

Re-Judaizing Jesus

By David Van Biema. (Illustration by Christoph Nieman for TIME)

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Recently a popular blogger — let's call him 'Rabbi Ben' — zinged the scholarship of a man we shall call 'Rabbi Rob'. 'Rabbi Ben' claimed 'Rabbi Rob' did not "understand the difference between Judaism prior to the two Jewish wars in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. and later Mishnaic and Talmudic [writings of ancient Jewish scholars within] Judaism [after Jesus' time]." He helpfully provided a syllabus.

Actually, neither man is a rabbi. (Sorry.) Ben Witherington is a Methodist New Testament scholar, and Rob Bell a rising Michigan mega-pastor. Yet each regards sources like the Mishnah and Rabbi Akiva as vital to understanding **history's best-known Jew: Jesus**. [The *Mishnah* is a collection of ancient Scriptural commentary by various scholars. Rabbi Akiva was and still is, one of the most highly-respected ancient Hebrew scholars. He was martyred around 132 A.D.]

This is seismic. For centuries, the discipline of Christian "Hebraics" consisted primarily of Christians cherry-picking Jewish texts to support the traditionally assumed contradiction between the Jews — whose alleged dry legalism contributed to their fumbling their ancient tribal covenant with God — and Jesus, who personally embodied God's new covenant of love. [But today, seminaries across the Christian spectrum are studying the New Testament in context with ancient Hebrew writings from the time of Jesus.] Amy-Jill Levine is one such scholar from the Vanderbilt University. She says that **"if you get the [Jewish] context wrong, you will certainly get Jesus wrong."**

The shift came in stages: first a brute acceptance that Jesus was born a Jew and did Jewish things; then admission that he and his interpreter Paul saw themselves as Jews even while founding what became another faith; and today, recognition of what the Rev. Bruce Chilton, author of *Rabbi Jesus*, calls Jesus' passionate dedication "to Jewish ideas of his day" on everything from ritual purity to the ideal of the kingdom of God — ideas he rewove but did not abandon.

What does this mean, practically? At times the resulting adjustment seems simple. For example, Bell thinks he knows the mysterious words Jesus wrote in the dust while defending the adulteress ("He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," etc.) [John 8:7]. By Bell's calculation, that showdown occurred at the same time as religious Jews' yearly reading of the prophet Jeremiah's warning that "those who turn from [God] will be written in the dust because they have forsaken [him]." Thus Jesus wrote the crowd's names to warn that their lack of compassion alienated their (and his) God.

A trickier revision for readers involves Paul's Letter to the Romans, forever a key Christian text on sin and Christ's [saving] grace. Yet Chapters 9 through 11 are often skipped over for what seems like extraneous material, but which are specifically about the Jews. Jason Byassee, an editor at the *Christian Century*, says scholars are increasingly now reading Romans through those chapters, as a musing by a lifelong Jew on how God can fulfil his biblical covenant with Israel even if it does not accept His son. Byassee the theologian agrees. But as a Methodist pastor, he frets that **Romans "is no longer really about Gentile Christians [but Jews].** How do you preach it?"

That's not a frivolous query. Ideally, the reassessment should increase both Jewish-Christian amity [peaceful pursuits] **and gospel clarity**, things that **won't happen if regular Christians feel that in rediscovering Jesus the Jew, they have lost Christ**. Yet Bell finds this particular genie so logically powerful that he has no wish to rebottle it. **Once in, he says, "you're in deep. You're hooked, 'cause you can't ever read it the same way again."**