

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 33 - Theology and Religious Studies
Title of case study: Challenging Assumptions about Jesus the Jew in Christian Churches
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The ‘Jewishness of Jesus’ has become a scholarly cliché but discussion of the concept has been limited outside academia, particularly in churches where related issues are raised most frequently. James Crossley has published both reconstructions of Jesus in relation to Jewish contexts, and critiques of contemporary understandings of ‘Jesus the Jew’. Developing the collaboration between the Department of Biblical Studies and the Bible Society (a global organisation with more than 140 international Bible Societies), Crossley has made his findings available to 19,000 clergy and Bible discussion-group leaders in a booklet designed to interact with popular perceptions of Jesus’ ‘Jewishness’, as well as public blog discussions on ideas found in the booklet. Impact has also reached international Bible Societies and an international blog readership, with feedback clearly showing positive changes in perception and re-evaluations of Jesus’ ‘Jewishness’ as a direct result.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Much of James Crossley’s research has been on the rhetoric of ‘Jewishness’ in the study of Jesus and Christian origins (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5). Since coming to Sheffield in 2005, he has published on first-century Jewish contexts of the Gospel material, such as purity, Law and social history. He has shown that sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus, as well as various practices mentioned in the Gospels, are more obviously paralleled in early Judaism than is conventionally understood and that the idea that Jesus did something new in relation to Judaism and ‘Jewishness’ is unlikely [e.g. R1, R3].</p> <p>Building on a historic research tradition at Sheffield of ideological analysis of biblical scholarship in relation to ‘Jewishness’ by now retired staff (e.g. Keith Whitelam, Philip Davies), Crossley has also published extensively on the historical and ideological reasons for the emergence of the positive rhetoric concerning ‘Jesus the Jew’ over the past 40 years, with particular reference to shifting attitudes towards Israel and Palestine since the 1967 Six Day War [R2, R4] and the interaction between ideas of multiculturalism and western liberal capitalism [R5]. He has shown that the superficially positive rhetoric of ‘Jesus the Jew’ implicitly maintains a discourse of superiority by regularly making Jesus ‘transcend’ or ‘override’ key symbols of the scholarly construction of ‘Jewishness’. This is part of wider dominant cultural discourses concerning Judaism in America and Britain which have likewise been positive but have simultaneously maintained implicit superiority over Jews and Judaism. Underlying the positive and negative constructions of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘religion’ are influential discourses about multicultural tolerance which have also embraced the ethnic or religious ‘Other’ but with any alien ‘religious’ traits perceived as too problematic for western liberalism removed. The current dominant narratives in the quest for the historical Jesus are based on constructions of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘religion’ that merely provide foils for cultural superiority and require an alternative narrative to provide a more rounded picture of Christian origins.</p> <p>Crossley has been centrally involved in one of the most significant research projects designed to look at historical and ideological contexts of historical Jesus scholarship. Between 2007 and 2011 Crossley was one of two international participants in the Jesus and Cultural Complexity Project at the University of Oslo. The project was awarded funding by the Norwegian Research Council for seminars, conferences and workshops. This project looked at the ways in which Jesus has been constructed in a variety of cultural contexts over the past 200 years and their intersections with race, ethnicity, gender, nationalism, and philosophical trends. Crossley’s distinctive contribution</p>

was to focus on the ways in which Jesus has been constructed among scholars, intellectuals and politicians in relation to Israel, Palestine, and British or English nationalism. Crossley presented at four different sessions during this period and was a co-editor (with Halvor Moxnes and Ward Blanton) of one of the flagship books (*Jesus beyond Nationalism*) [R4].

In 2012, as part of the wider dissemination of the results of Crossley's research on Jesus and 'Jewishness', the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research and Innovation Committee funded approximately half of the production costs (£400) for a booklet developed by Crossley in collaboration with the Bible Society which would enable Crossley's research on 'Jesus the Jew' to have an impact on church groups throughout England and Wales.

3. References to the research

- R1. James Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened* (Louisville: WJK, 2006), submitted to RAE 2008
- R2. James Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century* (London: Equinox, 2008), submitted to REF 2014
- R3. James Crossley, 'Mark 7.1-23: Revisiting the Question of "All Foods Clean"', in *Torah in the New Testament* (eds. M. Tait and P. Oakes; London and New York: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 8-20
- R4. Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton and James Crossley (eds.), *Jesus beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2009), including Crossley's contribution, 'Jesus the Jew since 1967', pp. 119-137.
- R5. James Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship and Ideology* (London: Equinox, 2012), submitted to REF 2014

4. Details of the impact

The Bible Society, whose founders included William Wilberforce, was established in 1804 with the aim of providing wider circulation of the Bible. Today it is a global organisation with over 140 international Bible Societies. It is a non-denominational organisation which seeks to promote understanding of the Bible not only in churches but also in the arts, education, media, and politics. It is therefore an obvious public engagement partner for the Department of Biblical Studies (see REF3a).

Since spring 2010, the Department has been collaborating with the Bible Society and its Dean of Studies. After initial and ongoing collaboration on dissertation awards for undergraduates, it was clear that this partnership could be developed as part of the departmental research strategy, with the Bible Society providing national and international networks for dissemination and impact (see below) of research carried out at Sheffield. The issue of Jesus' 'Jewishness' was deemed to be particularly pressing for contemporary churches as high-profile scholarly debates had failed to make any significant impact among church audiences. This issue has been highlighted by Jewish scholars working in Jewish-Christian relations (e.g. A.J. Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* [2006]), so it was deemed to be of some urgency to get contemporary research on Jesus and his Jewish context directly through to a lay church audience. In addition, the Bible Society's own investigation has shown that there was a perception that church leaders might be 'protecting' congregations from latest developments in scholarship when in fact their study '*has shown us that most of the time the church probably underestimates the openness and capacity of its people to learn and thrive on new (to them) approaches*' [S1]. This collaboration meant that research at Sheffield could directly influence the ideas about Jesus and Judaism held by lay audiences so that they in turn could analyse and discuss the religious and ethnic identity of the 'founder' of the Christian faith.

The ongoing collaboration between the Department of Biblical Studies and the Bible Society provided an ideal opportunity to address this issue, initially in English and Welsh churches. Biblical Studies at Sheffield was able to provide leading research on the historical, political and ideological interpretation of scholarship and biblical texts whilst the Bible Society has extensive networks outside academia, both nationally and internationally through its connections with church groups and international membership in over 140 international societies. In 2011 Crossley and the Dean agreed to collaborate on a booklet called *Jesus the Jew*. The collaboration initially involved the Dean of Studies at the Bible Society reading through Crossley's main monographs and articles on the historical Jesus in his first-century cultural contexts as well as his published research on contemporary scholarship and its uses of terms such as 'Jew', 'Jewishness', 'Judaism' and so on. Crossley and the Dean co-wrote and completed *Jesus the Jew* in August 2012 which was explicitly designed for lay audiences with little, if any, knowledge of academic research. Not every issue raised in Crossley's research could be covered, and so the Dean and his colleagues in the Bible Society identified those areas of most relevance and interest for lay church groups. Three main aims developed from Crossley's research were outlined at the beginning of the booklet:

- to understand Jesus as a historical figure in the context of first-century Judaism
- to provide assistance in interpretation of both the Gospels and ancient Jewish texts
- to avoid problematic stereotypes, whether from the Gospels or from contemporary contexts, particularly where they have led to Christian anti-Semitism

To achieve these aims, six topics were taken directly from Crossley's research, including:

- An overview of Jewish history, groups and literature
- Jesus and the Law, with a case study on divorce
- Jesus and the Law, with a case study on wealth
- Jesus and prayer, with a case study on the 'Lord's Prayer'
- How Jesus' teachings might have been perceived by other Jewish groups
- How Jesus might have perceived his own views in relation to other Jewish groups

Within each of these six topics a series of questions were raised relating to the ways in which the participants viewed given Gospel passages in light of Jewish materials.

The range and reach of the booklet was both national and international. The Bible Society's networks made *Jesus the Jew* available to 19,000 clergy in England and Wales for use in discussion groups for the laity (10-15 participants would be deemed typical). To provide access beyond church groups in England and Wales, the booklet was made available on the website of the Bible Society for £3 to national and international audiences. By July 2013, over 2000 copies had been sold. In terms of changing perceptions, the Dean reflected on the collaboration and the publication of *Jesus the Jew*, by pointing out that '*making accessible the research of James Crossley and others on the Jewishness of Jesus and the way that his own culture illuminates a more accurate and incisive understanding of Jesus' teaching and identity...The church in the west is under the temptation to read Jesus inaccurately because we tend to see him through our cultural lens. The detailed work of scholars, like James, provides the material to counter this effectively*' [S1]. In order to assess changing perceptions further, the views of church educationalists and a discussion leader were sought. The Canon theologian of Birmingham and Guilford cathedrals (also preacher at Canterbury Cathedral, member of the General Synod, and Vice-President of the Bible Society) claimed of the booklet that '*This valuable course will help Bible study groups to enter the world of Jesus the Jew and by doing so to see the gospels with fresh eyes.*' A Baptist minister and former principal of London Bible College, claimed that '*This guide will lead us into understanding Jesus in his original setting. It does so competently, clearly and creatively and is a gift for any group who wants to really understand Jesus.*' [S8]

A specific test case was focused on the use of the booklet by an experienced group discussion leader and curate of St Michael le Belfrey, York [S4], whose discussion groups average around 15 participants. To get a greater indication of changing perceptions, feedback questions including the following were asked: 'On a scale of 1-5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, how did this booklet help your understanding of Jesus in relation to his Jewish context?' The group leader assessed this as 5. A further question was asked requiring written feedback in relation to reassessing Jesus in relation to Jewish legal and scriptural sources raised in the booklet. The response to this was that the booklet helps groups to '*understand Jesus' words and deeds in a fresh way*' and that it particularly aids the '*study of the scriptures by looking at Jesus in his own context*' and facilitates '*an encounter with Jesus...for today*'.

Further evidence of the significance of the impact of Crossley's research on the Jewishness of Jesus comes from the departmental blog 'Sheffield Biblical Studies', where the material was also published. Between 2010 and 2013, as the collaboration over the booklet was developing and being completed, the Jewishness of Jesus was one of the most popular topics on the blog, attracting over 1000 visitors, with most of the audience coming from North America. The conclusions made by Crossley on one blog post were also used by Zev Garber in his Op-Ed for the popular American website, *Bible and Interpretation* [S6,S7] (approximately 600,000 hits per month and 1700 unique visitors daily) as an example of ways in which preconceptions have successfully been challenged. Garber claimed the post was an 'insightful essay' and that the overview of key works '*suggest a rejection of Jewish stereotypes and a proper depiction of Judaism in the molding of the scriptural Jesus*' (November 2011).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Email from the Dean of Studies, The Bible Society
- S2. Bible Society (with over 140 international fellowships), <http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/>
- S3. *Jesus the Jew* booklet on the Bible Society website, <http://tinyurl.com/nr4ug8o>
- S4. Curate at St Michael le Belfrey, York, <http://www.belfrey.org/>
- S5. Sheffield Biblical Studies blog, www.sheffieldbiblicalstudies.wordpress.com
- S6. Zev Garber, 'Historical Jesus Scholarship: The Jewish Factor', *Bible and Interpretation* (November, 2011), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/gar358002.shtml>
- S7. Editor of Bible and Interpretation
- S8. *Jesus the Jew* endorsements, Bible Society website, <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/products/9780564048762/>