

**REVIEW**

Edward Kessler

*An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), paperback, xix + 243 pp.

Reviewed by Eugene J. Fisher, Retired Associate Director for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Edward Kessler, Executive Director of the Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths at Cambridge University, has both the personal experience and academic expertise to write an introduction to Jewish-Christian relations. He has written an excellent survey of the history of the sometimes dynamic, too often tragic relationship between Judaism and its sibling faith, Christianity, from antiquity through the present.

After a brief narration of the relationship over two millennia, he mentions some of the most important contemporary scholars in the field. He then turns to the New Testament. It is, he argues, a Jewish book written in the main by Jews to convince other Jews that a proper reading of the Hebrew (or Jewish) Scriptures would convince them that the Jew, Jesus, is the promised Messiah. (Interestingly, Kessler uses the term "Old Testament" when he is describing Christian understandings of the Hebrew Scriptures. Though many Christians, especially those involved in dialogue with Jews, no longer use the term, others still do.)

The roughly contemporaneous writings of the early Church fathers and of the rabbis are then examined. He introduces the main authors and texts and situates them helpfully in their historical contexts. On the Christian side, he highlights the writers whose works are especially relevant to Judaism, such as Justin and Origen. On the Jewish side, he briefly introduces the rabbis and their main texts, but focuses primarily on topics such as references to Jesus and the *birkat ha-minim* that may contain anti-Christian polemics. (Of the latter, he says only that it is possible that *minim* sometimes referred to Christians.) He also marshals evidence that Jews and Christians were not only aware of but actually influenced each other's religious views. This occurred even while Christians especially, but perhaps some Jews as well, were strongly hostile to each other. A chapter is devoted to ancient and medieval interpretations of the *akedah*, or binding of Isaac, in Genesis 22, in order to demonstrate an "exegetical encounter" between the two traditions (p. 82). He finds both significant similarities in their approaches to the famous story as well as sharp differences that hint at religious polemics. He considers not only written commentaries and texts, but artistic depictions, and finds evidence of a religious encounter in all of these.

Moving forward historically, Kessler notes that relations did become uglier beginning in England in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, with the invention of the blood libel charge that the Jews of Norwich had murdered a twelve year old Christian boy. Despite the fact that Pope Innocent IV (c. 1200-54) officially rejected the notion that Jews used human (Christian) blood for ritual purposes, the blood libel spread, and with it anti-Jewish portrayals in Christian art and literature. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Jews had been expelled from every country in Western Europe with the exception of Italy. There, the traditional papal protection of Jews, inspired by St. Augustine's claim that

Jews should be a degraded but protected witness people, prevailed. Here, I must note a correction to Kessler's text, which overstates Augustine's contribution to anti-Judaism in the Church (pp. 50-51). In point of fact the issue in Augustine's time was whether Judaism should continue, as under Roman law, to be a *religio licita*, a legally recognized religion, or not, which is to say whether it would be allowed to survive. Ambrose of Milan, Augustine's mentor, articulating the generally-held view, had argued that Judaism should lose its status as a protected religion. Like paganism, it should be expunged from Christian society. Augustine argued otherwise, and his views prevailed. This is seen, for example, in the actions of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), who, as Kessler acknowledges, gave Judaism, and Judaism alone, a protected status as a minority religion. (See also Paula Fredriksen's *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).)

Turning to the modern period, Kessler narrates quite well how Christian anti-Judaism prepared the way for modern racial antisemitism. However, the latter was, he argues, qualitatively different from the Christian teaching of contempt because of its notion of the separation of humanity into superior and inferior races. This was totally at odds with the traditional Jewish and Christian notions of descent from one set of parents, Adam and Eve. He discusses as well Jewish and Christian responses to the *Shoah* and Zionism, and some of the controversies over both Christian culpability for the *Shoah* and Christian and Jewish tensions around the state of Israel. He concludes with reflections on contemporary issues such as covenant, mission, and dialogue between Jews and Christians, putting these in the context of the wider dialogue among the world's religions, particularly Islam.

One of the points Kessler makes throughout the book is that, despite the massacres, pogroms, ghettos, and expulsions of Jews that marred so much of Jewish life under Christian rule, there were also periods of relative harmony. Furthermore, Jewish thinking and religious practice were positively influenced by the Christian-dominated cultures in which they lived. Christian understandings of scripture were also deeply enhanced by knowledge of Jewish traditions. Through contact with rabbis, some learned how Jews understood their scriptures.

There are a few minor errors and shortcomings. For example, it was not Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel but French Jewish historian Jules Isaac who met with Pope John XXIII and encouraged him to have the Second Vatican Council address the Church's understanding of Jews and Judaism (though Heschel did have a significant role in the development of *Nostra Aetate*). In 1967 the Holy See replaced a demand for internationalization of the city of Jerusalem with a demand for "international guarantees" for its holy places (p. 169). Kessler does not give enough attention to the Catholic Church's development of themes that first appeared in *Nostra Aetate* in two landmark later documents, 1974's *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* and 1985's *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis*. Furthermore, since the author is British, he concentrates upon Jewish-Christian relations there and treats the richly complex history of Jewish-Christian relations in the United States and Canada too briefly. A few of Kessler's biblical interpretations are questionable. For example, while the statement in Matthew 27:25, "His [Jesus'] blood be on us and on our children," is attributed to the Jewish crowd, Kessler says it refers to "the people as a whole" (p. 39). Also, he interprets Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 8:8-13 as supersessionist, though it would be helpful to note that such an interpretation is disputed by most Catholic and mainline Protestant biblical scholars today (pp. 27-28).

But these, and a few others like them, are minor caveats. Overall, the book is excellent, filled with insights that experts in the field as well as upper-level undergraduate and graduate students will learn from. In a course (especially at a Catholic university), I might recommend pairing it with

Mary Boys' *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

The book contains a helpful timeline of events. These range from the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in 200 BCE, up through modern Jewish and Christian statements and even last year's International Council of Christians and Jews' *Revision of the 10 Points of Seelisberg*. He also includes a bibliography, glossary of terms, and index.