



# Jewish Views of Jesus

By Steve Cohen

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## A Brief Survey of Jewish Views of Jesus

My wife and I were talking the other night and when I told her of the subject of this installment. So I asked her (yes, she is Jewish), “What do Jewish people think of Jesus?” Without batting an eyelash, her response was, “Jewish people do not think of Jesus!” Generally Jesus is given little to no thought.

Throughout the ages, the question of who Y’shua (Jesus) is has encountered a full spectrum of reactions ranging from He is a myth, fable and the New Testament is merely an assemblage of narishkeit (Yiddish for foolishness)... all the way to He is the promised Messiah, God incarnate who died for our sins and rose from the dead. Quite a spectrum, indeed.

While Christianity has had and continues to have a major impact on Jews and Judaism, Jesus is not seen as a major figure in Jewish history. Nevertheless, Jews do not actively seek to refute Christian teachings as Judaism teaches respect for all peoples and their faiths. Over the centuries, the question of why Jews did not and do not accept Jesus as divine has forced Jewish theologians to respond to Christian claims about Jesus, particularly those that use Jewish belief and the Hebrew bible (Tanach) to justify their claims.

The belief that Jesus is God, a person of the Trinity, the Messiah, or a prophet of God is incompatible with traditional Jewish philosophical tenets. The idea of the Jewish Messiah is different from the Christian Christ because Jews believe Jesus did not fulfill Jewish Messianic prophecies that establish the criteria for the coming of the Messiah.

Authoritative texts of Judaism reject Jesus as God, Divine Being, intermediary between humans and God, Messiah or saint. The belief in the Trinity is also held to be incompatible with Judaism, as are many other tenets of Christianity.

While there is no particular view of Jesus mandated by Judaism, some Rabbis have speculated about his life. Maimonides in his Epistle to Yemen writes that Jesus was a heretic who sought to annul the Torah. American rabbi and author Milton Steinberg (1903–1949) wrote that Jews saw the historical Jesus as a noble and loving Jewish teacher.

The name Yeshu (alt: Jeshu, Yeishu,) appears in various works of classical Jewish rabbinic literature including the Babylonian Talmud (redacted roughly before 600 CE) and the classical midrash literature written between 250 CE and 700 CE. Scholars continue to debate the meaning of the name, which has been used as an acronym for the Hebrew expression (yemach shemo vezichro – “May his name and memory be obliterated”).

Celsus 2nd century CE - A long tradition of interpreting the term as a reference to Jesus exists outside normative Jewish commentary. This interpretation is first seen in the writing of Celsus who provided an account of Jesus which he claimed he obtained from a Jew. In this account Jesus is said to be the illegitimate child of Mary and a soldier named Panthera.

Rabbi Jacob Emden, one of the most prominent Talmudists and halachic authorities of the 18th century, had expressed a uniquely positive view of Jesus and Christianity, which can be viewed as a novel example of religious pluralism. According to Emden, Jesus was a righteous traditional Jew, who “never



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dreamed of destroying the Torah". Similarly, he also believed that Paul's seemingly antinomian teachings only refer to Gentiles, who are only obligated to observe the most basic Noahide laws.

Sholem Asch, Yiddish author 1880-1957 remarks:

*I couldn't help writing on Jesus. Since I first met him he has held my mind and heart. I grew up, you know, on the border of Poland and Russia, which was not exactly the finest place in the world for a Jew to sit down and write a life of Jesus Christ. Yet even through these years the hope of doing just that fascinated me. For Jesus Christ is to me the outstanding personality of all time, all history, both as Son of God and as Son of Man. Everything he ever said or did has value for us today and that is something you can say of no other man, dead or alive. There is no easy middle ground to stroll upon. You either accept Jesus or reject him. You can analyze Mohammed and . . . Buddha, but don't try it with him. You either accept or you reject.*

Martin Buber, Philosopher 1878-1965 writes:

*From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Savior has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which, for his sake and my own, I must endeavor to understand . . . I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories.*

It should be understood that there have been Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah (Christ) from apostolic days down to this very day. In the past 40 years has there been a resurgence of Jewish believers in Jesus in greater numbers than many generations. Together, we confess the words of the Messianic Apostles Creed:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Y'shua the Messiah, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Ruach Ha-kodesh (Holy Spirit) and born of the Virgin Miriam. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to Sheol. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Ruach Ha-kodesh, the holy congregation, the fellowship of His people, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Omein.*

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach writes:

*The real Jesus was a deeply religious Jewish patriot who despised the Romans for their cruelty to his people and for their paganism. He never once abrogated the laws of the Torah, and expressly condemned those who advocated doing so (Matthew 5:18). Jesus walked the earth with a yarmulke and a beard rather than a halo and a cross.*



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