An appreciative letter from a reader of *Rabbi Jesus: An intimate biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) concludes with some searching questions. I thought it would be helpful for me to answer them here, so we in the Institute can all benefit from them.

With the author’s permission, I reproduce the letter, and then gather his questions, summarizing them for my reply. There are too many to respond to in a single session, but I have put them together by topic, and hope over the next few weeks to work my way through them. If these exchanges spur any questions in your minds, or cause you to wish to respond, please be in touch.

_Valentine's Day_  
9th Day of Lent

_14 February 2008_

**Professor Bruce Chilton**  
*Bard College and Free Church of St. John the Evangelist*

_Cc Jacob Neusner_

_Dear Professor Chilton,_

I have been reading your amazing book, *Rabbi Jesus*. It is really an incredible work of historical detection and speculation. I would agree with Jacob Neusner's assessment (that appears on the back cover of the book) that you present a most compelling Judaic portrait of Jesus. I found it much more compelling than similar books by Amy Jill Levine and Julie Galambush. I thank you for sharing with us the results of your many years of burdened investigation into the true background of Jesus.
While I don’t agree with all your ideas, they are extremely challenging and have helped me to resolve a number of my own dilemmas, as a person who comes from a Jewish background, in trying to understand Jesus Christ. My overall impression is that Christians are so persuaded by the Gospel accounts of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection, that they don’t feel a strong need to make some of the more difficult Gospel claims about him fit into the Jewish cultural perspective that he held. Your book courageously ventures into these difficult areas and comes up with some amazing ideas and insights. I don’t know how many of them are your own original concepts as opposed to your well articulated synthesis of others' ideas, but your work is truly masterful.

I should like to list a number of questions and comments below. I pray you will have time to address at least some of them.

Sincerely in Christ, the Hope of Israel (Tikvat Yisrael)

Menachem and Elisheva Korn

First, I would like to call attention to the insight that “Christians are so persuaded by the Gospel accounts of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection, that they don’t feel a strong need to make some of the more difficult Gospel claims about him fit into the Jewish cultural perspective that he held.” That is an important theological observation, which I have explored in my most recent book, just published by Doubleday, Abraham’s Curse. My earlier book, Rabbi Jesus, concerns itself with history more than theology, targeting the narrative and development of Jesus’ life within Judaism that explains the emergence of Christianity.

1) The topic that produced the most questions was that of Jesus being a mamzer, that is: an Israelite whose father’s identity was not certainly known in the community in which he grew up. Because Jews during the first century C.E. reckoned descent
through the father (not the mother, as in later Judaism), a mamzer was not permitted to enter into the congregation of his people (Deuteronomy 23:2), and could not marry into most Israelite families (Mishnah, Qiddushin 4:1-2). A mamzer was by definition a marginal Israelite, and that helps to explain Jesus’ deep sympathy for victims of marginalization throughout his life.

In the New Testament, three explanations are given of Jesus’ birth. Some texts say he was the son of Joseph (for example, John 1:45), although Mary and Joseph were not living together at the time Jesus was conceived; others claim divine intervention to explain Jesus’ birth (for example, Luke 1:34-35); in one case, he is accused of being born as a result of “fornication” (John 8:41). The interesting feature of Jesus’ legal status, however, is that no matter which of these theories is correct, he would still be a mamzer. At a later time, the definition of mamzer in Judaism changed, from referring to someone whose father was unknown to someone whose father was known to be a Gentile. (During this same period, the second century C.E. and later, Israelite descent was reckoned through the mother, rather than the father.) This change gave rise to the legend, reflected in the Talmud, that Jesus’ biological father was a Roman soldier. That claim is deliberately dismissive, but it does show that Jesus was remembered to have been a mamzer, and that recollection was accurate.

Of all the arguments in Rabbi Jesus, showing that Jesus was a mamzer produced the most controversy back in 2000. Today, however, less than ten years after publication, my proposal has a wide following, even among Evangelical scholars.

2) The next question is related to Jesus’ status as a mamzer: “how do you know that Jesus’ brothers were older and therefore came from Joseph's previous marriage?”

Jesus had fourth named brothers, and at least two sisters (Mark 6:3). Joseph seems to have died when Jesus was young, because the Gospels stop referring to him by the time Jesus reaches early puberty. That just gives Mary and Joseph too little time to have that many children. The ancient historian Epiphanius
supported the theory of Joseph’s previous marriage, and he is probably right to the extent that some of Jesus’ siblings came from an earlier marriage. Joseph cared them for after his first wife’s death, and brought them into his subsequent marriage with Mary, who also bore him children. I detail this, not only in *Rabbi Jesus*, but on an electronic site:

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Chilton_James.htm

3) This leads to the question, “are you claiming that the correct interpretation of *Almah* is that Mary was a maiden when she conceived Jesus (her first born) even though she had other older step-children through her marriage to a widowed Joseph?”

That is exactly what I have argued in *Rabbi Jesus*, on the understanding that *almah* in the Hebrew language refers to a young woman, just into puberty, rather than a biological virgin. That is how the term is used in Isaiah 7:14, a classic text quoted in Matthew’s Gospel. (Matthew seems to have the best awareness among the Gospels of the circumstances that caused Jesus to be seen as a *mamzer*; see Matthew 1:18.) Of the three theories of Jesus’ birth in the New Testament, I believe the most plausible makes Joseph the father. Later in life, Jesus could only claim to be a descendant of David on the basis of Joseph’s paternity. In relation to these questions, I am asked also to cite a source for the toleration of sex prior to marriage in Israelite law: see Exodus 22:16-17.

No doubt, other questions will continue to arise from my identification of Jesus as a *mamzer*, but to date I have found that my proposal solves many more problems than it creates (unlike other theories of his birth). But members might well have other ideas. I have expanded the discussion to deal with a range of Rabbinic literature in several articles: “Jésus, le *mamzer* (Mt 1.18),” *New Testament Studies* 46 (2001) 222-227; “ Recovering Jesus’ Mamzerut,” *Ancient Israel, Judaism, and Christianity in Contemporary Perspective. Essays in Memory of Karl-Johan Illman*: Studies in Judaism (eds Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, Antii Laato, Risto Nurmela, Karl-Gustav

I hope to turn next to questions related to the chronology of Jesus’ life.