

Who is Jesus?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I recently wrote a review of a book on Jesus by [Shmuley Boteach](#) which I am sharing here. In [Kosher Jesus](#), he argues that “Jesus was a wise, learned rabbi who despised the Romans...worked to rekindle Jewish observance of every aspect of the Torah...was willing to die to end Roman dominion and renew Jewish sovereignty in ancient Israel.”

The question, of course, is to whom is he appealing? Does he really think Jesus existed as portrayed in Christian sources? If so what could he possibly have to offer Jews that is not already on record from our own great leaders of the century he is supposed to have lived in? Perhaps out of his genuine friendship and affection for his Christian admirers Shmuley is trying to remove the 600-pound gorilla in the room, the fundamentally different way Jews and Christians see the character of Jesus Christ. He wants Christians to understand Jesus was not God but a nice loyal Jewish boy (forgive me, I can't stop myself recalling the line from the Monty Python movie, [Life Of Brian](#), “He's not the Messiah; he's a very naughty boy”). And, as a sop, he wants Jews to stop thinking of Jesus as a heretic and the founder of a religion that persecuted them for two thousand years. Not only, but he has endowed him with a totally unsubstantiated title.

He leans heavily on the work of Hyam Maccoby, an English academic (one of my teachers and a grandson of the Kamenitzer Maggid), who masterfully showed how little in the Gospels made any historical sense and how contradictory and improbable their narratives were. Judea at the time was choc-a-bloc with radicals, rebels, saints, charismatic healers, and Teachers of Righteousness (to use Dead Sea Sect terminology), any one of whom, or even a combination of whom, could have served as a model for someone intent on creating a new movement designed for the Roman Empire.

The Gospels were written in Greek some hundred years at least after the purported events. The words attributed to Jesus contained nothing that would in any way have been offensive to the Pharisee, Rabbinic school of Judaism. Politically, the Jews at the time were as divided as today between the peace party and those refusing to compromise. No one would have objected to somebody claiming to be the Messiah, which to them was simply the term used for an anointed leader who would throw off the occupation and restore Jewish sovereignty. After all, many of them supported Bar Kochba, who tried to do just that in 132. The proof of the pudding was in the eating. If you won, you'd be the Messiah, and if you failed, a corpse. Neither was being the “Son of God” a problem, because the Bible calls us all sons and daughters of the one God. And for any human to have claimed he actually was God would, in the eyes of his contemporaries in Judea, simply have consigned him to the ranks of the delusionary.

Since [Geza Vermes](#), the Regius Professor at [Oxford](#), wrote Jesus the Jew in 1973, academics have been trying to recast Jesus as a Jew. But it is all

rather fanciful, because we have absolutely no direct, firsthand evidence whatsoever that Jesus actually existed. The Gospels were written for a gentile audience. Josephus, who might have been a contemporary and refers to him, never met him, and his record is not to be relied on. The Apostle Paul, whom Maccoby cast as the founder of Christianity, only met Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus. We have no more facts about the actual man said to be Jesus than we do about Noah. The Gospels are important documents, but not proofs of existence. I am not talking about the legacy or about the significance of the myth, simply the facts. Orthodox Jews often refer to uncensored scurrilous Talmudic references, usually in code, but we don't know when they were written and whether they reflected later tensions.

A lot of people were trying to make the world a better place as the Roman Empire began to unravel. If you read Daniel Boyarin, particularly [A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity](#), you will know that it was almost impossible to tell many Jews from many Christians or Nazarenes in the sectarian turmoil, splits, and persecutions of those days. It wasn't really until Constantine's Council of Nicaea in 325 that the dividing lines were finally drawn between Jews and Christians and between those who believed Jesus was a man and those who believed him to be God.

I felt, reading this book, the way I did after reading Freud's [Moses and Monotheism](#)^x. You can make out a case for almost anything, but since there are no supporting facts at all, it's all theory. I do not believe there is any point in trying to recast a religion's "myths" or narrative. The issue surely anyway is not the story but the message and the measure of a religious person is how he behaves.

Whoever we are, we believe what we are taught, conditioned, persuaded and we act on the basis of those convictions. Variety in itself is healthy. What we religious folk, must do is stop persecuting people for thinking differently, not try to persuade them to change their ideas. That is why Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1903–1993) laid his ground rules for interfaith that still define the dominant Orthodox position. We should engage in mutually beneficial interaction over causes and matters of joint concern. But to try to engage in Theological Disputation is pointless. I would only want to qualify this by saying it is always beneficial to study other points of view and "know what to reply even to the Epicurian" ([Avot 2.14](#)).

I respect and value all religions that try to make this world a better place and increase love between humans. I despise any religion that tries to impose its worldview on others. It doesn't matter who that religion has as a founding figure, or what tales it tells. No committed Jew is going to follow Jesus as a role model over Hillel, who said virtually the same things. Just as no believing Christian is going to take Hillel over Jesus. So why the need to pretend that Jesus existed and that he was a rabbi, or a shoemaker, or a financial advisor?

It's as idiosyncratic a book, as its author who ranks Maimonides on a higher level than Hillel. We contentious Jews can't even agree amongst ourselves about our own religion, let alone someone else's. His potted history is too simplistic, with the odd mistake and debatable judgments. For example, it was

not Pompey who started using the term "Palestina" instead of "Judea", it was Hadrian. Pharisees and Sadducees did indeed on occasion cooperate despite their differences, as the Mishna Yoma shows.

It is, however, fascinating how someone supposedly born of Jewish parents in Judea should be transformed into a blond Aryan, born in a Dutch barn surrounded by Scandinavian pines. We do indeed create gods in our own image. The long history of Christian persecution and anti-Semitism cannot entirely be blamed on a single mythical narrative. It is the continuous teaching that nonbelievers are inferior subhumans that is the source of most evil in our world, regardless of which religion.

Still, like all his books, it's a fun romp and an easy if controversial introduction to a contentious issue.