

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(audience applause) A brief memory. The late cardinal, Aaron Jean-Marie Lustiger, who recently passed away in France, he and I were friends. In the second volume of my memoirs, *And the Sea is Not Full*, I devote a long chapter to our friendship. It began with a disagreement. In a variety of public statements when he became Archbishop of Paris, he qualified himself as a *juif accompli*, an accomplished and fulfilled Jew. I objected to this self-definition. We met, finally. We had a six, seven-hour conversation about things [00:01:00] that you can imagine. At the end, I asked him, "Do you really think that you, because you converted, are a more fulfilled Jew than I am?" After hours of arguments and counterarguments, he promised never to use that expression again. And he kept his promise. But he continued to openly affirm, again and again, his Jewishness. Question. Can one be both Jewish and Christian? He answered yes, to the very end. And because of that, when he died, a kaddish was recited by his nephew at the entrance to the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris.

And now, I feel I must [00:02:00] give you a preliminary (coughs), excuse me, a preliminary warning. The Jew in me is about to speak words with some trepidation. These thoughts, tempered with some prudence, are not meant to wound religious or other sensitivities. Nor destroy beliefs and traditions which obviously are not mine. My goal, rather, is to try to understand an influential and no doubt inspired man who, at the beginning of his turbulent life, could and perhaps should be close to me. In my strong desire to remain respectful of Christians' feelings, it has always been in me [00:03:00] for years and years. For the sake of fairness, I try not to teach Christian texts or themes in my class. When there is a need to touch on them, as when I have one year taught a course titled "The Death of Great Masters," Moses, Muhammad, Buddha, Socrates, and Jesus, I ask Christian colleagues to speak about Jesus. I thought they would speak about him with the same fervor I have when I speak of my great Jewish masters. Somehow, I feel that Isaiah or the Besht are mine. Jesus is not. And the question is, why? Why not? After all, wasn't he Jewish?

I hope that we [00:04:00] shall explore these questions later. In order to grasp our illustrious guest for this evening, in his original truth, thus also in his exceptional destiny, we will take large steps back to place him in the context of his

childhood, adolescence, and then, his blossoming before death on the cross, under the starry blue sky of the eternal city of David, Jerusalem. So, it may mean arousing a completely natural tension with some non-Jewish students. Let's admit from the outset. If this story of Yeshua, son of Miriam and Joseph of Nazareth, had not finished with the crucifixion, it would have simply been probably a tale of an ordinary Jewish family [00:05:00] from Judah, who lived under a more or less brutal occupation by the powerful Roman Empire. It is the death of the sad son?, which toppled him into the history of religions and kept him there for two millenniums. Now, we must of course remember.

What is it about him? What is so special about this Yehoshua that he could stir up the people in whose midst he was born and inspire fear in Rome to the point that he was condemned to death? His father, a carpenter, did not belong to an important family. He was neither priest nor scholar. He did nothing to attract attention. If millions [00:06:00] and millions of men and women admire him all over the world, and think they know him today, because they belong to the religion that he established, it can only be thanks to his beloved son. Equally so for his mother and brothers and sisters. Nothing out of the ordinary happens to them. Neither good nor bad. Except through the

newly very public figure, Yeshua, whose abrupt insertion into history will change his path and perhaps, according to his followers, he is unraveling.

Now, who is he? Who is he to history, and who is he to the Jew that I am? For Roman and Greek philosophers of the time, this man was [00:07:00] to some, of course, certainly a kind of witchdoctor; a miracle man healer. For Muhammad, he is a prophet like so many others. For Christians, of course, he is a saint -- if not more so the son of God. The Redeemer, the Messiah. He has preoccupied my thoughts for years. It was simple: having spoken for more than so many years here, for 42 years, about biblical ancestors, judges and prophets, Talmudic wise men and Hasidic masters, why not tackle the one who for Christianity, represented all, and still represents a great spiritual leader and innovator, the leader inside Jewish history. And who [00:08:00] without leaving his tradition inspired movement, permanent movement, towards something noble and great that for some time, at the beginning, of course, was meant later on to replace that tradition.

If I hesitated for so long, it's mostly for fear. Running into, offending, dredging up the debate on both sides. Some would hold it against me for being too understanding. The others for

not being understanding enough. So, let's be sincere. Isn't the goal of our annual encounters to inform ourselves, to learn, to deepen our knowledge? Ignorance is never an option. To look away, as we [00:09:00] have done, as I have done, surely in my childhood, would only lead to oblivion, which is unfair, unjust. The next step would be, therefore, forgetting. And forgetting leads to indifference, which is impossible in the world, which is common to all of us. Forgetting means the antithesis of culture, education, and faith.

So therefore, we shall come back to the question accompanying our meeting this evening. How does the Jew I am see Yehoshua, son of Jewish parents, of Nazareth and Jerusalem, who after his death, changed the world in more than one way? But of course, you must know that having devoted so much time [00:10:00] to do research for this portrait, I wonder also judging to the presence of so many of you tonight, I didn't realize that Jesus was so popular. (laughter) So, I wonder whether we should not view it as the first of a series devoted to founders of religions. Such as Buddha or Muhammad.

Whatever you think about this, I am sure that we all agree at least on one issue. Neither of you is an outsider. Was Jesus an outsider? Was he an outsider to his contemporaries? Then

why is he an outsider to my contemporaries who are Jewish? But let's agree on something else. That those who are outside and wait for the doors to open, [00:11:00] they can come in. In truth, I never thought about Jesus when I was a child. I was unaware of his entire biography, of the person. But I knew, I believed I knew much about his teaching, about his heritage. In other words, therefore, about the consequences of his actions. I identified, I must be sincere and truthful, I identified the person and what his teaching has done to his surroundings and mine: I identified them with hatred for the Jews.

I studied Jewish history, and what did I learn? Crusades, pogroms, and [00:12:00] more pogroms. Ritual murders in the Middle Ages. Fear, trembling, persecutions, anguish. It was in his name that these things occurred pretty much everywhere in the Christian world, and surely in mine. Pogroms were usually led by priests with a cross in their hands. And so, the child that I was couldn't have come to one conclusion: that to Christians, the cross symbolized compassion and love. To us, it evoked fear. More fear. More danger. Thus, my fear of him, Jesus, it [00:13:00] ran so deep that on my way to the synagogue, to the house of study and prayer, I would cross the street so I wouldn't have to walk in front of the church. I was afraid of the priests. In my child's mind, already aware of the

persecutions to which my people had suffered, I was unable to conceive of him as a Jew. How could he, a Jew originally, been at the outset already a kind of forerunner of what Christians had done to me? I saw him as a Christian before he became Christian. How else?

Know that I have studied different sources, a lot, some thirty, forty volumes for tonight. The most important ones that I studied was Jacob Klausner [sic], a great historian; Peter Schäfer from Princeton; Jacob Neusner; even [00:14:00] Pope Benedict XVI, and John Paul II. A lot, a lot, a lot of biographies and studies on Jesus and his world. But the image Yeshua of Nazareth -- the image that he projects is quite different. They and others show how his behavior was Jewish, in the tradition of the Pharisees, who in their prayers, addressed *avinu shebashamayim*, our Father in heaven. And waited for redemption. He, too, prayed for redemption.

Thus, I imagine Jesus, a young pious Jew growing up in Judea, circumcised and devout. Searching for piety and knowledge. Growing up at a time where the Temple was still standing, and a social [00:15:00] life was governed by Talmudic laws and customs. Intoxication with God and his mysteries. I imagined him dressed in his tallit, or prayer shawl, wearing phylacteries

or tefillin. I see him praying three times a day. I imagine him observing him the Sabbath, naturally eating kosher. And fasting on Yom Kippur. Surely, a son respectful of his parents. Probably close to his four brothers, Jacob or James, Yosi, Shimon, and Yehuda, and his sisters, whose names nobody took the time to record. I see him taking courses. He was a student, a pupil at great academies. He was the pupil of Gamaliel the Elder, grandson of Hillel the Elder. I see him drawn to esoteric circles. You must admit, [00:16:00] all of you, had he lived in my time, he would have ended up in Auschwitz.

Nothing about what he does or says proves that his ambition was to create a new Torah, to replace the one of Moses. Nor even to found his own sect with its own basic principles and goals, going further or moving away. So why, then, is he treated so severely in the ancient and especially medieval texts? Is he blamed for his success among others? Should his success with gentiles be held against him? His universalization, what he calls of the Jewish law, with all the changes. Is it so bad? And the fundamental question: why is it said pretty much everywhere, even now, [00:17:00] that Jewish judges condemned him to death? This gentle man, who merely aspired to bring about ultimate deliverance and peace among nations.



Of all men and women who wrote about Jesus throughout the centuries, his life is the least known. The Gospel of Luke, for instance, devotes 12 words -- 12 words -- to evoke his 12 years until he reached the age of 12. What does he say? "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom." And that's all we know. The great French theologian, philosopher, and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, declares "Of his 33 years, he lived 30 without making himself known." Quote, unquote. But how is one to explain his hidden years?

[00:18:00] Is it because he spent his quasi-entire existence among Jews, who cared little about his future fame?

The fact is that in the Talmud, references about his youth and subsequent activities are rather meager. And the Talmud, after all, is the major chronicle of its times. Nothing happened without its being recorded at the times. How come that so few is written about him? Perhaps some of you remember another France story about Pontius Pilatus, already old, being asked, probably by a journalist, about the Jewish rebel, Jesus, whom he had sentenced to death long ago. And Pontius Pilatus has difficulties to recall the story of long ago. And to him, the whole episode -- for to Rome, it was only an episode -- was [00:19:00] insignificant. It sounded vaguely familiar. So, why

should everything about his childhood, adolescence, and upbringing be recorded? In fact, it wasn't.

Let's stay a moment longer with these biographical notes. There is precious little in books by historians, contemporary historians, and in the Talmud as well. Written 50 years after the death of Yehoshua, the Gospels are full of biographical details, but they depict a more legendary than historical Yehoshua. And on top of it, they are sometimes contradictory. For Matthew, he was born four years before the common era. For Luke, 10 years later. Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius speak of him but briefly. When looking into his biography, one stumbles through rather aggravating territories, since it's all so vague. [00:20:00] Where was he born? In Bethlehem or Nazareth? Both places are put forward. Nazareth is favored because he had a Galilean accent. One plausible explanation is that he was born in Bethlehem but he and his family moved to Nazareth. To add to our confusion, note that Nazareth of today is not the same as the one that would have seen the birth of Yehoshua.

The year one of his birth is also mentioned, but this contradicts a source which puts him in the time of Herod the Great, who died five years or six years prior. It's also said that he left this world at the age of 36. Or 33? Which seem

conflicting in the eyes of scholars and their calculations. One legend frequently noted by several sources tells of his dramatic encounter with Rabbi Joshua, the son [00:21:00] of Perachiah in Alexandria, and his falling out with him. It's a very beautiful story. In the tractates of Sotah and Sanhedrin, we read the following episode. When King Yannai decided to put to death all the sages of the Sanhedrin, the high tribunal, Rabbi Joshua ben Perachiah and his disciple, Yeshua, fled to Alexandria in Egypt, joining a huge and flourishing Jewish community. At King Yannai's death, when peace came, the famous sage Shimon ben Shetach wrote to Rabbi Joshua. Quote, "From me, Jerusalem, the holy city, to my sister, Alexandria, in Egypt, my husband dwells in your midst and I feel lonely and desolate." And Rabbi Joshua [00:22:00] replied, "I understand. Peace upon you. I shall return."

So, he rose up, together with his disciple Jesus, returned home. On the way, they stopped at an inn run by a woman who treated him with great respect and honor. "What a beautiful inn," said the master. *Akhsania* means both an "inn" in Hebrew and "hostess of the inn." "Yes," replied the disciple. "But her eyes are bleary." Rabbi Joshua's reaction was harsh. "You are a wicked person, since you pay attention to such matters." And he banned him. Day after day, Jesus came in vain, pleading to be taken

back. One day, he appeared before the master who was reciting the prayer "*Shema Yisrael*," "Hear, O Israel." Touched by his persistence, Rabbi Joshua couldn't interrupt his prayer, [00:23:00] but motioned to him with his hand that he agreed to take him back. But the disciple interpreted the gesture as an ultimate rejection. So, says the Talmud, he began worshipping idols. According to one master, he even practiced magic. Rabbi Joshua pleaded with him, "Repent." "Too late," said the disciple. "I learned from you that he who sins and causes others to sin may no longer repent."

Rabbi Joshua is criticized in the Talmud. Always, say the Talmudic sages, while your left hand rejects, may your right hand draw near. Not like Joshua, son of Perachiah, who repulsed Yehoshua, Jesus, with both hands. [00:24:00] What a story. The whole conflict between Jews and Christians for centuries and centuries was nothing but a result but a small misunderstanding? Was the master's wrong gesture as weighty as Jesus' obstinacy? All this is quite nice and useful, except that Rabbi Joshua, son of Perachiah, lived one hundred years before Yeshua. (laughter) Elsewhere, we are made to believe that he crossed paths with Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach and Rabbi Akiva. But again, this is impossible. The former lived one hundred years before the common era, and the latter one hundred years later.

According to Christian synoptic texts, he must have been a brilliant student who aroused admiring astonishment in the great masters. Some sources call him "rebbe." But [00:25:00] nowhere is his ordination mentioned. Which rabbinical jury or which master had crowned him rebbe? A mystery. One source puts forth the hypothesis that he was crowned Messiah by his disciples in Caesarea. True or not, since when can students bestow this title, the most exalting of vocabulary, on their elder? Again, a mystery. Yet these are the sort of mysteries in which Yehoshua finds himself shrouded.

When Jesus was born, Herod was king. A strange king. The Romans loved him. He was their man. At the senate session in Rome, Antony came forward and declared that it was in Rome's interest to crown him King of Judah. The vote was in his favor. Antony and Caesar, with a new [00:26:00] Jewish king in the middle, left a hole. Then, they deposited the official decree in the capitol. Some believe they also brought a sacrifice to the Roman God. True or not, there were huge festivities honoring Herod. But Herod was, according to erudite scholars, according to history, a dangerous psychopath. He had his wife, Mariamne, first, and two children murdered. When he was summoned to the Sanhedrin to respond on serious charges, he

behaved with arrogance, later he had its members murdered. At that time, people said it's better to be a dog in the house of Herod than to be his friend. One easily can imagine the mood in the country, when Jesus grew up. Granted, the Temple Janus was closed because for a while, all battlefields were quiet. But the internal [00:27:00] situation in Palestine was tense, filled with anguish and terror.

Can we imagine Yeshua's childhood? Why not? A Jewish childhood. After all, he must have helped his father, the carpenter, and perhaps his mother, Miriam, in the kitchen. I suppose there were all, of course, practicing Jews around them. Some apostles confirmed this about themselves, and thus, about their master. The language? Aramaic, the Yiddish or Ladino of the time. But they said their prayers in Hebrew.

The adolescent Jesus in Nazareth must have heard of Jerusalem. Isn't Jerusalem at the heart of Jewish liturgy? Of Jewish memory? Of Jewish learning? Isn't this what attracted him to the holy city -- the chance to meet famous scholars and teachers, mostly Pharisees? Is it there [00:28:00] that he must have fallen in love with Talmudic legends and aphorisms? Probably. At 12, said Luke, he increased his wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. Was he dazzled by the

splendor of Herod's temple? Inspired by the academies? Gratified by solemn service of the priests and the lyrical songs of the Levites? Probably yes. Shocked by the commercialization of the holy place? All the creation sources say yes. Admitted, those times were not known for their spiritual grandeur. The Temple was a place of corruption. The corruption was prevalent that positions for high priests were acquired with money and nepotism. So, is it possible, therefore, that Jesus, the naïve, good soul, [00:29:00] was shocked? Why shouldn't he be? But if so, we should feel empathy with him. Don't we know to this day that corruption exists in the highest places? (laughter) And you can buy -- not high priesthoods -- you can buy elections with money.

He met John the Baptist, good for both of them. It's natural for young students to be seduced by what is new and old in a person who is different from others. Well, hasn't he demonstrated already, a young man, a profound interest in the singular way of life of the Essenes. If he was so careful to follow the commandments of the Torah, why didn't he follow the first commandment, ordering man to marry and establish a family with children, to populate [00:30:00] the Earth? I was wondering, when I was studying all this, what would have happened had Jesus obeyed the commandment? Had he really

married a nice Jewish girl? (laughter) A plausible hypothesis is proposed, and the hypothesis is that he was attracted to the secret Essene sect. There, the purity was a key word. Living alone, a bit on the fringes, in a dark cellar, under strict and community rule. There, the sect's members shared all they owned. It was a kibbutz before the word became known. And what was their food? Bread, water, wine, and books. Guided by mystical, obscure dreams, and taking part spiritually in the battle between, , "the children of light and those of darkness." They offered their entire [00:31:00] being to unite themselves, to the supreme being, the creator of worlds and man. Thus to preserve the body and soul in total purity. To the extent where they refused to marry, as they dreaded the accompanying needs and compromises.

A number of sources reveal Yehoshua as Essene, having fallen under the influence of a charismatic leader, a decisive encounter, as it changed the disciple. Here, again, the student in me, who adores encounters, someone who believes as I do that life is made not of years but of moments, I should feel drawn to Yehoshua and find him, to say the least, appealing and moving as a human being, as a Jew of his time. In the same way that the Prophet Elisha left his parents to follow the Prophet Elijah, [00:32:00] the young Yehoshua broke from his own way of life out



of loyalty to John the Baptist. Did the latter perform a bit too many baptisms? So what. At the time, this word did not yet have its modern connotations. It factors often enough into the Bible and in Jewish customs. It is not John who transformed the image of Yehoshua, and who confronts us today. It's another, and we know it. The name is Saul -- Paul. We shall, of course, return to him.

Encounters within Jews and Christians do figure in Talmudic sources. Listen. Suspected of heresy, of being too close to Christians, the great Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was once arrested. Brought before the torturer, the Roman governor asked him, [00:33:00] "How can a venerable sage like you get involved with such frivolity?" And Rabbi Eliezer answered, "I recognize that the judge is right." Of course, he meant the judge in heaven. But the governor thought he referred to him. So, the sage was acquitted.

But Rabbi Eliezer felt bad. For having lied? For have even given the impression that he submitted to Roman idolatry? So much so that his disciples came to console him. Did he remember his meeting in Sepphoris with a certain Jacob from the village called Sechania, or Sikhnin, where there lived a community of Christians? With whom he had a conversation about the law,

about the harlots' gift to the sanctuary, whether they should be accepted or not, and who gave him a brilliant answer? His interpretation of a biblical verse pleased Rabbi Eliezer.

[00:34:00] That's why I arrested. Because I was pleased with his interpretation. In other words, because he was ambiguous, he was punished, but because his intentions were good, he was saved.

In the Babylonian Talmud, certain passages deal with Mary's virginity, essential to Christianity even then, for it emphasizes that Jesus' father was God and not Joseph. Some sources maintain -- I say it because I've read it -- that his father actually was a Roman soldier named Panthera. Interestingly enough, Hitler for some strange reason liked this. And he said -- two things he said we should remember. Once he said, one thing he said, "Conscience is a Jewish invention." The second thing that he said, actually, that "Jesus' father was a Roman soldier [00:35:00] named Panthera, thus making him an illegitimate child and therefore, he was killed by the Jews." Quote, Hitler.

For the moment, eventually surrounded by enthusiastic students of his own, he expresses himself as a practicing Jew loyal to his tradition. When asked his opinion on the biblical

commandments, he insists on the two loves, that you will love God with all your heart, and you will love your fellow human being, or your neighbor, as yourself. Everything he says finds its source, by and large, in Talmudic teachings and adages. Doesn't he say from the very beginning of his preaching that he considers himself sent only for those who have strayed, lost their way, the forgotten in the house of Israel? The minority? The repudiated? Would he have changed his path later [00:36:00], directed his mission towards the entire world -- which, of course, his disciples managed to do. Here again, another will do it for him: his major disciple, Paul.

For the moment, Yeshua behaves like a Jew among Jews. In his famous sermon on the mount, the monk is most captivating and stirring, even as a piece of literature. He evokes principles whose echo we find in the Talmud. His precepts reflect Hillel's moral teachings, as Rabbi Akiva's. What does he recommend for receiving grace from heaven? Repentance, fasting, prayer, and charity. These are the words that we use on Yom Kippur in the prayer "*Unetaneh Tokef*." These are the three ways of saving ourselves. His behavior becomes [00:37:00] a bit strange in spite of all, because he is said to have special powers. All of this makes me wonder, how could I not be taken with the humanism and compassion of this man who loves to tell fables and stories,

and who is constantly preoccupied with the cares and misfortunes of the poor and the weak? How could I understand that the masters of my masters, and their masters, felt the need to distance themselves from him, to rebuke him, to condemn him to exclusion from our collective memory?

He had supernatural gifts and used them -- so what? Other mystics had such talents, yet they are admired in our legends. Much has been written in the Talmud about Jesus' magical healing powers. Once, Rabbi Eliezer ben Dama, the son of Rabbi Yishmael's sister, was bitten by a snake. And Jacob, the same Jacob, the same village, [00:38:00] Sikhnin, offered to treat him in the name of Jesus ben Panthera. Rabbi Yishmael objected. The patient implored, "Please, allow him to treat him. I can bring proof from the Torah that it is permitted to save life." Of course it's permitted. Hardly had they finished when the patient died. And Rabbi Yishmael exclaimed, "Happy are you, ben Dama, son of Dama, that your body is pure, that your soul left while in the state of purity," which was before undergoing that treatment.

A similar story is told in a tractate of Shabbat. The grandson of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, the great Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who was the interlocutor of so many of the great masters. The

grandson suffered from an obstruction in his throat. The grandfather summoned Rabbi Yaakov, again, the same disciple of Jesus. Who whispered something in the patient's ear, [00:39:00] and a miracle occurred. The patient was healed. "What was your whisper?" the master wanted to know. "A verse from Scripture," said the disciple, "interpreted by Jesus." And Rabbi Joshua exclaimed, "It would have been better that he were dead and not to have heard the verse so misused." Strange, again. To save a life. Can we say anything? Can we do anything and permit it?

Even this type of anecdote should not tarnish the image of Jesus. In my eyes, after all, he was not the one to use his name to perform miracles. He did not offer his services; others asked for them. But he did perform miracles. His disciples affirm this in his Gospels, which mean "the good news." He liked to please others, offer his help, be useful. He cured the sick, walked on water, [00:40:00] changed the laws of nature, and even went so far as to promise sinners the power to forgive their sins, as long as they repented. He made water into wine, restored hearing to the deaf, made the paralyzed walk again -- even better, he brought a dead person back to life.

Let's admit, it sounds strange. So, Yehoshua was no longer a mystic who devoted his life to meditation and solitude, but he

wanted to capture the imagination of the crowds. So what? In spite of all this, this character should not displease me. Not that much. I always admire the strangeness in the stranger, the unusual, even the paradoxical in people. Those who are not ready to accept and to live a paradox are so boring. But didn't Jesus declare, according to Matthew, that he did not come to do away with the laws of the Prophets, but rather [00:41:00] to fulfill them? And that so long as the Earth and heaven shall exist, not the letter of the Bible would be lost? Didn't he forbid his disciples who had violated the sanctity of the Sabbath by fleeing from the Romans? But I can hardly be surprised by this fact.

Again, the fact is that the sages of the Talmud, and later the masters of the Middle Ages, didn't like him. Why? Once again, it's Matthew who first started me thinking. He says that while Yehoshua and his disciples are walking during the Sabbath in a wheat field, he allows them to pick a stalk and eat it. All the while knowing this is forbidden by biblical law. It was not a matter of life or death. Reprimanded by the Wise Men, Yehoshua answered, "The son of man is the master of the Sabbath." Ah. If this story is true, [00:42:00] it would change many things. Would Yehoshua forsake the Essene teaching, for which the divine words remain irrevocable, unchangeable, inviolate? "My kingdom

is not of this world," he declared. What? Not of this world? For the Jew, this does not correspond to his memory of the Divine word. Having come from above, the word remains alive on Earth. Rooted in everyday life, it governs our behavior and is reflected in each of our movements. Isn't this where we find the solemn and pathetic beauty of Jewish thought on the human condition? Because God is God, He is in history and the human destiny, here and elsewhere. Today, as yesterday, and tomorrow. Not in the other world. Once, we live, it's sealed. We [00:43:00] cannot repent in the other world.

As we only know Yehoshua through the writings of his disciples, one can only conclude that some sort transcendental metamorphosis did indeed occur in him. According to their accounts, he had become a Moses novus , a Moses redivivus. Moses brought back to life. A new Moses. And one whom the God of Abraham conferred a new mission, a new Torah. This allows especially Paul, but other disciples as well, to abolish the basic laws of the Bible, such as circumcision, the Sabbath, the commandment on food. And meanwhile, one of the thirteen principles on faith, by the great Maimonides, the astonishing codifier of the Talmud. What does he say? "*Ani ma'amin b'emunah shleimah.*" [00:44:00] I believe in full faith that the Torah of

Moses is the one and only given by God, and none other came, nor shall come to take its place.

And so, I began to understand the negative attitude of Jewish scholars towards Yehoshua. If led by what they read in the Gospels, and especially in Paul's letters, these scholars grasped their goal to convince the Jewish people that they should forget now their privileged relationship, not only with God but with the Torah given by God. To make way for a new Moses, new laws. In other words, they were asked to completely forget their past. Listen to what Paul says in addressing the Jews of Jerusalem. [00:45:00] Quote. "I am a Jew born in Tarsus, but it is here that I studied with Gamliel and learned the very details of our Torah. And like all of you, I was thoroughly devoted to God. I persecuted these people, the first Christians, to death. I had them put in prison, men and women. I even went to Damascus to find out about them there and bring them back to Jerusalem to punish them. But on the way, at high noon, a great light shone on me, and it made me fall. And I heard a voice speaking to me, saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you pursuing me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he answered, 'I am Yehoshua of Nazareth, he whom you are pursuing.' Around me, people saw the light but did not hear the voice which spoke to me. I said, 'What must I do, Lord?' And he responded



to me, 'Go to Damascus and there, [00:46:00] you will be told what will be commanded of you."

Thus, Paul of Tarsus, the only one of the apostles to have never seen the Jew Yehoshua, other than in a vision, became the principal architect of Christianity. It is he who built on the fundamental concept of a religion, a universal religion, opposed to Judaism. Or substituting itself to Judaism. He is the one who invented the cult of personality, "*tzaddik b'emunato yichyeh* ", he said, the just man lives and his faith is questioned by him. It is by faith in Jesus, he says, that the just man lives. Why, he asks, do the Jews dress in the tallit and cover their eyes while reading the Torah? It is so they do not see the truth located there. Is Paul ignorant? Did he already forget that by wrapping himself in the tallit, a Jew is better able to concentrate, [00:47:00] simply to concentrate, to cling to God, to be alone with God?

Why does he have this desire to defame what he cherished before? He will be among the first, but not the last, to invent stories to better accuse and charge Jews and their faith in God to call for Divine punishment to fall on them at the hands of humans, preferably Christians. Naturally, the crime of deicide counts first on the list of accusations. The nocturnal trial in the

home of the high priest, the judgment, the crucifixion. Anyone reading and believing it cannot help but experience a predicament for a Jew: an anger for a Christian. One could certainly make a defense in saying this happened two thousand years ago. We are not responsible for what was committed by our distant ancestors during that time. Yet it remains nonetheless disturbing [00:48:00] to draw from a religious tradition that would have permitted, if not have encouraged, such a tragedy on a human level. Such an injustice on the scale of history.

In the tractate of Sanhedrin, we read as follows. "*Tanu Rabanan*, this is what our masters taught us. Jesus was executed on the eve of Passover. Forty days before the execution, a herald went forth and proclaimed, 'He is going to be stoned, for he practiced sorcery, incited to idolatry, and led Israel astray. Anyone who knows anything in his defense, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.'" And since no one came, he was hanged, not stoned, on the eve of Passover.

Did I believe it when I was a child and studying this tractate? I really didn't think about it. But then wasn't I, as a child, not touched by his absolute solitude? At home, we didn't speak about it. That some [00:49:00] accused us of this or the other thing, that others tried to punish us for it, that such and such

an anti-Semite declares that we deserve exile, torment, torture, and death for having killed the Messiah, son of God, mattered little to me. We led our life without being touched directly by this event in our desire to remain anchored in our Jewish faith, waiting for the Messiah. A Jewish he or she who is waiting. Similarly at the house of study, Ezekiel speaks of the son of man and not of the son of God. In general, with the things around, with the problems, with the dangers, with the war looming, we often had other urgent matters to handle than to think of what happened two thousand years ago. I remember only the story in my town even saying that the young hooligan caught a Jewish boy in the street and beat him up. "Why do you beat me up?" [00:50:00] "Because you killed Christ." And he said, "But come, it happened two thousand years ago." And the hooligan says, "Yeah, but I just heard it." (laughter)

Later, prompted by a curiosity which no longer has anything to do with my own past, I was driven to learn more, as I do now. I knew that certain Christian circles harbored great hatred towards the Jewish people because of the crucifixion. I wanted to know why was he crucified. Was he crucified? Matthew refers to the fate of Jesus. Jerusalem kills its prophets and stones the envoys who are sent to them. In their dialogue, Justin says to Tryphon about the Jews, "If your masters and your saviors had

known about this, they would have censored him, as they censored facts on the death of the prophet Isaiah by King Manasseh." Was the meager presence in the Talmud of any illusion to the trial of Jesus quite [00:51:00] simply censure caused by a feeling of uneasiness, if not of guilt? I have long searched the various sources. A twentieth-century American historian, Milton Aaron, claims outright that such a trial never took place. Pure Christian fantasy to justify its anti-Semitism, he says. It is certain that Yehoshua of Nazareth came to Jerusalem, but his goal was not to stir up trouble with the Romans and against the Jewish establishment, but simply to go a yeshiva and study, to meet the well-known Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and take his courses.

His voice remains solitary. Other contemporary Jewish thinkers, again, for example, Haim Cohn or Klausner, do believe that there was a trial. But that it played out and also concluded differently than existing accounts portray. Most Jewish and some non-Jewish thinkers, agreeing [00:52:00] with Tacitus' version of it -- is that the Romans, not the Jews, killed Jesus. And they maintain that Jewish participation in the murder was biased for publication and nothing more. Former Supreme Court judge of Israel, Haim Cohn, bases his judgment on problems with the law. It is inconceivable that the Sanhedrin, the

Synhedrion, the court, the high court, consisting of 71 members, would have handed down a death sentence as given by the accounts written in the Gospels. If it in fact did, says Cohn, the Sanhedrin would have violated all biblical and rabbinical laws in a single act. In simple terms, despite what the Gospels say on the proceedings, which finished with a kind of lynching committed by Jews belonging to all social classes, the Jews are guilty [00:53:00] of neither the trial nor the condemnation nor the public execution with an atmosphere of fury and hate.

The arguments of the former judge, later historian, are many and varied. First, the Gospels are mistaken in placing the trial at the house of the high priest the night before Passover. It could only take place in what we call the *Lishkat HaGazit*, part of the Temple itself. On top of it, it was not allowed to take place at night. And even more so, for a case of capital punishment, the Sanhedrin would deliberate neither the eve nor the day of a religious holiday. That's the law. And lastly, even if Jesus confessed, a confession holds no judicial weight in rabbinic law. We in America are so proud of the Fifth Amendment. [00:54:00] A Supreme Court Chief Justice came to study with Lieberman a whole day and night on that, and he heard that we had it already two thousand years ago. He was beside himself. (laughter) That is exactly what it is; we do not

believe in self-incrimination. So how could it be possible? But Haim Cohn accepts the idea that an important meeting did indeed happen in the house of high priests. Only it had another goal: not to judge Yehoshua, but to help him save his life, when he would go before the Romans and their magistrate, Pontius Pilatus, the following day.

Now, Pilatus was not known for his humanism. Romans were never humanists. Quite to the contrary. Pilatus was a cruel warrior, bloodthirsty and eager to see tears flow. As a matter of fact, he was called back to the Rome because of his brutality in Judea. The Sanhedrin [00:55:00] and the high priest cared then about saving Jesus from Pilatus' wrath, thus, the nocturnal meeting. An original idea. Plausible, let's say possible. On the other hand, I accept the arguments of those who are opposed to the notion, whether Mel Gibson likes it or not, (laughter) that the Yehoshua of Nazareth was killed by a plotting group of Jewish religious leaders determined to condemn him for blasphemy. To blaspheme implies the negation of God, and ultimately of his justice.

It's impossible to accuse Yehoshua of that sin. He never claimed to be God, but only his spokesman and emissary. And even if his words alone could be interpreted as if they were

spoken by the Messiah, they did not represent a case justifying capital punishment. Did he believe in himself? Did he think that he was [00:56:00] truly or the true savior? Tough question. The thought must have crossed his mind. But just as soon to dismiss it. He was too Jewish, and too imbued with Jewish laws and customs, to ignore the simple and concrete evidence. If one is to believe in the tradition, certain conditions must be in place for the arrival of the Messiah to occur. Examples: the conquest of Judah and the national sovereignty resulting from it. The restitution of the glory of the Torah. Its power, and the reign of peace all over the world. These are conditions that must precede the coming of the Messiah. For the appearance of the Messiah must coincide with messianic times or reflected in certain symptoms. David Kimhi, or the RaDaK, indicates that number, [00:57:00] five, [inaudible] prefers 10, and Reb Abarbanel, 22. But there must be messianic times.

Jews wanted this factor to play an important role in the medieval disputations between Jewish and Christian scholars. Christians, then, preferred to underplay it. It was their weak point. In other words, the Yehoshua that the Jews knew and in some ways still know well, or not as well, is not the same one whom the Christians seem to adore and serve since his death.

Inspired by the legends attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and of course, Paul. So here is my problem. Between the Jewish Essene dreamer in search of peace and the absolute truth, and those who wanted him to be how they passionately wished he was, there is a transparent, if not understandable, wall. But by all appearances, impossible [00:58:00] to break through. Are they wrong? Far be it for me to judge their intentions and their love. I am not a judge, but a witness. I repeated what history of my people tells me. And it tells the story of horrors and atrocities committed in earlier times in his name. So they cried out for his glory.

I want to make it clear: this is not to say that the Christians today are in any way guilty or even responsible for what was done in the name of their leader, prophet. I believe, of course, that we are all children of God. We are all children of the same grandfather of heaven. And my religion is as good as someone else's, and I must respect all the believers, especially those who believe [00:59:00] in the monotheistic God. Of course. But we speak about the past, about in which the way it was created. So, the question of course is, how can we understand this separation? Focus on the history of the Crusades. The God of the Crusades was my God and their God, but Jesus was used by the Crusaders to kill my people, murder them.



Out of concern for sincerity, it's incumbent upon me to jump two thousand years, and therefore, to declare that today, thank God, we must say that never have relations between Jews and Christians been as good. Never in our history. And they should be so. Today, rabbis and priests meet all the time, and they study together, and they work together. We owe it to John [01:00:00] XXIII and John Paul II who followed in his footsteps. The only mistake was that when we did that, and we began the ecumenistic adventure which is a great adventure before God -- the third partner, Islam, we should have invited, rabbis and priests should have always invited them to their meetings, a Muslim representative, a qadi or a sheikh, just to be together. Is it too late? I hope not.

I must also mention the fact that in spite of the Church's antagonism with regard to the Jews, the important voices were raised to give Jesus his due. In the third century, the great Maimonides already mentions, said good things about him, his impact on the relinquishment of paganism in the world. Spinoza favored Christianity for his spirituality. In the eighteenth century, Rabbi Yaakov Emden said good things about Jesus.

[01:01:00] In the twentieth century, Klausner drew a portrait of Jesus entirely Jewish in his behavior as well as in his ideas.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Protestant theologian, said that Christianity is above the tragic -- fears and death are overcome by triumph. In Judaism, death is never a triumph. Let us remember, even in his death, Yehoshua the Jew expressed himself as a Jew. He wept. His final words, *Eli Eli Lama Sabachthani*", oh Lord, why have you forsaken me? No, really. I must say, it's beautiful. A Jew who died with a question. (laughter)

To conclude this rather melancholy meditation, I will read to you a page taken from a novel written in 1967 after the Six-Day War in Jerusalem. "Having sunken deeply into the memory of this city of God, the characters, prophets, visionaries, beggars, [01:02:00] madmen, and also -- Yeshua. Listen. It is now," says the novelist, "Shlomo's turn to speak. 'May I tell you about my meeting with Yeshua? Do you remember him, the innocent preacher who had only one word on his lips, love? Poor man.' I saw him the day he was crucified, not far from here. 'You are mad,' mumbled the Israeli soldier. 'I remember it clearly,' says Shlomo. 'I went over to him and said, it's not you I shall be waiting for.' And Jesus seemed serene, at peace with himself and the whole creation. I tried to make him understand that this was not the first time a Jew was dying for his faith. There were other martyrs before him. But they had gone to their deaths crying, screaming with pain. For them, for us, no death

is worthy of being invoked or sanctified. All life is sacred, irreplaceable. It's inhuman for any person to renounce it joyfully. [01:03:00] It's blasphemous to abandon it without remorse.

'Are you angry with me?' he asked. 'No,' I answered. 'Not angry. Just sad.' 'Because of me?' 'Yes, because of you,' said Shlomo. 'You think you are suffering for my sake and for my brothers, yet we are the ones who will be made to suffer for you, because of you.' And since he refused to believe this, I began to describe what actions his followers would undertake in his name to spread his word. I painted a picture of the future, which made him see the innumerable victims persecuted and crushed under the sign of his law. And thereupon, he, Yehoshua, burst into tears of despair. 'No, no, this is not how it will be. You are wrong. You must be. This is not how I foresee the reign of my spirit. I want my heritage to be a gift of compassion and hope, not a punishment in blood.' His sobs broke my heart. And [01:04:00] I sought to comfort him. I begged him to retrace his steps, to return to his people. 'Too late,' he answered. 'Once the stone is thrown, it can no longer be stopped. Once a spark is lit, it must burn itself out.' I was overcome by pity. And then, leapt up, weeping not only for us but for him as well."

Actually, the Jew Yehoshua could have stayed and perhaps should have stayed inside the Jewish community and faith. After all, with some rare exceptions, Judaism invites diversity and pluralism in its interpretation of the law given by Moses at Sinai. Aren't the sages Shammai and Hillel the best yet not the only examples of this liberal attitude? The entire Talmud is a dialogue [01:05:00] of controversy, of conflict of ideas, of interpretations. The exceptions, yes they were. The Sadducees in Talmudic times, and many centuries later, the Karaites. Both were in fact excluded from the tradition. Why? Because their theory, their approach, did not contradict one of its elements or one of its aspects, but went much further. They opposed and negated one of its basic components in its totality: the *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, the glorious oral tradition of the Talmud.

As for Christianity, personally, Yehoshua did not negate the Talmud, surely nor the Torah. He quoted the Talmud. He was part of its life. But its followers did. They -- let's say it -- they burned the Talmud. [01:06:00] Christians respect and cherish the Five Books of Moses, but many of its laws or their interpretation don't correspond to the way they were transmitted from generations to generations, from school to school, from teacher to pupil, from one family to another. The Talmud, auto-

da-fé. Louis IX, Saint Louis burned the Talmud in public places in Paris.

In conclusion, did Yehoshua of Nazareth invent the concept of a new covenant? Was he responsible for Christianity's beliefs, some of it, not most of the law of the Torah, including circumcision and culinary precepts need not be observed, that the intent is more important than the action? Nothing in Jewish sources seems to indicate this. Did he accomplish miracles? The Gospels say yes. [01:07:00] Was he suspected, or even accused, of curing the ill by witchcraft? Some texts hint at that, Talmudic texts. Not sure. Did he declare himself the Messiah or the king of the Jews? This answer is nebulous at best. In other words, with all he may have said or done to displease Jewish authority at the time, Yehoshua, son of Joseph and Miriam of Nazareth, lived his entire life as a Jew, and he died as a Jew. What will be done in his name, with his legacy, is a different story. Thank you. (audience applause)

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