

John E. Phelan, Jr.
Separated Siblings:
An Evangelical Understanding
of Jews and Judaism

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The subtitle of John Phelan’s thorough and well-researched book, *Separated Siblings: An Evangelical Understanding of Jews and Judaism*, could rightly continue with the phrase, “as they understand themselves.” For close to two decades, in what he describes as an enriching and challenging experience, Phelan has studied Judaism and explored his own faith with Jewish guidance. A retired president and senior professor of theological studies at North Park Seminary in Chicago, Phelan offers Christians an insider view of Judaism and Jews through his Christian lens. Many Christians learn about Jews and Judaism only in church or Sunday school and are unlikely to seek out Jewish sources. He hopes they will be willing to read a book written by a Christian about Jews and Judaism.

Co-chair of the National Evangelical-Jewish Conference, which annually brings together rabbis, pastors, scholars, and leaders, Phelan is painfully aware of how Christianity has caricatured Jews and Judaism throughout history. He has written this book as a corrective for Christians, though Jewish readers as well will appreciate his survey of key moments in the development of Judaism.

The best interreligious dialogue, Phelan writes, enables believers to raise difficult questions with each other without setting aside their own beliefs and practices. He believes that, by studying together, reading common texts respectfully, and engaging their respective traditions, Jews and Christians deepen not only their understandings of the faiths of others, but also their own faith. And, he suggests, another compelling reason for Christians to develop a greater understanding of the history, traditions, and texts of Jews is to not “fall prey to anti-Jewish or even anti-Semitic sentiments. The Jews are not simply an ancient people walking around...Palestine at the time of Jesus. They are a living, vital, contemporary people, but still vulnerable and still under threat” (xvii).

The first 15 chapters cover Jewish history, ancient and modern; peoplehood; religious understandings; the development of the rabbinic tradition; Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel; and the Jewishness of Jesus and Paul. He includes a wide range of Jewish scholarship beginning with articles from the early 1900s to the present. Phelan also introduces some important Christian scholars who wrote about the connections between Judaism and Christianity and some Christians' reflections on Judaism. He begins each chapter with quotations from various sources, Christian and Jewish, which are useful for further study and discussion.

Not surprisingly, since he is writing for Christians, Phelan focuses on Jewish experience, past and present, and on belief, God, and the commandments. He does not ignore secularizing influences like the Enlightenment, but he centers Judaism in faith and belief without disregarding how peoplehood is also crucial to Jewish self-understanding. Historically, to be a Jew, Phelan writes, "meant to be a people that lived in accordance with God's commandments as revealed in Torah" (4). He recognizes there are significant differences: Jews and Christians think differently about atonement, salvation, reconciliation, and repentance: "Next to the question of the identity of Jesus, the most contentious question between Jews and Christians is, 'how are we to be righteous and act justly?'" (114). But Phelan also believes the "difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament are not as great as some Jews and Christians believe" (129).

Phelan does not shy away from the challenge in Christian-Jewish relations posed by the State of Israel. He ends chapter 5 on Israel by recognizing this: "The entire Torah is suffused with promise, longing, and hope for the land – as is Jewish history. But what do such claims mean both theologically and politically in this politically volatile and theologically divided world? This is an enduring and profoundly challenging question" (93). When he writes about the period from the rise of Zionism to the creation of the State of Israel in chapter 15, Phelan includes a brief introduction to Christian Zionism and closes with another *cri de couer*, acknowledging that Christians' responses to Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel "continue to be complicated. . . Christians are. . . in conflict with Jews, often, but not always, over the actions of Israel. Conversations that once were hopeful are increasingly hostile and hopeless. What now is to be done?" (283)

In his final chapter, Dialogue and Hope, Phelan confronts Christian anti-Judaism directly. He begins with the manifesto written by the perpetrator of the 2019 synagogue attack in Poway, California, which contains traditional Christian anti-Jewish claims. Not just white supremacists but also people of good will can "perpetuate anti-Jewish tropes in their preaching, teaching, interpretation of the Bible, and political advocacy" (288). Speaking directly to his Christian readers, Phelan calls out negative tropes about Jews in popular Bible translations and demolishes popular misconceptions about Pharisees and Old Testament legalism.

He does not deal directly with how Jews reject evangelizing but shows through example a model of potential engagement and dialogue that deeply respects Jewish continuity. "I still insist that it is as important to explore Jews and Judaism 'with Christian eyes' as it is for Christians to see their own sacred texts and traditions 'through Jewish eyes,'" he writes. "Studying with Jews and exploring Jewish texts

has enriched my own faith...studying [with those] who have loved their own tradition and respected mine [has]...helped me become a better Christian” (xvii).

Phelan’s book is reader-friendly (e.g., he has footnotes rather than endnotes) and would lend itself to use in dialogue settings for both Christians and Jews. Chapters end with review questions as well as short bibliographies for additional reading. The book includes a glossary, an index, and a twelve-page bibliography and would be useful to teachers, pastors, and rabbis, as well as to lay people. This is among the few books written by an evangelical Christian with a deep appreciation and knowledge of Judaism that explicitly rejects any interest in proselytism. Phelan’s book will help Jews and Christians to become better allies in this complicated world.