

WINNING JEWS TO CHRIST

A Handbook to Aid Christians in their Approach to the Jews

by

Jacob Gartenhaus, Lrrr. D.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHANGING ATTITUDE OF THE JEWS TOWARD JESUS

Jesus came to His own, but His own received Him not.

We know that the masses of the people followed Him faithfully, lovingly, reverently, but when the crisis, the climax came, when He was to taste the bitter cup, He was alone; even His most faithful disciple, Peter, denied Him for a while. For a moment it seemed that even the Father forsook Him. Incited by the leaders, whose leadership was obviously jeopardized by Jesus, some people who yesterday shouted “Hosannah,” now shouted, “Crucify Him”!

After the Resurrection, thousands came back to Him, then hundreds of thousands, both in Judea and in Diaspora. But the Jewish people as a whole, “**received Him not.**” Not even when their Temple and the Holy City were destroyed and the majority of the people were either destroyed or dispersed — all as Jesus foretold; not even then did the blind leaders relinquish their grip on the people, keeping them away from their Saviour.

In order to justify their crime against Jesus, they concocted various tales to portray Jesus as an impostor, a blasphemer, a traitor, a sorcerer, who fully deserved the death to which the “saintly” Rabbis condemned Him. These tales, though so self-contradictory, so far-fetched in imagination and so perverted and distorted, were propagated and handed down from generation to generation both orally and in script, and sad as it is strange, the people implicitly believed these wild yarns. The shrewd leaders knew how to keep away anything that might contradict their story. The New Testament or any authentic account of the life of Jesus was nowhere within reach.

Excommunication was the fate of anyone guilty of reading any Christian book, let alone one who dared believe or speak favorably of Christ. Worst of all, the life and acts of the so-called “Christian people” could only serve the Rabbis as an example of how bad Christianity was. The Roman (Catholic) Church in the Middle Ages surely could not serve as a good example of what Christianity is meant to be.

However, the impact of the Christian Reformation upon Europe had its effect also on the Jewish people. Protestantism became interested in the Scriptures — both the Old Testament and the New Testament — and consequently the Jewish people appeared to Christians in a new light.

They began to realize that both the Old and the New Covenants were made primarily with the Jewish people and were to be everlasting covenants.

People began to see the Jews, not as a God-forsaken, accursed rabble, but as those who were the chosen people, and thus were worth saving, and worthy of Christian love. The Jews, many of them, could not help but reciprocate. They began to see that the Roman Church, with its Inquisition and persecution of Jews, was not synonymous with Christianity. Some even dared to read the New Testament which, after the Reformation, could more easily be obtained. And, of course, anyone who read the New Testament, or even part of it, could no longer believe the incongruous, incoherent and scurrilous tales about Jesus. Then, with the bursting of that bubble, the outlines of the true Jesus began to be recognized by the Jewish mind. But, alas! The risk was still too great to utter what one thought of Jesus, if it was not in strict accordance with the utterance of the ancient rabbis.

Now and then, however, there were courageous men who dared utter some praise of Jesus, and of course they suffered the consequences. Such men were, to cite but a few outstanding instances:

Baruch Spinoza, considered as the greatest Jewish philosopher and, by many, as one of the greatest philosophers mankind has ever produced. He lived in Protestant Holland, 1632-1677. He was excommunicated by the rabbis of his hometown, Amsterdam. Recently many people in Israel have voiced their conviction that the rabbis ought now to remove that excommunication. The Israeli Prime Minister, Ben Gurion, is a great and outspoken admirer of Spinoza. In his "Tractatus Theologica-Politicus," Spinoza writes:

"Christ was not so much a prophet as the mouthpiece of God, Christ was sent to teach not only Jews, but the whole human race; and therefore it was not enough that his mind should be accommodated to the opinions of the Jews alone, but also to the opinion and fundamental teaching common to the whole human race; in other words, to ideas universal and truth."

Heinrich Graetz, the greatest of Jewish historians (lived in Germany, 1817-1891), writes:

"High-minded earnestness and spotless moral purity were his undeniable attributes . . . the gentle disposition and humility of Jesus reminds one of Hillel, whom he seems to have taken as his particular model, and whose golden rule, 'What you wish not to be done to yourself do not unto others,' he adopted as the starting point of his moral code. Like Hillel, Jesus looked on the promotion of peace and forgiveness of injuries as the highest forms of virtue. His whole being was permeated by that deeper religion which contributed to the mildness of his face. He has made humanity honour; he has carried the highest wisdom to the homes of the lowly and the ignorant of the world. He has carried it beyond all barriers of schools and temples, and for this, only, he had to die a death of shame. The redeemer of the poor, the teacher of the ignorant, the friend of all that faint with toil and are oppressed with cares must die on the cross. Over the supreme tragedy let the angel of sorrow spread his wings. Veil thy face, sun! Be darkened, sky! Let the earth tremble and men mourn in tears! The most angelic of men, the most loving of teachers, the meek and humble prophet is to die by the death of the cross" (*History of the Jews*, Vol. II, p. 149).

Dr. J. M. Jost, 1793-1860, another great Jewish historian, writes:

“Spotless walk, unselfish love for mankind. Thousands of Jews adored Jesus, their teacher and friend” (*The History of Judaism and Their Sects*, Vol. I, Chapter 12).

Benjamin Disraeli, the Earl of Beaconsfield (1804-1881), novelist and statesman (British Prime Minister), writes:

“The pupil of Moses may ask himself whether all the princes of the House of David have done so much for the Jews as that Prince who was crucified. . . . Had it not been for him, the Jews would have been comparatively unknown or known only as a high Oriental Caste which had lost its country. Has not he made their history the most famous history in the world?”

“The wildest dreams of their rabbis have been far exceeded. Has not Jesus conquered Europe and changed its name to Christendom? All countries that refuse the cross will, and the time will come when the countless myriads in America and Australia will find music in the songs of Zion, and solace in the parables of Galilee.”

Theodore Reinach (1860-1928), of France, another great Jewish historian and archeologist of renown, writes:

“Although we know very little with certainty concerning the life and teachings of Christ, we know enough of him to believe that, in morals as well as in theology, he was the heir and continuator of the old prophets of Israel. There is no necessary gap between Isaiah and Jesus, but it is the misfortune of both Judaism and Christianity that a gap has been affected by the infiltration of heathen ideas in the one, and the stubborn ‘only too explainable’ reluctance of the other to admit among its prophets one of its greatest sons. I consider it the duty of both enlightened Christians and Jews to endeavor to bridge over this gap.”

Max Nordau (1849-1923), author of international fame, Zionist leader and colleague of Dr. Herzl, writes:

“Jesus is the soul of our soul as he is the flesh of our flesh. Who then could think of excluding him from the people of Israel? St. Peter will remain the only Jew who said of the Son of David: I know not the man.’ If the Jews up to the present have not rendered homage to the sublime beauty of the figure of Jesus, it is because their tormentors have always persecuted, tortured, and assassinated them in his name.”

Albert Einstein, the world-famous scientist, expressed his opinion about Jesus in an interview recorded in *The Saturday Evening Post*, as follows:

“To what extent are you influenced by Christianity?”

“As a child,” Einstein said, “I received instructions both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene.”

“Have you read Emil Ludwig’s book on Jesus?”

“Emil Ludwig’s Jesus is shallow,” Einstein replied. “Jesus is too colossal for the pen of phrase-mongers, however artful. No man can dispose of Christianity with a *bon mot*.”

“You accept the historical existence of Jesus?”

“Unquestionably. No man can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life. How different, for instance, is the impression which we receive from an account of the legendary heroes of antiquity like Theseus! Theseus and other heroes of his type lack the authentic vitality of Jesus.”

“Ludwig Lewisohn, in one of his recent books, claims that many of the sayings of Jesus paraphrase the sayings of other prophets,” Viereck interposed.

“No man,” Einstein replied, “can deny the fact that Jesus existed, nor that his sayings are beautiful. Even if some of them have been said before, no one expressed them so divinely as he.”

Israel Zangwill, considered as the greatest novelist in English Jewish literature, says: “We shall never get the future straight until we disentangle the past. To disentangle the past means to re-examine the trial of Jesus — myths woven purposely by our leaders around the greatest and most noble personality in history, only that we may not see and recognize the real Jesus. To us, my brethren, in this our day, is given the privilege to reclaim the Christ we have lost for so many centuries. Has not the crucified Christ more than fulfilled the highest and noblest of our greatest prophets? Is not He the Incarnation of the essence of what the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets taught?”

Dr. Claude Montefiore, recognized spokesman of English Liberals, President of the Jewish Religious Union, speaking of Jesus, said:

“The most important Jew that has ever lived, to whom the sinner and the outcast, age after age, have owed a great debt of gratitude” (*Jewish Chronicle*, July 14, 1809).

“I cannot conceive that a time will come when the figure of Jesus will no longer be a star of the first magnitude in the spiritual heavens, when he will no longer be regarded as one of the greatest religious heroes and teachers the world has seen. I cannot conceive that a time will come when ‘the Bible’ in the eyes of Europe will no longer be composed of the Old Testament and the New, or when the Gospels will be less prized than the Pentateuch, or the Books of the Chronicles preferred to the Epistles of Paul.

“The religion of the future will be, as I believe, a developed and purified Judaism, but from that developed and purified Judaism the records will tell, however imperfectly, of perhaps its greatest teacher. Certainly its most potent and influential teacher will not be excluded.”

The following most remarkable tribute to Christ appeared in a conservative Jewish periodical:

“I have often thought that Christians miss much of the glory and the grandeur and the beauty of the life of the founder of their faith, his wonderful power of imagery, his remarkable homiletic gifts, the magnificent doctrine he taught and the splendid life he lived by way of example to his followers . . . rebelled and revolted against the infamous ecclesiastical system that prevailed in the days of Jesus as well as against the political conditions which he denounced. There must, too, have been in his character, in his life, much more than in his death something infinitely glorious for him to have become, largely among Jews be it remembered, the object of such adoration as was paid him years and years after his death” (from *Jewish Chronicle*, June 5, 1931).

Dr. Felix Adler, founder of Ethical Culture Societies, speaking in New York before a large Jewish audience, had this to say:

“It has been said that if Christ came to New York or Chicago, they would stone him in the very churches. It is not so! If Christ came to New York or Chicago the publicans and sinners would sit at his feet! For they would know that he cared for them better than they in their darkness knew how to care for themselves, and would love him as they loved him in the days of yore.”

He goes on to point out that the resurrection of Jesus must have some historical foundation to have survived the centuries.

“It is sometimes insinuated that the entire Christian religion depends on the accounts contained in the New Testament, purporting that Jesus actually rose on the third day and was seen by his followers; and that if these reports are found to be contradictory, unsupported by sufficient evidence, and in themselves incredible, then the bottom falls out of the belief in immortality, as represented by Christianity.”

He continued:

“But similar reports have arisen in the world time and again; apparitions of the dead have been seen and have been taken for real; and yet such stories, after being current for a time, invariably have passed into oblivion. Why did this particular story persist, despite the paucity and the insufficiency of the evidence? Why did it get itself believed and take root?”

These glowing words coming from a man of international reputation shocked some of his rationalistic admirers, who charged him with having surrendered to the orthodox Christian position.

Here is the opinion of one of the outstanding rabbis of France, *Rabbi Emmanuel Weill*:

“Let us then as Jews be thankful there was a Jesus and a Paul. I do not know the secret of God, but I believe that Jesus and Christianity were providential means, useful to the Deity in guiding all men gradually and by an effort, keeping pace with the mental state of the majority of men, from paganism up to the pure and true idea of the divinity.”

And here one of Italy, *Prof. David Castelli*:

“Jesus, in a certain sense, fulfilled in his person the prophecies of the Old Testament: they reached in him a height beyond which it is impossible to go. He was the great teacher of mankind, spreading among all nations the principle of love and humanity which, until then, had remained confined within the limits of Judaism.”

American rabbis, living in a free Christian civilization, could also freely express what they thought of Jesus, and they often did. Thus a rabbi in St. Louis opened the service by reading the Sermon on the Mount and then preached a sermon giving the following six reasons why Jews should acknowledge Jesus:

1. “Because he lived as a Jew, mingled with Jews, and observed their festivals.”
2. “He died as a Jewish patriot, for principle and convictions.”
3. “His religion was the religion of the Synagogue. He taught the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man.”
4. “Jesus was a Jew in his criticism of the Jews of his day.”
5. “Jesus was a Jew in that he influenced the Jewish race by his personality. In other words, because Jesus was a kinsman of the Jews, they became of world importance.”
6. “Jesus was a Jew in his influence on the history of humanity.”

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, of New York, a great Zionist leader, one of the most prominent leaders of American Jewry, was often attacked (by certain speakers and writers) on account of his favorable expressions about Jesus. In a sermon at the civic Lenten Service held under the auspices of the Petterson Council of Churches, he is quoted as saying:

“There is less difference than most people think in the creeds of Christians and Jews. We differ only in the way in which we place Christ. He is a wonderful Jew. He is my teacher as well as yours. It would be well for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ.”

In an article that appeared in *The Outlook*, June 7, 1913, Rabbi Wise says: “It is no mean joy and ignoble pride in us of the House of Israel to recognize, to honor and to cherish among our brothers — Jesus the Jew.”

Rabbi Krauskopf, of Philadelphia:

“I will yield to none in recognizing the civilizing influence of the Man of Nazareth. I am ready to bestow upon him as high a tribute as anyone has yet bestowed” (from *A Rabbis Impressions*).

Dr. Gerson B. Levi, of Chicago, in a sermon published in the *Chicago Tribune*:

“A protest of Orthodox Jews criticizing me for my position has led me to make this public statement. For some time I have been teaching in my classes at the Temple, the New Testament with special reference to the life of Jesus in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, giving the history of the founding of the Christian Church.

“This is a Christian civilization and the majority of the people of America are of the Christian faith. Therefore, I feel it the duty of everyone who would understand our present civilization to study the foundations upon which it rests.”

Rabbi H. G. Enelow, D.D., of Temple of Emmanuel, New York City:

“Among the great and the good that the human race has produced, none has ever approached Jesus in universality of appeal and sway. He has become the most fascinating figure in history. In him is combined what is best and most mysterious and most enchanting in Israel — the eternal people whose child he was. The Jew cannot help glorying in what he has meant to the world, nor can he help hoping that Jesus may yet serve as a bond of union between Jew and Christian.”

Rabbi Enelow asks and answers the question: “What does the modern Jew think of Jesus? A Prophet? Yes, crowning a great tradition, and who can compute all that Jesus has meant to humanity? The love he has inspired, the solace he has given, the good he has engendered, the hope and joy he has kindled — all that is unequaled in human history.” He also speaks of Jesus as the most “fascinating and most influential and most beneficent religious teacher.”

Dr. E. N. Cailisch, Richmond, Va., giving reasons why Jesus was excluded from Judaism, expressed regret because of the estrangement that has existed between Jesus and his people:

“This is a moderate and restrained expression of conditions, and to those who regret that this estrangement has existed between Jesus and his people, and who hold that there is much in his life and teachings which can be of value to the Jew, the ‘hope must remain that somehow, and at some not too distant time, Jesus will be reclaimed by Judaism, and will assume the place which should be his in the minds and hearts of his fellow Jews.”

“With this thought I am in hearty accord. An ancient rabbi once said: ‘From all of my teachers I have learned,’ and in our ritual we voice the prayer: ‘O Lord, open our eyes that we may see and welcome all truth, whether shining from the annals of ancient revelations or reaching us through the seers of our own time.’ In this spirit I agree with the writer that the time has come when the Jew of today shall seek to know if there is not something in the life and doctrine of Jesus of Nazareth that will help him to make his own life nobler and truer, whether or not there may be room for Jesus in modern Judaism even as he had place in the ancient synagogue.”

Isidore Singer, Ph.D., Managing Editor of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, expresses his views in the following words:

“I regard Jesus of Nazareth as a Jew of Jews, one whom all Jewish people are learning to love. His teachings have been an immense service to the world in bringing Israel’s God to the knowledge of hundreds of millions of mankind.”

The great change in Jewish thought concerning Jesus of Nazareth, I cannot better illustrate than by this fact: When I was a boy, had my father, who was a very pious man, heard the name of Jesus uttered from the pulpit of the synagogue, he and every other man in the congregation would have left the building and the rabbi would have been dismissed at once.

Now it is not strange in many synagogues to hear sermons preached eulogistic of this Jesus, and no one thinks of protesting; in fact, we are all glad to claim Jesus as one of our people.

I also wish to call attention to that masterly, monumental book written in Hebrew, *Jesus of Nazareth*, by Joseph Klausner, one of the greatest Hebrew scholars and professors in the Hebrew University of Palestine. This was the first life of Christ published in the Hebrew language, and, according to all critics, Jewish and Christian, it is a scholarly work of the first magnitude.

It has done more to bring Israel nearer to Jesus than all the Medieval churches and to a great extent many of the Protestant churches even of today. Though it caused a great furor, the author was neither excommunicated nor stoned to death as might have been his lot in former days. For the first time in 1900 years, a rabbinical Jew discussed the life of Jesus.

“He pitilessly destroyed the idea that Jesus was a myth. He tells his readers they are wrong in taking a negative or indifferent attitude to Jesus, for his character and his indisputable idealism deserve a positive valuation.”

He declares all the hostile passages about Christ in the Talmud possess no historical value; that likewise the book, *Toldoth Yeshu*, is unhistorical and blasphemous.

I quote from the last chapter of this book which has so greatly stirred the Jewish and Christian world:

“But Jesus is for the Jewish nation a great Jewish teacher of morality and an artist in parable. In his ethical code, there is a sublimity, distinctiveness, and originality in form unparalleled in any other Hebrew ethical code; neither is there any parallel to the remarkable art of his parables. The shrewdness and sharpness of his proverbs and his forceful epigrams serve, in an exceptional degree, to make the ethical code be stripped of its wrappings of miracles and mysticism; the book of the ethics of Jesus will be one of the choicest treasures in the literature of Israel for all time.”

I have quoted but a few rabbis and scholars of prominence, and these are of the past generation. Liberal rabbis of the present day are even more daring in their praise and admiration of Jesus.

Orthodox rabbis still cling to the traditional tales, but at least they are more cautious in the use of their language; there is no longer the reviling, vilifying and derisive vocabulary of olden times.

Many Jewish authors, both in Hebrew and in Yiddish, demanded a revision of the trial of Jesus. Some years ago one of the greatest Jewish writers, Dr. Chain Zhitlowsky, demanded a revision of the trial of Jesus. In *Das Neue Leben*, his journal, he says:

“The Jewish legend concerning Jesus is a shameless blasphemy of all that should be considered holy and precious. . . . Every Jew should be proud of the fact that Jesus is our brother, flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood. We desire to put him back where he belongs.”

Many Jewish novelists had Jesus as the “hero” of their novels. Outstanding among them, was the late Shalom Ash, who is generally considered as the greatest of Jewish novelists. His so-called “Christian” novels, such as *The Nazarene*, have raised a storm of protest from many notable Jews, especially in America. Nevertheless, they were translated into Hebrew and printed in Israel, and found a wide circulation there.

Not only because his books are real masterpieces in literature, did the Jews in Israel eagerly read them, but also because there in the reborn homeland the Jews want to be free from all encumbrances and impediments which have thus far kept them away from the Truth, the free unadulterated truth which some of their leaders so badly distorted.

Many are asking themselves:

“For nineteen hundred years we blindly followed our leaders. Now it has been proven beyond refutation that their whole account of Jesus is utter nonsense. Can we now trust the rabbis? May not the Christian’s account be the right one? Have not our forefathers erred in their condemnation of Jesus?”

It is in Israel where a new day is dawning, the day when finally they will fully recognize Him whom they pierced, the day when they will shout: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Jehovah.”

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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