



# Saint Paul and the Jews

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**by Krister  
Stendahl**

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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