Jesus the Jew: Contributions of Geza Vermes to the Modern Jesus Debate

Robert A. Zelada

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Jesus the Jew: Contributions of Geza Vermes to the Modern Jesus Debate

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Robert A. Zelada
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Approved by:

Vincent Smiles
(Vincent Smiles, Associate Professor of Theology)

John Merkle
(John Merkle, Professor of Theology)

Barry Cytron
(Barry Cytron, Jay Phillips Chair in Jewish Studies)

Vincent Smiles
(Vincent Smiles, Department Chair of Theology)

Mark Thamert
(Mark Thamert, Director of Honors Program)

Margaret Cook
(Margaret Cook, Director of Honors Thesis Program)
Recently the Catholic Church has encouraged and participated in dialogue and exchange among different faith traditions. Specifically, much discussion has occurred between Catholics and Jews in an effort to bridge the gap which had developed between the two religions over many centuries. Continuing in the spirit of this dialogue, this paper intends to synthesize major themes in a trilogy of books written on the search for the historical Jesus by Geza Vermes. The themes of this trilogy are especially important to this dialogue because they accentuate the Jewishness of Jesus and because they are written by a contemporary Jewish scholar. The aim of the paper is then two-fold. First, it aims at a continuation of the dialogue between two faith traditions which have a common past. Second, and more to this author's inclination, it aims at accentuating the continuing need for re-examination of traditional ideas if the Christian tradition hopes to stay true to its original inspirations in a rapidly changing world.

To achieve this two-fold goal, this paper will focus on the Jewishness of Jesus. Throughout the development of Christianity, Jesus' Jewish background was for the most part ignored. Through poor textual interpretation, it was believed that in some way, Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus and that Christianity superseded Judaism. Hence, an anti-Jewish attitude developed in the Christian religion, which influenced the downplaying of Jesus' Jewishness by Christian scholars. Stemming from the document Nostra Aetate issued by the Second Vatican Council, and continuing in the Pontificate of John Paul II, interfaith dialogue has compelled Christians to acknowledge that they were wrong and at fault for their hateful beliefs concerning Judaism. Moreover, statements by Pope John Paul II acknowledged the "intrinsic" relationship of Judaism and Christianity, noting that we both stem from the same tradition of the Old Testament [Sherman/Kasimow 74]. In short, from dialogue many of the traditional anti-Jewish teachings in the church have been shattered, while there has been a growing recognition
of the Jewishness of Jesus. With a better understanding of Jesus’ Jewishness, the Christian community can better interpret the life and teachings of Jesus. Therefore, this paper aims at continuing the Christian re-examination of faith with the aid of the recreation of the Jewish Jesus so elegantly portrayed in Vermes’ writings.

Demonstrating the historicity of alleged events has always been a difficult task. While there are texts that document Jesus’ life, their historical accuracy is tentative. Our best scholars tell us the author of each Gospel text includes his own bias and objectives in his description of the person of Jesus. Each of the redactors of the four Gospels belonged to developing Christian communities. Great conflict and prejudice existed between these new Christian communities and both the political and religious establishments of the time. When the writers of the Gospels began to record the life of Jesus, these conflicts influenced their writings and were interwoven with the stories of Jesus. In truth, they reflect the lives of the writers and communities of the texts.

A very logical question that stems from these problems, then, is how much one can discover of the historical events concerning the person of Jesus. This has become a hotly debated academic question. A very influential scholar in the search for the historical Jesus has been Geza Vermes. Vermes incorporates all of the traditional techniques of biblical exegesis in his research; however, his research takes somewhat of a different tone than other scholars of Jesus’ life. It is Vermes’ strong belief that to investigate the life of Jesus, one must have an extensive background in Judaism and its texts surrounding the time of Jesus, along with a strong familiarity with the languages associated with the writings of the Gospels and Jewish tradition [JWJ 69]. He stresses the need of the historian to suspend religious beliefs and examine the New Testament without prejudice. According to Vermes, “the New Testament, however marvellous
and influential, is but a fraction of the literary legacy of first-century Judaism" [JWJ 70].

Moreover, once one leaves behind his/her religious prejudices:

The New Testament then ceases to be insignificant for Jews or autonomous and in every sense primary for Christians . . . [A] good deal of the New Testament appears as reflecting a brief movement in the age-long religious development of Israel that starts with the bible and continues via the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran, Philo, the New Testament, Josephus, Pseudo-Philo, the Mishnah, Tosefta, Targum, Midrash, Talmud – and so on and so forth. [JWJ 86]

In other words, to interpret the Gospels in a proper manner, the scholar must note that they stem from communities of Jewish descent, and therefore must be interpreted as documents which fit into the evolving tradition of Jewish writings. Approaching the Synoptic texts from this point of view provides Vermes' writings with an original perspective and highlights theories which are controversial and provocative and give the Christian community reason to reflect and re-examine its assumptions about Jesus’ life.

One must question the plausibility of approaching religious texts without predetermined prejudices. Vermes gives clear examples that illustrate the problems predetermined beliefs bring to biblical interpretation. As Vermes describes:

... when a committed Christian embarks on ... a task with a mind already persuaded by the dogmatic suppositions of his church ... he is bound to read the gospels in a particular manner and to attribute the maximum possible Christian traditional significance even to the most neutral sentence, one that in any other context he would not even be tempted to interpret that way. [JWJ 1]

Vermes suggests that the historian must step out of these beliefs when searching for answers surrounding Jesus’ life. He also assures the reader that his goal has always been to place Jesus in first century Galilee and its political/social/cultural climate without the influence of the Christian tradition. The result of his study is, indeed, a Jesus who fits particularly well in the world of first-century Galilean Judaism. Using Vermes’ argument, though, if one approaches the Gospels with non-Christian beliefs about Jesus, as Vermes does, would not that person tend to gravitate
towards texts and interpretations contradicting Christian beliefs? This is a question which will be considered later in this paper when Vermes’ theories regarding Jesus have been discussed more in depth. The more immediate question concerns the scholar at hand. Who is Geza Vermes? What in his life has led him to the investigation of the life of Jesus? To answer this question, we turn to the autobiography of Vermes.

**The Life of Geza Vermes**

Vermes’ life began on June 22, 1924 in a small town in southern Hungary. He was born into a family of Jewish background, but which turned to Catholicism in 1931. Vermes’ mother was a school teacher, while his father was a journalist. Schooling began for Geza at the age of six in a Catholic elementary school and continued at a Catholic secondary school. Vermes was an exemplary student, especially talented in languages and humanities, and graduated from preparatory school with excellent grades. To continue with his education and a growing interest in religious studies, Vermes applied to and was accepted at a Catholic seminary in Hungary [PA 3-26].

During his years in school, outside influences of the world began to affect Vermes and his family. Gradually inhibiting anti-Jewish laws were enacted with the rise of the Third Reich, culminating in the loss of employment by Vermes’ father and forms of prejudice which Vermes experienced at school. While his family was Catholic, their Jewish background, family, and friends made his family “guilty” by association. [PA 3-26].

The few years after his arrival at the seminary in the fall of 1942 would prove quite turbulent for Vermes. On the intellectual front he found himself quite unchallenged and began to search for another school which satisfied his academic needs. Boredom, though, would prove to
be a minute problem in the coming years. With the rise of Nazi Germany, Vermes was forced to move into hiding. This was because his conversion to Catholicism was after a certain date set by official laws. Through the end of 1944 Vermes moved throughout Hungary, doing his best to avoid government officials. During these turbulent years Vermes' parents were taken by German forces and died in Nazi concentration camps [PA 27-39].

After the war was over and Hungary was liberated, the country was in chaos. Similarly, Vermes' life experienced many changes after the war. While he did return to his seminary for a short while, Geza realized more and more that parish life was not for him and attempted to find post-graduate schools in which he could pursue his interest in theology. Particularly, he had growing interests in the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew language itself. He discovered a novitiate in Belgium, called The Congregation of the Fathers of Notre-Dame de Sion. This novitiate was appealing because he could attend the nearby Jesuit university while staying with the Fathers of Notre-Dame de Sion. Acceptance was granted, and he arrived at his new home in October of 1946 [PA 40-50].

Located in Louvain, Belgium, Vermes resumed his education. For the next four years, Vermes continued to pursue post-graduate degrees on his way into the scholarly realm. He became quite interested in biblical studies, but quite disenchanted with the state of Catholic theology regarding biblical texts. This is because of the extreme restrictions placed on Catholic scholars in theories or findings that contradicted the teachings of the church. To somewhat avoid these restrictions, Vermes focused his studies on the Old Testament with what appears to be an equivalent to a masters thesis on the Song of Songs. This was to be developed into his doctoral thesis, but in 1948 Vermes learned of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and was soon to be captivated by their implications for biblical scholarship [PA 53-70].
Vermes' interest with the Scrolls intensified and he began to focus much of his time on them, reading each and every publication that would come out on the topic. Consequently, Vermes changed the focus of his doctoral thesis to the Scrolls. He completed his doctorate on the Scrolls in 1952 from the University of Louvain. Not long after, in January of 1953, Vermes left Belgium for Paris to continue reworking his dissertation. While there, he became a member of a trio which published a journal that focused on changing the church's anti-Jewish teachings and to attempt to bring about a better understanding of the Jewish faith. This group worked together until the tragic death of one of the members in 1955. While in mourning for his co-worker and friend, Vermes met his wife-to-be. The complication was that she was married and that he was a Catholic priest [PA 71-97; 111-118].

In March of 1957, Vermes severed all ties in France and left for England. Pam, Vermes' wife-to-be, had separated from her husband. Vermes left the Catholic Church because of Pam, and because of his disenchantment with the stringent controls of the Vatican over biblical scholarship. Even more influential in Vermes' decision to leave the Church was his disgust with the Church's anti-Jewish teachings and doctrines. In May of 1958, Vermes and Pam were married and began their life together [PA 111-151].

On arrival in England Vermes began looking for work in the academic sphere, finding a position at the University of Newcastle, where he would spend eight years of his life. The academic life in Newcastle was not the challenge that Geza looked for, though, and he began to search for openings in other institutions. That is not to say that Vermes was unproductive in these years. He published several writings, mostly concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls, that began

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1Vermes was ordained a priest in 1950.
drawing notoriety from academic circles. His life was to soon change with a posted opening at Oxford University [PA 111-151].

Geza applied for the job at Oxford without much hope for the possibility of being granted the job. To his surprise, though, he was offered the job without so much as an interview. The position was the opportunity of a lifetime, and Vermes did not let it pass. He accepted the position of Reader of Jewish Studies at Oxford on April Fools Day of 1965, and began a large chapter of his life [PA 151-156].

Vermes first years at Oxford were quiet with regard to scholarship but they also helped define his new Jewish identity. While his scholarly work was small, he did embark on two large projects. The main project was the revision of a handbook published by the German scholar Emil Schürer in the late eighteen hundreds. Vermes also became editor of the Journal of Jewish Studies in 1969 after the death of the editor of the quarterly publication. It was this event that Vermes notes as one of the major experiences which defined his new identity in the Jewish world. In October of 1970, Geza joined the Liberal Jewish Synagogue of London, thus confirming his status as a member of the Jewish tradition and completing a spiritual transition that had been developing over two decades [PA 155-170].

The next decade at Oxford was one of great prosperity in the academic arena for Vermes. He revitalized a wavering Journal of Jewish Studies, along with completing the enormous Schürer task. The year 1978 saw Geza elected as chairman of the board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford, complemented by several other accomplishments and leadership positions. These included the establishment of the British Association for Jewish Studies while being its first president in 1975, along with holding the presidency from 1981-1984 of the
European Association for Jewish Studies. Already Vermes was established as one of the foremost scholars in the field of Judaica [PA 171-187].

It was also during this time period that Vermes began publishing works on the quest for the historical Jesus. The first of these books, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*, was first published in 1973, spurred by an article written by Vermes in which he tried to place Jesus in the political/cultural climate of Intertestamental Palestine. The second book of his Jesus trilogy, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, was consistently postponed due to the immense amount of work Vermes dealt with at the time, in particular the Schürer project. The basis for the second book came from a series of lectures Vermes delivered, culminating with the publication of *Jesus and the World of Judaism* in 1983. Vermes final book, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, was also published later than planned due to the completion of the Schürer project and Vermes' wife's ailing health. *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* was finally published in 1993. Criticism of the trilogy covered the spectrum from praise to disapproval. The general opinion, though, was and is that Vermes' picture of Jesus and his teachings has made an immeasurable impact not only on the search for the historical Jesus, but also on interfaith dialogue between Jews and Christians [PA 210-224].

With this biographical information in mind, we now begin to explore the ideas of Geza Vermes in hopes of continuing and participating in this historic encounter between two faiths communities.
Intertestamental Palestine

We begin our investigation by examining the region and cultural climate into which Jesus was born. In *Jesus the Jew*, Vermes attempts to "fit Jesus and his movement into the greater context of first-century AD Palestine" [JTJ 42].

The region of Palestine contained great variation in reference to its political leadership. Galilee had a governmental system that was much different from its neighbor Judea. At the time of the census described in Luke 2:1, Judea was controlled by a Roman prefect. Vermes states that this was an embarrassment to the people of Judea since the Sanhedrin and the chief priests were not allowed to rule their own people. Galilee, however, was ruled by Herodians from 4 BC to 39 AD, thereby evading the humiliation Judea was forced to suffer in being ruled by the Romans. In Vermes' opinion, a kind of political prejudice existed between the two countries, kindling a dislike for Galileans by Judeans [JTJ 44-45].

Contributing to the dislike of Galileans was their distinct regional accent. What seems to have occurred in Galilee, Vermes comments, is that certain accents were dropped in the pronunciation of many words [JTJ 53]. Judeans disliked their "ugly" pronunciation, so much so that it was assumed this demonstrated Galilean lethargy. The hatred of Galilean accents was so strong that in certain towns of Judea those who spoke Galilean Aramaic were not allowed to read publicly from the Bible [JTJ 52-53].

Vermes states that textual evidence points to Jesus as a speaker of Galilean Aramaic. He deduces this by stating that nearly all of the Aramaic words preserved in the Gospels reflect the Galilean Aramaic spoken in "the . . . more recent paraphrase of the Pentateuch, the Palestinian Targum, and in the Talmud of Palestine" [53]. Moreover, Jesus himself uses words that mirror the language employed in these sources (*mamona* appears in Matt 6:24; *ephphetha* appears in
Mark 7:34). Since it seems plausible that Jesus had the Galilean accent, this may have added to the prejudice he was to experience.

Moreover, Galilee had quite an economic advantage over Judea [JTJ 45-46]. The Galileans were shrewd farmers and made good use of fertile land. This resulted in Galilee being well populated and wealthier than its neighbor, Judea. Adding to their success were the trades of crafts and fishing. Galilee's combination of a more politically free atmosphere and successful economy created a country that was independent in both social and economic realms. According to Vermes, "... the province constituted an autonomous and self-contained politico-ethnic unit" [JTJ 44]. Because of its obvious difference from other areas in the region, Vermes concludes that much of the conflict Jesus encountered stemmed from the simple fact that he was from Galilee.

Because Galileans gained social independence through this economic and political security, revolutionary thinkers and movements flourished from this region. The well-known Zealot revolts can be traced to revolutionary leaders from Galilee. Likewise, other revolutionary leaders also came from this region during and after the time of Jesus. It was inevitable that Galilee would be looked upon as a region in which subversives were cultivated [JTJ 46-48]. All of this only added to the existing hostility towards Galilee.

All of the above create a prejudice that was bound to exist towards Jesus before his teaching ever began. Fitting Jesus into the social, cultural, and economic atmosphere of

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2 It is important to note here that while the overall economy of Galilee was successful in comparison its neighbors, there still existed lower classes and those of little resource in the land.

3 Scholars have debated the possibility that Jesus belonged to the Zealot movement for some time. Vermes believes this accusation most likely stems from the simple fact that Jesus was Galilean, where the Zealot revolutionaries originated. Although some of Jesus' apostles were noted as revolutionaries, and some believed that he would convert to a political leader, Vermes concludes that Jesus was not a Zealot. Specifically he cites Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:37-38; Acts 1:6 [JTJ 49-52].
Palestine begins to shed light on some of the conflict Jesus encounters in the Gospels. His mission, while noble, was bound to encounter opposition given its Galilean roots.

**Jesus and Mosaic Law**

Now that the stage has been set for Jesus and his ministry, let us begin to try to answer some specific questions regarding Jesus. A central question to this paper, and the person of Jesus, concerns the nature of the Judaism Jesus practiced. To begin to examine this issue, we look at Vermes’ investigation, in his book *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, of Jesus’ interpretation and observation of the Law of the Jewish tradition. We then move on to Jesus’ moral observations, and finally confront the apparent antitheses preached by Jesus.

The basic picture Vermes paints of Jesus as described in the Bible is one of an observant Jew. The first and most obvious fact pointing to the Jewishness of Jesus is his repeated appearances at synagogues [RJJ 14]. The Gospels also tell of Jesus’ journey to the Temple to worship at Passover, with Jesus teaching for several days after the festival (Mark 11:15;14:49) [RJJ 14]. Two other instances suggest Jesus’ observance of the Law. The first are the texts of Matthew 9:20 and 14:36 in which Jesus is seen wearing tassels on his garment. Vermes interprets this as reflecting Jesus’ observation of the ritual law in which Jewish males attached tassels to the bottom of their garment.⁴ The second instance is his apparent compliance in paying the tax for the upkeep of the Temple (Matt 17:24-27) [RJJ 16].⁵ We see here some of the preliminary evidence Vermes provides for his interpretation of the of Jesus’ Jewish identity.

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⁴ The Greek word used for tassels is *kraspedon*. At its basic level, the word means edge, border, or hem. And, while this word does appear in the texts cited, it could be that those who grabbed Jesus’ clothes simply grabbed onto the hem of Jesus’ garment.

⁵ It is important to note the central role the Temple played in Jewish cult during this period. Jesus seems to be somewhat in favor of the ritual if one considers his contribution to the Temple’s upkeep.
Continuing with his picture of a Jewish Jesus, Vermes points to another text confirming Jesus’ Jewish identity. This is the story of Jesus healing a leper (Mark 1:44). After healing the man, Jesus instructs him to partake of the appropriate Mosaic ritual to cleanse himself. If Jesus did not see himself as being obligated to follow the Torah, he would not have insisted on this man’s completion of the Mosaic ritual [RJJ 18].

J.D. Crossan provides an alternate view to Vermes’ interpretation of this incident [77-84]. Crossan suggests that Jesus did not literally cure the disease of leprosy as understood in medical terms, but that Jesus’ healing refers to a social healing. Crossan proposes that the ritual laws concerning bodily defilement could have symbolized a mechanism aimed at protecting Jews from being absorbed by a larger, more powerful culture like that of the Romans. In such an atmosphere, importance would be placed on observance of purity laws and the appearance of a healthy, non-defiled, body. Therefore, any person who was to contract a visibly scarring disease would be ostracized from the society as if they had defiled their body through breaking purity laws. Consequently, when Jesus is seen as “healing” this leper, he is actually defying the social prejudice against the leper by accepting him into society instead of actually curing his disease.

Following this “healing,” Crossan suggests that Jesus sent the cured leper to the temple for reasons other than ritual law. He claims that the leper is sent to show those at Temple who were concerned with ritual law that God’s power was specially granted to Jesus.

Whether one accepts Jesus’ healing in this case as historical or not, the evidence Vermes provides suggests that Jesus obeyed many of the Jewish laws. If this is the case, why is it that common interpretations of biblical texts suggest that Jesus was sent by God specifically to eradicate the necessity of the Law? Many Christians are taught that one of Jesus’ prime
functions was to free people from the yoke of the Law. Is this Jesus’ true teaching, or is there some other interpretation?

Vermes attacks this question head on, trying to determine if Jesus ever truly breaks the laws of the Torah. Vermes bluntly states that Jesus never deliberately sets out to break rules of the Torah [RJJ 21]. The only time it seems that Jesus contradicts ritual law is when one aspect of the Torah comes into conflict with another, or if the law allows some leeway for interpretation.6

One occasion in which this conflict presents itself is when Jesus heals on the Sabbath. There are three instances where Jesus heals people on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11; Luke 13:10-17; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6) [RJJ 22].7 In the Jewish tradition, there has never been any doubt that the preservation of life outweighs observing the ritual of the Sabbath. Furthermore, accusations that Jesus performed "work" by healing on the Sabbath are also inaccurate since none of Jesus’ healing entails work as defined in the Torah. This is because Jesus uses his voice or the laying on of hands to heal, which is not classified as work by Mosaic Law [RJJ 22-23]. What appears to be a conflict is dismissed by Vermes as no conflict at all.

A second instance in which Jesus is accused of violating the Sabbath is when he allows his disciples to pick corn from a field they pass through in order to have food to eat (Mark 2:23-28). Vermes also dismisses the idea that this text shows Jesus breaking the Law. First, while "harvesting" is one of the areas prohibited by Law, Vermes states that, "Sabbath observance in the second century, and probably also in the first, was subservient to the essential well-being of a Jew" [RJJ 24]. Furthermore, picking corn in someone else’s field is not defined as theft in biblical law (Deut 23:26) [RJJ 23]. In essence, Jesus allows his followers to eat from the field because of their need for food.

6 In the case of the leper, Jesus sees the moral law of loving one’s neighbor as superseding ritual law.
7 What is interesting, though, is that only one of these texts has triple attestation in the Synoptics.
While Vermes notes the probable didactic nature of the text, it is helpful to note here the view of other scholars. James Dunn suggests that this story should be interpreted more as an addition of the early developing Christian communities rather than a historic story about Jesus. He suggests that the redactors of this text inserted the story to mirror conflicts they were experiencing at the time of redaction. Dunn quotes E.P. Sanders, noting it was probably extremely unlikely that a group of Pharisees would gather together in a cornfield on the Sabbath in the hopes of catching would be Law-breakers [Dunn 69]. Dunn explains that this text can be seen as an example of "internal Jewish disputes...a dispute over how the Sabbath should be observed, not...whether it should be observed" [Dunn 70]. We are reminded here of the predominant view of scholars who believe that Jesus was a faithful Jew whose following had different views regarding Torah observance than other sects of Judaism like the Pharisees.

Another area Christians point to as proof of Jesus’ negation of the Law is texts concerning Jewish food laws. We see in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus presumably declares all foods to be clean (7:19). Most people view this as the "smoking gun," where one can see Jesus’ rejection of Jewish law and tradition. Vermes argues that this is an incorrect interpretation. First, stating "that which goes into the mouth does not defile" does not imply that Jesus abolished the dietary laws. Vermes also claims that the statement "purifying all foods" was an addition of the author of Mark since it does not exist in the Gospel of Matthew. Supporting this idea is the fact that Peter is seen in the early church refusing to eat with Gentiles and refusing to kill or eat four-legged animals (Acts 10:13-15;11:7-9; Gal 2:11-14). Vermes concludes that it is erroneous to deduce that Jesus nullified the dietary laws [RJJ 24-26].

Again James Dunn becomes useful in this investigation of Jesus and the Law. Dunn sites Sanders and his view that there was probably little argumentation between Jesus and the
Pharisees regarding "Sabbath, food, and purity laws" [Dunn 69]. These were issues written into the Gospels meant to explain conflict in the developing Jewish Christian churches. Dunn explains that these texts describe "Jewish Christian congregations, who from within Judaism or as part of Judaism felt the need to explain and defend themselves to other Jews" [Dunn 70-71]. In short Dunn classifies these texts as not in congruence with Jesus’ true teaching.

Vermes next considers Jesus’ appearance and preaching in the well-known "Sermon on the Mount" section of the Gospels [RJJ 30-37]. This is another area people use to show Jesus’ overt and conflicting differences to Jewish teachings. In Vermes’ opinion, the critic is confronted here with the issue of authenticity of the Gospel texts. Vermes points out, though, that the goal does not necessarily have to be an issue of authenticity. What the reader can and should strive for, instead, is to find some central ideas and overtones of Jesus’ teachings [RJJ 30].

The "antitheses" preached by Jesus begin with teachings on murder and adultery. Both murder (Matt 5:21-26) and adultery (Matt 5:27-30) are dealt with by Jesus in a similar fashion. Parallel to rabbinic teaching, Jesus does not focus specifically on the acts of murder and adultery. His teachings focus on the anger and lust that drive each of these acts. Jesus’ teaching, then, focuses on the necessity of quelling feelings of anger and lust before they lead to sinful actions [RJJ 30-33]. Also, since Jesus’ teachings resembles rabbinic ideas, it can be concluded that they are in accord with Jewish thought.

The next "antithesis" deals with the well-known cliché "an eye for an eye" (Matt 5:38-42). Vermes reminds us of a common misconception about this teaching. Never was it

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8 Vermes notes that the third antithesis seems to be more like an extension of the case of adultery (Matt 5:31-32) than a statement separate from adultery [RJJ 33-34].
traditionally interpreted as meaning any kind of revenge. It simply meant that there was to be a certain kind of monetary compensation for something that was taken or stolen [RJJ 35-36].

Concluding his investigation of the "Sermon on the Mount," Vermes discusses the idea of loving your neighbor as presented in the Gospel of Matthew (5:43-48). This text is a perfect example of the influence of the Jewish tradition on Jesus’ teachings and thoughts. While the text includes a section saying "hate your enemy," Vermes credits this attachment to the writer of Matthew rather than the person of Jesus [RJJ 37]. We therefore examine the section which states you should love your enemy [RJJ 36-37]. The obvious textual precedent for this teaching stems from the Hebrew Bible in Leviticus 19:18. This text states that you should "love your neighbor like yourself" [RJJ 37]. Here we have a mirroring of the statement made by Jesus to love one’s neighbor, one of the most fundamental teachings found in the Jewish tradition. Also directly related to this text is the Golden rule (discussed later in the paper), which has multiple attestation in the writings of the Jewish tradition. It appears, in various forms, in the Apocrypha, Philo’s Hypothetica, the Talmud, and the Targum [RJJ 39-41]. In short, the idea was not a revolutionary one stemming from Jesus and his followers, but an idea that had been part of the Jewish tradition long before the person of Jesus.

Besides legalistic issues, Vermes also confronts Jesus’ teachings and actions with regard to Jewish moral laws [RJJ 26-29]. To begin, he turns to those laws concerning filial piety. As before, it appears that Jesus is in conflict with Jewish thought. The reader confronts passages in which Jesus instructs his followers concerning the prevailing nature of his ministry. This mission is so important that even family ties must be broken. Recent scholarship uses the text of Luke 9:59-60 to prove Jesus’ guilt of breaking Jewish law [RJJ 27]. Here Jesus calls a disciple

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9 Vermes also states that this addition may stem from the Q source [RJJ 36-37].
to overlook necessary burial rights of the deceased in order to follow His ministry. While many interpret this event as Jesus’ willingness to disregard ritual law, Vermes provides an alternate, yet circumstantial, explanation. It seems possible that the man was using the excuse of having to deal with proper burial services because he was tarrying on his decision to join Jesus’ ministry. In this case, Jesus’ sharp rebuttal makes more sense.\(^\text{10}\) And, while this is circumstantial, Vermes says that it is at least as, or even more, satisfactory than the common interpretation [RJJ 28-29].

In this section Vermes quotes scholar E.P. Sanders and his theory as to the meaning of this text. Sanders states, "[this] may show that Jesus was prepared, if necessary, to challenge the adequacy of the Mosaic dispensation" [RJJ 28]. While above it is shown that Vermes disagrees with this interpretation, it seems in some instances, Jesus was willing to diverge from ritual law. As will be seen later in this paper, a situation could arise in which Jesus’ concern with moral issues and/or with the urgency of the coming Kingdom would have precedence over Mosaic Law. The important point to note here is the fact that Jesus was, fundamentally, a Torah-observing Jew who sometimes let moral or ethical teachings from the Jewish tradition override ritual teachings. In short, Jesus was always in congruency with the tradition of Judaism.

The final section of Vermes’ discussion of the Jewish identity of Jesus points out the repetition in the Gospels of people calling for an all-enveloping commandment which can govern life [RJJ 37-43]. We see several people asking Jesus for such summaries. Once again, while Jesus’ answers are hard to understand, each one has overtones and undertones that point directly to Jesus’ Jewish beliefs.

The first example occurs when Jesus is questioned about how to receive eternal life (Mark 10:17-19). Jesus replies that the observance of the Decalogue is of supreme importance.

\(^\text{10}\) Furthermore, this can be seen as Jesus’ difference from mainstream Judaism in reference to his belief in the immediacy of the Kingdom of God.
Vermes comments that while there are differences in the structures of the evangelists’ reports of the story, he sees no reason why the teaching should not be authentic to the person of Jesus [RJJ 38]. Jesus’ instructions to obey the Laws of Moses, which include the prohibition of murder, adultery, theft, and lying, along with the command of honoring one’s father and mother, are in direct accord with Jewish tradition.

Also in accord with Jewish tradition is the text known as the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12). It is important for the reader to note that there are equivalent statements to the Golden Rule in the Jewish tradition; however, these statements are written in a negative form. For example, Tobit 4:25 states "Do not do to anyone what you yourself would hate" [RJJ 40]. Intertestamental Judaism, along with rabbinic texts, considers the affirmative form of the rule a counterpart to the negative form. Vermes concludes that the use of solely the positive form attests to its authenticity in the teaching of Jesus since it would have been uncommon to do so in this time period [RJJ 40-41]. Seen here, once again, is a direct correspondence between Jesus’ teachings and the Jewish tradition.

The third example of summarization deals with a rethinking of the first commandment, continuing Jesus’ continuity with Jewish thought (Mark 12:29-31). Vermes shows there is a definite link between the commandment to love God (Deut 6:5) and to love fellow men (Lev 18:18) in intertestamental and rabbinic literature (Issachar 7:6; Philo, De Decalogo 108-110) [RJJ 42-43]. However, the combination of these two particular texts as one all-encompassing commandment is definitely original to the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus. As Vermes says, this combination in Mark is an apparent perfect summary which includes all of the laws and ethics of the Torah in a single statement [RJJ 43].
What the reader discovers in this section of Vermes’ writings is that the apparent rejection of Jewish Law and religion by Jesus turns out to be no kind of rejection whatsoever. All the teachings Jesus presents, if interpreted in the correct light, correspond with Jewish thought and teaching. More specifically, the Jewish identity of Jesus shines through the examples above.

If we deduce from the above arguments that Jesus was fundamentally Jewish, an obvious question comes to the foreground. Why did Jesus experience so much resistance from Jewish authorities, namely the Pharisees? The question is one that cannot be fully answered at this point, but a few facts will be mentioned presently. As stated above, the majority of scholars agree that most of the alleged conflicts between the Pharisees and Jesus reflect conflicts experienced by early Christian communities that were written into the life and times of Jesus. Hyam Maccoby goes so far as to say that the Pharisees "were interested in ritual purity, since this formed part of the Torah, but their chief concern was morality and its central theme, love of neighbor" [14]. However, assuming the conflict did exist in Jesus’ time, this question still needs to be answered. Vermes argues that Jesus was an observer of the Law. The extent to which he obeyed the Law, as we have seen, was in accord with the Jewish tradition. As will be evident in the next two sections discussing Jesus’ role as a charismatic hasid, and his teaching on the Kingdom of God, Jesus preached an ethical/moral Judaism which is both characteristic of hasidism and congruent with Jesus’ eschatological view of the world. This form of Judaism was bound to conflict to some extent with the ritual nature of the Judaism of the Pharisees, assuming this conflict is historical.

Secondly, the Jewish tradition has always had many different "forms." This can been seen in the various categories of Judaism existing at the beginning of the first-century (Pharisees,
Sadducees, Essenes, Qumran community, hasidism, etc). In this way one can see that Jesus’ emphasis on more moral/ethical concerns was fundamentally Jewish. However, Jesus’ Judaism did have a different emphasis than that of the ritually concerned Pharisees. In essence, what seems to occur much of the time between Jesus and the Pharisees can be seen as procedural conflict, rather than an attack by the Pharisees on Jesus’ Jewish identity.

**Jesus and the Kingdom of God**

Perhaps the most important aspect of Jesus’ teachings was his idea of his mission on earth. Central to this mission are two terms that are used interchangeably in Jesus’ teaching, "Kingdom of God" and "Kingdom of Heaven." Was Jesus’ idea of the Kingdom one of an urgent, apocalyptic nature, or of one that was to come far in the future? We begin by looking at the idea of the Kingdom of God in biblical and intertestamental times.

The first picture of God as ruler of a Kingdom comes to us through Old Testament stories. God created the world, established the divine law, and, culminating in the reign of David, ruled through the King of Israel. This picture was disrupted by the conquest of Israel by the Babylonians; consequently, the picture of God and His Kingdom underwent change during the Exile. Vermes states it was in Exile that the idea of messianism became part of the idea of the Kingdom of God [RJJ 122]. The Israelites desired a figure that would save them from slavery and reestablish Israel in their proper place as the head of nations under God’s rule. The idea of messianism developed into two main theories. The first featured a messianic figure who would save all from the Exile and rule God’s Kingdom on earth. The second theory suggested that God would directly intervene to save His people from slavery and usher in His Kingdom, without an earthly mediator [RJJ 121-124].
These theories of God's Kingdom began to change with the beginning of the Maccabean era. What Vermes calls a "tendency towards the transcendent" in the ideas regarding the Kingdom appear in such texts as the Psalms of Solomon, the Book of Daniel, and the Qumran scrolls [RJJ 125]. These texts describe visions which focus on a mystical realization of the Kingdom. What Vermes gathers from these ideas is that, together, they form a messianic literary genre, some being confined to the times they were written, while others build on ideas from previous writers. As Vermes states, "[i]t is only in a framework of this sort that the teaching of Jesus can be grasped properly as part of the evolving religious ideology of Judaism" [RJJ 135].

This does not suggest that Jesus necessarily read these texts. Vermes' point is that the ideologies were present in the tradition, in some form or another, during Jesus' time. Therefore, through interaction with other people by oral traditions and preachings, Jesus may have been influenced by these thoughts.

Vermes next examines the Kingdom of God as seen in the Gospels, starting with the parables of Jesus. What makes finding specifics about the Kingdom of God difficult in Jesus' teachings is that he focuses on conduct that gains access to the Kingdom, rather than physical descriptions of the Kingdom itself. What Vermes concludes from the first group of parables examined (Mark 4:26-29; 4:30-32; Matt 13:33) is that the Kingdom Jesus discusses is one that is already present [RJJ 137]. It is here and now, moving towards the end, but needing the participation of humans to be realized and fulfilled. Vermes deduces this from the first parable that "the seed must be sown," and from the third parable that "the leaven [must be] mixed by men and women" [RJJ 137-138]. While human interaction is not the sole factor in bringing about the Kingdom, it does play an important role in its arrival.
While this is one way to view the texts, Jesus’ ideas could be interpreted differently. In the first two parables (Mark 4:26-29; 4:30-32), while the seed needs to be sown, the text actually focuses more on the mysterious growth of the seed in and through the earth, rather than on human interaction. In the third parable, Matt 13:33, the image of the female can be interpreted as being a representation of God, thereby making human interaction non-influential in the coming of the Kingdom.

The second group of parables focuses more on the "correct attitude to be adopted" by those wishing to enter the Kingdom (Matt 13:44-46; 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 21:28-32) [RJJ 138-139]. Perhaps the most important of the virtues we find in these parables is the willingness to drop everything in one’s life and focus on the impending Kingdom. Other qualities these parables highlight as necessary are repentance, generosity, and "whole hearted confidence that God will intervene" [RJJ 139].

Vermes moves from parables to prophetic proclamations in search for a greater meaning of Jesus’ Kingdom of God [RJJ 139-142]. In these proclamations Jesus suggests several different ideas concerning the Kingdom. One is that the Kingdom is achieved through the Jewish form of repentance, _teshuvah_ (Matt 4:17) [RJJ 139]. Another idea is that the presence of the Kingdom will be foreshadowed in the performance of exorcisms [RJJ 139-140]. The predominant theme seems to be that the Kingdom of God is already upon the listeners, that the Kingdom is here and will be fully realized in the near future. Adding to the idea of the present Kingdom are statements by Jesus that "not all here" will see the Kingdom (Mark 9:1). These texts become problematic because it is quite possible that they were inserted later by the early church redactors to give reasons for the delay of the Kingdom [RJJ 141]. In either case, Jesus’ prophetic proclamations reemphasize the immediacy of the Kingdom.
Vermes now moves into direct sayings and teachings of Jesus with regard to the Kingdom of God. The first subdivision of these teachings, again, deals with behavior necessary to enter the Kingdom. The first requirement is that of poverty, or the "poor of spirit" (Luke 6:20; Matt 5:3) [RJJ 142-143]. More detrimental to one's access to the Kingdom, though, is having too many possessions (Mark 10:23-25). The second and third subdivisions Vermes deals with focus on the level of devotion one must give to the Lord. One must have total faith in God and be willing to follow His calling at any cost, both at the time of these particular passages and at the final hour (Mark 10:15; Luke 9:60). In sum, devotion to God and the Kingdom must be total and unconditional [RJJ 143-144].

So, what can we actually know about Jesus and the Kingdom? In Vermes' words, "In the mind of Jesus the nature of the Kingdom comes second to the role to be played by the actors of the drama, himself and his adepts...[T]he 'what' of the philosopher gives way to the 'when' and 'how' of the prophet and the wisdom teacher" [RJJ 146]. Moreover, "The essential requisites are detachment from possessions, unquestioning trust in God and absolute submission to him" [RJJ 148].

Another important aspect to the Kingdom of God is the time frame in which the Kingdom was expected to arrive. While many of the New Testament texts seem to suggest that Jesus expected the Kingdom to come at some distant point in time, seen in references to Gentiles inheriting the Kingdom (Luke 13:27-29), Vermes explains these texts as the evangelists' attempts to explain why the end had yet to occur. Texts that reflect the true teaching of Jesus and his followers paint a different picture. He and his followers believed that they were a part of the eschatological end. Their outlook was quite different from that of the developing church due to their belief that their call to repentance and devotion to the impending Kingdom had to be done
immediately because the end time was at hand. The early church, however, was beginning to adapt to the idea that the Kingdom might not be realized for some time.

As we have seen, Jesus' eschatological mindset had a profound effect on his preaching. His preoccupation with the immediacy of the Kingdom and its special call to humans made observance of the ritual halakhic laws, in some instances, secondary to right action in accord with the coming Kingdom. Jesus' call to moral standards (contained in the Jewish tradition) along with the urgency of the Kingdom, at times, took precedence over ritual law. This does not imply a dismissal of the law or a rejection of Judaism by Jesus. As seen above, the picture of Jesus is, for the most part, one of a Torah-observant Jew. What it does mean is that Jesus, given his feelings of extreme urgency, was more concerned with changing peoples minds and hearts in favor of Jewish moral and ethical codes than with ritual law. Since the end time was upon them, and since God would make judgements on those who were right in mind and soul, ritual law sometimes took second place to congruence with the moral law of Judaism.

Charismatic Judaism

While it has been established that Jesus followed much of Jewish law and that his vision of the Kingdom of God influenced his teaching, one more aspect of Vermes' ideas shall be considered here to give a more complete picture of Jesus. We embark on Jesus' resemblance to the charismatic hasid for the final section of this discussion.

Vermes' chapter on Jesus and his role in charismatic Judaism begins with an explanation of what it meant to be a healing person, also known as a physician, in intertestamental times [JTJ 59-61]. As makes logical sense, with regard to the state of medicine and science at the time, scriptural writings contain very little mention of physicians. During biblical times, calling a
doctor was seen as lack of faith in God's healing capabilities; therefore, there is little mention of physicians in biblical literature. This belief began to change during the second century BC. Medical expertise could be sought, provided that a person first "pray to God, to repent from sin, to resolve to amend his ways, and to offer gifts and sacrifices in the Temple" [JTJ 60]. Even when a physician was called, it was implied that the doctor received his power from the grace of God, instead of from magical practices. As Vermes puts it:

a man's healing powers are measured, first and foremost, by his proximity to God, and only secondarily by the expertise acquired from study of the divinely ordained curative qualities of plants and herbs. Professional knowledge is an additional asset to the healer's essential requisite, holiness. [JTJ 60-61]

An important point Vermes calls the reader to is that all sickness, mental and physical, was seen as being caused by possession from evil spirits or demons [JTJ 61]. Hence, the proper way to defeat this kind of evil was through the mystery and majesty of God's power. Moreover, only a select few were seen as capable of calling on God and His power to cast out such evil infections. These healings blended both religious ceremony and elements of magical practices. Similar to Jesus' healings, Vermes notes several examples of holy men who were not exorcists, but who, in times of need, had the power to cast out evil spirits [JTJ 65-69]. One of these examples concerns Abraham in the Qumran Genesis Apocryphon.11 Another example appears in the Book of Biblical Antiquities by Pseudo-Philo. In this text King Saul calls on David to magically keep an evil spirit under control through poetry [JTJ 67]. Lastly, the figure of Daniel appears in a text called "The Prayer of Nabonidus" from Qumran Cave 4. This text is particularly interesting because it parallels the language Jesus uses in his healing of the paralytic

11 In this example, the King of Egypt and his court were infected with an evil spirit to protect Sarah's virtue. After two years of trying to rid his court of the spirit, the King of Egypt summoned Abraham to expel the evil spirit from the land [JTJ 66].
(Mark 2:2-12) [JTJ 67-68]. In these examples, Vermes shows that Jesus’ exorcisms and healings resemble the healing of holy men.

Next Vermes moves into an exploration of Jesus and how he is similar to the Jewish charismatic. It seems evident from Scripture that Jesus had special powers which resulted from some direct relationship with God; furthermore Jesus’ powers resemble other Jewish figures of the same time period. These healers also appear to have special powers that derived from a unique relationship with God [RJJ 69]. Vermes classifies this group as the charismatic hasidim.

Vermes first describes the first century BC charismatic Honi. Honi was one of the hasidim who were believed to be able to exercise special miracle working abilities in times of crisis. Honi is described by both the Mishnah (Ta’anith 3:8) and by the historian Josephus (Jewish Antiquities 14, 22-4) as one who called on the Lord to bring rain in a period of drought [JTJ 69-72]. The Mishnah (Ta’anith 3:8) presents Honi as able to influence God in a special way:

Once they said to Honi the Circle-Drawer: ‘Pray that it may rain.’ . . . He prayed but it did not rain. Then what did he do? He drew a circle, and stood in it, and said before God: ‘Lord of the world, thy children have turned to me because I am the son of the house before thee. I swear by thy great name that I will not move hence until thou be merciful towards thy children.’ It then began to drizzle. ‘I have not asked for this’, he said, ‘but for rain to fill the cisterns, pits and rock-cavities.’ There came a cloud burst. ‘I have not asked for this, but for rain of grace, blessing and gift.’ It then rained normally . . . [JTJ 70]

Moreover, Simeon ben Shetah, the leading Pharisee of Honi’s time, states:

‘What can I do with you, since even though you importune God, he does what you wish in the same way that a father does whatever his importuning son asks him?’ [JTJ 70]

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\[12\] This parallel is important because then Jesus’ saying of “Child, your sins are forgiven,” appears to be commonplace and not the blasphemy of which he was accused (Mark 2:2-12) [JTJ 68].
Here we see the influential nature and intimate relationship charismatics had with God. While references to Honi are limited besides those listed here, it is important to look at his characteristics in order to better understand the embodiment of the charismatics.

The second charismatic Vermes describes is Hanina ben Dosa. He lived just after the time of Jesus and according to Vermes was "a man of extraordinary devotion and miraculous healing talents" [JTJ 73]. Textual references to Hanina appear in both the Mishnah and the Talmud. His fame as a healer was well known and he was asked to assist many high leaders in times of crisis; however, there seems to be some evidence that he was in conflict with the Pharisees and the "later rabbinic establishment" [JTJ 74]. This conflict stemmed from Hanina’s authority, which he derived directly from God. Hanina was also disinterested in specifics regarding ritual law, focusing the majority of his concern on moral and ethical teachings. While this does not imply that Hanina found the law unnecessary, it is important to note that he and the charismatic tradition focused their religious vigor on a moral/ethical Judaism, rather than a strictly law-abiding Judaism.

Moreover, there are examples of Gospel stories regarding Jesus which are significantly similar to those found written about Hanina. Vermes sights two of these parallels. The first is that of Matthew 8:5-13 and Berakhoth 34b of the Babylonian Talmud. They describe Jesus and Hanina healing the sick. The second is that of Mark 5:1-15 and Pesahim 112b of the Babylonian Talmud. These texts describe Jesus and Hanina’s power over demons [JWJ 7-9].

At this point Vermes begins to accentuate the similarities between Jesus and Hanina [JTJ 72-78]. To begin, the general characteristics of the charismatic was inseparable from that of the prophet Elijah; hence, both Jesus and Hanina were identified with him.\(^\text{13}\) Both Jesus and Hanina

\(^\text{13}\) Hanina: Babylonian Talmud, Berakhoth 61.b
focused the majority of their teaching on moral and ethical questions. Both Jesus and Hanina chose to live lives of poverty. Both Jesus and Hanina (as also Honi) came from Galilee.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps made more convincing by what is already known about intertestamental Palestine, Galilee had a tendency to produce revolutionary thinkers and leaders, with a perfect example being these charismatics. As can be seen, there are many similarities between the these two men.

One of the most intriguing similarities between Jesus and Hanina is their experience with the Pharisees. While on some issues the charismatics were more strict than the Pharisees, other aspects of the legal code were simply dismissed by the charismatics. This brought about much of the conflict between the two groups. The issue that caused the most conflict, though, was that the Pharisees received their authority through strict observance to ritual law, while the charismatics seemed to receive their authority from a special relationship with God. In a time when mysticism was in the minds of the proletariat, miracle workers like Hanina and Jesus, not surprisingly, developed very passionate followings. It is no wonder that such men threatened "the powers that be." The resemblance of Jesus and Hanina prompts Vermes to say "Jesus is to be seen as part of first-century charismatic Judaism and as the paramount example of the early Hasidim or Devout" [JTJ 79]. It is undeniable that charismatic Judaism and its miracle working figures were present during the last few centuries of the Second Temple period, and it seems as though Jesus can be characterized as one of these charismatics.\textsuperscript{15}

While there are similarities in many aspects of the charismatics and Jesus, not all are striking in their resemblance. Furthermore, the fact that some of their teachings and lifestyles

\textsuperscript{14} While Honi's connections to Galilee are circumstantial, Hanina seems to have direct ties to the area of Galilee [JTJ 72].

\textsuperscript{15} See J.P. Meier, A Marginal Jew, Volume II, p581-588. Meier points out some weaknesses in Vermes' argument concerning the similarity of Jesus to Honi and Hanina. Specifically, Meier addresses the questionable authenticity of the stories regarding Honi and Hanina, along with the plausibility of their Galilean connections. Meier also points out a major difference between the "miracles" of Honi and Hanina and the miracles of Jesus.
were similar does not necessarily mean that Jesus should be identified with this group of charismatic hasidim. It is important, however, to note the similarities and acknowledge the possibility of Jesus’ connection to this these men. While he may have not been the "definition" of the charismatic hasid, much of what he practiced is reflected in Hanina and Honi.

**Jesus the Jew**

We can now begin to fit together all of the pieces Vermes gives us to form a cohesive picture of Jesus. The climate and social structure of intertestamental Palestine created an environment that made it difficult for Jesus’ teachings to be entirely acceptable to the Jewish religious and Roman political establishments. As can be seen throughout history and even in the headlines of today’s news, conflicts between different peoples in a relatively small region of land can have explosive consequences. Being born into such a hostile environment was bound to have a profound effect on Jesus and his teachings, as one can see in the focus of his travelings in the land of Galilee.  

Moreover, the combination of his Jewish identity, his eschatological vision, and his prophetic teachings gave rise to a distinctive form of Judaism. While he did have devoted followers, his conflict with the Pharisees was likely to occur, if not because of his connection to "revolutionary Galilee," because of his radical messianic religious teachings and his zealous followers. Vermes himself states:

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16 Examining the many parables of Jesus concerning farming, his travel predominately through Galilee, and his family’s background, Vermes concludes that Jesus preached and taught about the rural Galilee that he knew through life experience [JTI 48].
17 If this apparent conflict is seen as an addition by redactors of the Gospels, Jesus could not avoid conflict with the Romans because of his religious teachings and devoted following. The Romans would have seen Jesus’ zealous following as a possible uprising against their control in the region and swiftly suppressed the threat by extinguishing its leader. See Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, p79-80; 104-105.
Since halakhah became the cornerstone of rabbinic Judaism, it is not surprising that, despite their popular religious appeal, Jesus, Hanina, and others, were slowly but surely squeezed out beyond the pale of true respectability. [JTJ 82]

In Vermes’ mind, there is no doubt as to the Jewishness of Jesus. From his apparel to his observance of Passover, all evidence suggests that Jesus was a faithful Jewish man. His was not precisely a Pharisaic form of Judaism, nor the Judaism of the temple cult, but a distinctive movement within Judaism composed of several different elements specific to himself. This Judaism combined the ritual life of halakhah with an eschatological urgency which demanded right moral action. Because Jesus and his followers believed that the end was near, Jesus believed that the call to follow his moral teaching was more important than the observance of ritualistic rule. Combined with his eschatological vision was his apparent place as a Jewish wiseman or hasid. To recognize Jesus as a part of this group of charismatic hasidim only adds to the cohesiveness of the distinctive form of Judaism Jesus preached. All of these aspects of the Judaism of Jesus give new life to his teaching and show his original, but true, Jewish identity.

Conclusion

The astute reader now harkens back to a question encountered at the beginning of this investigation. Is it really possible for a person to leave their religious affiliations behind and examine a religious text without prejudice? More specifically, does the argument presented by Vermes appear to be without prejudice? What Vermes describes is a Jewish Jesus, one that fits particularly well into first-century Palestine. However, considering Vermes’ experience and disenchantment with the Catholic Church, and his Jewish beliefs, it seems somewhat doubtful that his background had no influence on his writing at all. Moreover, since Vermes is extremely knowledgeable about first-century Palestine, perhaps he is too eager to accentuate the similarities
between Jesus and his first-century Jewish counterparts. The critic may say that Vermes could possibly have fallen into the trap described in the introduction of being influenced by his own beliefs.

While some may see a prejudice in Vermes’ work, two aspects seem to testify to the validity of Vermes’ scholarship. First, if Vermes was attempting to minimize the distinctiveness of Jesus within first-century Judaism, he would avoid texts in which Jesus appears to break ritual law, which have been used by many Christian scholars to prove Jesus’ defiance of Judaism. Vermes shrewdly confronts these issues, though, and shows how they fit into either moral Judaism of the day or Jesus’ eschatological mindset. Second, Vermes seems to treat both the gospels and other Jewish writings as literature that convey history about thoughts, ideas, and beliefs of certain times and places. In this sense, Vermes seems to somehow take himself out of both traditions to portray a picture of Jesus that is as objective as can be expected.

At first glance, Vermes’ Jesus and the Jesus of the Catholic Church seem incompatible. It is specifically difficult for the Christian to see the historical accuracy of the Gospels questioned when the texts have been a central aspect to the teaching of the Church for centuries. Can the Jesus of Vermes be reconciled with the Jesus of Christianity?

Vermes would say that there is a fundamental misunderstanding pervading the tradition of Christianity with regard to Jesus. As seen above, while Vermes sees Jesus as a special charismatic figure, apparently resembling a prophet-like figure, Vermes does not see him as being an incarnation of the divine as Christianity does. He would argue that the church has come to worship Jesus in a way Jesus would never have imagined or wanted his followers to worship. Moreover, that the church is more entrenched in a Christianity developed by Paul and the early church rather than "the religion of Jesus the Jew."
If Vermes' picture of Jesus is true to the historical Jesus of Galilee, it does seem that Christianity has followed the wrong path. However, the fundamental issue is that of faith. To have faith in a religion is to, in some way, have an innate sense that what one believes is true. Consequently, while the Christian tradition may learn more and more about the historical Jesus and its difference with the Jesus of their tradition, faith will continually reaffirm the idea that Jesus was in some way divine. This does not mean that the tradition cannot change its interpretations of the person of Jesus. What is more celebratory of God's gift of intelligence than to learn more about the human nature of Jesus and incorporate that into the tradition? As long as Christianity continues to acknowledge that in some way Jesus was divine, the revision of ideas concerning his human nature simply make him a more accessible figure to worship.

All of the issues Vermes presents of Jesus' Jewishness, while different than what Christians learn about Jesus, do not deter from the Christian picture of Jesus. In fact, Jesus' devoted commitment to Judaism should be an inspiration to Christians today. The principles to which he devoted his life are very much the same as those to which Christians devote their lives. As many have noted, the Jewish tradition and Christian tradition are intimately related to each other. This provides one of the necessities of dialogue between our two traditions and part of the purpose of this paper. Coming to an understanding of the tradition that Jesus was a part of can only help us create a better understanding of the person our religion is based on. In the words of John Paul II, Jews and Christians share a "great spiritual patrimony," which solidifies Christians undeniable and intrinsic relationship to their Jewish brothers and sisters [Sherwin/Kasimow 75, 77].

As stated above, the ultimate question is that of faith. Just as Jews have faith that God made a covenant with Abraham, Christians have faith that God established a second covenant in
Christ. Just as Jews cannot prove the historicity of many claims in the Hebrew Bible, Christians cannot prove the historicity of many claims in the Gospels. While our traditions contain different expressions of faith, the current dialogue between Christians and Jews is bringing their traditions back into a familial relationship.
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