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Responses to Jesus: The Jewish “no” and the Christian “yes”

By Robert Anderson

It is the central argument of this paper and the firm conviction of its author that both the Jewish "no" and the Christian "yes" are valid responses to the church"s proclamation that centers upon Jesus of Nazareth. Though such an assertion may surprise some and disturb others, there is, in fact, nothing novel in it. It is no less than the logical outcome of the increasing number of individual church and ecumenical statements that have appeared

during the past three or four decades. Nor is anything new in what is written here. The issue of whether the church may legitimately continue to entertain exclusivist claims has been canvassed by many leading Christian scholars in recent years.

The publications in which their contributions have appeared are, in the main, not readily accessible to the general church community and, as a consequence, there has been little if any open discussion of the matter.

It is probably also correct to say that there has been a reluctance on the part of some scholars to seek a more public forum because of the heavy investment that so many Christians have in the traditional claim that redemption is through Jesus Christ and through him alone. The mid-third century CE dictum of Cyprian of Cartage that "outside the Church there is no salvation" continues to bubble along just below the surface.

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Moreover, there is easy recourse to certain New Testament texts which appear to offer unequivocal biblical support for the exclusivist point of view. Some of these are dealt with a little later in this paper. Meantime our attention must turn to the Jewish "no".

The Jewish "No"

There is no question at all that the almost unanimous response of Jews throughout our common history has been a resounding and emphatic "no" to whatever form it was in which they were faced with Christian claims. That Jesus" compatriots should respond in this way is something that the church, in general, has found difficult to comprehend. Indeed, it has not only been difficult, it has been disturbing to the point where it has been met with charges of Jewish recalcitrance, obstinacy and blindness. Is it possible that the savage vehemence of the language of such ecclesiastical leaders as the

fourth-century John Chrysostom and the sixteenth century Martin Luther betrays some sense of insecurity, some niggling doubt about their own position? Despite all the confidence of the Christian claims, despite all the vicissitudes of Jewish history, despite every pressure on them to convert, this ancient people continued to express their identity and to practice their faith. To their opponents this was a clear sign of an innate obduracy, if not of divine rejection. Since the time of Augustine the church had become accustomed to interpreting the precarious and often degraded position of Jews within Christendom as divine retribution for their negative response to Jesus. Even as noble a spirit as Dietrich Bonhoeffer found no difficulty in linking Jewish suffering to their rejection of Christ. Only their conversion could release them from this divinely ordained state.

The point I am making is that, overall, the church"s attitude to Jews and

Judaism has not been divorced from its own self-understanding. Seldom has Judaism been allowed to have an integrity of its own. All too often it has been seen as the obverse of Christianity, of what Christianity is not. Even a paper of this nature, with its concentration upon the Jewish "no" runs that same risk. What may redeem it, to some degree at least, is that space will be given to an examination or description, albeit a very brief one, of Judaism in its own right. But, for the moment, we note that, for a Christian, it is not possible, as it is for a Jew, to break the nexus between Christianity and Judaism. Why this should be so is not difficult to fathom. It comes down to this: Jesus was a Jew.

Jesus the Jew

It is a commonplace of modern New Testament studies to emphasise the Jewishness of Jesus. It is refreshing to be reminded that he was born a Jew, lived as a Jew and that he died as a

Jew, albeit at a very early age, on the Roman charge of sedition. The emphasis in any scholarly study of Jesus is now placed on those aspects of his life which see him in solidarity with his own people, at one with them in worship in synagogue and temple, and engaging with others, not least Pharisees, in argumentation about the proper interpretation of Torah.

But not only was Jesus a Jew, so too were his initial disciples and his earliest followers. Here was a positive Jewish response to him that must be permitted to qualify what was said at the beginning of this paper. But who was the Jesus, what was the Jesus to whom some of his fellow Jews responded and who later were prepared to carry a message about him to others, even beyond their own homeland?

The confidence and forcefulness with which the Christian Church has proclaimed its message of Jesus as Universal Redeemer, Son of

God and the Christ has served to obscure the fact that what cannot be ascertained are such central issues as Jesus" self-understanding, what he claimed of himself and what he set out to accomplish. What can be said with some measure of certainty is that it is highly unlikely that he saw himself as the Saviour of the world or Son of God in its later acquired sense or even as the Messiah of Israel. All of these are claims that have been made about him by those who have seen in his crucifixion something more than our ordinary death and who sensed his ongoing presence beyond that tragic event. In other words, the Jesus who is and has been proclaimed by the church is, as Paul van Buren has aptly put it, "the testified-to-Jesus", first by his earliest followers and then by their successors. But a distinction has to be made between those two groups, that is, the earliest proclaimers and their successors. The former made their claims about him in the context of

their own Judaism. In the book of the Acts of the Apostles we are informed that these earliest believers continued to worship in the Temple. Though their proclamation of Jesus and their claims to heal in this name did arouse opposition from time to time, there is no indication that at an early stage there arose the kind of tension that was to lead eventually to a parting of the ways. That was a breach that occurred because of one important factor, namely, the admission of gentiles as members of the Jesus-movement. When questions of Torah observance, not least the practice of circumcision and the dietary rules began to take centre stage, whatever tensions existed were greatly exacerbated. When, in the post-79 CE period, Judaism was faced with the monumental task of reconstruction, the issue of Jewish identity assumed an importance that could not tolerate the kind of compromises that would have accommodated the position adopted by

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some of the embryonic church"s leaders.

It is the development towards this position with its concomitant apologetic and polemic that is reflected in the writings of the New Testament, not least in the four Gospels. In these circumstances it is understandable that the Jesus portrayed is made to serve the purpose of the writers and that he should be represented less as a faithful Jew than as an adversary of his own religion. What Jesus claimed for himself, how he understood his own mission, whether as charismatic Galilean leader, internal reformer, eschatological prophet or whatever, becomes obscured by the needs and the outlook of the gospel writers and their communities.

This "testified-to Jesus" loses much of his Jewishness and much also of any appeal to possible Jewish followers. What is more, there arises within the splinter group, the group that has been forced to break

away from the parent body, a pattern of claims and accusations which has come to be associated with the outlook and behaviour of sectarian movements. When recourse is had to certain New Testament texts which appear to support an exclusivist Christian position these must be examined in light of the context in which they emerged. Statements attributed to Jesus such as his claim to be ". . . the way and the truth and the life" without whom there is no access to the Father (John 14:6) lose their exclusivist tendency when seen in the context in which they arose. A recent article by Professor Hugh Anderson, former Professor of New Testament in the University of Edinburgh, provides us with a scholarly counter to those who would invoke this text and others, for example Acts 4:12, in support of an absolutist position.*

The Jewish "Yes" to Judaism

Far more significant than the Jewish "no" to Jesus is the Jewish "yes" to Judaism. This is the affirmation of a continuing commitment to the historic covenant and to the Torah of the God of Israel. The importance of this latter point has been implicitly recognised, at least, in quite a number of the recent church statements. There is a sense in which such an observation tends to be patronising but it is a step in the right direction. Yet there are two factors, in particular, that prevent the churches from recognising the full significance of the continuing and persistent Jewish "yes" to Judaism. These factors are:

1. The age-old belief that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the promises (predictions?) within the Hebrew Scriptures (in this context the Old Testament) are fulfilled; and
2. The assertion that Judaism

served as a preliminary to the rise of Christianity; that it is a truncated religion offering itself for fulfilment beyond itself.

The arguments against both of the above positions are overwhelming but, necessarily, can be treated only very briefly here.

On the first point what might be said at the outset is that the links that have been made between the two testaments, within the New Testament itself and in church teaching and proclamation, do not stand the test of close scholarly scrutiny. What we find might be put succinctly in this way:

1. Certain texts or statements within the Hebrew Scriptures which are entirely removed from their initial context and pressed into a quite different service, for example, the

use of Isaiah 7:14 in support of a virgin birth.
2. Some Hebrew Bible passages that provide the type of language that serves the purpose of the New Testament writer, for example, the use of Isaiah Chapter 53 as predictive of the suffering of Jesus.
3. Hebrew Bible texts which are "played out" so to speak, as predictive of certain events in the life of Jesus, for example, the association of his birth not with Nazareth but with Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) and the use of Zechariah 9:9 as background to a putative triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

The list and the examples might go on and on. Taken individually these

"non-fulfilment" texts lack consequence but taken cumulatively they beckon us to change our approach theologically. I should add that this altered theological perspective provides no threat whatsoever to the fundamental truth of Christianity, a point we shall come to a little later.

On the second point, that of the "temporary" significance of Judaism within the divine purpose, what I offer here are no more than a few pointers which may be helpful to Christian readers who have not as yet considered these matters. The brief observations are:

- The categories of one religion should not be used in any attempt to understand or describe another. Many of the terms commonly used in Christianity may be misleading if applied to Judaism and sometimes

the same word may have different con notations. A good example is "salvation".
- Judaism is not some kind of obverse of Christianity i.e. all the things that the latter is not.
- Judaism is not a religion of works-righ teousness (Christian terminology) in contrast to Christianity as a religion of grace. We worship and serve the same God, the God of Abraham, Sarah and Jesus of Nazareth.
- Judaism is not a credal religion. It does not contain dogma or doctrine except in the most obvious sense of belief in the one, True God.
- Though Judaism is bound to the Hebrew Bible it is not

bound by it in the sense that nothing has happened since biblical times.

- Judaism embraces all the writings of the periods of the Sages, the Rabbis and their successors. This material is found initially in the *Mishnah*, the *Gemara* (together forming the two Tal muds) and the *Midrashim*.
- The Torah and its interpreted expansion is not a "means of salvation" in a Christian sense but is guidance in obedience to the God of the Covenant i.e. it provides "the way to walk" *(Halakhah).*
- Central to Jewish practice is the sanctific ation of the Divine Name

and the *tikkun hai olam,* "the mending of the world". This requires an active response.
- The God of Judaism is the God of love, of mercy and of justice. Repentance and forgiveness are no less a part of Judaism than they are of Christianity. So too is the hope of the establishing of the Kingdom (Rule) of God an essential part of Judaism.

Again, this list could Go on and on. The chief purpose in what has been written is to counter the harmful caricature of Judaism that is so often presented to Christians, and to indicate that all these things that Christians hold dear are present in Judaism, albeit expressed in different ways, but serving the same

purpose: the worship and service of the One, True God. There is nothing lacking. Had Judaism come to an end with the rise of Christianity the world would have been immeasurably the poorer; so too Christianity, for the new relationship increases our ancient debt. Much more could be written on this topic, indeed, much more should be written, but perhaps sufficient has been said to justify the assertion that far more significant than the Jewish "no" to Jesus is the continuing Jewish "yes" to Judaism.

The Christian "Yes" to Jesus

By definition a Christian is a person who has said "yes" to Jesus as the Christ of God. I should wish to go on to say that it is "yes" to Jesus as the Christ for her or for him as a Christian. It is, above all else, a *faith* statement and any principle of verification that may be applied must operate within that circumscribed domain. Moreover, what is meant by the title, the Christ,

is not necessarily immediately recognisable. It is, of course, an important theological issue for the church but it is not one that may, or should, be attended to independently of the context out of which it arose and that context has religious, political and social dimensions. Indeed, every claim about who Jesus is for the Christian must be examined within that multifaceted context. For example, of what importance is it that at the time of the early church it was customary for the Roman emperor, upon death, to be deified or that the notion of a descending Saviour God had currency in the Greco-Roman religious culture of that period as too the acceptance of hero virgin births then and earlier?

What, then, is the central significance of the Christian"s positive response? It is this: that the God of Jesus and of his compatriots of all eras has become the God of the nations, bringing to fruition the divine promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3). The God of Abraham is

also the God of the Christian. In this sense there is fulfilment of the ancient promise of the Hebrew Scriptures in what is centrally witnessed to in the New Testament. When Jesus, as a Jew prays thus: "Our Father in heaven . . ." we pray with him what is substantially a Jewish prayer. We are drawn into this experience but we come as later-carriers, as those who have received more than they can ever give. For that reason alone Christian mission to Jews is theologically untenable.

As Jesus included in his ministry a call to the lost sheep of Israel so is that call extended by the early evangelists, not least Paul, to the lost sheep of the nations, to the gentiles. It is done in the name of Jesus upon whom may be conferred the title, the Christ, the Anointed one of God, not in the sense of one who is supposedly presaged in the Hebrew Bible but as one through whom redemption has spread out to the nations. This understanding of the role of Jesus

Christ does not call in question the Jewish "no" nor should it ever trespass on the Jewish "yes" to Judaism. Together we hope and work for that messianic regime which is the fulfilment of the divine purpose (see 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 for the poetic presentation of this hope).

Conclusion

No person"s faith should ever be held at the expense of that of another; most assuredly not at the expense of that of another community of people.

If we would allow our imaginations to take us beyond the ancient biblical world with its religious signs and symbols, however important, beyond the restricting world of a "three-decker" universe with its heaven and earth and hell, beyond even the world of Copernicus; if we would do that and reflect upon the nature of the universe as we know it, upon its endless magnitude and infinite diversity, then, surely our common response

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to God would be one of awe and, above all else, one of humility. We would rejoice with the Psalmist:

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
.....
..
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established,
what are human beings that you are mindful of them
(mere) mortals that you care for them?
(Psalm 8:1, 3, 4).

*The Fantasy of Superiority: Rethinking our universalist claims in *Overcoming Fear Between Jews and Christians* edited by James H. Charlesworth. New York: Crossroad, 1992, pp 44-57

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