

## **Jesus Reclaimed**



# JESUS RECLAIMED

## Jewish Perspectives on the Nazarene

*Walter Homolka*

Translated by  
Ingrid Shafer



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*For Otto Kaiser, teacher and friend*



I know a good Hamburg Christian who can never reconcile himself to the fact that our Lord and Saviour was by birth a Jew. A deep dissatisfaction seizes him when he must admit to himself that the man who, as the pattern of perfection, deserves the highest honor, was still of kin to those snuffling, long-nosed fellows who go running about the streets selling old clothes, whom he so utterly despises, and who are even more desperately detestable when they like himself apply themselves to the wholesale business of spices and dye-stuffs, and encroach upon his interests.

—Heinrich Heine *Shakespeare's Maidens and Women*





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# Foreword

Leonard Swidler

Rabbi Walter Homolka carefully lays out the contributions Jewish scholars have been making to the ever fuller historical understanding of the most influential Jew—or perhaps the most influential human being—ever, Jesus of Nazareth. It is built on solid scholarship but written in terms that make it accessible to the educated layperson.

Now in the early twenty-first century, we are still learning more about Jesus of Nazareth as a result of the “third quest of the historical Jesus.” The first quest was launched during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment by scholars like Hermann Reimarus and gained momentum in the nineteenth century with the development of “scientific history” under scholars such as Leopold von Ranke. The quest ground to a halt early in the twentieth century with the declaration by Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann that it was impossible. All we had to go on were several faith statements about Jesus and, therefore, it was impossible to discern the human face of Jesus beneath all the projections.

The second quest was started by Bultmann’s prize student, Ernst Käsemann, with his inaugural address at the University of Göttingen in 1954—he later became professor at my alma mater, the University of Tübingen. He argued that despite the “faith statement” nature of the Gospels, we *can* attain a historical picture of the real Jesus by using tools such as (1) *dissimilarity* (if a statement was

contrary to the aims of early Judaism or the early Christians, it likely came from Jesus), (2) *multiple attestation* (if a statement is found in more than one source), and (3) *coherence* (if a statement cohered with already accepted Jesus statements), to which was later added (4) *linguistic suitability* (if a statement made sense in Jesus' Aramaic).

How did these criteria work? Let me give just one example. The New Testament writings are full of negative statements about women by persons *other* than Jesus—for example, “Women should keep silence in the church” (1 Cor 14:33); “I suffer no woman to have authority over a man” (1 Tm 2:11); “Wives, be subject to your husbands” (1 Pt 3:1). Moreover, Jesus’s younger Jewish contemporary Josephus wrote, “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, in all four of the Gospels, *nowhere* does Jesus say or do anything negative regarding women; on the contrary, he says and does many, many positive things. Conclusion: those “feminist” remarks and actions attributed in the Gospels to Jesus could not stem from the frequently misogynist Jewish or Christian sources, but had to go back to Jesus himself.<sup>2</sup>

As helpful as the “principle of dissimilarity” was, at the same time it tended to alienate Jesus from his natural Jewish context—which did not make any sense. Hence, starting in the late 1970s, researchers focused on the broader background of the New Testament, and most especially its Jewish background. This approach drew the interest of many excellent scholars, including many of the most respected contemporary biblical scholars, resulting in what has been named the “third quest of the historical Jesus”:

In the ‘third quest,’ which first emerged predominantly in the English-speaking world, a sociological interest replaced a theological interest, and the concern to find Jesus a place in Judaism re-

placed the demarcation of Jesus from Judaism; an openness to non-canonical (sometimes heretical) sources also replaced the preference for canonical sources.<sup>3</sup>

Jewish scholars were on this “third quest for the historical Jesus” long before we Christian scholars took up the quest. At one point we Christians finally realized that it is absolutely essential to view Jesus as Rabbi Yeshua Ha-Notzri, Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, and to recognize all his relatives (Mary, Joseph, James, and so on) and first followers as fellow Jews if we are ever going to understand who the “founder” of Christianity was and what he was all about.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, it is with deep gratitude that I welcome this latest book in a glorious tradition of Jewish scholarship that is of immense help to its sibling, Christian scholarship. But it is much more than that. It is a handy handbook, a veritable vade mecum on the growing deeper historical understanding of Jesus among Jewish scholars and thus an important source for Christian and Islamic scholars alike.

## Notes

1. Josephus, *Against Apion*, II, 201, cited in Leonard Swidler, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976), 2.
2. See Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988); Leonard Swidler, *Jesus Was a Feminist* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007).
3. Gerd Theissen, Annette Merz. *The Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 10.
4. I too, belatedly, joined the pioneer Christian scholars in this “third quest”: Leonard Swidler, *Yeshua: A Model for Moderns* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988; 2nd expanded ed., 1993).



# Translator's Preface

Ingrid Shafer

While reading Walter Homolka's 2009 German book *Jesus of Nazareth*, I became convinced that it deserved to be broadly distributed beyond a German-speaking public, both academic and lay. I was especially fascinated by the second part of the title: *im Spiegel jüdischer Forschung* (in the Mirror of Jewish Scholarship). The title happened to coincide with one of my lifelong personal and academic passions—my conviction that all of us perceive what we consider reality through what I have called “hermeneutical lenses,” spectacles or mirrors that determine what we “see” and what we consider “the truth.” I spent forty-one years teaching interdisciplinary global history of ideas at a liberal arts college, and I never quite ceased being amazed at the extent to which my students, often unwilling captives in required courses, were threatened by having their preconscious assumptions challenged, especially concerning their religious or ideological convictions. Simply saying, “Jesus was a Jew” or “Jesus was not a Christian” raised a chorus of objections. Yet, this was precisely what I had hoped to communicate to others ever since I was in my late teens in the 1950s.

I was born in Innsbruck, Austria, one month before Hitler marched into Poland, and have been haunted by images of the Shoah ever since I was old enough to read magazines and question adults. Eventually, I began to seek a rational explanation for what seemed the uncon-

scious, knee-jerk anti-Jewish prejudices of so many “good people” I knew—teachers, classmates, even my father. No one, for example, seemed to question what to me appeared an absurd and hate-fomenting local story of the *Judenstein* (Jewstone), the shrine of the Blessed Andrew of Rinn [Anderl], the final resting place of a small boy whose throat, the teacher told us during a class outing, had been slit centuries before by a group of Jewish merchants. In the chapel, we saw the gray boulder on which the toddler had reportedly been slaughtered. We marveled at the imprint of the tiny body miraculously left behind, a silent witness to a crime so heinous it softened the very stone. We were encouraged to ponder the pictures on the chapel walls of the heinous act being committed, to kneel for prayer in the pews, and to imagine the child’s agony and his mother’s despair when she discovered her son’s exsanguinated corpse hanging from a birch tree.

In the months and years following that class outing, in the recesses of my mind, doubts began to stir. Initially, I had been sickened by the teacher’s story and the gruesome pictures of the murder. Eventually, the entire tradition, especially the miraculously imprinted stone, began to make no sense and seemed fabricated in order to terrify Christian children, malign Jews, and attract pilgrim business. This suspicion was reinforced by a fine priest, Professor Anton Egger, my religion teacher at the *Realgymnasium* [Secondary School], who was clearly unimpressed by the cult and who told me years later that he had doubted the legitimacy of the devotion all along. Especially when I discovered that a folk drama version of the Anderl murder by a Norbertine canon, Gottfried Schöpf, was still regularly performed, I began to connect the ways Jews of the past were depicted in pious tales with the ways ordinary Christians continued to view their Jewish contemporaries.

Between 1985 and 1994, due to the efforts of Bishop Reinhold Stecher, the blood libel story was officially de-



bunked, little Anderl was debeatified and the shrine was turned into a memorial to the victims of anti-Semitism, with the following inscription, here cited in translation, on a plaque: "This stone reminds us of a dark deed of blood as well as, by its very name, of the many sins Christians have committed against Jews. In the future it shall serve as a sign of our reconciliation with the people who have borne us the savior." However, this did not neutralize the extent to which the shrine attracted pilgrims and, with its graphic depictions of the murder, the extent to which it helped shape the ways countless visitors, especially children in their most formative years, viewed Jews, even after World War II, as it had for centuries before.

The power of image to shape one's understanding of reality and especially one's preconscious, intuitive assumptions cannot be overemphasized, and it affects people of all traditions as it grinds the hermeneutical lenses and shapes the mirrors through and in which we view/create the "other"—whether the "other" is Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, atheist, Republican, Democrat, conservative, liberal, and so forth *ad infinitum*. As long as they are not presented as the "one and only" privileged truth, these differing perspectives can serve as valuable steps toward a balanced, multifaceted, dynamically evolving understanding of whatever one seeks to comprehend. By absolutizing any one position, truth is reduced to dogma, which is, concerning the quest for the historical Jesus, precisely the position taken by Joseph Ratzinger when he insists that seeking to know Jesus cannot be legitimate unless it is done through the lens of the kerygmatic Christ of faith, which is clearly impossible for any non-Christian (and even some who consider themselves Christians). In this book, Homolka convincingly engages Ratzinger and makes a case for the importance of understanding how Jesus has been viewed in close to two millennia of Jewish tradition.