



‘The Messiah Confrontation’

THE FALSE accusation that the Jews killed Jesus, which was responsible for much anti-Judaism and antisemitism on the part of Christians over many centuries, is refuted comprehensively and systemically by Professor Emeritus (of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem) Israel Knohl in his latest book entitled *The Messiah Confrontation: Pharisees versus Sadducees and the Death of Jesus*.

This brilliant book traces the history of the messianic concept in Judaism and early Christianity in a detailed and scientific manner, based on decades of biblical scholarship by one of Israel’s pre-eminent Bible scholars in recent decades. As Knohl says in the introduction:

This book traces the appearance of the messianic idea from the prophet Isaiah to the Bar Kochbah revolt. It demonstrates the dramatic, many-sided and fascinating controversy about the messianic idea within the Bible itself.

In addition, this book is essential reading for scholars and laypeople who are interested in the subject of Jewish-Christian relations in the contemporary period. Knohl’s work is scholarly and practical. One of the goals of this book is to serve as a healing force within Jewish-Christian relations.

In fact, Knohl’s thorough analysis has far-reaching consequences for the relationship between Jews and Christians today. In his introduction, he states this clearly:

It demonstrates that the idea that the “Jewish people” killed Jesus is fundamentally mistaken. First, the Romans killed Jesus (Jews were not allowed to perform executions when they lived under Roman rule). Second, although the great majority of the Jewish people did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, most Jews had a conception of a Messiah similar to that of Jesus.

On the one hand, this conclusion by the famous Israeli biblical scholar and historian is not new. Since the Second Vatican

Council of the early 1960s, the Catholic Church has essentially exonerated the Jewish people for the death of Jesus via its proclamation in the historic document of October 1965 known as *Nostra Aetate* (“In Our Time”). But not all Christians are Catholic and not even all Catholics know about this document.

On the other hand, Knohl, who has been doing research on the messianic idea in biblical scholarship for decades – and the editors at the Jewish Publication Society and the University of Nebraska Press – felt that this book was important enough to have it translated into English since it casts a new light on the historical events surrounding Jesus’s crucifixion. Indeed, Knohl claims that the book offers the first-ever detailed historical basis for the famous Vatican Declaration of 1965.

The Messiah Confrontation unfolds like a fascinating mystery. Knohl carefully outlines the various ideas about the messiah that developed from the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. He is intensively familiar with both texts. However, the detailed and fascinating historical survey in this book is all dedicated to reaching the conclusion of how the Jews at the time of Jesus – including the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Jews of Qumran – understood the idea of the Messiah in their time, with special emphasis on how this affected the trial of Jesus as outlined in the various gospels of the New Testament.

For Knohl, the trial of Jesus is the apex of the book. He is particularly concerned with the question of the judges’ identities in the trial of Jesus:

The book-long journey we have undertaken to tease out the various competing approaches to the Messiah in the time of the Hebrew Bible compels us to reconsider who Jesus’s judges were and on what charge he was sentenced – and, ultimately to reconceive why Jesus was crucified.

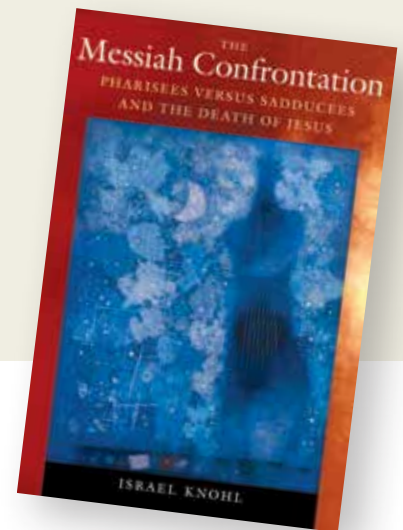


COURTESY ISRAEL KNOHL

Israel Knohl

As far as Knohl is concerned, the trial of Jesus was the culmination of a 750-year conflict between two different biblical currents regarding the Messiah. In the time of Jesus – in Second Temple times – it became entangled in the struggle between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees, who came from the priestly tradition in the Bible, adopted the position found in the sections of the Torah known to be the priestly sections, which sought to glorify God and create a clear division between the human and the divine. From the Sadducee point of view, Jesus’s claim that he was the son of God was considered blasphemy. Punishment for this would have been death.

In contrast, the Pharisees had very different ideas. They believed that a king-Messiah of the house of David would arrive to crush “unrighteous rulers” and cleanse Jerusalem from nations that tried to destroy it. Like the Pharisees, the rabbinic sages also believed in the appearance of a person of quasi-divine nature. For example, Rabbi Akiva, who was one of the greatest sages of



**The Messiah Confrontation:
Pharisees Versus Sadducees
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Israel Knohl, translated by David Maisel
Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication
Society and Lincoln, Nebraska,
the University of Nebraska Press, 2023
220 pages, \$20.40

the period, supported the messianic leader Bar Kochbah in his struggle against the Romans (132-136 CE).

These sages would certainly not have sentenced Jesus to death, since his view of the Messiah was not very different from theirs. However, at the time of the trial of Jesus, the Pharisees were not in control. Rather, "Owing to tragic circumstances, Jesus lived in a time when the Sadducees were in charge of the Temple, and he was judged by them." Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that even though the Sadducees judged him, they did not kill Jesus. Near the end of the book, by way of conclusion, Knohl writes:

It is a great distortion of history to place the blame for Jesus's crucifixion on the Jewish people as a whole. Ultimately the Roman governor Pontius Pilate delivered the death sentence, and Roman soldiers carried out the crucifixion. Moreover, according to all the evidence, the Sadducees who initially condemned Jesus to death were in the minority of the Jewish people. Most people in Jesus's period supported the Pharisees, who, like Jesus and his disciples, believed in the appearance of a Messiah of a divine nature. Furthermore, historical Judaism, which developed after the Second Temple's destruction under the Rabbis' leadership, also accepted the hope of a Messiah of a superhuman kind.

What I take away clearly and comprehensively from this book is not only that the Jews did not kill Jesus, but also the idea that the trial of Jesus was essentially a tragedy that took place within two very distinct views about the Messiah, that of the Sadducees vs. that of the Pharisees. It was fascinating to learn from Professor Knohl that the Pharisees and most of the Jews were essentially on the same side of the argument. Moreover, Knohl postulates that the trial of Jesus arose almost by accident:

Had the Romans granted the Pharisees

rather than the Sadducees the authority to judge people who disturbed the order and rules in the Temple area, and had Jesus's judges been Pharisees rather than Sadducees, Jesus would not have been condemned to death, convicted and crucified.

This is a powerful statement that is relevant not only in the field of biblical scholarship but also in Jewish-Christian Relations. In the contemporary dialogue between Jews and Christians which goes on at many places and many levels, the clarion call for healing issued by Knohl at the end of this book needs to be heard widely. In essence, he is calling for a deep dialogue based on a deep dive into the relevant biblical texts.

All too often, contemporary dialogue between Christians and Jews has been superficial and not well-informed by scholarship. Sometimes, there are simply too many clichés and slogans, what some people call "kumbaya dialogue."

In contrast, a field of related study has been developed in the United States and beyond, with seminaries and universities establishing special institutes and centers to do research and to engage in public education for a wide variety of audiences.

This superbly written and well-translated scholarly book on a crucial issue that has plagued Jewish-Christian relations over the centuries will not only serve the inter-related fields of biblical scholarship and Jewish-Christian relations but will also be useful for laypersons of all religions who want to learn about the history of the messianic idea in the Bible and its relevance in contemporary times.

Knohl's final sentence in this brilliant book has stayed with me.

It is my hope that this work will give rise to new discourse, understanding and healing between Jews and Christians.

I share his hope and firmly believe that this enriching and inspiring book can be extremely useful in achieving his goal. ■