

**Zev Garber and Kenneth L. Hanson, eds., *Judaism and Jesus*. Monograph Series, *Mentalities/Mentalités* 33:1 (2019) 177 pp.**

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After a Preface by Kenneth L. Hanson and an Introduction by Zev Garber, this scholarly collection of essays manifests in nine chapters (many of which are or contain material previously published) divided into three numbered sections, and is followed by a Source Index of Biblical (Hebrew and Christian, Talmudic), including texts references to the Apocrypha, Pseudepigraphia; as well as to the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Texts, then Philo Judaeus, Titus Flavius Josephus, the Mishnah, the Two Talmuds (Bavli and Yerushalmi), other Rabbinic Writings; and finally, one “Miscellaneous” classical Latin listing, Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*. This certainly is no vulgarization, popularization or Religion for Idiots. It is, quite frankly, heavy stuff.

Not only heavy going, it is also heady stuff: to some outrageously controversial to cluster together studies of Judaism and Jesus. But this is what Garber and Hanson have been doing for many years. No mishmash version of “Judeo-Christian Heritage”, the two authors take the juxtaposition seriously, and the integrity of Judaism and Christianity, with a shared interest in who and what Jesus was and is carefully parsed and discussed. In addition to their preliminary material, Garber contributes four chapters and Hanson and five.

Hanson’s Preface calls the collection “a collaborative effort to shine a fresh Hebraic spotlight on the ancient Galilean sage known in antiquity as *Yeshua m’Nazaret* – Jesus of Nazareth.” He also offers a disarming autobiographical statement of how he moved from an Evangelical Christian background through Messianic Judaism to a conversion to Judaism itself, thus defanging the image of Messianic Judaism as the monster that seeks to lure away gullible and poorly-educated young Jewish boys and girls and transform them into the grotesque Jesus-worshipping Jew. Hanson thus sees his scholarly task as not “to complete” the Jewishness of the Children of Israel through baptism and missionary fervour, but to return the figure of Jesus to the fullness of his Judaism before the image was distorted by the New Testament and ecclesiastical treatises.

Garber, “the mayven in blue jeans,” sparks off the collection in his Introduction by calling for better knowledge of philology, history, religious history, and rationality before anything serious can be said about the Jewish milieu in which Jesus appeared, the way he thought, preached and interpreted previous scriptures, and then the particularities of the variety of Judaisms and Christianities there were in the opening centuries of the Common Era or we might say in the complexities of the late Hellenistic world. While he wishes to initiate an intelligent dialogue between rabbinical Jews and so-called messianic Jews, they first need to know what they are talking about; otherwise there is either only people talking past each other or arguing against brick walls. Intelligent, patient and rational discussion may enhance both sides understanding the other, without, however, disturbing the unique and distinct integrity of the other.

Section I consists two chapters, one each by the two authors, Chapter 1, Garber’s “Teaching Jewish Studies” and Chapter 2, Hanson’s “Jesus in the Trenches.” To understand teaching about Christ and Christianity from a Jewish perspective is a particularly American way of doing things, especially when students tend to come from relatively uneducated backgrounds, and where the notion of faith is reified beyond what most of the rest of the modern

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secular world conceives. In the same way, too, intelligent discussions on culture itself seem to be restricted to what Americans call “colleges” and the rest of the world universities; and where everyone who teaches in these colleges is generically a “professor”. Given all these aspects of American exceptionalism in higher education, it is wonderful to see Garber so enthusiastic about what and how he teaches: he really does believe in the idea of a Judeo-Christian civilization. In Chapter 1, after describing the courses he teaches in a small two-year college in California, he launches forth on a cogent and illuminating discussion of what he personally believes comes out of these exercises, or rather more plainly: what he believes. As an Orthodox practicing Jew, he has no truck with or for the compromise or concession of a Jesus who was the first Christian. Jesus was and is—if one reads the texts closely and contextually—a Jew of the same sort as the Pharisees idealized in Hillel—and not the iconic person configured and proclaimed by Paul (born Saul). Listening to what the Jewish rabbi Jesus preached one can see the seething multi-cultural and creative currents at work in Second Temple Judaism. Is this a Jesus a modern Jew can engage with meaningfully? The other, the messianic and gnostic figure of the Pauline church as developed through the medieval period and on into the Protestant Reformation can be respected as a central icon in a different religion altogether, albeit one that shares certain texts, images and ideas with Talmudic Judaism. Jews and Christians use much of this background to mean different and incompatible things.

Hanson’s second chapter is titled in full “Jesus ‘In the Trenches’: Pedagogical Challenges Posed by Teaching the Nazarene in the Context of Judaic Studies” and raises some of the same questions as Garber did: Are the two religions, Judaism and Christianity, so irreconcilable that there can be no meaningful dialogue, especially in an American context and under the aegis of a small secular college? Implicit, too, are the questions of political correctness in a time and place of great divisions in the United States and of propriety in asking young relatively ill-prepared students to probe their own and others’ spiritual beliefs. It is then not so much a dialogue between Jews and Christians as between those who have no basis of understanding what they are being asked to probe and those who see such questions as hostile to what they have been brought up not to question—ever. This is not even the same thing that Thomas Carlyle had to confront when he spoke of young children in the hinterlands of rural Wales who had never heard either of God or Jesus.

A further complication arises when you factor in the reality that many young adults in a community college (and unfortunately probably in four-year colleges and universities as well) who do not know how to read books at all, and need such a high degree of guidance that only selected paragraphs from books and articles have to be provided for them—or shown power point images of brief and fragmentary statements. I cannot imagine the classroom situation in which Hanson imagines his probing, open discussions and non-hostile questioning taking place. Yet he does honestly set forth the problems of what to do where openness is resisted, reading or listening to other points of view considered painful, and discussion a foreign notion altogether. When some sort of response is elicited (“on line”, of course) Hanson asks himself (and we who are reading his essay) what can be done “when faced with attitudes that are not only grossly oversimplified and historically inaccurate,” and when these comments are “deeply offensive” to one side or the other. Hanson’s “tack” is “to segue” around and in back of these opinions to try give the historical, political and social contexts. But is anybody listening out there? In other words, Hanson’s intentions and his explanations make a lot of sense to an

educated, sophisticated and patient audience; however, are these the individuals and groups he seeks to reach? Here is what this pedagogue says:

The great majority of undergraduate students, both Jewish and Christian, cannot be expected to be aware of the intricacies of the 'synoptic problem, or the extent to which the critical examination of source material directly affects our appreciation of the history behind them. (p. 47)

How does one succeed making such community college students "mindful" of these problems and the way to address them?

Five chapters are clustered into Section II, two by Garber and three by Hanson. Thus: Garber's Chapter 3, "One in Christ" and Chapter 4, "Jewish Jesus: Partisan's Imagination"; and Hanson's Chapter 5, "Jesus, the Pharisees and the Sages," Chapter 6, "The Shema, the Historical Jesus and Messianic Judaism" and Chapter 7, "Threading the Needle: The Hasidim and the Nazarene."

In the first of two articles in this section of the book by Garber, "'One in Christ': The View from Torah and Shoah," the argument is embedded in personal and autobiographical comments, and while not exactly on the defensive, as the Jew, he reiterates the need for "mutual understanding and respect" on both sides of the dialogue, "as well as personal change and growth within their faith affirmation." It is as though grotesque phrases like "faith affirmation" or "Easter faith" were there to shield him in debate with "a collegial friend." After many centuries of bitterness and inequality, when Jews were forced to attend and listen to conversionist preaching and engage in so-called debates where the conclusions were long since decided before any rabbi opened his mouth, Garber thinks the playing field has finally been levelled...maybe just a teensy-weensy little bit. For the sake of argument, and not with a metaphorical gun at his head, the rabbi assumes that Jesus was a real historical person and an iconic reality, and that what constitutes New Testament theology makes sense and can be discussed in a calm, rational way.

Nevertheless, for all the abstractions and neologisms, the New Testament and associated writings form themselves into a "teaching of contempt." Similarly, the rabbinical traditions, no matter how much they can be dressed up today in similar jargon, are a "teaching of absolute monotheism." The lovely words and images about love, forgiveness and mercy just don't stand up to the Jewish notions of truth, justice and reason. On the other hand, Garber thinks he can find sufficient wriggle room in both Judaism and Christianity for a dialogue to take place; not a debate on which religion is better than the other, but on how far they can agree to disagree. Unfortunately, just a few years after this chapter was first published, anti-Semitism has grown so strong and is so pervasive on American campuses—as anti-Zionism and as anti-Jewishness—that I find it hard to go along with the well-meant intentions of Garber and his colleague. In terms of seeing Jesus through the lens of Jewish Studies and in the context of lower level Christian and Jewish students fumbling to understand their own place in the American liberal tradition. The solution as faith in "faith knowledge" just seems to pile abstraction on metaphor on mythology. Highly educated professors with sophisticated experience in textual analysis and commentary may gain much from wrestling with the angel of God; or better yet, through "everyday acts of humaneness." In the days when the Cuckoo has occupied the nest of the university and pushed out the chicks of learning, fouled the halls of justice with confusion and bigotry and the corridors of power with alternative facts and fake news, how can anyone honestly think it will work merely to proclaim: "Respect the difference"? There is too much noise to be able to hear the silent voice of reason.

Garber's third essay in this section is termed Chapter Four, "The Jewish Jesus: A Partisan's Imagination". Whereas the Christian tradition from the New Testament on has read Jesus out of history, especially Jewish history, Garber's self-appointed task is to read Jesus back into Jewish history and especially the historical functioning of midrash. The political situation in the Land of Israel as a contested state within the Hellenistic Empire that was Rome was one fraught with dangerous fanaticisms, extreme withdrawals into apocalyptic and messianic cults, and moderate factions seeking to ameliorate the problems and thus restore autonomy to the Temple State of Jerusalem. Jesus is reconstructed by these warring groups and imagined as providing if not a practical solution through political machinations or military strategy, then at least by revivifying ancient myths and divinizing the heavenly Temple as a cult of salvation through sacrifice. The Sadducees as a priestly party seeking support from the Romans opposed the rabbinically-inclined Pharisees who, when an alternative messianic state proved impossible to establish, created a study-based legal system that could exist without a priestly cult nor even a tangible national territory. Followers and reformers of Paul's mystery religion demonized the Pharisees and premised their spiritual victory on the subjugation of the rabbinical Jews. In many ways, Christianity turned Judaism inside out, upside down and backwards, whilst Talmudic Judaism shaped its customs, beliefs and ideals in opposition to the triumphalist, replacement theology of the Church.

Hanson slams back into the argument with Chapter Five, "Jesus, the Pharisees and the Sages: Allies, Foes and Straw Men." The first steps to understanding what the Gospels and other books of the New Testament tells us about Jesus come when we tease apart the parts of the text written within Second Temple discursive conventions and those added later and filtered through Hellenistic and subsequent Christian lenses. Jesus knew and lived within the parameters of both the Written and Oral Law, and he preached and taught through the midrashic examples of his own questioning of their efficacy within the world around him. What he tested and questioned were already in a state of flux. There are instances where Jesus leans towards the liberal interpretations of the House of Hillel, and times when he tilted towards the more conservative strict readings of the House of Shammai, but he always remains within House of Israel. Hanson proposes that Jesus "likely formed a bridge between Shammai and Hillel" and He always speaks in ways "quite consistent with Mishnaic and Talmudic precepts", except when the Gospels insert their own Pauline versions of a Christian Messiah, and in so doing transform the Pharisees into the opposite of what they really were and thus make them the hypocritical enemies of the Saviour. That there were hypocrites within the Pharisee Party is admitted in rabbinical writings, but that is not the same thing: hypocrites were sinners, not Pharisees. It comes down to this: understanding the New Testament requires critical and contextual readings. Hanson is not sure "Yeshua's twenty-first century followers (including Messianic Jews) are up to it."

The third of Hanson's essays in Section Two takes up that challenge and is entitled "Chapter Six. The Shema, the Historical Jesus and Messianic Jesus." He goes, as he says, to "the heart of the issue": what is Messianic Judaism? Is it a viable version of normative Judaism, a mischievous Christian scheme to hoodwink Jews, or a totally new religion? Looking at "serious scholars" in the movement, Hanson shows that there is no valid theology, a lot of wordplay and thus a crisis of identity. Unlike the Brooklyn-based Chabadniks or some streams of medieval and later Jewish Kabbalah, where occasional near-heretical ideas and images appear, the messianic Jews cross the red line: they are not "bad Jews", they simply are no

longer—if they ever were—Jews. Yet, in line with the tenor of the whole book, this chapter tries to be polite and respectful to this group of misguided enthusiasts.

Which takes us to Hanson's third chapter in this section, "Chapter Seven: 'Threading the Needle': The Nazarene, the Ḥasidim, and Ancient 'Zealotry'," a long essay especially written for this book. To put Jesus (*Yeshua*) in historical context, it is first necessary to deal with that pesky group of enigmatic pietists known as Ḥasidim, not to be confused, however, with the German Pietists of the Middle Ages or the followers of the *Besht* (Baal Shem Tov) in the eighteenth century or the modern *Chabadniks* from Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn.

In tracking down who these first century of the Common Era Ḥasidim were, Hanson is meticulous and cautious; but even then, the closer the scrutiny of extant documents and the more incisive the parsing of relevant passages, the less clear who this group were, or perhaps several groups with varying degrees of violence in their activities, with only perhaps some of these religious extremists likely to have given birth to Jesus or created him as a generic model or title as their leader. In addition to zealous warfare against external and internal enemies, the Ḥasidim were sometimes known for their miracle-working and magical tricks. Then, to be sure, some of the pietists were also pacifists and mystics, their goal in some cases being to withdraw from this sinful world and enter the pure world-to-come. Joshua or Yeshua or Jesus, being a common name at the time, it is hard to track down which of the Ḥasidic movements he may have come from or which of them constructed their mythical teacher of righteousness, suffering servant or sacrificial hero as their own divine Saviour. Once bands or fraternal groups of Christians started to form and coalesce into triumphalist parties, the sages, scribes and rabbis would have to define who and what they were in opposition to these strange heretics. Jews followed the Law, sought Justice in the world, and conducted themselves in accord with loving kindness and the pursuit of the truth.

As José Faur has argued in his many books on the Jewish view of Jesus and the rise of Christianity, the writers of the New Testament and early ecclesiastical treatises were not familiar with rabbinic modes of discourse, misunderstood midrashim, and were confused by the argumentative and witty style of scriptural interpretation. In fact, Faur thinks that the emergence of the Nazarene sect is an affair of Alexandria rather than Jerusalem. But Hanson pursues his scholarly labyrinth with the clue of respect and patience, and will not dismiss out of hand such groups as militantly religious bandits or traitorous hooligans. As he attempts to "thread the needle" in terms of how we are to understand the Ḥasidim (and Jesus/Yeshua of Nazareth) in relation to their attitudes toward violent militarism," he really doesn't come out at the other side. The situation is too confusing and he can't decide where Jesus was or was supposed to be. "Had Yeshua lived three decades later might he have joined the Great Revolt? The question deserves some serious reflection." Does it? Will it help naïve modern students in the first two years of a college education know anything they can understand? Perhaps the American dromedary just doesn't fit through the pedagogical needle and it will spit in your eye if you get too close.

Now to Section III and the last two chapters, one by each of the authors, Garber's Chapter 8, "Perpetual Dilemma" and Hanson's Chapter 9, "Sitting at a Common Table." Speaking at a conference where "serious scholars" were debating the state of 21<sup>st</sup> century Messianic Judaism, as though a legitimate dialogue could occur, meaning, in other words, as though there were something a real Jew could find something to say about this crazy movement, Garber offers

“My thoughts on how God, Torah, and Jesus talk are used, misused, and confused...” It would be like sitting down politely and discussing the Shoah with a Holocaust Denier. Remember: Garber, like Hanson, is not saying there can't be real dialogue and learning between a Christian and a Jew and, as Garber colourfully puts it, “for the most part harmony in diversity prevails under the tent of Sinai and Calvary.” However, inviting the Messianic Jews to the share a meal in a trialogue creates a crisis. “I walked from the gathering,” says Garber, “disappointed and sad. In a converse way, I felt like Paul reverting to Saul, walking from the table of Messianic Jewish Christians in righteous conflict.”

Then Garber takes up the case of Edith Stein, baptized a Catholic, but murdered by the Nazis as a Jew. Does that qualify her to be considered a “baptized Jew”? Whatever sympathy one feels for a victim of the Holocaust, using her as a proof text in the argument for messianic Judaism is nothing less than a grotesque insult to Judaism, one more attempt to denigrate Talmud and Halakhah, a ploy to justify coerced conversion. Let her be beatified by the Vatican and worshipped as a saint, but not glorified as a completed Jew. That Christians don't see the hurt such talk causes is what makes Garber back off from his usual patience and respect. Mainstream Judaism rejects Messianic Judaism ‘as an acceptable *halakhic* movement.’ That is why “Contemporary Jews and denominational Judaism view Messianic Judaism as a farce and at worst a scam.” It's like putting on black face and asking to be pitied as a “house nigger,” or rather dressing up as Shylock or Fagan and asking to be elected bishop of Jerusalem.

On a much higher plane of discussion, Garber concludes his chapter with a review of a book *Converging Destinies: Jews, Christians and the Mission of God* and a response by the author of that book Stuart Dauermann: a relieved thanks for the seriousness and careful parsing of his argument, but otherwise nothing—a non-debate or even dialogue. It would seem, then, that his polite and low-key voice has smashed Dauermann's presentation of Messianic Judaism to smithereens, yet left the man alone in the midst of his faith.

But that's not all, as the hucksters say in their late night television sales pitch, you also get Kenneth Hanson's last word, “Chapter Nine, ‘Sitting at a Common Table’.” Hanson is more optimistic about an interfaith discussion that includes Messianic Jews along with Christians and Jews despite our living in “an era of societal polarization”, so that “communities of faith” can learn from each other. I am unconvinced that no matter how much jargon is piled up, neologisms invented, and metaphors twisted that anyone can go beyond embarrassed smiles and enigmatic silences. If our own age of extremism and terrorist cultural destruction is comparable to the tensions and wars of the Second Temple Period, then what lies ahead is bleak indeed.

One is tempted here as a conclusion to this review to cite from George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1874-1876).

It is a common sentence that Knowledge is power; but who hath duly considered or set forth the power of Ignorance? Knowledge slowly builds up what Ignorance in an hour pulls down.