Re-imaging the Christian-Jewish Relationship

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Prof. John T. Pawlikowski surveys the changes in the image of Jesus' relation to his Jewish context in recent New Testament scholarship and their implications for Christian-Jewish relations.

Reimaging the Christian-Jewish Relationship

The contemporary dialogue with Jews and Judaism has begun to demonstrate an impact on the understanding of the New Testament and early Christianity both in Christian and Jews circles. We are witnessing a genuine revolution in New Testament and early Christian scholarship, as well as parallel scholarship on the Judaism of the period. Within Christian biblical scholarship we are experiencing a rapid end to the dominance of the early "Religionsgeschichte" which emphasized the almost totally Hellenistic background of Pauline Christianity as well as its later modified manifestation in Rudolf Bultmann and some of his disciples such as Ernst Käsemann and Helmut Koester. These exegetical approaches to the New Testament seriously eroded Jesus" concrete ties to, and dependence upon, biblical and Second Temple Judaism. This in turn tended to produce an excessively universalistic interpretation of Jesus" message, which harbored the seeds for theological anti-Judaism.

There have been a number of leading biblical scholars, some with a continuing transcontinental influence, who have contributed to the de-Judaization of Christian faith. One of the most prominent is Gerhard Kittel, the original editor of the very important *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. He viewed post-biblical Judaism, including the Judaism of Jesus" day, as a faith of a community largely in dispersion. For Kittel, post-biblical Judaism was to be symbolized by a stranger roaming the earth in a homeless condition.

Another important figure was Martin Noth whose *History of Israel* became a standard reference for professors and students alike. Noth described Israel as strictly a religious community, which had died a slow, agonizing death in the first century A.D. For Noth, Jewish history reached its culmination in the arrival of Jesus. But Jesus himself no longer was part of the history of Israel. In him the history of Israel had come to its end with the rejection and condemnation of Jesus by the Jerusalem religious community.

The most important example of such anti-Judaic interpretation of the significance of Jesus was Rudolph Bultmann. Unlike Kittel, who was removed from his teaching post at Tübingen in 1945 because of his pro-Nazi sympathies, Bultmann"s exegesis did not carry over into politics. But theologically speaking, his understanding of the Christ Event also left Jews and Judaism with little or no meaning after the coming of Jesus. In his *Theology of the New Testament*, he held to the view that a Jewish people cannot be said to exist with the emergence of Christianity. For him Jewish law, ritual, and piety removed God to a distant realm, while through the continued presence of Jesus in prayer and worship each individual was brought ever closer to God. Bultmann"s understanding of Judaism was based on totally inadequate sources in terms of Second Temple Judaism and Jesus" relationship to its teachings.

In the last several decades we have seen a dramatic shift away from the dominance of the anti-Judaic understanding of the New Testament promoted by the likes of Kittel and Bultmann. Led by

scholars such as W.D. Davies, E. P. Sanders, Douglas Hare, Daniel Harrington, Robin Scroggs and an ever increasing list of others, the New Testament is gradually being liberated from what Professor Arthur J. Droge has called its "Bultmannian captivity." This is not to say that there exists complete agreement among these scholars regarding the precise forms of Judaism that most directly influenced Jesus. Far from it. Major source problems and ambiguities will likely guarantee the continuation of a lively debate for the foreseeable future.

Robin Scroggs has offered us a nice summary of these developments. He emphasizes the following points:

1. The movement begun by Jesus and continued after his death in Palestine can best be described as a reform movement within Judaism. There is no evidence during this period that Christians had a separate identity from Jews
2. The Pauline missionary movement, as Paul understood it, was a Jewish mission which includes the Gentiles as the proper object of God"s call to his people;
3. Prior to the end of the Jewish war with the Romans in 70 C.E., there is no such reality as Christianity. Followers of Jesus did not have a self-understanding of themselves as a religion over against Judaism. A distinctive Christian identity only began to emerge after the war;
4. The later portions of the New Testament all show some signs of a movement toward separation, but they also generally retain some contact with their Jewish matrix.

Other scholars both Jews and Christians have advanced this re-examination of the separation of Christianity from Judaism, now understood as complex and of considerable duration. Among the more important are Hayim Perelmuter, Jacob Neusner, Efraim Shmueli, Robert Wilken, and Anthony Saldarini. These scholars have demonstrated the variety of "Judaisms" existing at the time of Jesus (hence Christianity cannot be seen as the fulfillment of a monolithic Judaism) and they have shown that the complete separation between the church and the synagogue was not completed until several centuries into the Common Era. They have uncovered evidence of regular Christian participation in Jewish worship as late as the second and third century (and in a few places even in the fourth century), especially in the East. This means that the popular belief among Christians that the church was fully established by the time of its birth is now untenable in light of the new historical evidence.

This recent scholarly research forces us, in my judgment, to significantly reimage the Jewish-Christian relationship. For centuries the image of this relationship was that of

displacement/replacement. Jews had forfeited their covenantal relationship with God for their failure to accept Jesus and the church had replaced the Jewish people in that relationship. This relationship was often depicted in rather dramatic ways, such as on the facade of the Strasbourg cathedral, where the church is presented as a vibrant, outward-looking young woman and the synagogue as a blindfolded, broken woman holding cracked stone tablets.

Since the beginning of the serious rethinking of the Christian-Jewish relationship within the Christian churches some forty years ago, new images have begun to emerge.

Covenant

The first effort involved portraying Jews and Christians as both members of a single, on- going covenant (albeit in different ways and with different roles) or as members of two, distinct, but parallel covenants. The single covenant approach clearly dominated. I myself have favored the double covenant approach. I have detailed both of these approaches in my book *Jesus and the Theology of Israel*. The single covenant had the advantage of emphasizing the continued bonding between Jews and Christians. The double covenant perspective, which also stressed the original Christian-Jewish nexus, better brought to light the distinct transformation of each of the traditions once they fully split.

Schism

Another early attempt at reimaging came in terms of viewing the split between Christians and Jews as a schism. Cardinal Carlo Martini of Milan, a noted biblical scholar, popularized this viewpoint in his writings. In the schism perspective the split should not have occurred and there is need to overcome it. As a result of the schism, Christianity surrendered a vital aspect of its faith perspective.

In recent years many, including myself, have begun to question these earlier efforts at reimaging. The single covenant is too linear in its perspective and does not account for the complexity of “Judaisms” at the time of Jesus. This also is the case for the “schism” theory. The double covenant approach better accounts for the evidence we now have of the gradualness of the separation, but tends to underplay the continued bonding between Jews and Christians which Christian leaders such as Pope John Paul II have strongly underlined.

Among the newly emerging images of the Christian-Jewish relationship the following appear the most promising.

Siblings

The first is the notion of "Siblings" advanced by Jewish scholars Alan Segal and the late Hayim Perelmuter. It has the advantage both of stressing the innate bonding while also allowing for distinctiveness. Siblings are related, but hardly ever identical. Another image along the same lines is put forth by Mary Boys in her highly recommended new volume *Has God Only One Blessing*? She depicts Jews and Christians as “fraternal twins.” This image has the same advantages as “siblings,” although she appears to posit a somewhat deeper connection than even “siblings.”

Partners in Waiting

Clark Williamson in his book *A Guest in the House of Israel* argues for an image of "Partners in Waiting." This notion clearly emphasizes an open-ended rather than a settled relationship. It stresses Christian-Jewish bonding, but not as strongly as "siblings" or "fraternal twins." "Partners," after all, have no basic familial ties.

Co-Emergent Religious Communities

The final new image is that of "co-emergent religious communities." This perspective is in the process of being developed by University of California scholar Daniel Boyarin. He argues that what finally resulted from the complex revolution in Second Temple Judaism were two new, distinct religious communities known as rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. His perspective accounts fairly well for the historical evidence now at hand. But it is weaker than the other images in stressing the continued bonding.

We are still in the early stages of this second contemporary rethinking of the Christian-Jewish relationship. At this point I am most inclined to the "Siblings" image. But we need to continue the

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reflection process. The new historical understanding of gradual separation and the theological about-face regarding the Jewish-Christian relationship in Vatican II"s *Nostra Aetate* and parallel Protestant documents such as the Rhineland Synod Statement force upon the Christian community the necessity of a profound rethinking of how we fundamentally understand and depict the Christian-Jewish relationship.

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