The point of contention that has always been decisive in the Jewish-Christian dialogue has been the person of Jesus. If we have now begun to see through historical Jesus studies that Jesus Christ binds Jews and Christians together, it is also clear that he remains the main dividing point between Jews and Christians.¹ It is understandable that Jews and Christians have always shared a very large amount of their theology—in fact, a much greater amount than is usually expected. The first Christians, all of whom were Jewish, believed that their faith was the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures and that they were beginning to receive what had been promised in the covenants and the prophets. They thought of their faith not as a new religion but as the true Judaism. There was nevertheless a key dividing point between the earliest Christians and the Jews, and it centered in the Christian confession of the crucified Jesus as both Messiah and Lord, as the one who had inaugurated a new era in the history of salvation, an era of eschatological fulfillment. The situation was effectively captured in the aphorism of Schalom Ben-Chorin, himself the author of a book entitled Brother Jesus: “The faith of Jesus unites us—faith in Jesus separates us.”²

If the estimate of Jesus is the fundamental cause of disagreement between Jews and Christians, one may well ask whether or not the quest of the “historical Jesus,” assuming it arrives at something other than the traditional Christian view of Jesus, might not be a boon for Jewish-Christian dialogue. Without doubt the quest has been an ameliorating factor in the dialogue, as we shall see, but one could hardly call it a boon. We will explore the reasons for this conclusion in this essay. We begin with a brief look at the history of the Jewish study of Jesus that parallels the liberal Protestant quest, proceed to an analysis

of some of the specific conclusions of the quest that bear upon our subject, follow this with a discussion of the obstacles posed by the quest, and conclude with some comments about the dialogue itself.

1. The Jewish Study of Jesus and the Quest

The nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus, as documented in Albert Schweitzer’s famous book, was—from Reimarus to Wrede—almost exclusively a Gentile undertaking. Nevertheless, already with Reimarus (1778), anticipated by the English Deists—and with a considerable number of the others described by Schweitzer, the Jewishness of Jesus began to emerge with striking clarity, and concomitantly the disjunction between Jesus and the Christ who was the center of the church’s faith. Influential scholars such as Ferdinand Christian Baur and William Wrede drove a great wedge between Jesus and Paul, stressing the discontinuity between the two, and making Paul the de facto creator of Christianity. This is a viewpoint that would eventually be taken up by Jewish scholars in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Apart from the scandalous Toledot Yeshu, an ancient folk-tale based partly on Talmudic anecdotes about Jesus, written down first in the tenth century, but still read by orthodox Jews in the nineteenth century, Jews wrote little about Jesus until the twentieth century. The emancipation of the Jews from the ghettos of Europe over a two-hundred year period, ending in 1933, and the birth of the Haskalah (the Jewish “Enlightenment”) movement among the Jews in the eighteenth century, enabled the Jews to escape their isolation and to enter, and adapt themselves to, the world of modern thinking. The

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