

Family ties: "Christianity had to start within Judaism"

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

I am probably not the only preacher who cringes every Good Friday as I read John's passion narrative, with its relentless negative references to "the Jews." As I read those passages I think of my friends Joe and Tony, Jews who are married to Presbyterians and are sitting in the pews. I want to interrupt the reading and say, "This doesn't really refer to all Jews. And we know it was the Romans who crucified Jesus, not his own people."

Despite Christians' increasing awareness of the anti-Judaic elements of the New Testament, Amy-Jill Levine is right, I think, to say that Christian preachers tend to use Judaism as a negative foil (see "[Misusing Jesus](#)"). She identifies one of the standard homiletical devices many of us preachers use: we characterize the Jesus of the New Testament not as the Jew he clearly was, but as an anti-Jew. It's satisfying to rip into the Pharisees as an example of a rigid, moralistic religion and to present Jesus primarily as a critic of his own religion—to present him, in fact, as a liberal mainline Protestant.

Levine's commentary on the story of the hemorrhaging woman who touches Jesus' cloak demolishes many of the assumptions we make when we cite that text. According to Levine, the woman is not the marginal and unclean figure in Jewish life that Christian preachers make her out to be as they stress the theme of Jesus' inclusivity.

Levine's article reminded me of a collection of essays that I find myself returning to regularly: *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity*, by Irving Greenberg. Greenberg is an Orthodox rabbi who has served as chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. His friendship with Christian scholars—Roy and Alice Eckhart and Paul van Buren among them—inspired Greenberg to think in new ways about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Of Christians he says: "The group that would bring the message of . . . redemption to the rest of the nations had to grow out of the family and covenanted

community of Israel.” But, Greenberg says, the Christian community “was not intended to be a replacement. The new avant-garde was to secede and connect to new masses of people. This new religion should not be too Jewish. Christianity had to start within Judaism, but it had to grow into its own autonomous existence.” The book includes reflections by Christian scholars and a study guide and is available from the Jewish Publication Society. It is an invaluable resource for thinking in new ways about Jewish-Christian relationships..