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Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Volume 52, Number 3, Summer 2017, pp. 381-401 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2017.0041>



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The Mythmaker: Hyam Maccoby and the Invention of Christianity*

Rebecca Moore

P R E C I S

This essay examines the writings of Hyam Maccoby, a twentieth-century Jewish scholar of rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity. After locating Maccoby in the context of Jewish anti-Christian writings, it presents his critical view of Christian doctrines. This scholar claimed in numerous publications that Christianity was inherently antisemitic due to the teachings of Paul the apostle, especially his doctrine of the vicarious atonement. It is therefore worth presenting, assessing, and challenging Maccoby's views as a barrier to Jewish and Christian dialogue.



Introduction

In her article, “Doing Justice to Judaism,” Mary C. Boys described her personal journey into Jewish and Christian dialogue.¹ She traced her deepening awareness of the ways in which supersessionist beliefs and the “Christ killer” slander impede genuine exchange. She also noted the ways in which historical-critical studies of the Bible can help Christians develop a theology that would “unleash the power in the story of the passion and death

*The author expresses her appreciation to Lawrence Baron, Richard Freeman, Paul Mojzes, Fielding McGehee III, and the anonymous reviewers for *J.E.S.* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹See Mary C. Boys, “Doing Justice to Judaism: The Challenge to Christianity,” *J.E.S.* 49 (Winter, 2014): 107–110.

of Jesus” but, at the same time, acknowledge the harm the story has done to Jews. Quoting the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 2001 statement on “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” Boys wrote that “Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion.”² Boys and the Commission have implicitly made the case for their Jewish interlocutors’ doing justice to Christianity, although that may not have been their intent.

Yet, despite strong statements of reconciliation made by Jewish scholars and rabbis, modern Jewish polemicists continue to attract an audience. *Dabru Emet*, which more than 170 Jewish scholars signed in 2000, reaffirmed that Jews and Christians worship the same God and asserted that Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon.³ The 2015 declaration on Christianity made by Orthodox rabbis avowed “that the emergence of Christianity in human history is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations.”⁴ Nevertheless, the meaningful dialogue between Jews and Christians that occurred in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has not diminished the appeal of anti-Christian literature. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, some Christian missionaries continue to proselytize Jews, even though institutional statements may officially prohibit or discourage this activity.⁵ Notably problematic are Messianic Jews and Hebrew Christians, who frequently meet in evangelical churches or are sponsored by Christians

² Ibid., pp. 109–110, citing “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001, section IIA.7, no. 22; available at <http://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/282-pbc-2001>.

³ “Dabru Emet [Speak Truth]: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” Institute for Islamic, Christian, Jewish Studies; available at <http://www.icjs.org/dabru-emet/text-version>.

⁴ Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation, “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: *Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians*,” no. 3; available at <http://cjcuc.com/site/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>.

⁵ E.g., the statement, “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” issued by the Catholic Commission for Religious Relations with Jews in 2015, explicitly stated that “the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews,” December 10, 2015, no. 40; available at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=11101>.

and who believe themselves to be practicing Jews.⁶ Moreover, “Messianic Christians” who re-purpose Jewish holidays for a Christian agenda, such as observance of a Passover Seder or construction of a tabernacle during Sukkoth, also blur the boundaries in ways traditionalists find troubling. Many Jews, especially those not involved in the dialogical enterprise, suspect that the Christian embrace of Jewish origins has a missiological purpose.

A second and related concern about boundary-blurring is the question of assimilation of Jews into the wider, non-Jewish—and increasingly non-Christian—culture. Through intermarriage, secularization, and a general liberalizing of social mores in the West, constructing and maintaining a clear Jewish identity has become increasingly difficult. A number of programs have developed within Judaism to counteract these problems. Birthright Israel funds a ten-day trip to Israel for secular young adults in order to “strengthen Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and solidarity with Israel.”⁷ Jdate bills itself as the “premier” Jewish dating service, one among hundreds of such programs.⁸

A third and enduring reason for anti-Christian polemic is the harrowing legacy of Christian Antisemitism. Some argue that the “teaching of contempt” is built into the very fabric of Christian doctrine.⁹ While there is debate over whether Christianity and its teachings “inevitably” led to the Holocaust, there is little controversy concerning its contributing to a climate of hatred of Jews for two millennia. Most Jews see the movement among some mainline Protestant denominations to boycott, divest, or sanction (BDS) Israeli-owned companies located in the West Bank as yet another form of Christian Antisemitism.¹⁰ Official governmental and church pronouncements notwithstanding, many Christians tend to support BDS efforts because they feel sympathy for Palestinians. The widespread, though

⁶ For an inclusive view of Messianic Judaism written by a Reform rabbi/Jewish theologian, see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* (New York: Cassell, 2000).

⁷ See Birthright Israel at https://www.birtherightisrael.com/about_us_inner/52?scroll=art_2.

⁸ See <https://www.jdate.com/>.

⁹ See Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, tr. Helen Weaver (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Jeffrey Salkin, “Why Do Some Mainstream Churches Dislike Israel?” *Religion News Service*, May 10, 2016; available to subscribers at <http://religionnews.com/2016/05/10/hillary-clinton-methodists-bds/>.

not unanimous, Jewish view is summed up in the headline “BDS is not pro-Palestinian, it’s anti-Semitic.”¹¹

Given these realities, challenges to Christian hegemony are to be expected. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, self-defense manuals armed Jewish teenagers and young adults with facts about Judaism and arguments against Christianity in the face of deceptive proselytizers of all stripes. Twenty-first-century polemicists such as Rabbi Tovia Singer, founder of Outreach Judaism, have aggressively contested Christian truth-claims in a variety of settings. Polemical tracts do not merely refute Christian teachings, however; at times they misrepresent them.

The most significant Jewish writer in this regard was Hyam Maccoby (1924–2004), whose “polemical agenda was undisguised.”¹² His widely admired books have gone through multiple printings and are still quoted on blogs and websites. GoodReads shows six editions of *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* and forty-six mainly positive reviews. This book has been translated into German, Arabic, and Polish. Shmuley Boteach credited Maccoby with much of the historical research he used for his popular *Kosher Jesus*.¹³ An obituary (following Maccoby’s May 2, 2004, death) called him “a Jew of profound learning,”¹⁴ while a reader’s review on Amazon.com called him “a scholarly hero.” Others, however, have labeled him “idiosyncratic,” “tendentious,” and “the stormy petrel of Biblical and post-biblical scholarship.”¹⁵

It is worth considering Maccoby’s writings for several reasons. First, al-

¹¹ Pini Dunner, “BDS Is not Pro-Palestinian, It’s Anti-Semitic,” *Jewish Journal*, August 25, 2015; available at http://www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/bds_is_not_pro_palestinian_its_anti_semitic.

¹² Daniel R. Langton, “The Myth of the ‘Traditional View of Paul’ and the Role of the Apostle in Modern Jewish-Christian Polemics,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28 (September, 2005): 86.

¹³ Shmuley Boteach, *Kosher Jesus* (Jerusalem and New York: Gefen Publishing House, 2012).

¹⁴ “Obituary: Professor Hyam Maccoby,” *The Free Library*; available at <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/OBITUARY%3A+Professor+Hyam+Maccoby.-a0116190365>.

¹⁵ “Idiosyncratic” is from “It’s ‘Kosher’ to Accept Real Jesus,” *Rosh Pina Project*; available at <https://roshpinaproject.com/tag/hyam-maccoby/>. “Tendentious” is from Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 307, n. 5; and from Jon D. Levenson, Review of *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil*, *Commentary* 94 (October, 1992): 56. “Stormy petrel” is from Albert H. Friedlander, “Hyam Maccoby,” *European Judaism* 37 (Autumn, 2004): 123.

though his arguments about Christian origins have been refuted in academic assessments and in reviews published in scholarly journals, his books remain quite popular, as evidenced by GoodReads. They continue to inform Jewish and non-Jewish understanding of Christianity. Second, since polemical works were directed at insiders rather than outsiders, Maccoby intended to furnish Jewish readers with anti-Christian ammunition in the present, not just as an academic exercise. A look at his complete corpus demonstrates that his primary concern was to write for Jews about Judaism rather than to engage in dialogue with, or to communicate with, Christians. Moreover, his historical studies were designed to show the disconnection rather than the connection between Judaism and Christianity. Third, Maccoby took a very different approach from contemporaries such as Samuel Sandmel and Geza Vermes, and from present-day Jewish scholars such as Amy-Jill Levine and Pamela Eisenbaum, who are committed to genuine dialogue with Christians. While these and other scholars do not avoid telling inconvenient truths to their Christian readers, their tone and style indicate warmth, affection, and appreciation. In contrast, Maccoby adopted a combative and “needlessly pugilistic stance,” which would confound most attempts to engage in thoughtful and respectful discussion.¹⁶

Even though Maccoby warrants consideration, we might ask if it is appropriate to examine a polemicist in a periodical dedicated to interreligious understanding. The *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* regularly publishes articles that highlight Christian ideas and practices that have served as impediments to Jewish and Christian dialogue. For example, John T. Squires’s analysis of key issues made in public statements about Christians relating to Jews includes a section devoted to “Matters to Be Deplored.”¹⁷ In addition, *J.E.S.* publishes reviews of books that assess Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other obstacles to genuine interfaith appreciation. Less frequently—one might say, rarely—does *J.E.S.* address Jewish attitudes toward Christianity, problematic or otherwise, although there are notable exceptions.¹⁸ It

¹⁶“Needlessly pugilistic stance” is from an undated, unsigned article in *Kirkus Review*; see <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/hyman-maccoby/the-mythmaker-paul-and-the-invention-of-christi/>.

¹⁷John T. Squires, “Christians Relating to Jews: Key Issues in Public Statements,” *J.E.S.* 44 (Spring, 2009): 180–202.

¹⁸E.g., Steven Leonard Jacobs, “Two Takes on Christianity: Furthering the Dialogue,” *J.E.S.* 47 (Fall, 2012): 508–524.

therefore seems fitting for this journal to document the ideas of one influential polemicist and his misrepresentation of Christian history and doctrine.

This essay describes the key arguments Maccoby makes in order to show how this significant Jewish scholar depicted Christianity and its origins. Its purpose is to reveal the “Christian story” created by Maccoby in order to heighten awareness about what many Jews believe to be true about Christianity.¹⁹ Working from the premise that the Jewish narrative of Christianity can be every bit as troubling as the Christian chronicle of Judaism, it introduces readers to some of its contours. It does not attempt to refute the opinions of Maccoby but, rather, puts the British scholar’s work within the historical context of Jewish anti-Christian polemical works and presents the specifics of his characterization of Christianity.

Jewish Polemical Arguments before Hyam Maccoby

Polemical exchanges have characterized the relationship between Judaism and Christianity since their beginnings, because adherents of both faiths have defined themselves in opposition to the other.²⁰ Scholars have challenged the Jewish dogma that Christianity was a daughter religion born out of a normative Judaism by persuasively demonstrating that the two faiths simultaneously emerged from the crucible of political, cultural, and theological ferment occurring in the first centuries of the Common Era.²¹ Al-

¹⁹“Christian story” is Maccoby’s expression, in Hyam Maccoby, “Reply,” in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Origins of the Holocaust: Christian Anti-Semitism* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs and Institute for Holocaust Studies; and New York: City University of New York, 1986), p. 67.

²⁰This essay focuses on Jewish anti-Christian rhetoric; to learn more about Christian anti-Jewish writings, see the section “Further Reading,” in Edward Kessler, *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and, more recently, Eugene J. Fisher, “Sources for the Study of Catholic-Jewish Relations,” *J.E.S.* 50 (Fall, 2015): 539–560.

²¹To list just a few: Jacob Neusner, “Oral Law,” in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), pp. 673–677; Binyamin Katzoff, “‘God of Our Fathers’: Rabbinic Liturgy and Jewish-Christian Engagement,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (Summer, 2009): 303–322; Segal, *Paul the Convert*; and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaea-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); but see also Daniel Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category (to which Is Appended a Correction to My *Border Lines*),” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99 (Winter, 2009): 7–36.

though Christian arguments against Jewish traditions could be said to begin with the apostle Paul and the New Testament evangelists, it was not until the early third century that we find a clear Jewish response. This was when the *Pirke Avot* of the Mishnah justified a system of Jewish traditions as being divinely given to Moses and handed down to the present, in possible rebuttal to the Christian claim of apostolic tradition that began with Jesus as outlined by Clement of Rome at the end of the first century.²²

Although many, and perhaps most, Jews would deny that rabbinic literature and Jewish liturgy in any way self-consciously negated Christian beliefs and practices, recent research tells a different story. For example, the anachronistic depiction of Abraham as an observant Jew before Sinai—circumcised on Yom Kippur, observant of Passover, heeding all the rituals of purity—probably reflected rabbinic rejection of Pauline emphasis on the faith of Abraham. According to Samuel Sandmel, the rabbis portrayed “the originator of faith in the true God . . . [as the one who] abides in that faith against persecuting idolaters,” that is, Christians.²³ The Jewish Passover Haggadah may well have developed after the appearance of the Christian Haggadah written by Melito of Sardis, argued Israel Yuval.²⁴ The “scanty references” to Jesus of Nazareth in rabbinic literature, therefore, do not indicate rabbinic indifference to Christian teachings.²⁵

Rabbinic literature undoubtedly had an ideological and even apologetic intent but should not be classified as polemical writing. Indeed, Jewish anti-Christian works were “virtually nonexistent before the twelfth century.”²⁶ (A notable exception is the *Toledot Yeshu—The Book of the Generations of Jesus*—a parody of the Gospels that mocked Jesus, claiming he was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier; it first appeared in the tenth century, but

²² See Risa Levitt Kohn and Rebecca Moore, *A Portable God: The Origin of Judaism and Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), pp. 154–162.

²³ Samuel Sandmel, “Abraham in Normative and Hellenistic Jewish Traditions,” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1949, p. 113.

²⁴ Israel J. Yuval, “Easter and Passover as Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” in Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, eds., *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), pp. 98–124.

²⁵ See Jacob Z. Lauterbach, “Jesus in the Talmud,” in his *Rabbinic Essays* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1951), p. 477.

²⁶ David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), p. 7.

may have older roots in the fifth).²⁷ But, during the Middle Ages a number of economic, political, cultural, and other events undermined the already-precarious position that Jews held in Europe. Christian animosity to heretics of all types, including Jews, led to crusades, inquisitions, and expulsions. Christian interest in rabbinic literature emerged, in part, as a way to combat Judaism through written and oral disputations. In response, Jews perfected a polemical style and genre that directly attacked Christian truth-claims.

Jews and Christians alike relied upon three types of proofs in their polemical writings at that time. These were arguments based upon exegesis, or biblical interpretation; those that relied on history; and, most importantly in the medieval era, those founded in logic and rationality.²⁸ Exegetical arguments tended to justify the literal or historical interpretation of scripture against the allegorical or symbolic (that is, christological) meaning. The text says what it means and means what it says. Otherwise, why would God have not given Moses the key to symbolic interpretation?²⁹ Historical arguments were made from observation: If Christianity were true, how could Islam mount such a successful challenge? If Christians were more ethical than Jews, how could one account for the immorality of monks and nuns? If the Messiah had come, why did the world remain in its unredeemed state?

The final type of argument—from reason—grew in popularity at this time and drew from commonsense logic. How could God become incarnate and fall subject to suffering and death? How could the immutable and incorporeal creator of the universe have changed into a material being?³⁰ Jewish polemicists took on the most challenging doctrines (for Christians), which were the easiest (for Jews) to refute: the Trinity, the Incarnation, transubstantiation, and the virgin conception. These anti-Christian polemics drew from first-hand knowledge of missionary lessons, Christian heresies, Muslim polemics, public disputations with Christian apologists, and even Christian texts in Latin. Resources were marshaled “to demonstrate to fel-

²⁷ See Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Ktav Publishing House and Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1977), p. 5 and p. 175, n. 27.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁹ This was the question Rabbi David Kimhi (1160–1235) broached in the thirteenth century.

³⁰ See Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics*, pp. 9–10.

low Jews that Christianity was altogether a false religion” in order to prevent Jewish apostasy.³¹

Perhaps the most notable polemical work of this era was the *Nizzahon Vetus* (Old Book of Polemic), a veritable encyclopedia of folk tales, legends, biblical interpretation, and other polemical tools—probably compiled by a German Jew in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.³² Two examples illustrate the tone and style of the work:

Ask [the heretics]: If the Christian priest is supposed to take the place of the biblical priest, why doesn't he get married and have children like Aaron the high priest? Moreover, the first commandment given to Adam dealt with being fruitful and multiplying . . .

One should ask the heretics: Why do you uproot even one letter from the Torah of Moses? . . . Jesus himself said that he did not come to destroy the Torah of Moses . . . [Matt. 5:17–18].³³

At first glance, these appear to be biblical arguments, but it is clear that the form of argumentation is syllogistic: if such is the case . . . then why don't you do it . . .? We continue to find arguments from the *Nizzahon Vetus* in twentieth- and twenty-first-century polemical texts.

The appeal of rational argumentation continued throughout the Reformation-Renaissance and into the Enlightenment eras. *Faith Strengthened*, a polemical book by Abraham ben Isaac of Troki (1533–94), relied upon arguments made by radical Christians in the Protestant Reformation.³⁴ In 1820, *Israel Vindicated: A Refutation of the Calumnies Propagated respecting the Jewish Nation; in which the Objects and Views of the American Society for Ameliorating the Condition of the Jews Are Investigated* aimed at resisting Christian missionary activities. The original subtitle was omitted—*And Reasons Assigned for Rejecting the Christian Religion*—though the contents certainly included such arguments.³⁵ Written by a well-known Freethinker and journalist, George Houston, *Israel Vindicated* was financed

³¹ Ibid., p. 165.

³² See Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, pp. 33–34.

³³ Ibid., pp. 205 and 215.

³⁴ See Jerome Friedman, “The Reformation and Jewish Antichristian Polemics,” *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 41, no. 1 (1979): 83–97.

³⁵ See Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Freethinker, the Jews, and the Missionaries: George Houston and the Mystery of *Israel Vindicated*,” *AJS Review*, vol. 5 (1980), pp. 101–114.

and promoted by leading Jews who could temporarily ignore some of Houston's anti-Jewish views in exchange for broadcasting his well-reasoned anti-Christian opinions. Throughout the nineteenth century, Reform Jews in the United States used arguments from Deism, Freethought, and earlier Jewish polemical texts to wage an ideological battle against a militant missionary movement in American Protestantism. In *Religion and Reason*, for example, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) invoked rationality to defend Jewish beliefs: “Nothing which reason rejects is to be accepted,” which of course meant Christianity.³⁶

New arguments against Christianity emerged in the nineteenth century—and from an unlikely source. Protestant biblical theologians began to evaluate the influence that Hellenistic culture had upon early Christianity. F. C. Baur (1792–1860) and the style of biblical criticism he founded at the University of Tübingen profoundly influenced all subsequent study of the Bible. Baur posited a Jewish church founded by Peter and a gentile church founded by Paul; both strands of Christianity reached a final synthesis in Catholic Christianity. These strands of Christianity could be observed throughout the New Testament, which attempted to smooth over theological differences. Baur highlighted the Hellenistic nature of the gentile church, and Jewish polemicists developed this emphasis further. Today, however, historians of first-century Judaic religions (which would include Christianity) do not draw the distinction between Hellenism and Judaism so sharply. “This is not to deny that Judaism and Hellenism each possessed certain unique features, but it remains a distortion to treat them as two opposed systems, each one coherent and consistent in itself and sharply contrasting to the other.”³⁷

Another development in nineteenth-century Protestant theology that influenced Jewish polemic was the rise of historical-Jesus studies. A variety of portraits of Jesus appeared, ranging from D. F. Strauss's mythological Jesus to Ernst Renan's romantic Jesus. Close readings of the New Testament made the scholars in Baur's Tübingen school more skeptical about the histo-

³⁶ Isaac Mayer Wise, quoted in Jonathan D. Sarna, “The American Jewish Response to Nineteenth-Century Christian Missions,” *The Journal of American History* 68 (June, 1981): 40.

³⁷ R. M. Price, “‘Hellenization’ and Logos Doctrine in Justin Martyr,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 42 (March, 1988): 19.

ricity of the Bible and about the New Testament than even the most unconvinced Jew.

The nascent *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (literally “Science of Judaism” but, more appropriately, “Jewish Studies”) in the nineteenth century also led Jewish scholars to reappraise the significance of Jesus in his historical context. In addition, the entry of Jews into New Testament studies at the turn of the twentieth century paradoxically set the stage for modern polemicists. These earlier scholars did not engage in anti-Christian rhetoric themselves; indeed, some, such as Claude G. Montefiore (1858–1938), were particularly irenic, seeking to interpret Christianity to both Christians and Jews.

In general, Jewish New Testament scholars have eschewed polemical argumentation. Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus identified seven “ideological figures” that characterize the approach of these scholars, noting that some make their arguments as being from a “privileged spiritual affinity with the world of the New Testament” or as designed to reveal the anti-Judaism of the New Testament or to bolster Jewish self-esteem.³⁸ In my view, the feature that differentiates modern Jewish New Testament scholars from their polemical counterparts is that the former are recognized by their scholarly peers, Jew and Christian alike, in academic journals and university presses. Their arguments utilize modern research standards, account for problematic texts in a coherent way, and attend to the historical and cultural environments from which the texts emerged.³⁹ These writers take a very different approach to New Testament Studies than did Hyam Maccoby.

The Christian Myth, according to Hyam Maccoby

Hyam Maccoby did not begin his career as a religion scholar.⁴⁰ He read Classics and English at Balliol College, Oxford, and worked at Bletchley Park during World War II in the Royal Signal Corps. After the war he became English Master at Chiswick School, where in 1973 he co-edited and co-translated a collection of Jewish fables with Wolf Mankowitz—*The Day God Laughed: Sayings, Fables and Entertainments of the Jewish Sages*—and

³⁸Jonathan D. Brumberg-Kraus, “A Jewish Ideological Perspective on the Study of Christian Scripture,” *Jewish Social Studies* N.S. 4 (Autumn, 1997): 126 and 128.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴⁰For a warm and personal appraisal of Maccoby, see Friedlander, “Hyam Maccoby.”

wrote the first in a series of controversial interpretations of Christianity, *Revolution in Judea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance*.⁴¹ In 1975 he joined the staff as a librarian at Leo Baeck College, which trained Reform and Liberal rabbis. Eventually he taught there as well. During the 1980's, he was a regular columnist for the Jewish magazine *Commentary*, writing on a wide variety of important figures in the history of Judaism.

Maccoby's career as a popular polemicist took off with the following titles: *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*;⁴² *The Sacred Executioner: Human Sacrifice and the Legacy of Guilt*;⁴³ *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*;⁴⁴ *Early Rabbinic Writings*;⁴⁵ *Judaism in the First Century*;⁴⁶ *Paul and Hellenism*;⁴⁷ *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil*;⁴⁸ and *A Pariah People: The Anthropology of Anti-Semitism*.⁴⁹ After retirement from Leo Baeck College, Maccoby joined the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Leeds in 1998 as visiting, then research, professor. He continued to write and publish until his death: *Ritual and Morality*;⁵⁰ *The Philosophy of the Talmud*;⁵¹ and *Jesus the Pharisee*.⁵²

Revolution in Judaea sketches the outlines of arguments that Maccoby

⁴¹ Hyam Maccoby and Wolf Mankowitz, eds. and trs., *The Day God Laughed: Sayings, Fables and Entertainments of the Jewish Sages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); and Hyam Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance* (New York: Taplinger, 1980 [orig.: London: Orbach and Charles, Ltd., 1973]).

⁴² Hyam Maccoby, ed. and tr., *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1982).

⁴³ Hyam Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner: Human Sacrifice and the Legacy of Guilt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

⁴⁴ Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson Ltd.; and San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1986).

⁴⁵ Hyam Maccoby, *Early Rabbinic Writings* (New York and Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴⁶ Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism in the First Century* (London: Sheldon Press, 1989).

⁴⁷ Hyam Maccoby, *Paul and Hellenism* (London: SCM Press; and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

⁴⁸ Hyam Maccoby, *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil* (London: Peter Halban; and New York: The Free Press, 1992).

⁴⁹ Hyam Maccoby, *A Pariah People: The Anthropology of Anti-Semitism* (London: Constable, 1996).

⁵⁰ Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵¹ Hyam Maccoby, *The Philosophy of the Talmud* (New York and London: Routledge-Curzon, 2002).

⁵² Hyam Maccoby, *Jesus the Pharisee* (London: SCM Press, 2003).

would cultivate in subsequent books.⁵³ Jesus was a Pharisee and a messianic claimant, whom Paul misunderstood (or reinvented) to cohere with the apostle's pagan beliefs. This explains why the Gospels show Jesus in conflict with Jews, rather than with Romans. Indeed, the Gospels' silence regarding the Roman occupation is akin to the French writing about 1940–45 without mentioning the Nazi occupation.⁵⁴ The book begins with the account of Jesus Barabbas, the criminal whom Pilate set free at the wish of the crowd, and ends by saying that Jesus Barabbas was none other than Jesus the Messiah. The entire Barabbas scene, which appears in all four Gospels, was fabricated in order to stress that Jews were the enemies of Jesus and bore responsibility for his death.

Revolution in Judaea sees Jesus as an apocalyptic messiah, one who fully intended a political kingship but who believed that God alone, not military might, would bring it about. Though Jesus himself was not a zealot, five of his closest disciples were. Jesus began his mission as a prophet announcing the coming Reign of God, but in the last week of his life he became a Messiah when the crowds proclaimed him king as he entered Jerusalem. Jesus was also a Pharisee, a member of the small but popular proto-rabbinical sect in Judaea. His famous sayings and slogans can be traced to Pharisaic lore, according to Maccoby.⁵⁵ Tried by the High Priest, rather than the Sanhedrin, on the charge of sedition, he was executed by the Romans as a political prisoner. His followers were observant Jews and would have remained so, were it not for Paul the apostle, “who transformed Nazarenism into Christianity.”⁵⁶

According to Maccoby, Paul hellenized Christianity by introducing foreign beliefs and practices. His letters elevated Jesus to divine status, asserted that the Torah was abrogated, and reinterpreted the death of Jesus in Gnostic terms. The Gospels reproduced Pauline doctrine and were written through the lenses of belief in dualism, antinomianism, predestination, absolutism, and original sin. For Paul, Jesus did not die in conflict with Rome but, rather, in a cosmic struggle between good and evil. This explains

⁵³ This analysis presents the views of Maccoby, not those of the present author.

⁵⁴ Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea*, p. 20.

⁵⁵ The book's appendices show parallels between Jesus' teachings and Pharisaic teachings.

⁵⁶ Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea*, p. 179.

why the figure of Satan emerges as “a second God” in the New Testament. Maccoby concluded: “Jesus was a good man who fell among Gentiles. That is to say, he fell among those who did not understand that to turn him into a god was to diminish him. He tried to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, and he failed; but the meaning of his life is in the attempt, not in the failure.”⁵⁷

The Sacred Executioner expands upon some of the themes introduced in *Revolution in Judaea* but focuses on theology rather than history. This work reflects Maccoby’s background in Classics and English, as he examined the mythological figure “who slays another person . . . and as a result is treated as both sacred and accursed.”⁵⁸ When this “sacred executioner” kills another (whether by accident or by evil design), the death somehow benefits the tribe, thereby making it a ritual sacrifice rather than a random murder. A further benefit is that the group is absolved of guilt for the act, while the sacred executioner takes both the blame and the punishment for it. According to Maccoby, we find this character in the Bible (Cain and Abel, the Kenites and the Rechabites), as well as in classical accounts (Romulus and Remus, the bull-slaying feast in Athens, Set and Osiris) and other world mythology (the Teutonic figures of Hother and Balder).

Human culture eventually repudiates human sacrifice, as evidenced by the story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22), replacing it with animal and vegetable offerings. Maccoby argued, however, that Christianity regressed “to earlier modes of atonement, and, inevitably, a revival of the idea of shifting blame by vicarious atonement, both in the form of a sacrificial victim and in the less understood form of the Sacred Executioner . . . who vicariously undergoes the guilt felt by mankind because of its desperate recourse to sacrificial modes of atonement for its sins.”⁵⁹ This “foundation myth” places human sacrifice at the heart of Christianity in order to placate a “God who was regarded as angry with all mankind because of the sin of Adam.”⁶⁰ The death of Jesus is not the death of just a human being or martyr but is, instead, a cosmic sacrifice born out of a Hellenistic, rather than Jewish, understanding of atonement. Christianity adopted the idea of a dying and ris-

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 195.

⁵⁸ Maccoby, *Sacred Executioner*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

ing god, as well as a belief in the mystical participation in that god's death and rebirth, from mystery religions. It was the apostle Paul who drew together these elements along with the sacred history of the Hebrew Bible and elements of Gnostic dualism to establish Christianity as a salvation cult, an argument Maccoby later elaborated in *The Mythmaker*.

If Jesus was the sacrifice, who was the sacred executioner? It was not Judas, who betrayed Jesus but did not do the actual slaying—a topic elaborated in *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil*. Nor was it Pilate, since “[t]he essence of the Sacred Executioner is that he dares to take the responsibility for the sacrifice.”⁶¹ The New Testament attempts to demonstrate that the Jews collectively are responsible—on the one hand, having lost the promises made to Abraham, and, on the other, having absolved Christians from responsibility for the sacrifice. “The bringing about of Jesus’s death can thus be thought of both as a terrible crime (for which the Jews were responsible) and as a fortunate, saving event (by which all Christians can profit).”⁶²

The role of the Jews as the Sacred Executioner does not end with Jesus’ death but continues throughout history. This explains why Christians believe that Jews hate Christianity and why they plot (imaginary) crimes against Christians: poisoning wells, spreading plague, committing ritual murder, violating the Virgin Mary, and “killing” the host. These stories served as the “reservoir of loathing and contempt of the Jew that enabled the Nazis to carry through their policy of extermination.”⁶³ In other words, the myth of the Sacred Executioner became so embedded in Christendom (Maccoby’s expression) that Nazism would never have come into existence without it.

Maccoby admitted that there were liberal Christians “even in the Roman Catholic Church” who did not see Jesus’ death as a sacrifice,⁶⁴ thus indicating his awareness that his view was not uncontested. The idea of vicarious atonement is not the only view of Jesus’ death, and “in fact, it isn’t even the classical view,” says Alan T. Davies. “There is no single Christian myth of

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

redemption, and never has been.”⁶⁵ Moreover, Maccoby’s Freudian approach—seen in his analysis of the mass, which in the Middle Ages “became the centre of oral-aggressive fantasies of killing and eating the sacrificed god”⁶⁶—also has been criticized.⁶⁷ One might also question Maccoby’s reliance on Joseph Campbell and Sir James Frazer regarding his theoretical approaches to mythology—and wonder that the name of René Girard, historian *par excellence* of sacred violence, does not appear in the book’s bibliography.

Regardless of possible objections to Maccoby’s claims, the point for him was that Antisemitism is “an ‘essential ingredient’ in the Christian myth of redemption.”⁶⁸ It is not the Jewish rejection of Jesus that is the problem but the Jewish murder of Jesus—that is, deicide—that is at stake. Maccoby dismissed the “much-praised resolution of Vatican II that purported to release the Jews from the Christian charge of deicide.”⁶⁹ *Nostra aetate* was “formally correct”⁷⁰ in saying that the Jews as a whole at that time were not guilty of Jesus’ death, but the document nevertheless calls upon modern Jews not to associate themselves with that “wicked generation.”⁷¹ “To dissociate themselves from this generation [that is, the Tannaim] would be, for Jews, to dissociate themselves from Judaism.”⁷²

If Maccoby deconstructed Christianity in *The Sacred Executioner*, he de-

⁶⁵ Alan T. Davies, “A Comment on Professor Maccoby’s Thesis,” in Braham, *Origins of the Holocaust*, p. 60.

⁶⁶ Maccoby, *Sacred Executioner*, p. 161.

⁶⁷ See A. James Rudin, “A Response to Professor Hyam Maccoby,” in Braham, *Origins of the Holocaust*, pp. 45–52.

⁶⁸ Hyam Maccoby, “The Origins of Anti-Semitism” in Braham, *Origins of the Holocaust*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Maccoby, *Sacred Executioner*, p. 144.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ I have been unable to find the expression “wicked generation” in either the Latin or English versions of *Nostra aetate*, no. 4: “*Licet autem Ecclesia sit novus populus Dei, Iudaei tamen tamen neque ut a Deo reprobati neque ut maledicti exhibeantur, quasi hoc ex Sacris Litteris sequitur.*” (“Granted, moreover, that the Church is the new people of God: even so, let the Jews not be viewed [purported] either as rejected by God or as wicked [accursed] persons, as though this would follow from Sacred Scripture.”) Thanks to E. N. Genovese for this clarification. See http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html, where it is translated: “Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.”

⁷² Maccoby, *Sacred Executioner*, p. 145.

molished Paul in *The Mythmaker*, characterizing him as a conflicted individual, a gentile convert to Judaism who purported to be a Pharisee. Paul's Damascus Road experience resolved psychological problems by saving him from the "abyss of self-hatred and failure."⁷³ The question of whether Paul was a Pharisee was crucial for Maccoby for two reasons. First, he conflated Pharisees with rabbis, who for him represented normative Judaism then and now. Second, he could explain Paul's innovative doctrines as a gross misunderstanding of Judaism, because Paul simply was not Jewish, rather than include him under the umbrella of diverse first-century "Judaisms." Maccoby explicitly rejected contemporary histories of Judaism that show it as variegated and in flux in the first century—from radically apocalyptic to completely hellenized. He relied on Baur's Hegelian view of early church growth instead: that a Pauline, pagan form of Christianity clashed with a Petrine, Jewish form that ultimately was synthesized into the "great church" of Catholic Christianity.

The themes introduced in *Revolution in Judaea* and *The Sacred Executioner* reappear in Maccoby's analysis of the role of Paul in the invention of Christianity.⁷⁴ Jesus is a revolutionary Pharisee proclaiming an earthly Realm of God. The Pharisees were the party of opposition to Rome, existing in tension with the Sadducees and the priesthood. Therefore, it seems "incredible" that a Pharisee would work for the High Priest to hound the Jerusalem church, which was accepted and even defended by the Pharisees, according to the book of Acts.⁷⁵

In addition, Paul's psychological dualism did not characterize pharisaic thinking. On the contrary, the ideological parallel is with Gnosticism, which saw evil forces organized in a hierarchy against God. Jesus came as a divine savior from heaven to earth to break their power. Paul's Gnostic viewpoint also explains his antinomianism, since one school of Gnosticism claimed that the god of the Jews was an inferior demiurge who gave Torah to Israel. Paul's fable included elements from the mystery religions as well,

⁷³ Maccoby, *Mythmaker*, p. 100.

⁷⁴ For scholarly analyses of the apostle Paul by Jewish writers, see Samuel Sandmel, *The Genius of Paul* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1958); H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, tr. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961); Segal, *Paul the Convert*; and Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

⁷⁵ Maccoby, *Mythmaker*, p. 33.

namely, the myth of the dying and rising god “who confers salvation and immortality through a mystic sharing in his death and resurrection.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, Paul slapped a veneer of Judaism over this story: “It was from Judaism that Paul added to his concoction the dimension of history.”⁷⁷ The scheme of succeeding epochs, from Adam to the last days, came from Judaism and legitimized both Paul and his new religion, for the deities of the mystery religions were ahistorical.

Maccoby devoted a chapter to the eucharist, since part of his project was to portray Christianity as a religion that reintroduced the idea of blood sacrifices. He argued that the eucharist is what marks Christianity as a religion apart from Judaism. Because the first mention of the “Lord’s Supper” (a pagan term for sacred meals, said Maccoby) appears in Paul, “it is abundantly clear that *Paul himself was the inventor and creator of the Eucharist*, both as an idea and as a Church institution.”⁷⁸ Though he noted the “verbal correspondences” between Paul (1 Cor. 11:23–30) and the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 26:26–29, Mk. 14:22–25, and Lk. 22:15–20), he did not credit an earlier Passion Narrative.⁷⁹ He observed that the Gospel of John does not associate the words of institution with an actual meal but reports Jesus as instructing his disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood, a rather shocking concept for any Jews. Maccoby saw this as evidence that Paul’s own words of institution were later attributed to Jesus, when Jesus himself simply blessed wine and bread at the end of a meal.

The book concludes by declaring that Paul “sharpened and intensified” the Antisemitism that exists in Gnosticism: “The Jews became not just the opponents of the figure descended from the world of light, but the performers of the cosmic sacrifice by which the heavenly visitant brings salvation.”⁸⁰ Strongly influenced by Pauline theology, the Gospels pick up this theme and pit Jews against Jesus; even the name of his betrayer—Judas—indicates the guilt of the Jews.

Maccoby continued these arguments in both *Paul and Hellenism* and *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil*. The former bolsters the positions

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 195.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 197.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 113; emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 114.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 204.

he took in *The Mythmaker*, by expounding further and in more scholarly detail upon his discussions of Gnosticism, the mystery religions, and the eucharist. While *The Mythmaker* briefly criticizes New Testament scholars Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, and Krister Stendahl—who argue that Paul, a Jew, did not intend to found a new religion but wanted to bring Judaism to the gentiles—*Paul and Hellenism* devotes twenty-four pages to refuting these academics. Maccoby conceded that contemporary Christian theologians reject the Hellenistic interpretation that he applied to Paul, but he added that “[t]he resultant gap between Jesus and Paul . . . was too hard to bear.”⁸¹ He also admitted that *Paul and Hellenism* was intended to counter scholarly efforts to identify Hellenistic elements in Jewish literature. Finally, he credited Paul with providing the link between Gnosticism and Christian Antisemitism; while Paul was not antisemitic, his elevation of the Jews as the “communal Sacred Executioner for Christianity” left them accursed.⁸²

In *Judas Iscariot*, Maccoby advanced an argument made in the appendix to *Revolution in Judaea*, namely, that Judas Iscariot was Jesus’ brother. One of the twelve disciples, also known as Thaddeus, Judas was a Galilean zealot as indicated by his name (*sicari/iscariot*, which means dagger). Though he was more radical than Jesus, a fact that perhaps led to a certain estrangement, he nevertheless became a leader in the Jerusalem church and probably wrote the New Testament letter ascribed to him. But, thanks to the rise of the Pauline church, “Judas” became synonymous with “Jew,” so this mysterious figure became “the eponymous representative of the Jewish people as a whole.”⁸³ As long as the Jews are perceived as Christ-killers who are performing the role of the sacred executioner, Antisemitism will continue. Maccoby concluded: “The real and only permanent solution to the problem of antisemitism is to dismantle the Pauline Christian myth of atonement.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Maccoby, *Paul and Hellenism*, p. 183.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Maccoby, *Judas Iscariot*, p. 162.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Conclusions

Christians of varying stripes—progressive, fundamental, liturgical, creedal, charismatic—will find much to deplore in Maccoby’s explanation of Christian theology, as will Jews. The Institute for Holocaust Studies of the City University of New York devoted its fifth conference to assessing Maccoby’s thesis regarding the Antisemitism intrinsic to Christian doctrine. Questioned by clergy from both religions, Maccoby found himself on the defensive. Eugene J. Fisher, then-Executive Secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, asserted that Maccoby was “simply wrong both in his description of ‘the Christian myth’ and in his interpretation of it.”⁸⁵ The Rev. Robert Andrew Everett, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, found “the esoteric nature of his thesis . . . too abstract to have any concrete influence on Christian attitudes toward Jews.”⁸⁶ Rabbi A. James Rudin, then-National Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, agreed and doubted that the sacred executioner thesis would prompt Christian theologians or scholars to revisit the theology of vicarious atonement.⁸⁷

If Maccoby’s narrative is not a mirror of Christianity as Christians see their faith, it is certainly a reflection of the way many Jews see Christianity. Anecdotally, the adult learners in my courses at the Center for Jewish Culture in San Diego have repeated to me many of Maccoby’s theses about Paul and the paganization of the Jesus movement. More substantively, we find references to Maccoby by name or by content in present-day Jewish polemical works. Even though his ideas have been challenged by Jewish and Christian scholars for decades, his writings are, nevertheless, instructive for those who wish to know what a number of people believe about Christianity. As Maccoby himself observed, official declarations and scholarly evaluations rarely impact the individual believer in the pew.

Maccoby was a true follower of his namesakes, the Maccabees, defending the one God and attacking the incursions of Hellenistic religion on the

⁸⁵ Eugene J. Fisher, “The Origins of Anti-Semitism in Christian Theology: A Reaction and Critique,” in Brahm, *Origins of the Holocaust*, p. 24.

⁸⁶ Robert Andrew Everett, “A Reply to Hyam Maccoby’s *The Sacred Executioner*,” in Brahm, *Origins of the Holocaust*, p. 33.

⁸⁷ See Rudin, “Response to Professor Hyam Maccoby.”

purity of Judaism. Unfortunately, the picture he drew of Christianity as an invention of Paul that is pagan through and through is recognizable by few Christians. To be blunt, he misrepresented Christianity.

Since “[t]ruth-telling was a precondition to the improved Jewish-Christian relationship,” according to Paul Mojzes, it seems necessary—or even just, in Boy’s words—to tell the truth about Maccoby.⁸⁸ Indeed, his polemical assertions might actually be helpful starting points for uncovering unsuspected attitudes and opinions held by both Jews and Christians. Those engaged in the dialogical enterprise rushed forward to challenge the polemical untruths presented in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. The assertions of Hyam Maccoby deserve an equal challenge.

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⁸⁸Paul Mojzes, “On Truth-Telling in Christian-Muslim Relations,” *J.E.S.* 47 (Summer, 2012): 320. Although Mojzes was referring to admissions of guilt concerning historical atrocities, the broader principle of telling the truth in general seems apt.