

Yes, Jesus was Jewish

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There is a popular notion that Jesus, in his conflicts with the religious authorities of his time, was showing his opposition to religion in general and to Judaism in particular. This view is most clearly expressed by Garry Wills in his book *What Jesus Meant*, in a chapter entitled “Against Religion”:

The most striking, resented, and dangerous of Jesus’ activities was his opposition to religion as that was understood in his time. This is what led to his death. Religion killed him. He opposed all formalisms in worship – ritual purifications, sacrifice, external prayer and fasting norms, the Sabbath and eating codes, priesthoods, the Temple, and the rules of Sadducees, Pharisees, and Scribes. He called authentic only the religion of the heart.¹

This view is very cogently and succinctly expressed. It is also completely wrong.

Jesus was Jewish. He was born a Jew, lived a Jewish life, and died as a Jew. He was not opposed to Judaism, and was not trying to end it. The notion that Jesus was out to abolish Jewish religious observances and replace them with a vague “religion of the heart” is not original with Wills, and it has a long history. But it misreads the scriptures and misconstrues Jesus’s Jewish context. In fact, practically every sentence in the paragraph quoted above is incorrect.

The notion that religion killed Jesus is problematic. The Romans executed him, and they could hardly have cared less about Jewish religious squabbles. They killed Jesus because he was drawing crowds, was hailed as “King of the Jews,” and was deemed an insurrection threat. That is, after all, the sign they fixed above his cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” This is a complex subject, also involving the accuracy of the Gospel reports compared with what we know from other sources, and I will not address it here in depth, except to say that the concern of the Jewish leaders about the threat Jesus’s ministry posed was a very practical one. John’s Gospel gets it right: “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place

¹ Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 59.

and our nation” (John 11:48). Our present concern, however, is Jesus’s relationship to religion, and specifically to the Judaism of his time.

Let’s now consider the different categories Wills mentions.

Ritual purifications

Wills gives a number of examples intended to show that Jesus’s opposition to Judaism included especially its purity code. The first is the woman who suffered from constant hemorrhages for twelve years. Such discharges from the body made one technically impure, until undergoing a ritual ablution.

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.” But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.” When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.” (Luke 8:43-48)

Wills remarks:

For twelve years the woman of the gospel had borne this curse, making endless fruitless appeals to doctors and purifiers of the unclean. Now, desperate for a cure, she defies the ban on contact with others. She jostles through a crowd that presses in on Jesus, reaching out her hand for the edge of his cloak. He turns with a start and asks, “Who touched me?” Though she felt the flow stop instantly, she is afraid to admit that she violated the taboo against contact. Everyone in the crowd denies touching him, and Peter says there is no telling who could have brushed up against him in the press of so many about him. But Jesus insists: “Someone touched me. I realized it when power surged from me” (Lk 8.46). The woman, trembling with fear, throws herself down before him and admits her offense. But he is not offended. He says, gently, “Your trust, my daughter, is what healed you – go in peace” (8.48). Trust, not ritual water, cleanses.²

² Wills, *Jesus*, 28.

The problem with this analysis is that the point of the story is not the purity code. Given the woman's frequent discharges, ritual water would have been of no avail. Jesus does not nullify the purity code. He does not declare the woman pure in spite of her condition. Instead, he heals her condition! The waters of the ritual bath were never intended to do that.

Wills gives another, even more tenuous example:

Even when his friend Mary anoints his feet, he is being touched by an unclean woman, since she lets down her hair to dry his feet (Jn 12.3), and letting down one's hair in public makes a woman unclean, as does any deliberate dishevelment before others (Num 5.18).³

Again, the purity code is not the point of the story. Numbers 5 concerns trial by ordeal for a woman accused of adultery. As part of the procedure, "The priest shall set the woman before the LORD, dishevel the woman's hair, and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance" (Numbers 5:18). The priest does not make the woman unclean by doing so. (Whether or not the woman is unclean would depend on her innocence, not on her hair.) The reference is irrelevant to the point Wills wants to make.

A third example Wills offers is the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), which he also cites as an example of Jesus's opposition to the purity regulations.

The story of the "good Samaritan" is often told simply to show goodness of heart in the rescuer. It also shows the inhuman effects of the purity code of the Jewish priesthood. The story is a powerful part of Jesus' attack on the formalisms of "religion."⁴

Wills completely misunderstands the parable.

To understand this parable, one needs to read it through Jewish eyes (and this is just one reason I am sympathetic to the view that the author of Luke, like all the other New Testament writers, was Jewish). Let's take a look at the text:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read

³ Wills, *Jesus*, 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-39)

This parable has absolutely nothing to do with "the purity code of the Jewish priesthood." So why would Wills say that it does?

It has become fashionable to try to find reasons why the priest and the Levite did not stop to help the man. So the reason often given is that priests were forbidden to touch dead bodies, because it would render the priest impure and unable to carry out his priestly functions. And so the neglecting the traveler is blamed on these priestly purity regulations.

This makes no sense, for at least three reasons. First, the man was not dead! It was obvious to the Samaritan that the man was still alive, otherwise why try to help him? Surely the priest and the Levite must have seen what the Samaritan saw, that the man was not dead. And there is no prohibition for a priest against helping someone in need. In fact, when a life is in the balance, saving that life takes precedence over all other regulations and observances.

Second, they were all traveling down *from* Jerusalem, away from the Temple. So the priest's making sure he was clean and fit for Temple service would not have been a concern. Helping someone in need would have taken priority.

Third, the Levite, not being a priest, was under no prohibition against touching the dead, so even if he did think the man was dead, that would not have been any reason for him to pass the man by. So clearly the purity code for priests is not the issue here. Even if we assume the priest and the Levite could not see what was obvious to the Samaritan, if they did pass by what they really thought was a corpse, the parable would have no point. The point was, who is this man's neighbor? Corpses don't need good neighbors. Leaving a corpse untouched would not be a breach of good neighborliness.

Now let's try to read this parable through Jewish eyes. Jews reading it would never think the issue was the priestly purity code. What would they think?

Any Jew of the period, and even any educated Jew today, would be conscious of the three basic divisions in Jewish society. There are priests, Levites, and the rest of the people (called "Israel"). So any Jew is called either priest, Levite, or Israel, depending on the person's lineage. This tripartite division is fundamental to Jewish identity.

Bearing this in mind, we can see how masterfully the parable is constructed. First, a priest comes along. Then a Levite comes along. So the reader is set up to expect that the third one, naturally, will be Israel, just a regular Jew. But it turns out to be a Samaritan! The dashing of a false expectation is expected to shock, and it does, for anyone who knows how to read the parable properly.

And so this parable, along with the other examples Wills cites, cannot be used as evidence that Jesus rejected Judaism. Because he didn't.

Sacrifice and the Temple

These two go together so I will treat them as one.

People have long been mystified as to just why Jesus took that aggressive action in the Temple, overturning the money changers' tables. Many unconvincing explanations have been proposed. Wills interprets Jesus's "cleansing" (a very inaccurate term) of the Temple as a sign of disapproval of the sacrificial system, and of Temple Judaism itself. This reads more into

the text than is actually there. Jesus makes no direct statement against the sacrificial cult or against Temple worship. But he does say this:

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers." (Matthew 21:12-13)

If Jesus were just prophesying the end of the Temple, then why talk about a den of robbers? We have no evidence whatsoever that the money changers were robbing anyone (even though some have speculated otherwise with no justification). Pilgrims coming to Jerusalem from afar needed animals for sacrifice, and they could not bring animals with them on their long journey. So they had to purchase them in the Temple. But they could not use the usual coin of the realm, which bore Caesar's image. They had to exchange those coins for the accepted Temple currency. That is what the money changers were for. There was nothing illegal or unethical about it.

There is a theory, which Wills mentions, that by overturning the tables Jesus was prefiguring the destruction of the Temple. Well, maybe, but that also has no textual foundation, and more importantly, it does not get at the heart of Jesus's opposition to Temple practice. Why, still, a den of robbers, of all things?

A brief delve into Bible scholarship makes this incident intelligible. We know from Josephus that debt records were kept in the Temple.⁵ This was one component of a highly oppressive system of taxation. There was a Temple tax that all were obligated to pay, and in addition taxes owed to the government. The Temple served as a bank, supporting both these forms of taxation. The peasant class was taxed into a bare subsistence existence, and not infrequently lost their lands and their freedom.⁶ Tax collectors were essentially state-sanctioned extortionists, and ordinary people hated them. The Temple authorities were in collusion with them and with Rome, holding the tax records and keeping track of every inhabitant, what each one had

⁵ Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2:427.

⁶ William R. Herzog II, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 132-143.

and what each one owed.⁷ Thus the Temple became an instrument of oppression and robbery.

Through his dramatic action in the Temple and his declaration from scripture (he was quoting Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11), Jesus was calling out this extortion and protesting the corruption of the Temple authorities. That must have been a huge factor in their resolve to destroy him. They could not carry it out themselves, since only the Roman state had the power of capital punishment, so they resolved to get Rome involved. But Rome probably already knew who Jesus was – they kept close tabs on Jerusalem and would have noticed the crowds gathered round him – and they had their own reasons to execute him.

So Jesus was certainly opposed to the current practices in the Temple, which had become a tool of the Roman government and the corrupt priestly class. About the sacrificial cult itself, Jesus does not say. He may or may not have been opposed to animal sacrifice. But even if he was opposed to it, this would have nothing to do with being “against religion.” The prophet Hosea also looked toward a time when animal sacrifices would be no more:

*“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6)*

*Take words with you
and return to the LORD;
say to him,
“Take away all guilt;
accept that which is good,
and we will offer
the fruit [literally: “the bulls”] of our lips.” (Hosea 14:2)*

Hosea looked to a time when prayer (the “bulls of our lips”) would replace animals (real bulls) as an offering to God. And Hosea was not against religion. Like Jesus, he was a religious Jew to the end. At most, Jesus would have been following in that tradition.

Jesus’s criticisms of religious rituals are more in line with those of his mentor Isaiah, who condemned these observances not for their own sake but only when separated from social justice.

⁷ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 18.

*What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.*

*When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11-17)*

It is solemn assemblies *with iniquity* that God cannot endure. Isaiah was not calling for an end to religious practice. Neither was Jesus.

If the abolition of the Temple and of Jewish observance in favor of some amorphous “religion of the heart” had been high on Jesus’s list of priorities, one would have expected the disciples to have abandoned Jewish practice and especially the Temple. But we know from Acts that Jesus’s disciples in Jerusalem continued to worship and pray at the Temple, and from Paul’s letters (specifically Galatians and Romans) we know the Jewish disciples continued to observe the food laws. So if Jesus meant to do away with all

that, either he was a very poor communicator (which we know he certainly was not!), or the disciples just weren't listening to him (also quite unlikely).

So we cannot say that Jesus was opposed to the Temple *in itself*, and its use in Jewish religious practice. All we can say is that he was strongly antagonistic to what the Temple *had become*, and how the Temple authorities had corrupted the religion.

The Sabbath

Wills includes Sabbath observance in his list of things that Jesus opposed. He cites the numerous Gospel passages where Jesus clashes with the Pharisees over healing on the Sabbath. This issue has been the cause of much confusion.

First, nowhere in scripture is healing prohibited on the Sabbath, and "healing" is not one of the 39 categories of work codified by the rabbis as forbidden on the Sabbath. In fact, there is a rabbinic dictum that one *must* break the sabbath if necessary to save a life. What Jesus and the Pharisees were arguing about was not *whether* to observe the Sabbath, but *how*.

Healing itself was not, strictly speaking, prohibited on the Sabbath, but telling the healed cripple to carry his mat (John 5:8) could have been considered a violation, and was subject to dispute. Such disputes were common in Jewish jurisprudence. Hillel and Shammai were two important rabbis who were contemporaries of Jesus, and they each founded a school of the law. Shammai was known to lean toward strict interpretations of the law, whereas Hillel was more lenient. Hillel's lenience does not mean he opposed the Jewish religion. All these disputes took place *inside* Judaism.

Jesus clearly leaned more toward Hillel's approach. He noted some hypocrisy in the Pharisaic position: while they objected to the paralytic's carrying his mat, they themselves would not hesitate to carry their own sheep out of a ditch (Matthew 12:11).

Wills himself quotes two verses showing that Jesus did in fact observe and honor the Sabbath, only not the same way the Pharisees did: "The Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8), and "The Sabbath exists for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). (I am using here the author's

translation.) Jesus also says “it is lawful to do good on the sabbath” (Matthew 12:12), showing respect for the Sabbath tradition. He also taught in synagogues on the Sabbath, a very traditional thing to do: “On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded” (Mark 6:2; also cf. Luke 4:16, Luke 4:31, Luke 6:6, Luke 13:10). So clearly Jesus was not opposed to Sabbath observance.

Conclusion: Jesus was not “against religion”

We can see that Jesus was a traditional Jew in every way, and that his disagreements with other authorities were well within the range of religious opinion that existed at the time. Views on the law in that era were fluid, much more so than many people realize, and there was much variation: remember, this was before the codification of the oral law that we now know as the Talmud. Jesus did not lie outside the realm of what could be considered first-century Judaism.

How else do we know this? The Gospels give us a number of other clues.

Jesus’s followers recognized him as a religious authority. Many times they call him “rabbi” (Matthew 26:25, Matthew 26:49, Mark 9:5, Mark 10:51, Mark 11:21, Mark 14:45, John 1:38, John 1:49, John 3:2, John 3:26, John 4:31, John 6:25, John 9:2, John 11:8, John 20:16).

In addition to the Sabbath, Jesus also observed the Jewish festivals, especially the Passover: “The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem” (John 2:13); “I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples” (Matthew 26:18). The Last Supper was a traditional Passover meal.

We also know that Jesus’s Jewish followers observed Jewish law. That was the basis for the entire controversy about whether one must become Jewish and observe Jewish law to become a follower of the Way. Peter and Paul clashed at Antioch over a disagreement about the observance of Jewish food laws. So if Jesus was indeed opposed to the Jewish religion, his disciples unfortunately didn’t get the memo.

Another precept Jesus observed concerned the ritual fringes on one’s garment:

The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God. (Numbers 15:37-41)

This is what the fringes look like:



The fringes prescribed in the scripture refer specifically to the four longest ones, the ones at the corners, two on either side. Some very religious Jews wear a special undergarment with just those four fringes on it; you may have observed that in some Hasidic Jews today, the four fringes poking out from under the person's shirt. Jesus may have worn something like that.

In Hebrew this fringe, or tassel, is called *tzitzit* (צִיצִית). In the Greek Septuagint the word is *kraspedon* (κράσπεδον). This word does not occur often in either testament, but when it does, it always refers to this kind of tassel. The word occurs in the following passage:

She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. (Luke 8:44)

This is the type of fringe Jesus would have worn.

If there is any remaining doubt about Jesus's attitude toward the Jewish law, he tells us himself:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:17-20)

“But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.” (Luke 16:17)

Jesus's disputes with the Pharisees were not unlike those between Hillel and Shammai. And they were all within the realm of observant Judaism. In opposing the exaggerated rigor of the Pharisees Jesus was not “against religion.” He was a *religious reformer and restorer*. As was his mentor, the prophet Isaiah.

A final word

In this chapter Wills seems to want to separate Jesus from the Jewish religion. We see it here again:

Jesus did not come to replace the Temple with other buildings, whether huts or rich cathedrals, but to instill a religion of the heart, with only himself as the place where we encounter the Father.⁸

This completely misrepresents what Jesus was about. Jesus was not proclaiming himself; he was proclaiming the kingdom of God, the reality of eternal life, both here and hereafter. He was not presenting himself as a substitute for the Temple. He gave no directive discouraging worship at the

⁸ Wills, *Jesus*, 76.

Temple (see Matthew 5:23-24). He was not trying to found some new religion, “of the heart” or otherwise, that would take the place of Judaism. This tendency to split Jesus off from Judaism reflects an anti-Judaism from the developing church read back into the New Testament. Fortunately, increasing numbers of scholars have been calling attention to this.

Knowing something of Jesus’s religious background and the Judaism of his time adds an essential dimension to our understanding of Jesus. One can no more understand Jesus without at least some knowledge of Judaism than one can understand Gandhi without some knowledge of Hinduism, or the Buddha without some knowledge of Buddhism. And yet there has been a tendency in the church to deracinate Jesus, to separate him from his Jewish roots. Not too long ago I heard Jesus referred to in church as a “Palestinian carpenter.” This misrepresents who Jesus was, but unfortunately it is just one example of a tendency throughout church history to present Jesus as if he were not really Jewish, and in fact, as if he were the first Christian, the founder of another and completely different religion. That is not who he was. Jesus honored the Judaism he grew up with, and he wanted to purify it of the corrupting influences of the religious authorities of his time, especially those associated with the Temple.

And so Jesus set an example for us to follow today. Many of the corrupting influences against which he struggled are with us today, in different and various forms. Jesus has become a universal figure, not for Jews only but for the world, but neither should he be taken away from the Jewish people. It is Jesus as a Jew who challenges us to look at our own religion, whatever it may be, and ask if it sincerely encourages the practice of non-self-interested love. Jesus was not “against religion.” Far from it. Jesus respected religion and wanted to make it better, so that it could become the blessing for all of us that God intended. Understanding Jesus’s Jewishness helps us see this far more clearly than would otherwise be possible.

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