

Jesus the Jew

David Wood

He was a Jewish child,
He had a Jewish nose,
He read the Jewish Bible,
And wore all Jewish clothes.
He kept the Jewish law
With Jewish thoroughness,
His Jewish mamma wouldn't let
Her Jewish boy do less.
He loved the Jewish feasts,
The Jewish temple too,
He prayed the Jewish psalter,
A proud and Jewish Jew.

This ditty - it can hardly be called poetry - is a good way into our subject, the Jewishness of Jesus, or Jesus the Jew. To frame the subject in these words, however, alerts us immediately to the fact that our conversation today is a distinctly modern event, with a history reaching back little more than thirty years. In 1973 Geza Vermes published his epoch-making book ***Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels***, followed later by ***Jesus and the World of Judaism***, and, later still, by ***The Gospel of Jesus the Jew***. ***Jesus the Jew*** gave rise to a host of similar studies, and created an environment where the Jewishness of Jesus is almost taken for granted. We need to recognise the novelty of this state of affairs. "Jesus the Jew" in the year 2001 might be a cliché, but in 1973 it was shocking news.

The shock waves went in both directions, penetrating contemporary Judaism as well as Christianity. Geza Vermes had broken an unwritten prohibition of his own people, defiling his lips by discussing Jesus of Nazareth in public. Jews were not accustomed to claiming Jesus as one of their own. If they thought of him at all, they inevitably thought in Christian categories, seeing Jesus as Christians did, while rejecting Christian claims. He was, after all, the founder of Christianity, which made him the first Christian. His mother, of course, as all the world knew, was not just Christian but Roman Catholic!

This storm in a theological tea-cup is hardly surprising. On both sides of the Jewish-Christian divide, any serious consideration of the Jewishness of Jesus was bedevilled by a long and bitter history.

For too many Christians, the 'divinity' of Jesus is all that matters. They fail to see that his divinity is not even intelligible apart from his Jewish life and background. For them, the fact that Jesus was a Jew is of no consequence. The statement

'Jesus is God' is a sufficient account of the Christian faith. In other words, Christians commonly understand the doctrine of the incarnation as the belief that God became some sort of general human being, a representative and neutral figure, a man of whom we need know nothing except that he was born of a virgin, worked miracles, died and rose again.

The consequences of this distorted (and heretical!) Christology have been catastrophic.

Forgetfulness of Jesus' Jewishness, together with an exclusive concentration on his divinity, has had disastrous effects on the people from whom Jesus came. Routinely accused of 'deicide', in popular Christian imagination Jews became killers of God. 'The Jews' as a race have taken sole blame for the crucifixion of God's Son, when, apart from being an historical lie, this charge is also a denial of basic Christian orthodoxy. After all, an *infinitesimal* number of Jewish authorities, particular religious and political leaders at a particular moment in history, opposed Jesus and handed him over to death. Historically, this death was a miscarriage of justice, while theologically, the crucifixion results directly from all human sin and becomes the means of all human redemption.

Forgetfulness of Jesus' Jewishness has been crucial in fostering such anti-Semitism, or, more accurately, anti-Judaism. The 'Jewish problem' is in essence a Christian problem, a problem of Christianity's creating. In framing his 'final solution' to the Jewish problem, Hitler simply built on almost twenty centuries of hatred, and improved on the church's incompetence. The ghetto was child's play by comparison to the gas chamber. Had church history been different, the Shoah would have been impossible.

Given so much bad blood, so much ignorance and prejudice, in the face of so many lies, whatever we say about Jesus the Jew needs to begin with pretty basic stuff. Thus, the ditty, followed by this -

"The fact is: Jesus' nose was an unmistakably Jewish nose. His thoughts were Jewish thoughts. His God was Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was of crucial significance to Jesus that he was a Jew; and if he was the Son of God it was in strict continuity with the line of Semitic thought according to which Jews were the people of God and the king was, in a special sense, God's son."

I am quoting here a book published by a Roman Catholic scholar in 1974, just a year on from *Jesus the Jew*. Significantly, even such a sympathetic author makes the classic mistake of pronouncing YHWH, the unpronounceable divine name, and employing a *Christian* pronunciation at that. It was still too soon for this writer to notice that *any* attempt to say what must under no circumstances be said will be offensive to observant Jews.

Paying attention to the Jewishness of Jesus teaches us to care about righting past wrongs, heightening our sensitivity in all dealings with our parent faith. This is by no means just a useful bonus. It is sufficient reason in itself to justify our quest to see Jesus in his actual historical context. Those who denigrate political correctness are vaunting the *status quo*, avoiding the necessity laid upon us by Christ himself to live in charity with our neighbours.

In terms of Christianity itself, however, the great gain in attending to the historical facts is a more balanced Christology.

The doctrine of the incarnation presumes that Jesus is first and foremost fully human. If this is so, we can be sure that his assimilation into the human race was by way of Judaism. The Jewish religion was his religion, he had no other. He learnt about God at his mother's knee. She kindled the Sabbath lights. She taught him to pray. She answered his questions. At festival time, he worshipped in the great Temple in Jerusalem, but week by week he participated in the liturgy of synagogue and home. He delighted in the festivals of Passover, Pentecost and tabernacles. These fed his soul. Learning the Torah, reading the prophets, praying the psalms - these fed his imagination. His thoughts about himself and his mission were Jewish thoughts, growing out of the prophetic tradition.

Jesus' years in Nazareth were the formative period of his life. There he acquired his taste for rural beauty, noticed the onset of summer when the fig trees came into leaf, watched the spring flowers bloom and the careless flight of the birds. No wonder his whole vocabulary was of corn fields and sheep folds, vineyards and lakeside fishing nets. His eyes were accustomed to a landscape of small plots enclosed in boundary walls, so that he grew up recognizing the frontiers between one farm and another, one tribal or village heritage and another. Cosmopolitan northern Palestine was his home, and it had its full effect in shaping him.

He was familiar with the inland Sea of Galilee, but didn't see the ocean until he reached adulthood when he withdrew from danger in Jewish territory and came into Lebanon, as we call it now, down to the great Phoenician ports of Tyre and Sidon. What did it say to him? As far as I know, only Bishop John V. Taylor has asked this question. Here is part of his answer.

"His landlocked world was a network of barriers. But here the dark blue Mediterranean stretched without line or marker to the horizon, and the galleys ploughed their paths hither and thither with no thought of trespass. Even that straight horizon was no boundary but only the limit of a man's sight. And down there among the rigging and the bales of the fortified harbour, Greeks and Romans, Phoenicians and Egyptians, and men from every port between Cornwall and Ceylon, the slave and the freeman, the honest and the crook, accepted one another in the tough, salty brotherhood of trade. As I read the gospels I am convinced that the sights of this foreign coastland stirred in Jesus a subversive thought that had already been forming in his mind. Wasn't this a truer

likeness of the kingdom of his Father who made each new sunrise for the good and bad alike and sent the rain on the just and the unjust? Wasn't this nearer to the openness he practiced as the child of that kingdom by associating with the disreputable and accepting the hospitality of sinners? And could God's reign ever be established among a people who throughout history had turned their backs on the great sea in revulsion and concentrated all their passion upon one holy land? He had already aroused the fury of his own village by recalling his Father's care for a woman of Sidon. He had cried to the towns by the lakeside that it would be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for them. And the trusting faith of a Roman officer had opened for him a vision of Gentiles streaming into the Kingdom from east and west, north and south. Yet something compelled him still to limit his vocation to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Had he been right?"

To entertain such thoughts at all, of course, Jesus had first to have a mind and imagination well stocked with the traditions of his people. He had to have read and absorbed and reflected on the sacred literature and experiences of his ancestors. These furnished him with the necessary vocabulary and world view for making sense of his own perceptions. In other words, revelation was disclosed to Jesus as it is to any of us, slowly, fitfully, from scripture, from observation, within the normal processes of living, God disclosed in relationships with family, friends and strangers.

All this begins to push away any lingering notions we may have about Jesus as some sort of robotic figure, an actor going through the motions in a play written out in every detail in advance. His bible offered him no easy blueprint. Like us, he had to work it out for himself. Jesus is not the messiah his nation looked forward to, so it is foolish to suggest that his nation *should* have recognized him. This is to disparage Jewish people and to minimize the daringly creative contribution of Jesus as a religious genius. Jesus became the Christ he determined he should be by his own daringly new reading of the traditional scriptures. He deliberately took the way of the suffering servant he met in Isaiah and the other prophets, seeing this as the only way to ensure that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We actually know a great deal about the childhood of Jesus, his youth and adulthood. The Jewish bible was his childhood, youth, and adulthood.

In that bible Jesus did not encounter a hypothetical being who lives at some distance from the world, detached from normal life. He did not find a being who occasionally intervened in human history, but for the most part stayed aloof, watchful, vaguely disapproving. This view of God is pretty common among all sorts of people, but it is not Jesus' God. When he searched the scriptures and argued with the doctors, neither did he find some Hindu God, a figure like Krishna. There was, to be sure, something of the stern Muslim view, God demanding blind obedience and total submission, but there was also more.

Through the Hebrew scriptures and in his own experience Jesus came to know a God who yearns over the plight of the people of Israel, and indeed of the whole world. This God hates the human wickedness which defaces the creation and which destroys human beings. This God is also one who, when people are in despair and at their wits' end, comes in person to soothe and to save. God shares our distress and acts in human history to redeem us. The more we think about it, the more Jesus in his radical humanity starts to look very like this God.

Christian faith does not rest on the suggestion that Jesus can be identified with some remote, lofty, imaginary supreme being of our own inventing. Christian faith rests on the conviction that the only true God has emerged within the fabric of the universe as one of us and one with us. Tom Wright, a respected contemporary New Testament scholar, puts it this way -

"And not a droopy, pre-Raphaelite Jesus, either, but a shrewd Palestinian Jewish villager who drank wine with his friends, agonized over the plight of his people, taught in strange stories and pungent aphorisms, and was executed by the occupying forces."

"The doctrine of the incarnation was never intended to be about the elevation of a human being to divine status. That's what, according to the Romans, happened to the emperors after they died, or even before. The Christian doctrine is all about a different sort of God - a God who was so different to normal expectations that he could, completely appropriately, become human in, and as, the man Jesus of Nazareth. To say that Jesus is in some sense God is of course to make a startling statement about Jesus. It is also to make a stupendous claim about God."

When we Christians make our distinctive claim that God is Christlike, and that in God is no unChristlikeness at all, we do so with reference to this shrewd Jewish villager. The hero of Palestinian religion in the first century, according to Geza Vermes, was not the king, the rabbi, or the priest, but the man of God, the charismatic figure believed to be capable of working miracles and mastering the forces of evil and darkness. Jesus, as we meet him in the gospels, is perfectly at home in such company. The titles assigned to him - prophet, lord, and son of God - were routinely applied to similar holy men. Compared to the portrait of minor charismatic figures of the period, however, Jesus stands out as incomparably superior.

The judgment of the man credited with discovering Jesus the Jew and first drawing attention to him is worth remembering.

"Second to none in profundity of insight and grandeur of character, he is in particular an unsurpassed master of the art of laying bare the inmost core of spiritual truth and bringing every issue back to the essence of religion, the existential relationship of man and man, and man and God."

There can be little doubt that this Jesus had no intention of founding a new religion. He died, as he lived, a good Jew. His passion was to reform Judaism, not replace it with something else. He preached an urgent repentance, calling on the people around him to turn again to God. Indeed, it seems certain that his expectation was that by his own actions the Kingdom of God was being ushered in. This justified him in living as if it had already arrived, and inviting others to do the same.

Geza Vermes writes -

"The Father image is at the heart of Jesus' interpretation of the Deity. It is a characteristic Jewish concept which, as usual, has gained personal and individual colouring in the mind of Jesus."

"Needless to say, the picture of a loving and solicitous Father does not tally with the human experience of a harsh, unjust and cruel world. Then as now, fledglings fell from the nest, little ones perished and, as Jesus himself was soon to experience, the innocent suffered. It would be a mistake to imagine that he offered to his followers a kind of sentimentally anthropomorphic image. But what lies at the heart of his intuition and gives individuality and freshness to his vision is the conviction that the eternal, distant, dominating and tremendous Creator is also and primarily a near and approachable God."

Geza Vermes, and those who have followed in his pioneering path, seek only to clear away misunderstandings in search of the real Jesus. Although all these scholars - some Christian, some Jewish, others outside the household of faith - reach different conclusions, they agree on one thing at least: Jesus continues to confront Christian and Jew alike.

It is as though we are always meeting Jesus again for the first time.