

Why Couldn't Jews Accept Jesus as God?

Chapter 4 - Smaller Type

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Revised

In our discussion, we have noted that the types of events in which Jesus participated were also experienced by some of the Hebrew prophets who lived nearly a thousand years before him. This was especially true of Elijah and Elisha who, like Jesus, lived in Galilee, that section of Israel in which wonder working (miracles) was anticipated from a "man of God" or a prophet of that time. Included in this panorama of events were things like feeding many people from a small amount of food, healing, bringing the dead back to life, walking on the water or splitting the body of water and walking on dry land.

Of course, the details of these stories differ in some specifics, but the general aspect of these tales was remarkably similar. Even the appearance of Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple and the words of his lecture to the assembled multitude followed the example of the appearance and lecture in the Temple Court of the Literary Prophet, Jeremiah, some 600 years earlier.

From all that this author can observe, the repetition of events and the message accompanying them were intended in order to show the linkage between Jesus and the earlier prophets. Further, the repetition was believed to show the fulfillment of the earlier prophecies in the person of Jesus. In this way, the followers of Jesus demonstrated that he was the predicted messiah (anointed one).

While the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah (scholars seem unified in believing there were two Isaiahs), spoke of a human messiah, later followers of Jesus thought of him as divine, the Son of God, maybe even part of a single Trinitarian God (the Father, Son and Holy Ghost).

Such theological matters are beyond the scope of this book. After the death of Jesus, authors who never saw Jesus, such as Paul, developed a theology which was in conflict with Judaism. The further developing Christianity got from the life of the human Jesus, the further it got from Judaism.

The leaders of Judaism, believing them to be under the dictation of God (____), began to distance themselves from this new developing religion. They were aware of such religions as Buddhism where the founder was transformed into a God and worshiped as such. However, Buddha himself did not believe in a God and, of course, did not worship him. This did not prevent the followers of Buddha's teachings from elevating him to the rank of divinity.

The two most charismatic figures in early Judaism were Moses and the prophet Elijah. Moses was said to die a normal death, but "no one knows where he is buried". Elijah, on the other hand, was said to have been taken up to heaven by a whirlwind. Tradition, however, teaches that God has arranged for Elijah to return to earth to announce the coming of the messiah (not a divine one).

Throughout the history of the Jewish people, the Jews have encountered nations whose leader has claimed to be the Son of God. Indeed, the Egyptian Pharaoh, according to their tradition, was a God himself.

When the Greek Empire split into two parts, the Jewish people fell under the aegis of the eastern or Greco-Syrian Empire. Its ruler named himself Antiochus Epiphanes, that is, Antiochus "God-revealed". He placed a statue of himself in the Jerusalem Temple and commanded that the Jews worship him. The Jews revolted and, according to the Second Book of Maccabees, recaptured the Temple and destroyed the statue. Because of their understanding of monotheism, the Jews could not accept the deity of a human being. They believed that every person was created "in the image of God".

When Christianity became the dominant religion of the western world, Jews suffered much for refusing to accept the deity of Jesus. Christians could not understand why the Jews were so stubborn. The teaching of their religion for thousands of years was so ingrained in the Jews that they could not violate this basic part of their being. The Christians of Europe down through the centuries have understood that in choosing not to believe in the divinity of Jesus, the Jews were rejecting their God. Therefore, the Jews were considered to be the children of the devil. To such an evil people, one could do anything, and Jews were often physically attacked or even killed. For an excellent scholarly history of the suffering of the Jews in Europe, see "The Anguish of the Jews" by the priest, Father Edward H. Flannery.¹

¹ Published by Macmillan, New York, and Collier Macmillan Publishers, London

The Sermon on the Mount

This famous Sermon is found in only two of the Gospels, and it appears only in a shorter form in Luke. Matthew, written after Luke, has the Sermon in a fuller form, perhaps expanded by Matthew. Many scholars believe that Luke, the older Gospel, may have the original teaching. Mark and Paul do not mention the Sermon nor does the earliest Christian manual of instruction, the Didache.

According to Tertullian (one of the old Church Fathers), the Sermon was a statement not dissimilar from the thought of the Hebrew Bible (Tanach). He quotes verse from the Tanach to clarify the Sermon.²

The arrangement of the Sermon begins with the use of the Hebrew word "Ashrei" (happy), a common procedure in the Psalms (26 instances) and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

Gerald Friedlander points out that Beatitudes occur in "The Psalms of Solomon", "Ecclesiastics", and in the "Secrets of Enoch". These are works by Jews but not included in the official books of the Hebrew Bible (Tanach).³

The phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven", so important to Jesus, is the translation of the Aramaic "Malchuta Dishemaya". The term occurs in the Book of Daniel, (2:44 and 7:14).

While Christianity and Judaism are today admittedly two distinct religions, it remains obvious that they are related as mother is to daughter. Many Christians are sometimes surprised to learn that Jesus was born a Jew and grew up in the Jewish community of his time. Some Christians are surprised to learn that prayers like the 23rd Psalm and laws such as the Ten Commandants are part of the Jewish scripture. Some Christians are wrongly convinced that Jesus originated the teaching "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", but Jesus knew he was quoting a teaching from Leviticus 19. Even such basic words in the Christian liturgy as "Hallelujah" are from the Jewish Scripture. ("Hallelu" is Hebrew for "praise" and "yah" is the Hebrew abbreviation for the Hebrew name for "the Lord").

Grounded as Christianity is in Judaism, it began to deviate from that religion when it spoke of Jesus as one to be worshipped. During the middle Ages, Christians came to believe that because Jews would not worship Jesus, they were denying God, while Jews have believed they were the only true monotheists, worshipping God without a mediator.

² Adv. Marcion, IV.14

³ "The Jewish sources of the Sermon on the Mount", published by KTAV Publishing House, Inc., New York, Edited by Harry M. Orlinsky.

In modern times, and especially in America, Judaism and its daughter religion have developed much good feeling toward one another in spite of their admitted differences. Most American cities have an interfaith dialogue group. Many congregations have attended the religious service of a congregation of another faith. In the author's congregation, we have sponsored programs with choirs of half a dozen congregations, singing separately and then together as one great choir. Pulpits have been exchanged between rabbi and minister or priest.

When Pope John Paul II, came to Miami, Florida, to meet with national Jewish leaders, he addressed the small group. In response, the group was addressed by a Rabbi.⁴ John Paul II was a man who strove earnestly to bring Catholics and Jews together and spoke of two valid, though different, covenants with God. He was, indeed, a leader who shared a true affection for all people. The question, however, is how well the rank and file of priests mediate the Pope's teaching to their congregations.

While Liberal Jews have generally been open to interfaith understanding, Orthodox Jews are generally less open. It is one of the main themes of our essays to point out that we Jews should seek knowledge about Christianity, just as Christians are seeking greater knowledge about Judaism.

If we Jews know enough about our own religion and are confident in our own faith, then we are prepared to learn more about other faiths.

We ought to know that just as Christianity is rooted in Judaism, so Judaism has benefited from the contribution of Christianity. For example, Christians have included the Hebrew Bible, our testament, in their own Bible. In this way Christians have spread knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. Further, their societies have distributed their Bible (including the Hebrew Bible) throughout the world. Many hotel rooms are provided with a copy of the Christian Bible and thus, the Hebrew Bible. Jews alone could not have spread information about their Bible so effectively. Through such wide distribution, Christians have, intentionally or otherwise, rendered Jews a great service.

There are things, also, in the New Testament which can be appreciated by Jews. Jesus was not the Son of God, according to Jewish belief, but he was a masterful teacher. Jews can accept that fact, even if we don't accept the deity of Jesus. He taught fundamental lessons of life through simple parables. People with little formal education could understand his message because of these well drawn stories.

Further, Jesus had the faculty of selecting basic teachings from his Jewish background and compiling them into a single format. The "Sermon on the Mount" with its compilation of "beatitudes" or blessings has nothing that is absent from Jewish teaching, but the "beatitudes" present these teachings in a simple and dramatic form.

⁴ Rabbi Waxman of Great Neck, NY, immediate past President, of the Synagogue Council of America. This author was the reigning President.

Similarly, the "Lord's Prayer" bears this title, because it was a prayer presented by Jesus. Again, this prayer is a collection, simply presented, of teachings from the Hebrew Bible. There is really nothing unjewish about it, except its title.

Not everything that is in The New Testament can be accepted by Jews, but we can still recognize that Jesus was a great teacher.

The suggestion is not made here that everything that Jesus taught was from his knowledge of the Hebrew Scripture and tradition. The notion, for example, that whosoever helps the poor and suffering, thereby helps God himself is uniquely presented in The New Testament and is a grand idea. The teachings are an extension and personalizing of a teaching of the Hebrew prophet Hosea. Hosea did teach that God suffers and prospers with His people, but the extension of the idea to the relationships of God and each individual amounts to something different. While different from Hosea's teaching, it is certainly consistent with Jewish thought.