



## Bearing Faithful Witness' Part 5

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**A Study Paper for an understanding of the Scriptures in their Jewish context and for an interpretation that is not anti-Judaic. Only the first, theological parts are at this site. The complete United Church of Canada document can be found at the Web site of the United Church of Canada: <http://www.united-church.ca/bfw/home.htm>**

### BEARING FAITHFUL WITNESS

#### A Study Paper (5)

##### The Letters of the Apostle Paul

For the churches that have grown out of the Reformation the doctrine of "justification by grace through faith alone" formed the central part of the gospel. The opposing position is "salvation through works of the law". This position was often seen to be represented by Jews and Paul's judaizing opponents, which in turn led to accusations of Jews as advocating legalism and self-righteousness.

Through a better knowledge of Judaism, through scholarly Jewish-Christian dialogue and a new understanding of Paul, the simple polarization between Christianity's grace and Judaism's law can no longer be defended. **For Jews the Torah is supremely the gracious gift of God. To keep the law is not a burden but a delight.**

A Christian theology after the Holocaust points to chapters 9 to 11 of Paul's letter to the Romans, where he clearly states that God's covenant with Israel has not been abrogated (Rom. 11:1-2) and that the church continues to be in relationship with Israel.

Paul was never "converted" from Judaism to Christianity; he was called to be the apostle to the gentiles (Gal. 1:11-17). He first served God within Judaism and after his call he served the same God among the gentiles. He was proud of being Jewish (Philippians 3:4-6) and he understood the significance of the Torah for Judaism. This Jewish background undergirded his understanding of God's purpose for gentiles.

Since Paul did not see himself as a teacher to Jews (Galatians 2:1-9), the opponents with whom he struggled cannot have been Jews or Judaism. His writings about Jewish matters are directed largely or even completely to gentile congregations, assuring them of their acceptance by God without adhering to the Torah of Israel. Jews come to God through Torah, gentiles through Christ. Paul claims that in Christ the "goal" (not end) of Torah is reached (Romans 10:4) by bringing the gentiles to the God of Israel (Romans 15:8-12). God is righteous and faithful to his promise in a new act, by bringing gentiles to God through Christ, apart from Torah, but not in contradiction to it (Romans 3:21).

Scholars have pointed out that Paul uses 'law' in two ways: positively as the Jewish covenantal relationship with God (Gal. 6:2; the Torah of Christ) and negatively as the 'condemnation', under which the gentile world lives in a condition of disobedience to God (Romans 6:14; not under law [= condemnation] but under grace). Gentiles (non-Jews) live under condemnation until, in Christ, they

are set free to do God's will.

### **Problematic Passages:**

In the first letter Paul wrote, he accuses the Jews of killing Jesus, opposing the church, and opposing God. He encourages church members by telling them that they are not alone in suffering for the faith:

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last. (I Thessalonians 2:14-16)

#### ***Paul's Letters and Scripture***

Paul did not intend to write deathless "Scripture". The Hebrew Scriptures were sufficient for him. He wrote letters that dealt with specific concerns arising in specific churches. Sometimes the church felt the strong presence of the Holy Spirit in Paul's writings (e.g. I Cor. 13) but Paul did not always feel it (e.g. I Cor. 7:25).

- Does this tell us something about the nature of Scripture?
- If someone told Paul that they were going to take his letters, written to support, guide and encourage churches, and give them the designation "Scripture", what do you suppose his reaction would have been? Would he rewrite them? Would he allow some to be included but not others? Would he write something else?

This statement is unique in Paul's letters for its vindictiveness. We leave it to scholars to explain, noting only that some scholars are convinced, on purely linguistic grounds, that this has been added by a later editor.

It is certainly true that Paul was a creative thinker. His innovations sometimes change the meaning of concepts that are basic to Judaism (e.g. Paul expands the Jewish notion of sin beyond that for which one is personally responsible through action or inaction; in "saving" us from this sin, Christ does something that Jews see as unnecessary). Paul's argumentative style includes playing with the old biblical stories, a Jewish technique called "midrash". Some Jewish commentators are sometimes exasperated by Paul's arguments, but as Jewish scholar Jon Levenson says, "It is no small irony that to argue [his positions], Paul had no alternative but to rely on the Jewish Scriptures - the only Bible he knew or could imagine - and to utilize exegetical [i.e. interpretative] procedures that the rabbis would use, with at least equal dexterity." (*The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, p.219) Paul often reshapes stories to present conventional Judaism as a foil for Christ (e.g. Gal. 3:21ff re Hagar and Sarah; II Cor. 3:12ff re the veiling of Moses). Although Paul understands God as having a joint purpose in working through Judaism and the church, at times he seems to forget the connection and his style of argument becomes confrontational and divisive. Over all, Paul thought that God was using the

church to fulfill the promise to Abraham that lies at the root of Judaism's reason for being: "through you all nations of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12:3); Judaism may not think that this is necessary, but the truth of the claim resides with God and the clues to its truth or falsehood reside in the degree of blessing that Judaism and Christianity actually are to the nations of the world.

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## 6. The Letter to the Hebrews

Reading the letter or sermon to the Hebrews one cannot avoid getting the impression that the Christian faith supersedes the Jewish faith. Jewish matters are here mentioned more than in any other of the Christian writings. However, Jewish scholars have pointed out that Hebrews deals with Judaism as it was before the Temple was destroyed. Many Jewish groups of the time would have agreed with the things said about the Judaism of the Temple (e.g. the Jewish commentator and philosopher Philo of Alexandria, the Samaritans, the people of Northern Galilee, the Essenes, and some Pharisees).

Hebrews was perhaps written to a Jewish-Christian community greatly threatened in their faith and hope (as were all Jews) by the destruction of the Temple. Jesus and the Christian faith are constantly compared with parts of the Jewish religious system. Judaism is not vilified, but it is presented as inferior to Christianity.

### Problematic Passages:

Perfection, the goal of life, is not possible through the law or Torah (7:19; 9:9; 10:1), but only through Christ. Even for Christians it is only possible because Christ has entered upon his high priestly work of conveying the prayers of the church to God and interceding on its behalf.

Comparisons are made throughout Hebrews between heavenly things that are perfect and real and earthly things that are only the shadow of the heavenly. (Heavenly: Jesus Christ as mediator; perfection; immediate presence of God. Earthly: the things pertaining to Judaism and lesser intermediaries; imperfection; question of whether there is any way into God's presence).

Jesus' ministry is more excellent than that of the priests. He is the mediator of a better covenant with better promises than that of Israel (8:6). The first covenant of God with Israel is faulty (8:7-8). Therefore God has established a second or a new covenant (8:8). Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted and given a supersessionist interpretation, typical of the way Christians treat the covenant of Israel: "In speaking of 'a new covenant', he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear." (8:13)

Christians have come "to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (12:24). This is the only place in the Christian writings where, referring to a new covenant, a Greek word is used for 'new' that cannot be translated as 'renewed'.

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## 7. Revelation or the Apocalypse

The seven churches that are the recipients of this document suffered terrible persecution by the Roman authorities. Under the emperor Domitian, Jews as an established religious group, were

exempted from emperor worship, while Christians, as a new minority, had to choose between bowing to every statue on the street or suffering cruel persecution.

In Revelation, Christians are in conflict mainly with the emperor (13:1-18) and with rival Christian teachers (2:20-23). In two of the letters, however, opponents include "the synagogue of Satan". This may refer to Christians who were regarded as hypocritical by the author because they claimed Jewish identity in order to avoid persecution by the Romans; in this case they are not Jews at all. Or it may refer to some particular Jews, known to those receiving the letter, who have denounced Christians to the authorities and have thereby shown that they are not true Jews. In either case, the intent of the author does not seem to be to attack Jews. The author's choice of the phrase, "synagogue of Satan" (as opposed to, say, "church of Satan" or "following of Satan"), is perverse and reflects a residual animosity to and suspicion of the synagogue and Jews. We should be careful not to subconsciously imbibe this attitude.

The passages in question are the following:

"I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." (2:9-10; letter to the church in Smyrna)

"I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying -I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you." (3:9; letter to the church in Philadelphia).

## Conclusion:

1. The anti-Judaic language in NT texts is mixed with the gospel message and with pro-Jewish expressions. Jesus is often shown as a true Torah-believing and observing Jew, and sometimes as detrimentally opposed to Judaism. The same applies to Paul. Whichever picture of Jesus or Paul we choose is interpretive; the best data that we have today suggests that neither rejected Judaism or their own Jewishness, quite the opposite. We should choose to interpret on that side of the dichotomy.
2. Most biblical scholars agree that the Gospels and Acts, which were written at least a generation after Jesus' death, are not biographies of Jesus and Paul. They are comprehensive sermons or narrative theologies that tell the Christian story to the churches for whom they were written. They address the concerns and circumstances of their time. They reflect the growing enmity between the early Christian and the Jewish communities in the late first century. As such they are argumentative and often present a skewed picture of Judaism as a foil for the positive things they want to say about Jesus and his movement. We must adjust the picture of Judaism that they present with information from the Hebrew Scriptures, from other sources of the time, from discussions with modern Jews, by whatever means we can. To do so is respectful of these texts in their role as Scripture; it clears away potential cause for disrespect.
3. The apostle Paul hinted that God may have used the estrangement between synagogue and church to initially protect the Jewish community from abandoning its own covenant. Paul struggled to define the relationship between church and Israel: "I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the gentiles has come in"

(Romans. 11:25). Be this as it may, the development of anti-Judaism could not have been in the purpose of God. It certainly has no place in the church more than fifty years after the Holocaust.

4. This paper recommends leaving Scripture texts intact, not censoring them, and speaking to the issue of anti-Judaism when the texts raise the concern. Many passages need not be anti-Jewish when interpreted with understanding. Those passages that are definitely so (e.g. John 8:43-44) should be used to teach the damage that Christians have done to Jews over the centuries. Such passages can help us to appreciate problems of understanding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. We affirm that God's guiding wisdom and grace enables us to do justice and to reject the language and practice of anti-Judaism.

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