It has become quite commonplace within the Quest for the Historical Jesus to claim that Jesus was Jewish. In this readable and stimulating new book, Bruce Chilton, Bell Professor of Religion at Bard College, imaginatively fleshes-out what this means for understanding the man from Nazareth. Chilton’s years of academic study of the New Testament and related documents such as the Targums and his study of languages, particularly Aramaic, have helped him “to discover that not only the inspiration behind Jesus’ teachings, but also its actual content—point by point—was drawn directly from Jewish sources” (pp. xviii-xix). From his research “a portrait of Jesus as an inspired rabbi with an exclusively Jewish agenda began to emerge” (p. xix). This book attempts to re-present as a coherent whole his portrait of Rabbi Jesus.

Chilton’s retelling of the story involves the blending of key historical facts and later legends with imaginative expansions on details and motives. For example, we learn that “Miriam, Mary as we now know her, was some thirteen years old—the age Jewish maidens of that time married—when Jesus’ father, the widower Joseph, came to her village of Nazareth, in all likelihood to repair the house of her parents” (p. 6). Chilton’s delineation of the age of marriage has historical basis, while Joseph as a widower is a second century tradition, and the reason for his presence in Nazareth is complete conjecture (although not a bad one!). Chilton goes on to suggest that “the attraction between Joseph and Mary must have been immediate since they broke with custom and slept together soon after meeting and well before their marriage was publicly recognized” (pp. 6-7). Apart from the obvious ire that this statement will raise among many, Chilton uses the scenario to explain why Jesus’ conception was later perceived as a result of either fornication or miracle (however, Chilton does not address how the rumor of a Roman soldier [ben Panthera] fathering Jesus came about from this scenario). The result is that
Jesus goes through life as a mamzer, a person of suspect paternity, a stigma that affected his childhood and explains some of his later teachings. This brief description of Chilton’s treatment of Jesus’ conception is representative of his method throughout the book.

Following the discussion of Jesus’ conception, Chilton tells of Jesus’ pilgrimage to Jerusalem and his time there as a street urchin once he left his parents’ side (Luke having mis-represented Jesus’ quick reunification with his parents). He then suggests that Jesus went to the wilderness to seek John the Baptist, a man for whom immersion in water was part of God’s plan to release Israel from both sin and oppression (p. 50). Jesus learned a great deal from John, apparently much that is reflected in his own teachings later. Under John’s tutelage, Jesus especially learned to meditate on the mysteries of the divine mind and came to know the Throne of God as a moving Chariot through the visions of Ezekiel, a method Chilton links to kabbalah (p. 175).

Chilton suggests that it was during Jesus’s nineteenth year that John was arrested and Jesus returned to Nazareth for a “period of ease and honest pleasure,” finding his voice as a teacher and storyteller and testing out many of his ideas. However, he soon ventured eastwards throughout the Lower Galilee, “taking every opportunity to lambaste the symposial game of maneuvering for status” (p. 83). As an exorcist, Chilton suggests, Jesus drew upon an esoteric practice he learned from John that involved going into a trance by meditating on the divine throne (p. 93). Chilton affirms the reality of Jesus’s exorcisms although remains somewhat unwilling to attribute either a purely human explanation to this power (e.g., psycho-somatic) or give ascent to a divine hand. This is not always the case with other miracles, towards which Chilton takes a modernist approach that does not deny that “miracles” occurred but seeks (or assumes) a natural explanation (water “into” wine, p. 184; feeding of the five thousand, pp. 186-87). However, on the raising of Lazarus he remains somewhat obtuse—“we have a definite case of Jesus’s miraculous capacity to discover life in people whom others had given up for dead” (p. 246).

Chilton continues to retell the story of Jesus, attempting along the way to expand on the details and motivations of his teachings by drawing on the world of rabbinic Judaism that Chilton knows so well. Although one could quibble with details here and there, the overall effect is to produce a picture of Jesus fully aligned with his