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Should Jews Accept Jesus As A Prophet?

Chapter One *- smaller type*

Reviewed

When Christians pay homage to the man called Jesus, who lived about 2,000 years ago, and whom most Christians call, "Lord", or "Son of God", we Jews have often wondered why it is that so many non-Jews have selected this one Jew and made so much of him. For our part, we have regarded Jeremiah and Moses as being equally as great as or greater than Jesus, yet we have not made a God of Jeremiah or Moses. Indeed, our scripture says that no person knows where Moses was interred, since it was not uncommon for people to worship at the spot where a truly great man was buried. Since Jews have always been taught that all humans are created in God's image, but one man cannot be God, since we have been taught that God cannot be pictured in human form or in any other form, we have shied away from any sympathetic understanding of Jesus. We have felt that to come close to him, even to examine him and what he stood for in his time, is to risk "Hillul Ha-Shem (profanation of God's name)". To examine Jesus closely has been a matter taboo for most Jews lest they become guilty of committing some kind of heresy.

There is a great trend in Christianity today whereby more and more Christians feel that to understand their faith more clearly, they must turn to the study of ancient Judaism. There is clearly in Christian circles today a great thirst for understanding Judaism in all of its dimensions, and especially, in those dimensions which go into the make-up of Jesus. Jews, for the most part, have been cautious about this new interest. They are afraid that it is an overture to an invitation to Jews to accept Christianity. May I state firmly that I have no fear of this Christian drive to learn about Judaism. It can only bring better understanding between the adherents or our respective faiths. But I don't think we Jews should merely sit passively by while Christians commendably try to learn something about our faith. I think we ought to try to learn something about our faith, too, and one of the best ways to learn about the Judaism of 2,000 years ago is to read the New Testament. In spite of the fact that the New Testament seems to Jews to be written with a partisan viewpoint; in spite of the fact that later contributors to its pages reflect an anti-Jewish bias, no Jew can read the teachings of Jesus without noting its substantially Jewish perspective and emphasis. If one knows anything about the Talmud, that compendium of Jewish laws and knowledge prepared ~~for~~ several centuries before and after the birth of Jesus, one can see that Jesus spoke, for the most part, as some of the rabbinical teachers of his day, trying to sift through the growing volume of ritual in order to arrive at the basic heart of Judaism, even as Rabbi Hillel had done fifty years before Jesus and as the Hebrew Prophet Jeremiah had done 600 years before Hillel.

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In short, except for a few pages added to the New Testament by comparatively late authors and editors, the New Testament appears as a Jewish book, written by Jews, concerning matters that happened to Jews, and presenting moral and ethical teachings from the Jewish tradition. To be sure, there are certain viewpoints in the New Testament which are inconsistent with our bible (Tanach) and with mainstream Judaism, but there are other books written by Jews which represent divergent viewpoints, and we do not hesitate to read these books. Some such books, for example, have been preserved in a collection known as the Apocrypha, and we would not even have this collection if the Catholic Church had not preserved it as part of their Holy Bible.¹ Even though we might feel that the perspective of most of these Apocryphal books is outside the ken of normative Judaism, we read these books, from time to time, just to learn what some Jews believed 2200 years ago, just to learn what their problems were and how they attempted to solve them. By reading the Apocryphal books and noting that the Rabbis of that day outlawed them as inconsistent with normative Judaism, just in this way do we learn all the more clearly what normative Judaism at that time was. If we read the New Testament, we discover why the Rabbis could not accept it as scripture. Its doctrine of the coming end of the world is borrowed from the apocryphal literature and from the apocalyptic literature of a divergent group of Jews.

Jews today cannot accept this doctrine of the cataclysmic end to history, because ours is a religion for this world and for human history as we know it. The New Testament has a doctrine of salvation by faith, through believing that Jesus was a dying and rising God. The concept of a God of agriculture who dies in winter and is re-born in springtime is one of the oldest theses of ancient Semitic religions. The founders of Judaism taught that God was the creator of nature, but He was not in nature. That is, he did not die, like the things in nature, so there was no need for Him to be resurrected. This doctrine is alien to normative Judaism which teaches that salvation comes in this world in normal human society, as people strive to make that society more just and peaceful. The New Testament has a doctrine that humans are forgiven for their sins through the sacrifice of the "first born son of God", that is Jesus. This is alien to prophetic Judaism which turned against the priestly notion of vicarious atonement and substitute sacrifice. On the contrary, Judaism developed, through the prophets, the idea that each person must save himself through his own deeds. Let us mark this point, however. More and more Christian scholars, as well as Jewish scholars, contend that many of these New Testament notions which are alien to normative Judaism were alien also to Jesus. More and more we learn that it was Paul, who never saw Jesus, and others, who introduced many non-Jewish ideas into the recreated meaning of the deceased Jesus. It has even been suggested by some Christian teachers that if Jesus were to return to earth today,

¹ *The Christian Bible consists of both Old and New Testament*

he would belong to the synagogue, as he did in his own time, and he would consider the Church as alien to his understanding and purposes.

Julius Wellhausen, the great Christian biblical scholar, wrote in 1905, "Jesus was not a Christian, he was a Jew". Dr. Wellhausen, whose works on the bible are known to every bible scholar, wrote further, "(Jesus)...did not preach a new faith but taught people to do the will of God, and in his opinion, as also in the opinion of the Jews, that will of God was to be found in the law of Moses and in the other books of (Jewish) scripture". (Einleitung In Die Drei Ersten Evangelein), parentheses this author's.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the celebrated Pastor of New York's Riverside Church for many years, has stated, "The Church has garbed the simple Jewish teacher beyond all recognition in heavy brocaded garments of sterile theology, until the real Jesus has been got rid of altogether". Perhaps, we have been intuitively wise in standing four square against the Pauline presentation of Jesus. But need we be so opposed to the real Jesus, as Fosdick says, "the gentle Jew", surely no more than a man, perhaps one of history's outstanding teachers?

More and more Christian scholars are searching the New Testament to discover the historic Jesus and to try to separate him from the Christological image that has been impressed upon him. Suppose, now that Christians discover that Jesus was not the Christ, nor the resurrected God, but merely a great teacher in the Jewish tradition. Will they renounce their Christianity and seek to be Jews, or will they cling to their Christian organizations and beckon to the Jew to join them? Perhaps, we Jews should participate in this scholarly attempt to discover the real Jesus. Perhaps, we might claim him as our own, in the end, and invite the Christians to join our movement as Jews, since any real follower of what Jesus taught would have to be a Jew in spirit.

Dr. Lynn Abbott, the Christian theologian, writing in his book, "What Christianity Means To Me", has said, "But when I came to study the teachings of Jesus... I found that he never mentioned vicarious atonement, or the fall of Adam, nor the trinity... nor did I find in Christ's teaching any provision of a new theology or a new ecclesiastical system to take the place of the old. Born a Jew, he remained a Jew to the day of his death... The notion that Jesus organized a Christian Church to take the place of the decaying Jewish Church has very little evidence to support it... The institutions of Christianity, however important they may be, were not framed by Christ and imposed on his followers. They were gradually developed by his followers after his death...Christianity converted paganism, but paganism changed Christianity".

What Dr. Abbott is clearly saying is that the religion of Jesus was far different from the religion that grew up about Jesus.

What are the true teachings of Jesus, if he did not teach any of the mystic sacraments about himself? The answer to this question is given in the New Testament in a little incident where Jesus is asked, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law"? Jesus answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself".² This is the essence of the teaching of Jesus. You will observe, of course, that the first of these statements is in our prayer book, and it comes from the fifth book of our scripture, Deuteronomy (6:4, 5). The second statement, concerning love of neighbor, comes from our book of Leviticus, (19:18). In brief, Jesus readily quoted Jewish scripture in summarizing his view of life. In fact, if one reads the 19th chapter of the book of Leviticus, one will find almost all of the ethical teachings of Jesus including the teaching of concern for one's enemy.

In this brief chapter, we can only introduce this important subject, but let me make this point. In my opinion, Jesus is rather typical of the Jewish people in a very profound sense, for he was crucified, murdered, if you will, by non-Jews who for some reason could not tolerate his doctrine of a revolutionary world in which all people would be brothers and sisters and tyrants would be overthrown. While many Christians still cling to the notion that the "Jews" are responsible for the death of Jesus, the fact remains that the Romans killed him for daring to assert a claim to the throne of ancient Judea. To be the Messiah, one had to be King of an independent Judea. This is why the Romans mocked him by writing across his cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews": This is why they mocked him by garbing him in purple robes, purple being the symbol of royalty. This is why they gave him a crown, to be sure, a crown of thorns.³ To me, Jesus is not God, nor the Son of God, nor the Messiah, nor do I believe in his resurrection. He was a simple Jewish teacher trying to teach Jews that the Roman way, the military way, was not the way, but that love of humankind was the way. For this he was killed, as Martin Luther King was killed, as Jews throughout history have been crucified, and maimed, and cremated, and butchered. Jesus was only one of millions of Jews who were unjustly killed, but since he was killed, he, like all the other Jewish martyrs, is a symbol of what the world has done to the Jew, as well as to other victims of prejudice and misunderstanding.

The saintly Rabbi Leo Baeck condemned to a concentration camp, but whose spirit Hitler could not conquer, has written, "...The Gospel which was originally something Jewish, becomes a book... within Jewish literature... It is a Jewish book because... the

² Matthew 22:36-39 RSV, compare 19:16 ff where the question is, "What good must I do to have eternal life"? Jesus answers, "if you would enter life, keep the commandments". Jesus names five of the Ten Commandments plus the command to love your neighbor. These are the so-called "Noahidic laws" which under Jewish tradition are all that are required to the non-Jew. According to Jewish tradition, the Jew, in addition, must observe the other commandments relating to God. This may be the inference of 19:17-19.

³ Matthew 27:27-29

pure air of which it is full and which it breathes is that of the Jewish Holy Scriptures; because a Jewish spirit and none other lives in it; because Jewish faith and Jewish hope, Jewish suffering and Jewish distress, Jewish knowledge and Jewish expectations, and these alone resound through it...". Dr. Baeck concludes, "Judaism may not pass it by, nor wish to give up."⁴

Perhaps the time will never come when Jews will want to give the New Testament status equal to that of the Old Testament, but if we want to understand a significant segment of Jewish history, we ought to read the New Testament, and if we want to understand the individual Jew through whom Jewish ethics came to a large portion of the world, we have to come to know the man Jesus.⁵

⁴ Leo Baeck, "Judaism and Christianity – The Gospel as a document of History"

⁵ A much more thorough work on this general theme is to be found in chapter ten of "Can Faith Survive", Dr. Maurice N. Eisendrath, published by McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964. I am indebted to Dr. Eisendrath for some of the quotations here included.