

# Jesus and Judaism

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It is a distortion of early Judaism to suggest that there was a dichotomy between the torah and love or mercy. The idea of “covenantal love” (*chesed*) was and is at the heart of Judaism. The relationship between covenantal love and “righteousness” (*tsedeqah*) can be problematic for Christians as they attempt to discern the attitude of Jesus toward the practices of early Judaism. Suffice it to say that the ideal of love and mercy is in tension with the pursuit of righteousness in practical religion. Just think about Christian history, or Islamic history—the examples are almost too numerous. The ideal of covenantal love as the origin and end of the pursuit of righteousness often does not meet up with the reality of religious living, and there are constant efforts at reform (Amos, Hosea, and the rest of the prophets in the Old Testament; Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta in the history of Christianity). Now, one should not simply lump together these figures and list Jesus as “one of the prophets,” but in order to better understand Jesus’ attitude toward the Mosaic law and religious living, we should see Jesus’ teaching not as an abrogation of the torah but as a prophetic critique of religious practice.

The ministry of Jesus must be understood as a ministry to Israel. Jesus was a Jew and his ministry is intelligible as a religious renewal or reform movement. Some scholars have registered concern regarding this interpretation of Jesus’ sayings, that portraying Jesus as a reformer or renewer of Judaism implies something was amiss with Judaism in the first-century. While concerns over Christian misinterpretations of Judaism are generally well founded, to say that Jesus was concerned about religious reform does not imply **anti-Semitism** or a dismissal of Judaism. Rather, traditions are vital to the extent that they can inspire reformers. As decadent as late medieval Catholicism was in so many ways, the tradition could still produce a Martin Luther. Though Roman Catholics do not agree with everything Luther taught, he is rightly viewed in Catholic circles as someone interested in reforming the church precisely because he valued it, not because he hated it or wanted it destroyed. While the comparison between Christ and Luther is incongruent in many ways, it may prove helpful for understanding that the disputes Jesus has with religious authorities revolved around important principles on which both parties agreed.

The Torah, the first five books of the Bible, was at the heart of Jewish life. These books narrate the story (*haggadah*, Hebrew for “telling” or “narrating”) of Israel’s ancestors and offer instruction (*halakah*, Hebrew for “instruction,” literally “walking”) for responding to Israel’s God. The stories provide Israel with its self-understanding as God’s beloved, chosen, and redeemed people. This election was gratuitous, there was nothing that Israel did to deserve it, and in fact the Old Testament points out time and again the ways Israel turned away from God’s election. The instruction, the law, provided Israel with the appropriate response to God’s gracious election.<sup>1</sup> Divorced from the narratives, the instruction could take on a life of its own and be used to brutalize and marginalize people. One can interpret many of Jesus’ disputes with Jewish officials (often stereotyped with the expression “scribes and Pharisees,” or “chief priests and



Pharisees”) as stemming from Jesus’ desire to protect the traditions of Israel by connecting them with the story of God’s mercy and love.

A good example of this is the late Christian story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53—8:11), though the story probably does not go back to stage one (it appears to be a scribal addition to John’s Gospel). Yet the episode illustrates how Jesus, in the midst of what appears to be a legal dispute, appeals to the story of Israel to call for an expanded and deeper interpretation of the demands of *halakah*. A woman caught in the act of adultery is brought before Jesus (one may fairly wonder what happened to her partner). The Pharisees ask Jesus whether they should stone her as the torah seemed to require. In response Jesus writes with his finger on the ground and invites anyone who is without sin to cast a stone at her. Jesus then bends down to write a second time. John Paul Heil has rightly pointed to Jesus’ writing as the *crux interpretum* of the passage. For Heil, this act recalls God’s giving of the commandments on Sinai. The tablets that are given to Moses were inscribed with letters that came from God’s finger (Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10, 10:2), but these tablets had to be rewritten because Moses smashed them when he descended the mountain and found the people of Israel, who had just sworn loyalty to YHWH, in a drunken orgy around the golden calf. The Old Testament tells us that despite Israel’s sin, disobedience, and failure, God gave them another chance. The commandments were rewritten, and Israel remained chosen, even though they deserved to be forsaken by God.<sup>2</sup> Thus, when Jesus writes with his finger on the ground, and particularly when he writes the second time, he is reminding the Jewish community of their own story. They, the entire people of Israel, like the adulterous woman, have sinned. Jesus thus challenges those who would use the commandments to play a game of “gotcha” apart from the story of God’s love, mercy, and fidelity.

If the story of the woman caught in adultery has any resonance within the life of Jesus—and a case can be made through the criterion of coherence—it provides an example of how Jesus, faithful to the prophetic and best rabbinic traditions, sees the story of God’s love and the value of the human (made in God’s image) as the determining factor for the interpretation and application of any commandment. Jesus’ summons to conversion, however, did not make Jesus a libertine; rather, the demands of the covenant are properly understood and lived when interpreted as part of the story of YHWH’s love for Israel.

## The Death of Jesus

Mel Gibson’s recent film *The Passion of the Christ* raised several important and controversial issues surrounding the execution of Jesus. Many scholars and theologians believe that Gibson erroneously portrayed the Jewish authorities as primarily responsible for the death of Jesus and portrayed them in an exceedingly negative light. The extent to which these charges against Gibson are valid is a matter of debate, but there is little disagreement about the way controversy surrounding the film highlighted the historical question of who was responsible for the death of Jesus. One point of agreement that has emerged among scholars is that Jesus provoked opposition, yet the identity of his opponents remains at



least partly uncertain. The fact that he is often portrayed in the Gospels as fighting with “the scribes and the Pharisees” or even “the Jews” does not clarify the matter, for the Gospels also contend that the Jewish **Sanhedrin**, led by the Sadducees at the time, was responsible for “handing over” Jesus to the Romans. The Sanhedrin was a group of clerics who were responsible for the administration of the temple and ensuring the observance of Jewish law. Since 6 CE, when Herod’s son Archelaus was deposed and a Roman prefecture was instituted in Judea, the Sanhedrin had to work under a watchful Roman eye. It is apparent that some arrangement existed between the Roman governor (Pontius Pilate) and the Sanhedrin. The leader of the Sanhedrin was confirmed by the Roman governor and allowed to exercise his office only with the support of Rome. It is interesting to note that the High Priest (the head of the Sanhedrin) at the time of Jesus (Joseph Caiaphas) was elevated to that office shortly before Pilate became governor and remained until Pilate was recalled to Rome in 36 CE. This is remarkable given that there was rapid turnover in the high priesthood prior to the time of Caiaphas. We can reasonably deduce from this that Caiaphas was generally willing to cooperate with the Roman authorities.

The cooperation between Pilate and Caiaphas does not answer the question of responsibility for the death of Jesus; nor does it address the irregularities one finds in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial. From the evidence at hand, it appears that the Jewish trial narrated in the Gospels is not reliable: there could not have been a trial at night, for such a thing was forbidden by law and good sense; additionally, the Sanhedrin handled matters only within its jurisdiction, but a charge of sedition or any charge calling for the death penalty could not have involved the Sanhedrin since it did not have the *potestas gladii* (the power to execute).<sup>3</sup> It seems that the hearing before Caiaphas was not a trial but merely a kind of interview that provided a transition to the real trial before Pilate the following morning. But what could have caused the Sanhedrin, controlled by the Sadducees and not the Pharisees at this time, to see Jesus as a threat? In Mark 14:64 the Sanhedrin charged Jesus with blasphemy (*blasphemeō*, “to speak against God”). Is this a Christian “spin” on the death of Jesus? What could Jesus have said or done that could be construed as blasphemous?

In the Gospel tradition the hearing before Caiaphas appears to center on Jesus’ activity in the temple and the question of Jesus’ self-understanding. Jesus’ stay in Jerusalem, and particularly his symbolic activity in the temple (Mark 11:15–19), present us with a crucial piece of data for grasping Jesus’ self-understanding. The temple action—driving the money changers and vendors out of the temple—is to be viewed in the context of the prophetic literature, particularly Zechariah, whom Jesus evokes with his messianic entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–10; cf. Zechariah 9:9). Questions about his attitude and his activity in the temple focus the charge of the high priest at the hearing. The charge is answered by Jesus in the affirmative with an appeal to Daniel 7 (the “Son of Man”) and Psalm 110 (“seated at the right hand” of God) and tells the high priest that he will be a witness to the events that will vindicate Jesus’ claim to be Messiah (even though he uses the phrase “Son of Man”: Mark 14:62 pars.).<sup>4</sup> Although the response Jesus gives in the Gospels is suffused with later Christology, the basics of the dispute seem plausible: if Jesus



spoke against the temple and offered a form of reconciliation to sinners apart from the temple, he was implicitly claiming an authority for himself that rivaled the authority of the ruling elite.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his prophetic action in the temple both portray Jesus as understanding himself as having divine authority. Many New Testament scholars are understandably hesitant to identify Jesus' self-understanding since it smacks of historical psychology, a highly suspect discipline. After all, do we have a good sense of even our own motivations and self-understanding? Many hours of expensive therapy can help one to gain some understanding of these issues, but how can one accurately answer such questions for figures from the distant past? Other scholars insist that one can infer the basic contours of Jesus' self-understanding from his actions. N. T. Wright, for example, even goes so far as to argue that Jesus understood himself to be Israel's Messiah, a point with which many scholars would disagree. Wright is careful to nuance his presentation of the Messiah in first-century Judaism, which he deems a highly complex idea,<sup>5</sup> and offers some basic ideas and tasks associated with the Messiah that cut across the sectarian literature of the time: the Messiah was to defeat Israel's enemies in battle, and the Messiah was to rebuild, restore, or cleanse the temple.<sup>6</sup> Wright contends that Jesus envisioned himself as the king, the Messiah, God's anointed, through whom YHWH was at last restoring his people.<sup>7</sup> This definition, or redefinition, of Messiah emerges within the context of Wright's presentation of Jesus' prophetic "kingdom praxis," i.e., the stories Jesus told, and the worldview created by these stories and **praxis**.

Jesus' announcement of the *kingdom* was meant to embody and enact the hope that God would visit and restore the people of Israel. This is apparent in the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus, from the earliest days of his ministry to the time of his death, is portrayed as conscious of his status as Messiah and never misses an opportunity to express that self-understanding.<sup>8</sup> Yet, one must also reckon with the fact that the Gospels present a clear gap between the authority Jesus seems to claim through his actions and the level at which Jesus is prepared to accept the designation "messiah." Jesus' reluctance to use the title may account, in part, for his use of the self-designation Son of Man. In the hearing before Caiaphas, Jesus' use of this self-designation causes dismay within the Sanhedrin because the Son of Man figure is best situated and understood within the context of Israel's nationalistic hope for restoration. From the Jewish perspective, Jesus' subversion of Israel's story and symbols were the heart of the matter. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees believed Jesus was a false prophet who led the people away from the true worship of YHWH. For the Sadducees, Jesus was troublesome because he stirred up sentiment against those who controlled access to YHWH through the temple. Though Jesus did not lead an army, his messianic pretensions could become the focus of a real revolution, for which Rome would hold the entire nation responsible. Additionally, Wright contends that Jesus committed blasphemy by placing himself beside YHWH. Quite simply, from the Jewish perspective, Jesus was a false prophet and deserved death (Deuteronomy 13:1–11).



Jesus' own attitude toward his death is best grasped through a reading of his last supper with his disciples. There Jesus blends the story of his life with the story of Israel so that Jesus' life is understood as the climax of Israel's story.<sup>9</sup> The symbolic activity in the temple makes it clear that Jesus is replacing the system of sacrifice with himself; his own death was to bring about a new exodus, an end to Israel's oppression.<sup>10</sup> This fits in well with Jesus' prophetic ministry—reinterpreting the nationalistic and violent symbols of Israel with non-violent resistance. Jesus' own life would be the symbol of the new people of YHWH, a people defined by their suffering and the suffering of their Messiah. N. T. Wright goes further, however, and contends that the death of Jesus was understood by him as vicarious substitution—Jesus would suffer in place of the people of Israel. In doing so, Jesus was utilizing the tradition established in the stories of **Maccabean** martyrs as well as the theology articulated in Isaiah's **Suffering Servant**.<sup>11</sup> Jesus' death would bring about a victory:

Jesus believed it was his [G]od-given vocation to identify with the rebel cause, the kingdom cause, when at last that identification could not be understood as [an] endorsement [of violent nationalism]. . . . He would go ahead of his people, to take upon himself both the fate that they had suffered one way or another for half a millennium at the hands of pagan empires and the fate that [many of] his contemporaries were apparently hell-bent upon pulling down on their heads once for all. The martyr tradition [as embodied in the Maccabean literature in particular] suggested that this was the way in which Israel would at last be brought through suffering to vindication. (N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 596)

This victory and vindication was to be accomplished in Jesus' mind through the two central tasks of the Messiah: purification of the temple and victory in battle. We have seen the purification of the temple and Jesus' interpretation of his death as sacrificial in the Last Supper. Jesus' messianic task was completed with the victory in battle over Israel's enemies—yet these enemies were not those defined by violent nationalists in Jerusalem or Galilee. Rather, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom and his call to conversion redefined Israel's enemy as Satan rather than Rome, as sin rather than as the presence of a Gentile government in Israel. His confrontation with power, particularly Roman power, and the love he demonstrated in the face of that power, were evident in the story of his life and his death.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is at the heart of E. P. Sanders's notion of "covenantal nomism."



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<sup>2</sup> John Paul Heil, "The Story of Jesus and the Adulteress (Jn 7:53—8:11) Reconsidered," *Biblica* 72 (1991): 182–91.

<sup>3</sup> The only exception appears to be by way of concession: if a Gentile were to enter the temple he would be subject to stoning. We have at least two inscriptions from the temple area that attest to this (see, e.g., Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.427).

<sup>4</sup> For Wright, Ps. 110 plays a significant role in Jesus' self-understanding in Mark 12:35–37 pars. On the use of Psalm 110 in early Christianity see David Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 18 (Nashville, Abingdon, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 307–20.

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 481–86.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 481–86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 487–88. Wright cites Wrede and Bultmann as two influential figures who advocated the identification of Jesus as Messiah as a post-resurrectional event.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 553–63.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 576–92. In early Judaism there were stories that envisioned salvation from the present evil age through the sufferings of certain figures who embodied the sufferings of Israel.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 606–9.

