art, philosophy, and—of course, in Jewish book!—even psychoanalysis. Not surprisingly, those Jewish scholars who are most positive about Paul turn out to be non-Orthodox. Langton even includes Messianic Jewish viewpoints (specifically, and a bit oddly, the very different views of Paul Levertoff, Sanford Mills, and Joseph Shulam). Yet these modern Jewish views of Paul by intellectuals have had little impact on *popular* Jewish ideas about the apostle. Langton’s complex book explores how Paul has been a vehicle for Jews to explore their own identities, especially those of Orthodox versus non-Orthodox. It is in essence a cultural kaleidoscope of Jewish “uses” of Paul.

Finally, **Mark Nanos** (www.marknanos.com) is a very prolific, and in biblical studies self-taught, Jewish author who has written several books and numerous articles on Paul, focusing on a revisionist interpretation of the New Testament epistles. His basis thesis can be found on his website: “I remain focussed on investigating the implications for Jewish-Christian relations of my reading of Paul as a Torah-observant Jew founding Jewish subgroup communities. These ‘churches’ were attracting some non-Jews, but nevertheless dedicated to practicing Judaism.” His books include *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), *The Irony of Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), and most recently, he was as a contributor to *Four Views on the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). His *To the Synagogues of Rome: A Jewish Commentary on Romans* will be published in 2014. Nanos has been a prominent conversation partner among Pauline theologians. His conclusions have been met with both affirmation and dissent. He is certainly a voice to pay attention to.

Online also see the article in Tablet magazine, “Was Paul a Jew?” by Judith Shulevitz, www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/2014/who-was-paul

4. Theology


Over at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, **Benjamin D. Sommer** has written *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. “What I propose to show in this book,” he writes, “is that the startling or bizarre idea in the Hebrew Bible is . . . not that God has a body — that is the standard notion of ancient Israelite theology — but rather that God has many bodies located in sundry places in the world that God created” (p. 1). Sommer shows that the basic idea of God’s corporeality (that is, that He has a body) is not new in Jewish thinking. God’s non-corporeality became the standard view only starting with medieval Jewish philosophy.

Moreover, God’s embodiment in the Hebrew Bible is what Sommer calls *fluid* (think of the back and forth between God and one of the visitors in Genesis 18). It is similarly fluid in later rabbinic literature and in the Kabbalah. With this as background, Sommer brings Christianity into the picture and shows the ideas of the Trinity and Incarnation are fully congruent with these ancient ideas. Christianity is to be rejected *not* because of those doctrines but on other grounds: that Jesus was a false Messiah; that Christianity repudiates the Torah and Israel’s election; that Christianity borrows from paganism in its idea of a dying and rising God (but not in the ideas of Trinity and Incarnation). In short, Sommer gives a “Jewish reclamation” of the Trinity/Incarnation that departs sharply from most mainstream Jewish assessments of those doctrines.

Back across the country in Berkeley, CA, **Daniel Boyarin** teaches Talmudic Culture and Rhetoric at the University of California. His 2012 book is entitled *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York : The New Press). His thesis is that the idea of a human-divine Messiah is not a later pagan addition but was part of the early Jewish Jesus-movement, with roots in Judaism prior to the New Testament. Those roots are found in the merging of the figure of “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7 with the expectation of an earthly Davidic king. Moreover, since the idea of a suffering Messiah was part of Judaism before and after Jesus, the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 is *not* a later Christian distortion of its true meaning. And, “this tradition was well documented by modern Messianic Jews, who are concerned to demonstrate that their belief in Jesus does not make them un-Jewish . . .” (pp 132-133). Written at a more popular level than his other books, it is noteworthy that a Talmudic professor defends the Jewishness of the idea of a divine-human Messiah.

5. Summary and Reflections

It should be clear from this survey that there is hardly a uniform Jewish approach to the New Testament, to Jesus, or to Paul. Many of the authors seeking to situate Jesus, Paul, and even Christian theology squarely in Judaism. For many of those surveyed, the issues of either Jewish or Christian truth claims is moot, or for the more religious writers, already settled. Rather, their explorations are sociological, historical and textual; their goals are enhanced self-identity and cross-community enrichment. The Jewish approach to Christianity is as multi-faceted as a busy deli menu.

Breakfast Specials (served till 11:30 A.M.) Eggs or Pancakes or French Toast - \$6.95 with Katz's Sausages - \$9.10 <small>(Potatoes, Orange Juice, Coffee or Tea Included)</small>			Sandwiches Ours are the largest and best you'll ever have. We dare you to finish one	
Bagel, Lox, Cream Cheese New York on your tongue! platter 12.50 on bagel 10.75 Bagel and Cream Cheese 3.25 at least you should ask for tomato	All Day Omelets Pastrami or Corned Beef 13.40 Salsami 11.80 Tongue 14.45 Lox and Onions 13.40 <small>with bread, pickles and steak fries</small>		Hot Katz's Pastrami 14.95 Smoked to juicy perfection and hand carved to your specifications (ask for Mayo at your own peril) Katz's Corned Beef 14.45 Our secret "dry cure" pickling formula requires a full month to be ready to serve. The secret to finishing one is to pace yourself Katz's Brisket 14.45 Bakes, try a little tenderness Katz's Knishwurst 10.60 Our garlic beef sausage - not for the faint of heart Ruben! 15.75 For years we've been keeping our Corned Beef, Swiss Cheese, Russian & Sauerkraut combo under wraps. Now we're ready to go public. Turkey 14.45 Hot Most and Tender Grilled Cheese 5.95 Combos 15.90 Combos with Tongue 16.45	
Soups Matzo Ball Soup 5.85 If the soup isn't surrounding it, this matzo ball would float away with 1/2 Sandwich 13.95* Chicken Noodle Soup 5.15 Thick with chicken & noodles, a meal with 1/2 Sandwich 13.50* Split Pea Soup 5.85 with 1/2 Sandwich 13.95* <small>*no combos or Ruben half sandwiches</small>	Salad Platters Tuna Chicken or Egg Salad 10.60 Individual Can Tuna 11.90 Individual Can Salmon 13.40 <small>All served with coleslaw and potato salad on bed of lettuce and tomato, with pickles</small>	Cold Katz's Tongue 15.55 Either center cut or tip, this is the finest example of this delicacy. Our specially cured in-house Katz's Original Recipe Salsami Soft 10.60 Hard 13.45 Our Salsami is famous all over the world. Choose either soft or the harder aged and see why people have been sending this Katz staple to loved ones for years Bologna 10.60 Roast Beef 14.45 Fresh Daily Chopped Liver 10.60 Like Grandma Made - only better Liverwurst 10.60 Old World Pace Egg Salad 8.45 Tuna or Chicken Salad 8.95 Salmon 10.25 Cheese 10.60 Swiss or American or Muenster. On Club Bread .60 Lettuce or tomato .60 Cheese 1.00 Lean or Extra Lean 1.00		
Beverages Sodas/Seltzer/Bottled Water 2.50 <small>(Ltr size 3.35)</small> Diet Browns Assortment Pepsi Cola 7UP Canada Dry Assorted Diet Juices 2.70 Shapple 2.60 Coffee or Tea 1.80 Cappuccino 3.95 Ice Coffee 2.70 Hot Chocolate 1.70 Espresso 2.75 Tap Soda M 1.85 Pitcher Soda 7.45 L 2.20 Beers On Tap 4.40 - 8.00	Salads Tossed Green Salad 4.60 Potato Salad 4.50 Cole Slaw 4.50 Macaroni Salad 4.50	Grill Favorites Katz's Cheesesteak 10.60 <small>This would make Rocky leave Philadelphia</small> Hamburger 4.55 Cheeseburger 5.60 Chiliburger 6.25 Double Burger 6.95 Double Cheeseburger 8.75		
Starters and Siders Steak Fries 4.50 Knishes (square/round) Potato, Broccoli, Sweet Potato, Kafta 3.25 Vegetarian Baked beans 4.50 Kafta (Stuffed Delima) 6.40 Chopped Liver w. onion 7.70 Noodle Pudding (Kugel) 4.95	Desserts New York Cheesecake 5.00 Creamy and sinful with fruit toppings additional 0.55 Layer Cakes 5.00 Pound Cakes 5.00 Fruit & Filling Pies 5.00 Cookies 3.50	Traditional Favorites Potato Latkes (3) with sour cream or apple sauce 9.10 Blintzes (cheese or cheese with fruit) 10.45		
Delivery? Call us	Large Party Space Available GRATUITES NOT INCLUDED	ASK ABOUT OUR PARTY PLANNING AND CATERING Visit our Web Site WWW.KATZDELI.COM Email to katzdel@aol.com Katz's Salsamis make a unique gift idea. Stop by our shipping counter and let us mail one to someone you love		
Central Info: KATZ'S DELICATESSEN 205 E. HOUSTON STREET NYC 10002 (212) 254-2246 Fax (212) 674-3270 SINCE 1888		All Day Specials All Specials come with bread and pickles Hot Open Faced Sandwich Plates 15.05 Brisket, Roast Beef, or Turkey Served with (choice of 2): steak fries, potato salad, cole slaw, macaroni salad or beans 3 Meat Platter 28.95 (Feeds 3 tourists or one regular customer) Dinner Platter 21.95 Start with a bowl of our matzo ball soup, then feast on this platter of hand sliced brisket with potato pancake and noodle kugel Katz's Homemade Beef Stew 16.20 Mildly spiced like grandma made. Served with tossed salad		

“The Jewish approach to Christianity is as multi-faceted as a busy deli menu.”

There are many take-aways that a survey like this can generate. Let me focus on two of them:

a. Education of our non-Jewish brothers and sisters.

As Levine's *Misunderstood Jew*; and Eisenbaum's *Paul Was Not a Christian* show, there is the task of educating the church. Levine and Eisenbaum try to situate Jesus more firmly in his Jewishness and (along with several other writers represented here) to open up corridors of understanding between Jews and Gentile Christians.

This is our task as well, though from quite another vantage point. All of us here at LCJE know how welcoming the churches are in which we speak (or we wouldn't be asked to speak!) and how we have encountered many Christians who want to learn more about the Jewishness of their faith.

Yet the appreciation for the Jewishness of Jesus and the New Testament is often idealized even by well-meaning Gentile Christians. Perceptions of the contemporary Jewish community are still often skewed. At a church meeting I have explained the nature of today's Jewish community as secular, open to exploring numerous spiritualities, and so on. Despite that explanation, some still don't get it: they remain shocked that Jews don't believe in the Messiah or don't read the Scriptures.

Well then, why can't we help Christians to understand their contemporary Jewish neighbors and fellow urbanites in more depth? We all encourage Christians to get to know their Jewish friends at a certain level and then to engage in spiritually oriented conversations. But this can be greatly expanded. For example, we could run a ten-week course on the modern Jewish community, meeting weekly, with a nominal charge for a book and refreshments. This could be advertised in area churches and we could have a goal of, say, 50 people attend. (Church-goers already meet weekly in substantial numbers when an Alpha Course is run out of a church. Once a week for 10 weeks is not as much of a scheduling problem as it might seem.)

Off-course day, those who are able would be invited to a synagogue service; to a Jewish film; or to meet Israelis working the kiosks in a local mall. Someone from the Jewish community who is willing could also be invited in for a session. This would be more in-depth than even a one day "Jewish evangelism seminar" which focuses more on the how to than on the "getting to know" preliminaries.

Just as some of these authors hope to make Jews comfortable and/or conversation partners vis-à-vis Christians, we can do the same for our Gentile Christian friends and constituents. This could work especially well in an urban area where many Christians already know Jewish people from school, work, or as neighbors.

b. The truth issue

I predict that the issue of the Jewishness of Jesus, Paul, and Christian doctrine will continue to take front seat to the issue of truth. The "rehabilitation" of Jesus and Paul will be viewed by many as instrumental in improving Jewish-Christian relations. Truth issues will be marginalized, as they have already been in the postmodern environment.

In an interview posted on our web site (www.jewsforjesus.org/publications/havurah/15-02/six-questions-for-amy-jill-levine), Amy-Jill Levine said this to me in response to a question about truth claims:

It was Pontius Pilate who asked “What is truth?” I am not inclined to put myself in his company. Theological claims are not open, as far as I can tell, to any empirical test. Belief is not like sudoku; it is like love. It is, to use Paul's language, based on “grace,” not logic. I'm personally much more interested in what people do than in what they believe. . . . I find theological debates about “truth” (e.g., the almost incessant atheist vs. theist debates) at best uninteresting, and usually tedious, or nasty.

As for many others today, truth issues do not sit comfortably in our culture. This may well lead to a situation where Jewish faith in Jesus and acceptance of the New Testament is taken as axiomatic—one Jewish option among many. At that point, some of the “preliminaries” of evangelism will be taken care of, in one form or another, and perhaps we can again talk about issues of truth. It will not be quite that cut-and-dried; there will continue to be the Jewish cost of following Jesus vis-à-vis family and community. The leading question, however, will not be whether messianic Jews are walking oxymorons or not; some will undoubtedly be asking: granted that's it's a Jewish option to believe in Jesus, so what? Who can know if he's the Messiah or not? How can you know what's true, anyway? We may find ourselves talking more about objective matters of truth and less about our identity. Maybe. Let's see what happens.