



Saint Paul and the Jews

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by Krister
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For a Christian, every dialogue stands under the famous words of Jesus, in Matthew 5:23-24: "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." The structure of his thinking is very similar to the basic tradition of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in which the making of amends

with brothers and sisters is a necessity.

Those words from the Sermon on the Mount do not say what most people think they say. The passage does not say . . . “when you are at the altar and you remember that you have some bad feelings *against your brother*” Instead it says, “you remember that *your brother has something against you.*” There is a big difference. There is only one way to get to know whether your brother has something against you: ask him. That is the real function of any dialogue among Jews and Christians.

We can hardly imagine what harm it has done to Jewish-Christian relations in American culture when the Jewish/Christian tradition is understood as its Jewishness being taken care of by having a few words about Job and the Old Testament – and then we take over. It is important to ask after what

might have been the intentions of Jesus or the first Christians and to what extent that intention got lost. None of us have such a naive view of providence that we believe that everything that happens in the world is good and positive and just. If it were that way, the messianic days would have come long, long ago. So, let me address myself first to a few biblical questions.

The Term “New Israel” is Post-Biblical

Nowhere in the New Testament is the church ever called Israel; the specific nomenclature of the church as a new Israel is post-biblical. Now that is not insignificant because most Christians read the scriptures as if they thought the church is the new Israel. Those of you who know your Bible very well would here refer to Galatians 6:16: “Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.” If you look those verses up in

the Greek text, the question is where to put the commas and how to analyze the Greek sentence structure. I don't think there is any question about the fact that what Paul here is saying is: Peace be upon those who follow the standards I have laid down, and mercy also on the people of Israel, i.e., the Jews.

It is usually taken for granted, of course, that the church is the new Israel because that is how the church fathers started to speak. The issue, especially in Pauline sections of Christian thought, is the right of gentiles and the ways in which gentiles come to share in the promises made to Israel. Paul's view is that the Christian, the gentile Christian, is an "honorary Jew" – while Christians, when generous in their latent arrogance, may say Jews are almost as good as Christians.

Romans 9–11

I would like to say something about that text to which everybody of course turns when attempting a theological analysis of the relation between the church and Israel. It is Romans 9–11. Let me set that passage in context. That is important. Paul knew what he was doing. His letters usually have specific issues and problems in mind, so he speaks distinctly differently in various letters.

For example, I think it can be argued successfully and without much dissent that in his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul never ever uses the term, “justification by faith,” in the sense he uses it in Galatians and Romans. That is so since the whole first Corinthian epistle is totally unpreoccupied with any relation between Jews and Gentiles. That was not because there were no Jews in Corinth because that's one of the few things we know from archeology. There was a Jewish body in Corinth; we have an inscription

on a wall to prove it. But for some reason Paul had no reason whatsoever to speak to the Corinthians about justification by faith in terms of the relation between Jews and Gentiles. You know what Paul says about Jews in Corinthians? He says that the Jews desire signs and the Greeks desire wisdom. Now that has very little to do with legalism, with the whole heavy Jewish-Christian discussion as it grew in the Western world. In short, Paul had different things to say in different epistles. And thus it is important to get hold of, not only the theological mindset of Paul, but the specific setting within which he addresses himself to this problem.

Romans is also different from Galatians, which deals with Judaizers, that is to say, gentiles, who have gotten infatuated with Jewish ways. But in Romans Paul is not thinking about Jewish Christianity. This is the letter in which he is thinking about the Jews.

This is the letter in which he addresses himself to Israel as a theological issue. He does so when his ministry is at a certain crucial point. He has finished in the east and he is moving west, he has set the eastern witnessing communities in place and he has his eyes set toward the west. At first Paul reflects upon how his ministry fits into the total plan of God, the plan of God for Israel, the plan of God for the world, the plan of God for the church. The letter's climax is actually in Romans 9–11.

Now I think that Paul's perception at this juncture in his ministry has two interesting components: (1) He has perceived that gentile Christians tended to display or harbor a haughty attitude toward the people of Israel. He had perceived snobbishness and superiority feelings. Their gratitude for all that Christ had done for them, tended to turn into a haughty attitude. (2) A fantastic thought started to dawn on

Paul, although it might have just sort of glimmered, and he didn't know what to do with it: perhaps the Jesus movement, for which he had become a witness to the gentiles, was actually, in the plan and scheme of God, going to be a gentile movement! It had not been so conceived in the beginning, not even by Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

A Haughty Attitude by Christians

Romans 9–11 is addressed consciously to the superiority feelings of gentile Christians, over against the people of Israel. And that is why it begins as it begins. How does Romans 9 begin? It begins with an enormous self-affirmation: I'm not lying, the Spirit is my witness, nothing is more important to me, nothing is more dear to me than if it were possible for me to convert a fellow Jew to Jesus Christ. I would rather be a castaway (*anathema*) from

Christ, if it could help in this matter, etc. Paul here used a literary device. He identified with the audience to catch their positive attention: I feel in me the same urge as you, he was saying. And there is really no other statement from Paul that matches this one in rhetorical intensity. This is the only time he says he is willing to go to hell. What he means is: "Dear gentiles, I understand you. I feel with you this urge." But, before the section (9–11) is over, Paul has come to the point where he is actually teaching that conversion of the Jews might not be the intention of God, that actually the movement is going to be a gentile movement, that there is in the mystery of God a coexistence of Jews and Christians.

If we put this passage in specific historical settings in the mid-fifties in Rome, it fits surprisingly well. The Jews had been expelled from the city of Rome under Claudius, in AD 49, but under Nero

from AD 54 and on, there was a return of Jews to the city. It might even be that the expulsion of the Jews had something to do with Jewish-Christian tensions in the late forties. But now the Jews were coming back, and the church of Rome had a very specific problem: how would they look at these returning Jews. These were not Jewish Christians. They were Jews.

The mysterious coexistence that Paul speaks about is thus designed as a counter to the spiritually haughty attitude he perceived in the Roman Christians. Hence it may not be coincidental that for four pages in the Greek text, from 10:17 to the end of 11, there is not a single reference to Jesus Christ. And the doxology with which this section ends is the only doxology ever to be written by Paul that is not Christological, but is written in "God language." Now if this language usage is conscious it is interesting; if it is unconscious it is even more interesting. Nobody

could ever claim
that Paul did not
have the guts to
wave the Christ flag,
that he would fall
short of evangelistic
zeal and zest.
Whatever flaws
there are in the
great apostle, this is
not one of them.
That is why this
absence of Christ
language, this
changing of thinking
into God language,
is so striking. Paul
is actually teaching
a mysterious
coexistence. Now
we can discuss the
implications of that
further, but I think
that the evidence is
strong indeed.

But, people say,
Romans 9–11 is not
the total Bible, the
total New
Testament. And that
is quite right. The
question is really
one of how to read
scriptures in the
Christian tradition.
I happen to think
that Paul has
insights he doesn't
always live up to.
The classical
example, of course,
is his statement
about women. He
did say "in Christ
there is neither
Jew nor Gentile,
neither slave nor
free, nor is there
male or female." He
actually changes
the syntax. He

doesn't say "neither male nor female."
He says "nor is there" and then he quotes Genesis, "male and female."
But he didn't quite know what to do with that insight. His theology was better than his applications. When he writes to Corinth he quotes that same trilogy but he drops out the words about male and female because he had trouble with women in Corinth, so he just suppresses it – or he at least doesn't feel very anxious to quote it. He had theological visions stir in his soul that were enormously impressive, even if he himself could not always carry out the implications.

God Did Not Dream of Christianizing the World

I am quite convinced that it never was the dream of God to Christianize the world. The more I think about it, the more strange I find the name of the journal called *The Christian Century*.

What a strange arrogance of American Christians at the beginning of this century! With a little help from God and American know-how, we would turn the world into a Christian world by the year 2000! God has his ways of correcting such arrogance. The Constantinian era is at an end, and the world has become global. That does not mean that Christianity should be just a western religion. I happen to believe that there should be a Christian presence everywhere in the world, just as there might be a Buddhist presence also.

We must recapture the meaning of mission, which is that of a witness and of a witnessing minority. Christians have inherited that from Israel. What effect that witness has in God's total scheme or plan we can leave to God. How God fits that witness into the total redemption of the world is too mysterious for us to fathom. Surely the answer is not to get everybody to become like us.

Israel has known that. There have been periods when Israel has been a missionary religion but never quite in the same way as Christianity. And when it has, it has often gotten second thoughts, and stressed the hurdles. Have you ever noticed that Jesus always used minority language when he speaks about these things? "You are the salt of the earth." Indeed, none of us would like to have a world that consisted only of salt. It just wouldn't be much fun. "You are the light of the world." Both of these are Jewish images grown out of the witnessing minorities in the total cosmos (of Isa. 49:6). Is there any party with whom we can counsel better about the risks and the glories and the pain and the joy and the experience of that kind of existence than Israel and the Jewish community? In this respect, we are very close indeed in our roots.

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