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# Defending the Faith: 19th Century American Jewish Writing on Christianity and Jesus

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## Defending the Faith: Nineteenth Century American Jewish Writings on Christianity and Jesus

George L. Berlin

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989

xii + 207 pp.

When Jews emigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century, they left behind some of the more obvious forms of antagonism, hatred, and violence directed at them by Christians. They were not confined to ghettos, and at least *de jure* they had civil rights and equality with Christians. But, as is well known, they faced various forms of exclusion, antagonism, and social pressures, such as missionary efforts directed at Jews by triumphalist Protestants bent on Christianizing America. But there was also the discounting by liberal Protestants of any enduring value in Judaism. And there was the lure of assimilation—sloughing off Judaism and blending into the American social, cultural, and religious landscapes. *Defending the Faith*, by a professor at Baltimore Hebrew University, deals with Jewish responses to these pressures in the nineteenth century. Part one outlines and analyzes the responses; part two reproduces extracts from some of the responses. Despite the rather plodding style, it is an instructive book. One learns almost as much about nineteenth-century American Christians as about their Jewish compatriots.

Chapter one outlines the demographic and political situation of Jews in nineteenth-century America. Given the minority situation of Jews in a *de facto*, and in some respects *de jure*, Christian country, responses to Christian devaluation of Judaism and Christian missionary efforts had to be circumspect: firm and clear enough to define and defend Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity, but measured, so as not to provoke an anti-Jewish backlash. Moreover, in a country characterized by separation of church and state, religious toleration, and freedom of conscience, Jews had to discover a stance appropriate to the new situation. Some Jews saw themselves as outsiders—distinct from American culture. Others, the “insiders”, stressed the commonalities between Judaism and Christianity, or Judaism and Americanism, or both.

Among the early defences of Judaism against Christian missionizing (ch. 2) was, interestingly, one by an anonymous Christian (an extract is printed in ch. 7) who feared domination of American life by one denomination or group of denominations. An early monthly, *The Jew* (1823–25), not only corrected misrepresentations of Judaism but also attacked Christianity, drawing on the stock of Jewish polemical literature to do so. In addition to his own articles, the editor, Solomon Henry Jackson, also published contributions from other Jews. One, by “Abraham”, impugned the authority of the New Testament, questioned Christians’ affirmations about Jesus, and challenged their claims that the messianic age had come—where were the peace and harmony that it was to usher in? Jackson himself

attacked the Gospel of Matthew's interpretation of the Hebrew prophets, including Isaiah 52-53: the suffering servant was the Jewish people, and those who rule over them and blasphemed God's name (Isaiah 52:5) were Christians. An anonymous contribution (excerpted in ch. 8) similarly applies Hebrew prophecies of spiritual blindness to Christians. Jackson was "a one man antidefamation agency," insisting "that American Jews should make use of the civil rights guaranteed them by the United States constitution to protect their interests, even in such a controversial area as religious argumentation" (24).

The most prominent defender of traditional (conservative) Judaism in nineteenth-century America was Isaac Leeser, who for almost two decades served American Judaism in a variety of ways (ch. 3). By correcting misunderstandings of Judaism he hoped to make American Jews proud of their traditions, better able to fend off Christian attacks and missionary efforts and more inclined to resist assimilation. One result would be more firmly established Jewish civil rights, another of his concerns. Christian teachings did not undermine or supersede the revelation to the Jews since those teachings contradicted that revelation. Against the Christian argument that Jewish suffering was divine punishment for their rejection of Jesus as messiah, Leeser pointed out that the Jews' very survival—despite Christian persecution—was proof of God's unbroken covenant with them; they suffered because they had not kept the covenant faithfully enough. Christians, however, had failed their covenant even more, notably in persecuting Jews.

Chapter four deals with Reform Judaism's response to the American milieu. Not surprisingly, it is the longest chapter, for Reform Jews had to go the greatest lengths to distinguish themselves from liberal Protestantism. They also wanted to demonstrate that Reform Judaism best met the needs of modern (i.e., late nineteenth-century) Americans and thus to justify the continued existence of Reform Judaism. Showing the consonance of Reform Judaism and Americanism would also, it was hoped, counter an increasing anti-Semitism. Since liberal Protestantism's claim to the superiority of Christianity rested on its affirmation of the uniqueness of Jesus and his message, Reform Jews expended much effort arguing that they understood Jesus better than his followers did. To rescue him they turned to rabbinic sources, then still largely ignored by Christian scholars. Far from being unique, Jesus was a loyal Jew who differed little from other Jewish leaders or, if he did, differed in degree, not kind. (These reconstructions might well add another chapter to a new edition of Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*; they conform to Schweitzer's demonstration that each generation fashioned Jesus in its own image in this case Jesus emerges as a proto-Reform Jew standing in the prophetic rather than the cultic line of Judaism.) As to Christian ethics, argue the writers, they are inferior to Jewish ethics because they focus on love rather than justice, and justice is superior because it not only values the individual but also seeks to redress social and economic wrongs.

Because they saw the crucifixion as a crucial factor in Christian anti-Semitism, Reform Jews sought to show that the gospel accounts distorted

and falsified the events: it was Romans, not Jews, who were to blame. Moreover, crucifixion is really a symbol of Judaism, not of Christianity: "The Jews," wrote Kaufman Kohler, "are a people of Christs. Not A Jew but THE Jew is the God-chosen mediator between the nations and creeds and classes of men whose life blood has so often to atone for the sins of the world. This is the solution of the Jewish question, this is the explanation of the perplexing puzzle concerning the wandering Jew" (53-54).

If Jesus was more like than unlike Judaism, then how did Christianity come to be? The villain was Paul. Here Reform Jews were fighting a battle on two fronts. Against traditional Jews, who charged them with Pauline antinomianism, they replied that it was orthodox Judaism—with its legalistic mindset—that was Pauline. Against liberal Protestants, who distanced themselves from Paul, they argued that since Jesus and his teachings belonged solidly in first-century Judaism, but the Christian religion was not the religion of Jesus, therefore Christianity derives from Paul—who, however, was a Hellenistic Jew influenced by non-Jewish thought. However, his universalism was praiseworthy.

Some Reformed Jewish defences of Judaism were directed against Unitarians who urged a Reform Jewish-Unitarian merger on the grounds that the two religions were so similar; others against the Ethical Culture Society, founded in 1876 by Felix Adler, son of a prominent Reform rabbi. Indeed, Berlin suggests, what the Reform authors wrote about Jesus was addressed more to liberal Christians than to Jews. Their positive assessments of Jesus were elitist, out of step with much of American Judaism, including many of the Reform laity. On the other hand, they failed to convince Christians that Judaism was superior to Christianity. In contrast to the outsider stance of traditional Jews, the stance of Reform Jews was that of insiders to America: "The message that the Reformers were delivering in their anti-Christian polemics was that the Jews were the Americans par excellence" (75).

The ninety-five pages of excerpts in Part Two, "Sources", include appeals to Jews to become Christians by a converted Jew and by a Presbyterian Synod, a defence of Jews by a Christian, a comparison of Moses and Jesus, a Jewish view of Jesus' teachings, a detailed explanation of why Jews don't accept Jesus as messiah, and others. It is good to have these firsthand statements from obscure sources gathered together and made accessible to readers, and for Christians to confront directly statements by Jews about Jesus, and to see themselves and their forebears in the mirror held up to them. Many of the views expressed have been outdistanced by subsequent scholarship, but many are still telling.

It is interesting to compare how these nineteenth-century Jews viewed Jesus and his followers, past and present, with the ways present-day Jews see them, e.g., Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (Oxford University Press, 1965) and *We Jews and You Christians* (Lippincott, 1967); Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Macmillan, 1973); Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Westminster, 1987); or Pinchas Lapide, *Israelis,*

*Jews, and Jesus* (Doubleday, 1979). Lapidé's work, which looks at Israeli works in Hebrew about Jesus, and the reaction to them in Israel, is especially interesting (cf. the present volume, pp. 73-75).

Typographical errors: "conversation [conversion] of Israel" (24); "ale [able] to continue" (40); "religions [religious] symbolism" (54); "univiersalism" (61); "Gladding [Gladden]" (65); "a matter of fat [fact]" (117); "cruse [curse] fell upon the Jews" (130); "Ernest Reman [Renan]" (152).

Harold E. Remus  
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## One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism

Larry W. Hurtado

Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988

\$16.25 paper

If you have ever wondered how worship of Jesus could arise in a religion of presumably strict monotheism, this book should prove interesting. Not that Hurtado, Associate Professor in the religious studies department at the University of Manitoba, presents reams of new data. But he orders and analyses the data we have—ancient texts and modern studies—in an original way, focusing on early Christian worship of Jesus, rather than on the more commonly studied christological titles, in order to understand what he calls "the early Christian mutation"—i.e., worship of a figure alongside God.

It is a mutation rather than an absolute *novum* because it "was a direct outgrowth from, and indeed a variety of, the ancient Jewish tradition" (99). Jewish monotheism did not preclude "divine agency"—heavenly figures "second only to God" and "described as participating in some way in God's rule of the world and his redemption of the elect" (17). But one also observes in Christianity a *novum*—worship of both one God and one Lord. And now, as CBC newscasters say, the details.

Hurtado's introductory chapter ably defends his concentration on Judaism rather than (also or primarily) on paganism: the latter had monotheistic tendencies but no thoroughgoing monotheism, whereas Jewish monotheism, though well developed, included secondary beings as well (Judaism was more complex than much earlier scholarship has allowed). These are what Hurtado looks at in chapter one, "Divine Agency in Ancient Jewish Monotheism". He demonstrates that the idea of divine agency was widespread in Judaism, both in the diaspora and the land of Israel. The agents can be grouped into "divine attributes and powers" (e.g., Wisdom, or Philo's Logos), "exalted patriarchs" (e.g., Moses and Enoch), "principal