

Bellow and Jesus: Moved and horrified

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

Stephen Mitchell sent his 1993 book *The Gospel According to Jesus* to Nobel Prize-winning novelist Saul Bellow, and to his surprise received a passionate response. Mitchell passed the correspondence on to me a dozen years ago, and I will forward it to the Bellow archives. But first some excerpts from Bellow's reply:

"I have great sympathy with what you have done. Let me explain: I was at the age of eight years a patient at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Montreal—dangerously ill. . . . My people were orthodox Russian Jews. I had a religious upbringing. In those times four-year-old kids were already reading Hebrew, memorizing Genesis and Exodus. Such was my background—the child of a despised people in the Montreal slums.

"I had never been separated from the family. It was a hellish winter (1923-1924), with heavy snows. . . . There were three operations. . . . I understood that I might die. . . .

"Then a lady came from some missionary society and gave me a New Testament to read. Jesus overwhelmed me. I was moved out of myself by Jesus, by 'suffer little children to come unto me,' by the lilies of the field. Jesus moved me beyond all bounds by his deeds and his words. His death was a horror to me. And I had to face the charges made in the Gospels against the Jews, my people. . . . In the ward, too, Jews were hated. My thought was . . . How could it be my fault? I am in the hospital.

"But I was beyond myself, moved far out by Jesus (Mark and Matthew). I kept this to myself. No discussions with my father, my mother. It was not *their* Bible. For them there was no *New Testament*. Obviously Jesus was not discussible with them. . . .

"I had never been in a position in which it was necessary to think for myself, without religious authorization, about God. Here at the Royal Victoria I was able, I was *enabled*—I was free to think for myself.

“You will understand now why I read you with sympathy. I understand the impulse that led you to make your own translation of the Gospels. But sympathy is not agreement. . . . I am not so freely ecumenical as you. You and I are Jews whose experiences are roughly similar; we have judged for ourselves. Jesus, yes, but what about two millennia of Jewish history? How do you propose to come to terms with the Jew as the prime enemy of Christianity?”

Bellow goes on to cite Hyam Maccoby’s *Revolution in Judea* and notes that the book “argues that Jesus was anointed, a messiah, a Pharisee who tried to free the Jews from Roman tyranny. The Greek authors of the Gospels named the Jews *the enemy race*. . . . Love of Jesus could not then be separated from hatred of the Jews. A proposition that must seriously be considered by the likes of you and me.”

Mitchell wrote a tender response, disagreeing with the argument that “love of Jesus could not be separated from hatred of the Jews.” He added: “I felt I *was* dealing with your proposition by omitting all the hate-filled passages from the Gospels and by clearly stating that these passages were added by a church that had failed to understand Jesus’ teaching. . . . I dearly hope, because of this version of the gospel, a Jewish child like the one you were (and I was) won’t have to face any trauma when he finds his heart open to Jesus: will be able to meet him as an elder brother, face to face.”

Bellow responded with a postcard, asking: Can one take “this passionate love in the Gospels and let the hate ‘drop away’? It’s too late for that, since the Jews have paid for this hate (daily) for 2 millennia. All best, S. Bellow.”

Following is the complete exchange between Saul Bellow and Stephen Mitchell:

June 22, 1991

Dear Mr. Mitchell,

I have great sympathy with what you have done. Let me explain: I was at the age of eight years a patient at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Montreal—dangerously ill in the childrens’ ward.

My people were Orthodox Russian Jews. I had a religious upbringing. In those times four-year-old kids were already reading Hebrew, memorizing Genesis and Exodus.

Such was my background—the child of a despised people in the Montreal slums.

I had never been separated from the family. It was a hellish winter (1923-1924), with heavy snows, fantastic icicles at the windows, the streetcars frosted over. My parents took turns coming to see me—I was allowed one short visit a week. I waited for them. There were three operations. My belly was haggled open—it was draining, I stank. I understood that I might die. I was pretty steady about this, I think. I didn't cry when my mother came and went. I was rather matter of fact about dying. Other children were covered up and wheeled away. In the morning, an empty bed—remade, blank. It was like that.

Then a lady came from some missionary society and gave me a New Testament to read.

Jesus overwhelmed me. I had heard about him, of course—marginal information, unfriendly (why should it have been friendly?). But I was moved when I read the Gospels. It wasn't a sentimental reaction. I wasn't one for crying. I had to get through this crisis, I had made up my mind about that. But I was moved out of myself by Jesus, by "suffer little children to come unto me," by the lilies of the field. Jesus moved me beyond all bounds by his deeds and his words. His death was a horror to me. And I had to face the charges made in the Gospels against the Jews, my people, Pharisees and Sadducees. In the ward, too, Jews were hated. My thought was (I tell it as it came to me then): How could it be my fault? I am in the hospital.

But I was beyond myself, moved far out by Jesus (Mark and Matthew), I kept this to myself. No discussions with my father, my mother. It was not *their* Bible. For them there was no *New Testament*. Obviously Jesus was not discussible with them. They had to live, as all Jews must, under a curse, and they were not prepared to interpret this to an eight-year-old child. In their struggle for existence, interpretation ought not to be required of them, too. I would have been imposing on them, and it would all too plainly have been disloyal. I also sensed that.

I had never been in a position in which it was necessary to think for myself, without religious authorization, about God. Here at the Royal Victoria I was able, I was *enabled*—I was free to think for myself.

You will understand now why I read you with sympathy. I understand the impulse that led you to make your own translation of the Gospels. But sympathy is not agreement. I am out of sympathy with your generational standpoint. I can't agree

that John Lennon stands in the line of the prophets, on a level with Isaiah and the rest. This seems to me a distortion due to fashion, too easy a mingling of the religions and the rock stars. Yes, I admire gurus (each instant on its separate merits), but I am not so freely ecumenical as you. You and I are Jews whose experiences are roughly similar; we have judged for ourselves. Jesus, yes, but what about two millennia of Jewish history? How do you propose to come to terms with the Jew as the prime enemy of Christianity? You may be interested in a book that has influenced my understanding of these things: Hyam Maccoby's *Revolution in Judea*. It argues that Jesus was anointed, a messiah, a Pharisee who tried to free the Jews from Roman tyranny. The Greek authors of the Gospels named the Jews *the* enemy race, universally to be hated by the rest of mankind. Love of Jesus could not then be separated from hatred of the Jews. A proposition that must seriously be considered by the likes of you and me.

Sincerely,

Saul Bellow

June 27, 1991

Dear Mr. Bellow,

I don't know what I expected from you—certainly not a letter like that! I was moved by your account, more than I can say, and grateful that you could write to me from the heart. Thank you so much.

I was also astonished by how similar your response as an eight-year-old was to my own response at nine. (I'm enclosing an account of that experience, from an early draft of the book.)

I want to get to the essential point at issue between us. But first I'd like to clear aside the lesser issues.

1) John Lennon. I didn't mean to put him on a level with Isaiah, but was referring to him as a modern and quotable example of messianic consciousness. The point of the passage is that the whole spectrum of human longing for the millennium—from the easy psychedelic culture of the '60s up to the pure and earned poignancy of Isaiah—is a result of facing the wrong direction.

2) The Gospels' anti-Semitism. If I understand you correctly, you are saying that any Jew who loves Jesus is morally responsible for coming to terms with the anti-Semitism in the Gospels. I fully agree with you, although we may not mean the same thing by *coming to terms*. What I mean is: pointing it out clearly and forcefully and stating how utterly contradictory it is to the authentic teachings of Jesus. (The second enclosure is a packet of relevant passages from the book.) But I don't believe that the anti-Semitism of the Gospels in any way invalidates the authentic teachings. That would be to deprive Jesus of what Tolstoy called "the right every man may claim, of being answerable only for his own words."

3) As for my ecumenical sense: Is Arthur Sammler's ecumenism really any less wide than mine? If Meister Eckhart was a guest of honor at this table in heaven, certainly Lao-tzu would have been welcome too.

Now to the essential point. You said, "Sympathy is not agreement." True enough. But I don't see how we are in any kind of *disagreement*. You said that after the Gospel writers named Jews as the enemy race, love of Jesus could not be separated from hatred of the Jews. When you were eight years old, though, you did love the authentic Jesus, and your love had to run the gauntlet of those other Gospel messages. In other words, there was a separation for you, as there was and is for me. Am I missing something? Doesn't your story confirm the whole venture of my book?

Let me try to rephrase my confusion. You told me a deeply moving story, a paradigm story, about a Jewish child responding to Jesus' radiance in the most genuine way, and also having to confront the poisonous aspects of the Gospel. And then, at the end of your letter, you seemed to repudiate that child's vision by pointing to two thousand years of Jewish history, as if there were an intrinsic connection between the poison and the radiance, as if the orthodox worldview of your parents were correct on that point, after all. Am I misreading you? What is the step you took here?

In *The Gospel According to Jesus*, I felt I was dealing with your proposition by omitting all the hate-filled passages from the Gospels and by clearly stating that these passages were added by a church that had failed to understand Jesus' teaching. There could be a book, perhaps even a good book, about the corruption of Jesus' message, written with the passionate indignation of Nietzsche or of Zola's "J'accuse." But that wasn't the book I needed to write; it wouldn't be written in the spirit of Jesus as I understand him, and couldn't be of use in transforming

Christianity. Someday, I dearly hope, because of this version of the gospel, a Jewish child like the one you were (and I was) won't have to face any trauma when he finds his heart open to Jesus: will be able to meet him as an elder brother, face to face.

I very much look forward to hearing from you again.

With affection and gratitude,

Stephen Mitchell