

A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN
RELATIONS



Above: An olive tree – see St Paul's Letter to the Romans 11:17-18. iStock.com/ Alexandra_pp

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*Spires with cross from St George Episcopal Mission
and star of David from Temple Israel, Leadville,
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*I acknowledge with gratitude
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and unrelenting encouragement
of Patsy Crotty.*



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INTRODUCTION



Above: Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall, Wikimedia

To understand the relationship between Christians and Jews today it is essential to understand the long history, the 2000 years of this relationship. Yet exploring the relationship today is much more than simply retelling history. This history can be confronting. It can become a way to change and deepen our self-understanding as Christians and to contribute to world peace as we learn to dialogue, to listen and to speak respectfully and attentively, in mutual relationships.

Christians need to recognise just how much in Christianity is from our Jewish roots. St Paul, in Romans, reminds the Gentile followers of the Way (early Gentile Christians), that they are grafted onto the root of Judaism (Rom 11:17–18). Paul indicates that the root continues to nourish the grafted-on branches. In

this *Friendly Guide*, Christians are invited to remember how much we have received from Jewish religious practice and tradition of the First Century CE. We would not have Easter, Pentecost, Eucharist, the Old Testament (also called the First Testament) or even the New Testament in the form we have it today if it were not for the fact that Christianity grew from within Judaism.

Christianity traces its history back to the times and figure of Jesus; this seems obvious. However, we need to remember that the Christian tradition grew within Judaism and received extraordinary gifts from the way that Judaism was lived in Jesus' time. Indeed, the link goes back much further to the stories and characters we share with Judaism in the Old/First Testament. Jesus was formed by

Temple Times

Jesus lived in the days when the Second Temple was central to Jewish life and practice. The First Temple, built by King Solomon (950 BCE approx.) was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The Second Temple was built on the same location in Jerusalem in 520 BCE (approx.) and destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The destruction of the Second Temple meant that continuing Judaism required major changes to its practice after 70 CE. This was in fact the very time that Christianity was emerging within Judaism and shaping itself.



Above: oldest known icon of Christ, 6th century from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai, Wikimedia

these stories and by living according to Jewish life and culture of his time.

The paradox is that Jesus both unites Christianity with Judaism yet at the same time divides these two communities. Christians believe that Jesus is God incarnate, fully human and fully divine while Jews believe that he was a good Jew but not divine. This Christian belief was defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. While this belief is ancient, Christians have attended more to Jesus' divinity than to his humanity. If we really believe in the Incarnation, we must fully acknowledge Jesus' humanity. To recognise Jesus as the Word made flesh, we must appreciate him in his own time in history, in his place and amidst the people with whom he was at home. His life on earth matters.

He was not a generic human being but lived in a family, a geographical, social and cultural context. We Christians need to know him in his humanity. This makes the Incarnation real. God's plan in Jesus was to be one with us. This is why we must learn to know him as a First Century Galilean Jew who was born into the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

This desire to know the man Jesus does not deny his divinity. However, this *Friendly Guide* is offered to help Christians know Jesus in his humanity, to know him as a Galilean Jew in Temple times, under Roman occupation.

This book will also explore the 2000 years since his birth and ask why the relationship between the followers of Jesus and the people he



Above: Judean desert. Photo Mary Reaburn

was born into, the Jewish people, has not always been peaceful or respectful but tragically has often been harmful and marginalising.

While the paradox is that Jesus both unites and divides Christians and Jews, we must remember that this was only true later, because in his day there were no Christians. Jesus was Jewish, as were Mary and Joseph and all his disciples: Mary of Magdala, Peter and the Twelve, almost all the named and unnamed women and men who followed him during his earthly life.

When we say he was Jewish, it is not simply his religious affiliation but also his culture, the whole context of his humanity. Being a First Century Jew included the political and historical context in which he

was raised, and which shaped his humanity and his Jewishness. It included the geography of the area in which he grew up and the whole physical, social and religious context of his life.

This book explores the meaning of Jesus' Jewishness for him and for Christians today. The meaning for Christians includes a long, troubled history and more recently an improving relationship with Judaism. Christian self-understanding is changing as we:

- re-learn the meaning of Jesus as a Jew in Temple times
- appreciate the richness we have received via our roots in Judaism
- learn of the tragic history of

the Jewish people in Christian Europe, with the horrors that culminated in the Holocaust

- appropriate the changes that have followed the Holocaust.

Unfortunately, much of the past 2000 years of Christian-Jewish relationships have been marked by violence, misunderstandings, power imbalances and even hatred. Yet social change, begun during the Enlightenment (which introduced scientific methods and a more analytical and literary-critical approach to the Bible) has allowed us to see things from a different perspective.

Different approaches to the Bible and to theology have seen Jewish and Christian scholars studying together



Background: Spires with cross from St George Episcopal Mission and star of David from Temple Israel, Leadville, Colorado, US. iStock.com/KaraGrubis

Below: Pope John XXIII by de Agostini
Wikimedia

Bottom: Dome of the Hall of Names at
Yad Vashem, Israel, Wikimedia



and learning from each other. Friendships have developed between Jews and Christians. The experience of World War Two and the Holocaust prompted further reflection, leading to significant changes in the ways Christians related to Jews and Judaism.

We Christians continue to be called to reflect on the many ways that our teaching and practice contributed to a social context in which the Nazis could perpetrate such horrors. Unfortunately, antisemitism still impacts our societies today.

Many individuals made significant contributions to the change in Jewish-Christian relations. In June 1960, Jules Isaac, a Jewish French historian and educator visited Pope John XXIII, and explained to him that a certain 'teaching of contempt' for Judaism in Catholic and Christian teaching had contributed to a social climate where the Holocaust took place. Pope John XXIII listened and assured him that his visit was not in vain. This was, in part, because John XXIII as Cardinal Angelo Roncalli had himself helped Jews escape Nazi

policies by intervening in several ways.

Almost two years after Jules Isaac's visit the Second Vatican Council began and in another four years the document on the Catholic Church's relationship with other faith traditions was promulgated. This document was called *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time). It was truly a response to Pope John XXIII's desire to open the windows of the Catholic Church and allow it to engage with the world.

This document has become a metaphor for changes in the Catholic Church's self-understanding as well as paralleling similar documents and changes in most Christian traditions. These changes can be characterised as liturgical, biblical, theological and social.

The invitation of this book is to explore the meaning and implications of Jesus being Jewish. There is a related invitation into Jewish-Christian relations today and indeed into wider interfaith relationships. These relationships are crucially important not only in themselves but also for the sake of society and our planet Earth.

