

How Inter-Christian Approaches to Paul's Rhetoric Can Perpetuate Negative Valuations of Jewishness – Although Proposing to Avoid that Outcome

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Paper Presented in the Early Jewish Christian Relations Section (S24-108)
at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, Georgia,
November 24, 2003

Abstract

This paper will focus on a problem arising in inter-Christian constructions for interpreting Paul's polemic, for example, in the way undertaken by J. Louis Martyn, since negative valuations of Jewishness persist in the discourse, regardless of stated intentions to avoid that outcome. This approach has masked the perpetuation of *Christianness* versus *Jewishness*, since moving it inside of Christianity does not eliminate the fact that what is negatively valued for non-Pauline (read "non-Gentile") Christianity is the degree to which it remains Jewish (regards Jewish identity and behavior as valuable expressions of faith). The discourse has changed a lot, but not to the degree that would match the stated intentions, and for the J/C relations critic, the explicit though often subtle reminders of this persistent prejudice against Jewishness in writings about Paul is painful to continue to discover in (and between) the lines of many contemporary works.

Paper

Where matters of Judaism are concerned, the discourse in Pauline studies has improved immensely in recent years, and the intention to do Christian theology in the light of the Shoah is evident in many contemporary projects. As monumental and welcome as some of these developments have been, for a Jewish reader or Jewish/Christian relations critic there is much that remains problematic in the discourse, and in the ideas upon which it depends. I aim to illustrate one of the areas where negative evaluations of *Jewishness*—that is, the identity, ideas, motives, and behavior associated with the ideals of Jewish people and religious life—continues to arise when Christian scholars are engaged in the interpretation of Paul’s texts. I hope that focusing attention on a detail that represents the kind of matters that permeate the language of the discipline will provide a useful way to generate discussion of the panel’s broader concerns.

I do not have in view those scholars who are not concerned and do not express concern to avoid anti-Jewishness—that is a different matter altogether. Rather, the goal is to investigate how problematic judgments persist in the work of scholars who state clearly the intention to avoid expressing anti-Jewish sentiments by way of a specific move to read Paul within historical and rhetorical inter-mural Christian constructions of the situations his letters address. Appeal to its ability to undermine anti-Jewishness has become a common refrain. Although I think that this approach could be helpful, as supposed (and successfully employed by several of my fellow-panelists!),¹ I have found the results to date to be largely disappointing. This construction does not have the power to accomplish the goal of eliminating anti-Jewish rhetoric if it is not

¹ Cf. L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987); J. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Their approaches are relatively unique in the way that they read Paul as dealing only with Gentiles, which makes a substantial difference in the way that their interpretation of Paul’s oppositional rhetoric is assessed. However, since both propose to understand Paul as remaining Jewish and respectful of Jewish identity for Jewish believers and non-believers in Christ, I suggest that their interpretations would be strengthened by working with inter- and intra-Jewish constructions, instead of inter- and intra-Christian ones, as will be discussed.

consistently applied, and if the traditional privileging of positively valued non-Jewish Christianness over negatively valued Jewishness persists, for example, in the course of the exegetical discourse itself. It also makes it difficult to understand Paul's position as truly Jewish, and his rhetoric as intra-Jewish, as many of these proponents also simultaneously suggest.² Moreover, it needs to work especially hard at how it values the Jewishness of the Christ-believers it constructs, if it hopes to avoid the *a fortiori* inference that what is assessed negatively for them would logically apply all the more to the Jewishness of Jews and Judaisms that do not even share that faith in Christ.

For efficiency, I will focus on some examples that arise in the work of J. Louis Martyn, particularly related to the interpretation of Paul's voice in Galatians, and the construction of Jewishness they seem to imply.³ I want to make it unmistakably clear that I am not questioning his intentions, only whether the exegesis conducted under this construction succeeds in the ways proposed. To strengthen this point, I want to note that when beginning my own investigation of Galatians I was persuaded of the historical probability and ideological desirability of the intra- or inter-Christian proposition. As I pondered the dilemma created by the discovery that Paul's rhetoric was not perhaps best understood as intra-Christian, I realized several problems with my presuppositions about the advantages offered by the construct. Not only did I begin to recognize historical and rhetorical problems, about which I have written a monograph, but I also saw that it did not necessarily hold the ideological promise I had supposed. This paper offers me the opportunity to explain some of the discoveries on the ideological front.

² E.g., J. Dunn, "Echoes of Intra-Jewish Polemic in Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *JBL* 112.3 (1993): 459-77.

³ Many other examples can be provided from the work of other scholars in the field that follows the same basic lines of argument, and to varying degrees, could be subject to the same or similar criticism as that offered below.

I will not deal here with agreements and disagreements I may have with the particulars of the interpretations discussed, but with the paradigms within which they work.⁴ I hope that those mentioned will agree that the few examples dealt with in this brief paper are fair representations of statements they make.

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In summary comments for a distinguished 1994 symposium on Paul and the Mosaic Law, James Dunn proposed that the consensus to be sought should be based upon finding the “*common ground between Paul and his fellow Christian Jews with whom he was in dispute*” (emphasis his).⁵ This statement, coupled with several others of that nature, such as the perception that these Christian Jews opposed Paul’s gospel (312), reveals an interpretive decision Dunn assumes to be largely if not entirely beyond debate among the participants. Its influence can be clearly traced in Pauline scholarship since it provided the basic framework for F. C. Baur’s interpretation of early Christianity: the dispute is an inter-mural “Christian” one between “Pauline” and “Jewish” Christianity. Dunn makes explicit the ideological benefit that is central to the theme under discussion here: this inter-Christian approach, since it moves the dispute away from one with non-Christ-believing Jews, “cuts the nerve of much of the charge of anti-Judaism laid against Paul” (310).⁶

⁴ I have engaged the interpretations in M. D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

⁵ “In Search of Common Ground,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Ed., J. D. G. Dunn; Rev. Ed.; Grand Rapids and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2001), 309.

⁶ This deduction resonates with a note in his 1993 Galatians volume in the *Black’s New Testament Commentary* series, where Dunn refers approvingly to Mussner’s observation about the importance of recognizing “the conclusion that Paul was not attacking Jews as such, far less the Jews, but only Christian Jews, fellow Christians of

Two problems with this conclusion immediately come to mind. The first is manifest in the way that this approach failed to inhibit the intensely anti-Jewish rhetoric filling the work of F. C. Baur and, to various degrees, many other interpreters since him, making it at least suspect as the right tool for cutting this nerve. Baur's work, of course, is from a much different time and place than the works I wish to address, but it was also based upon constructing an inter-Christian template for interpreting Paul's rhetoric. For example, his assessment of the essential nature of Paul's opponents in Galatia, although identified as Jewish Christians, did not attempt to avoid anti-Jewishness, and provides a forum to express his negative assessment of non-Christian Judaism all the more: "the chief reason why their Judaistic position was so narrow was just their natural incapacity to raise themselves from the lower state of religious consciousness to a higher and freer one."⁷ For him, "Christianity is the absolute religion, the religion of the spirit and of freedom, with regard to which Judaism belongs to an inferior standpoint, from which it must be classed with heathenism" under the weak and worthless elements of the world [he quotes the Greek of Gal 4:9] (265). Not only was Baur's discourse anti-Jewish regardless of this inter-Christian construction, it was precisely the Jewishness remaining within Jewish-Christianity that was objectionable to him, because Jewishness was by nature a detrimental force.

The second problem has not been as clearly realized, but I propose that it arises from the permission that this position grants itself to express uninhibited negative evaluations of Christ-

Jewish origin" (10 n 1), in the context of discussing Paul's rhetorical attacks in Galatians (*The Epistle to the Galatians* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993]).

⁷ F. C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Works, His Epistles and Teachings* (Ed. E. Zellers; Transl. A. Menzies; 1873-75 2nd Edition—two volumes, now in one; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 263. Baur further states that Galatians should be read with this point of view in mind: "It places us in the midst of the great excitement of the critical struggle which had begun between Judaism and Christianity, in the decision of the momentous question whether there should be a Christianity free from Judaism and essentially different from it, or whether Christianity should only exist as a form of Judaism, that is to say, as nothing else than a modified and extended Judaism." (263).

believing Jewishness, which logically extends all the more (*a fortiori*) to the Jewishness of those who do not even share the bond of Christ-faith, although this inference is often apparently not drawn, in fact, it appears to go generally unrecognized. Demonstrating this problem will be the focus of this paper. There is of course not sufficient time to discuss the variety of examples or the different kinds of advantages and disadvantages particular to each.

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In the introduction to his recent commentary on Galatians, which Richard Hays has praised as “provocative scholarship, unmatched in its penetrating insight and theological depth by any NT commentary of our generation,”⁸ J. Louis Martyn discusses “Galatians as read by Jews and Christians today” (35-41). Here Martyn observes that the reader will discover with him, against the traditional interpretations, that “anti-Judaic intention on Paul’s part” “is not present in the text” (36). The reasons given are several. The primary one is that “the ruling polarity is not that of Christianity versus Judaism, church versus synagogue,” but “rather the cosmic antinomy of God’s apocalyptic act in Christ versus religion, and thus the gospel versus religious tradition” (37). Religion here is defined as “the various communal, cultic means... by which human beings seek to know and to be happily related to the gods or God,” in particular, it “is a human enterprise” (37).

Martyn explains that what Paul and the church are about are essentially different than anything that anyone or institution was about prior to or independent of them; “that, in the life of the church, worship of God is the corporate act in which the religious distinction of sacred from profane is confessed to have been abolished precisely by God’s redemptive deed in Christ,” and

⁸ J. L. Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1997); reviewed by R. B. Hays in *Review of Biblical Literature* (ed. M. A. Sweeney; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 59.

in this Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile,” so that the church is the place where “God is planting his war of liberation from all religious differentiations” (37, n 67). That differentiation of Christ-believers of Pauline persuasion from the rest of the world seems to (a Jewish reader like) me to be of the same order as the Scriptural basis of the Jewish claim made for differentiating God-believers of Mosaic persuasion from the rest of the world, which is also based upon a claim to divine revelation; yet Sinai is defined by Martyn instead as having *introduced* “the sacred/profane distinction” that God in Christ terminates (39). I suppose the point is that Martyn’s interpretation is not specifically anti-Judaic, it is anti-everything-but-its-own-differentiated-group-which-claims-no-differentiation-among-its-members—just as can result from Jewish claims to election. It is also a questionable judgment to make, since Paul’s letters do distinguish between Jews/Greeks, masters/slaves, males/females, and so on, just as does rhetoric from other religious groups, and furthermore, Paul’s letters would not have to been written to address the kind of discrimination arising within these churches to which they attest in the first place, if it had been the case that such differences did not exist and lead, as they do in all social groups, to discrimination based upon categorical differences between people and groups.⁹ Anyway, I do not see how this approach by definition excludes anti-Jewishness.

The reader of this and other comments will find that Martyn’s argument logically depends upon a denial of the claim to revelation that is at the heart of Judaism as well as to the claim to “God’s invasive grace” that “is active in the love of neighbor,” for outside of Paul’s apocalyptic faith there is only “human being’s superstitious effort to come to know and to influence God” (37 n. 67). Martyn nevertheless claims that “Paul never presents it [his antinomy between apocalyptic and religion] as an attack on the practice of Judaism by Jews,” because “the issue he poses is without exception internal to the church,” that is, his polemic refers to “Jewish

⁹ Cf. M. A. Hogg and D. Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (New York and London: Routledge, 1986).

Christians, not to non-Christian Jews”: “Paul always focuses this antinomy on issues that are internal to the church” (38).

In Martyn’s interpretation, Paul is not engaged in religious activity, but in challenging “the emergence of religion *within* the church”; thus he can state that “the church is not a new religion set over against the old religion, Judaism” (39; emphasis his). Thus Martyn takes issue with those who propose that Galatians expresses Paul’s theory of the Jews: “one of the clearest indications that Galatians is not an anti-Judaic text lies in the fact that the letter contains no theory of the Jews, properly speaking” (37; cf. 40 n 73). Martyn’s interpretation of Galatians postulates that there were no Jewish communities in the cities of Paul’s addressees, no former Jews among their churches, and no Jews in view in Paul’s rhetoric, except Christian Jews who had arrived from Jerusalem: “Paul had, in fact, no reason to think that the members of his Galatian churches would ever come into contact with non-Christian Jews. Thus, the subject of church and synagogue lies beyond the letter’s horizon” (40).¹⁰

Coupled with appeal to John Gager’s observation that “anti-Judaic writings always speak *about* Jews” (40, n 70; emphasis Martyn’s), the claim is that Paul’s rhetoric—and by implication, Martyn’s—cannot be interpreted to be anti-Jewish. A more thoroughgoing *inter-Christian* construction would be hard to imagine. But the logical implications of this definition of apocalyptic versus religion, including the way that the revelation is reserved by definition only for the Christian church—forget that Paul’s Scriptures claim for Abraham the same basis for circumcision as well as for Moses the same basis for the giving of the commandments, to name just two examples—cannot help but reflect the view that not only is Christian Judaism bankrupt, but all the more, by implication, is non-Christian Judaism. Martyn’s rhetoric reflects this *a fortiori* logic at various points.

¹⁰ Elsewhere, Martyn pushes the point even further in a way important to his thesis with respect to the setting for interpreting Paul’s rhetoric by arguing that “Paul is unlikely to have spoken in any detail of his life as a Jew or even of Judaism itself” (153).

Martyn senses a problem with the introductory claim that Judaism is never in view in Galatians when dealing with 1:13-14. This passage may “contain an *implication* with regard to Judaism,” namely, that “Paul’s zealous observance of the Law failed to liberate him from enslavement to the elements of the old cosmos,” which Martyn arrives at by way of reference to 4:3-5 (38); nevertheless, it does not express anti-Judaic sentiments, for this reference to Paul’s early life “causes Judaism to lie *just beyond* the letter’s horizon” (41 n 75; emphasis mine). But is that so? Then why is it stated within the letter’s argument? But to stay on point, when Martyn discusses the exegesis of 1:13-14, he observes that “*Ioudaïsmos*, ‘Judaism,’ was coined in the Hellenistic period to refer to *the religion of the Jews* as distinct from the religions of other peoples,” so we are witnessing Paul referring to non-Christian Jewish *religion*, in terms that Martyn has clearly defined in antinomy with revelation, and his comment soon after this one displays this logic: “Galatians is thus a letter in which Paul speaks directly and explicitly and repeatedly *about* Judaism as a *religion*. With these references, then, Paul clearly indicates that he *cannot give an account* of the path along which God has now led him *without addressing the issue of religion*” (154; one of the “religion” emphases his!; other emphases, including those using “religion,” mine). And again, a few pages later, Martyn states, when writing of the sharp contrast he understands Paul to be making between his former life as a Law observant Jew and the next period as analogous to “the contrast between the present evil age and the new creation”: “after his apocalyptic call at God’s own hands... he saw that Judaism was now revealed to be a *religion*, as distinguished from God’s apocalyptic and new-creative act in Christ” (164; emphasis on “religion” his!). Surely these statements contradict his earlier denial that Galatians reflects a theory of the Jews. Moreover, Martyn here admits that Paul writes “about” Jewish religion, meeting the criterion he cited as necessary in order to qualify the rhetoric to be anti-Jewish.

Another element in Martyn’s argument about 1:13-14 that undermines the claim that his interpretation of Paul’s rhetoric is not anti-Judaic arises when discussing Paul’s call for the Galatians to imitate himself in 4:12. Martyn states: “Not observant of the Law when he was

among them, Paul became like them in that he could think of himself as a former Gentile (4:3). Now—given their temptation to credit the message of the Teachers—they are to become like him in regarding themselves as former Jews (4:5)” (420). But one wonders how the addressees as described by Martyn could understand such a proposition, since, according to Martyn, there were and are no Jews among the addressees, including Paul, who was no longer a Jew and did not discuss his former life as a Jew when among them, and no Jews are expected to arrive. Does this statement not exemplify the fact that the discourse and ideas that have dominated the study of Paul overcome both the logic of new ideas and the ability to express different intentions consistently in the midst of the details of the exegetical process?¹¹ For here the addressees are to conceptualize their own state and their responsibility to follow Paul’s advice in thoroughly Christian terms that require a shared negative valuation of what it meant to be a Jew in order to understand what it should mean to be a Christian. It is difficult not to hear with Daniel Boyarin an echo of the anti-Semitic legacy of labeling as “Jew” and “Jewish” and “Judaism” that which is negatively valued in European culture, to the degree that “the Jew within” symbolized human evil in Nazi propaganda. It is just this language that one discovers in Käsemann’s work, such as when he states: “In and with Israel he [Paul] strikes at the hidden Jew in all of us, at the man who validates rights and demands over against God on the basis of God’s past dealings with him and to this extent is serving not God but an illusion.”¹² After all, Martyn quotes from this Käsemann article favorably when defining religion as that which provides the human being with “an illusion of God” (37 n. 67). In spite of Martyn’s stated intentions, is there not at work here a Pauline discourse that is based on a theory of Jewishness, indeed, a negative assessment of a people and

¹¹ Cf. S. Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), for an excellent discussion of this problem.

¹² E. Käsemann, “Paul and Israel,” *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 186. See the critique of this and similar statements by Käsemann in D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 209-14.

religious life that Paul's addressees as well as Martyn's readers are assumed to share knowledge "about"? Does such discourse substantiate the claim to have avoided anti-Jewishness, for Martyn, or for the Paul for which it speaks?

To sum up the problem: this Jewish reader of Martyn's commentary cannot read it without seeing the negative valuation of religion that it posits and applies to Christ-believing interest groups that maintain their Jewishness extends logically to the negative valuation of non-Christian Judaism, of Jewishness in general, in spite of contrary assertions and the expression of benevolent intentions. And I am not the only reader to recognize this problem. In an overall appreciative review of Martyn's commentary, Richard Hays similarly observes: "Nonetheless, the letter's slanderous statements about the Law and its radical negation (on Martyn's reading) of the election of Israel seemingly leave no room for the continuing existence of a Law-observant Jewish people" (64).¹³

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Many scholars proceed with inter-Christian constructions for reading Paul as if working with a relatively if not entirely separate circle for Christianity, albeit a divided circle, within which they seek to interpret the conflict they imagine between Paul and Jewish Christianity, variously labeled. It is historically problematic, because, at the very least, such a circle cannot be drawn independent of the Jewish communities and norms within which the early Christ-believers began as a Jewish subgroup or subgroups, anymore that it can be drawn independent of the Greco-Roman political and cultural world. The personal and group divisions imagined to exist within the circle correspond to similar personal and group divisions that existed outside of the circle. As I have sought to demonstrate, the usual result—unintentionally, to be sure—is that the

¹³ Similar concern is expressed in the review by J. Barclay, from the same review session, and published also in *Review of Biblical Literature* (ed. M. A. Sweeney; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 48.

inter-Christian constructions circumscribe a smaller scale circle *along the same axis*, thereby merely mimicking the disputes imagined to arise within the larger circle drawn in traditional constructions of Christianity versus Judaism. It is based on a conceptualization of the world positively valuing the Christian component versus the negatively valued Jewish/others components, positively valuing Pauline (read, non-Jewish) Christianity versus Jewish or other kinds of (unacceptable forms of) Christianity. In other words, it does not change the perception that what is positively or negatively valued is to be analyzed along a non-Jewish/Jewish axis, because that axis divides the circle drawn, albeit a smaller circle, Christianity, into two parts along the same line of differentiation, non-Jewish/Jewish.¹⁴ Although this approach in principle leaves room for a different circle representing non-Jewish Christianity to exist independently, the way that the conflicting values are represented in the “Christian” circle suggests, *a fortiori*, a negative valuation of the norms represented within the Jewish circle, for its members have not even taken the positively valued step of faith in Jesus Christ. [draw circle inside circle along same axis]

How might this cycle of persistent negative valuations of Jewishness within the discourse interpreting Paul’s voice be broken? Here I can only sketch a few suggestions that come to mind for me, and hope for additional suggestions from you:

1. Naturally, change begins with the conviction that things are not as others have supposed them to be. If an interpreter does not believe that Jewishness is a negative value, whether discussing Christ-believing Jews or those who do not share this faith, whether discussing Jewishness in Paul’s time or one’s own, then it is not something that should arise in his or her analysis. If an interpreter believes that Paul did negatively value Jewishness, but he or she does not, and does

¹⁴ The reformation discourse in a similar way negatively valued Roman Catholicism as symbolizing Jewishness,

not want the potential impact of that interpretation of Paul's voice to perpetuate the harm traditionally caused, then he or she should offer some critical comment that distances what is attributed to Paul's voice from what is believed to be correct for those who share the values of the interpreter on the matter at hand. However, as just discussed, to some degree the problem may persist because it is obscured by the discourse itself,¹⁵ which brings up the next point.

2. Few would likely dispute that the discourse on Paul of previous generations was generally influenced by, when not influential to the anti-Jewishness that many scholars now seek to avoid and to challenge as mistaken and harmful. It was also not methodologically critical to the degree that is now expected in the field. The prevailing discourse perpetuates the questions and concerns of different times and people, which were of course built upon matters of concern and perspectives of yet earlier times and people. And some of that discourse is plainly anti-Jewish. Therefore, scholars should attempt to develop a new vocabulary and work independently of the language and ideas that dominate the exegetical tradition. New hypotheses for reading Paul need to be constructed and tested. And interpreters should work hard to remain consistent within the new paradigms developed; otherwise, their own potential is subverted.

3. Scholars should consider approaching the historical and rhetorical situations for interpreting Paul's texts on thoroughly inter/intra-Jewish instead of inter/intra-Christian models, and they should be careful not to mix them, which can undermine the effort. There is good historical reason to explore these approaches, since Paul and the other early believers in Jesus were Jewish and understood what they were doing to be Jewish. I think it likely that they thought of themselves in terms of a coalition, a Jewish subgroup or subgroups engaged in a temporary task on behalf of Israel, and not founding a new religion or sect that was in some way less Jewish.

differentiating Christianity along a similar Jewish/non-Jewish axis in its own time.

These approaches (and they) have a better chance of yielding the desired ideological benefit, to the degree that they consistently recognize the issues at dispute in Paul's letters did not revolve around the question of *whether* or *to what extent* Jewish norms such as Torah applied, but to *how* they applied to the new reality he claimed his groups represented; namely, the dawning of the age to come within the present age, so that Israelites and members of the nations worshipped the Creator God of all humankind as one, however, remaining both Israelites and representatives of the nations when doing so.

When the shared term is Jewishness, as it is in intra-Jewish terms, the contrast shifts from discussing whether there is something problematic with *Jewishness*, to whether or not a person or group *believes in Jesus Christ*, and the associated claims for what difference that makes. In other words, unlike when the shared term is Christ, the difference between two groups does not fall along a line differentiating levels of respect for Jewish identity and Torah, since Jewishness is likely upheld to be essential by Jewish groups. Imagining the dispute between and within Jewish group boundaries keeps the focus on the meaning of faith in Jesus for themselves, and others, as Jewish groups.

Another benefit of this conceptualization is that difference is respected. The intra-Jewish construction allows the historical participants as well as the interpreter to respect that having a different opinion about the meaning of Jesus Christ or of appeals to him to legitimate social change within Jewish groups need not represent value judgments that one decision or the other is better, just different. As I understand Paul, he upheld the Jewish notion that, although social (and biological) differences remain in the present age, that is, there remains Jews and non-Jews in Christ, the discrimination usually associated with such differences should not prevail, just as is expected to be the case in the age to come, when even the wolf and the lamb will dwell together. This seems to me to be a sensible and noble ideal for how to approach each other today in

¹⁵ See especially the discussion of Kelley, *Racializing Jesus*.

Jewish/Christian relations' terms, whether sharing his belief that this age has dawned in Jesus Christ, or not.