

Judaizing Jesus

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Synopsis

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The relationship between Judaism and Christianity has been acrimonious throughout most of history. Often confronted with persecution, with arguments of Divine rejection, and with religious practices and beliefs that appeared pagan and even idolatrous to them, most rabbis viewed Christianity negatively. However, quite surprisingly, not all rabbis viewed Christianity in this light.

The Renaissance brought about an unprecedented interaction between Jews and Christians that caused many rabbis to reconsider age-old views. The positive aspects of Christianity, at least concerning non-Jews, were increasingly embraced by many rabbis. These reconsiderations set the stage for a new era of engagement and rapprochement between these two religious communities which continues into the present. Judaizing Jesus explores those views and the circumstances that forged them.

The Italian rabbis represent one end of the spectrum in Jewish perspectives on Christianity. They represented, one might say, a more generous view of other religious traditions. The Italian rabbis held that Christians and Muslims were monotheists. Concerning Islam, of course, that been regarded as such previously. The attitudes towards Christianity were radical, however.

The Italian rabbis held that Christianity observed many of the essential principles of Judaism. As a consequence, Jews were allowed to trade with them. Jews were allowed to socialize with them. While there were always concerns over too much social interaction, Jews could teach Christians the Torah and other Jewish topics. Christians had a share in the World to Come as long as they obeyed the elementary doctrines of their religious traditions. This was because these principles stemmed from the Noachide laws.

The Italian models stood in contrast to the more traditional, medieval view towards Christianity. The medieval Jewish view as exclusivist in nature and was greatly drawn from Kabbalistic views to Jewish and non-Jewish identity. That understanding saw non-Jews, Christian or not, as little better than

idolaters. Consequently, it was wrong for Jews to interact with them beyond the minimum requirements mandated by the fact that Jews lived amidst them. Jews were prohibited from socializing with them. Teaching them Torah, written or oral lore, was a sin. Non-Jews would not receive a portion in the World to Come. </p> <p>The Western European Jewish experience reflects an acceptance of the general approach of Italian rabbis who experienced the Renaissance, and also lived through the European Enlightenment and ultimately Emancipation. As Gilbert Rosenthal notes, most non-Orthodox American Jews have perhaps unknowingly followed the perspectives crafted by Italian rabbis. </p>

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