Was Jesus a Jew?\(^1\) I suppose that Heikki Räisänen would respond with an univocal “yes". After all, he has shown how Jesus of history in important matters stayed within the boundaries of the first century CE Judaism.\(^2\) At the same time, he is also very well aware that the interpretation of Jesus goes well beyond the boundaries of Judaism and Christianity. As early as 30 years ago, Räisänen investigated the picture of Jesus in the Qur’an, a question that recently has become important within the Muslim-Christian dialogue. In his recent book, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma* (1997), Räisänen shows how images of Jesus participate in a broad spectrum of religious traditions and innovations. The present study is also inspired by another interest of Räisänen’s, viz. the history of interpretation of biblical texts and the effect that the Bible has had through centuries of use. It is with gratitude for many years of challenging inspiration and friendship that I offer these reflections on the interpretation of the Jewishness of Jesus.\(^3\)

In one sense the question: “Was Jesus a Jew?” is very simple. The Gospels leave no doubt that he was born to Jewish parents. Matthew and Luke even give his family tree (Matt 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38), that, although they are different and most likely an example of creative reconstruction, place Jesus within a long Jewish tradition. But why is it that even so the question is not so simple? Is it because it combines two words that are difficult to define and identify, “Jesus” and “Jew”? This question combines two names that have served an important function to define European identity, positively and negatively. “Jesus” has historically been a positive symbol for European

\(^{1}\) This is an English, revised version of a study published in Norwegian as “Jøden Jesus” in H. Moxnes (ed.), *Jesus: 2000 år etter Kristus* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000) 57–83.


\(^{3}\) My approach is inspired by cultural studies; for a more systematic, historical-critical review of this discussion, see Hans Dieter Betz, “Wellhausen’s Dictum ‘Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew’ in Light of Present Scholarship”, *ST* 45 (1991) 83–110.
identity, and even in recent times, with the influx of Muslim immigrants, this name has served to identify who "we" are as opposed to "them". Jesus as an ideal, as a figure in history, is a person whom many Europeans will identify with as a part of their history and culture. This identification has found many and varied expressions. Works of art is a typical example, in European figurative art Jesus has as a matter of fact been portrayed as a European.⁴

If Jesus was a sign of positive identification for many Europeans, "Jew" has served as an anti-type to this identity. Since the Middle Ages "Jew" has been an important part of European identity, but as "the other", that which represented the opposite of a European, implicitly Christian identity. The history of anti-Semitism shows the fateful outcome of this negative combination of identities. The negative image of Jews in anti-Semitism was a result of many myths and ideas that were central to the identity of Christian Europe. The very epitome of this negative image was reached in the accusation that "the Jews killed Christ". This accusation shows how the term "Jews" was used in an a-historical sense, or rather, in an all inclusive sense, spanning both past, present and future. Even if the intention was to say that a group of Jews in the first century were to blame for the execution of Jesus (in itself a doubtful historical reconstruction), we hear something totally different, the saying takes on the meaning of "all Jews at all times are guilty in the death of Christ". Christianity was not the only source for anti-Semitism, however. In many instances "Jew" represented the negative mirror image of the national identity that was consciously constructed in many European nations, both newly created and old ones, in the 19th century.⁵ The most famous example was the Dreyfus affair, in which the Jewish officer Henri Dreyfus was made a scapegoat in a matter of espionage against France.⁶

Consequently, "Was Jesus a Jew?" is not an innocent question. In the longest period of European history Jews have served as "the oth-


⁵ See especially on Germany, R. Brubaker, Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1992) 134–36, 166–68.