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| Apple, Raymond

Rabbi Raymond Apple offers a Jewish perspective on the Australian study document 'Re-Reading Paul.'

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Christian-Jewish dialogue is one of the great achievements of the second half of the 20th century, as the Holocaust is its great failure, and the two are inseparably intertwined. Largely spurred by the Holocaust, the dialogue has proceeded on many levels, quietly and less quietly, for fifty years now. It is far from having penetrated every church and synagogue, every Christian and Jewish heart and mind; but it continues to attract the involvement of many choice spirits, undeterred and undiscouraged by the moments of crisis and the voices of scorn or indifference.

One of the great advocates of the movement is Pope John Paul II. He and his church have constantly shown their commitment to reconciliation with Judaism and the Jewish people, despite the doubts of some of the arch-conservatives within Roman Catholicism and the criticism and reservations of some within the Jewish fold who are not yet sure of his motives and/or believe that his pace is not fast enough.

Where the message has to penetrate if it is to have an effect is the pulpits and schools, and, behind them, the institutions that train clergy and educators. Hence the importance of the 1995 Guidelines issued by C.C.J. Victoria; hence the importance of the continuing process of study and reflection that has ensued in the new Guidelines, "Re-Reading Paul".

What is the problem with Paul that creates difficulties for the Christian-Jewish relationship? Paul Johnson, in his *History of Christianity*, says clearly, "The apostle Paul ... was the first and greatest Christian personality ... the first pure Christian" (p.35). But there is a paradox – Paul is too Jewish for some ... and too anti-Jewish for others.

For Nietzsche, Paul is "the eternal Jew par excellence" ... as well as "a genius in hatred, ... [a] morbid crank". For the Nazis, he was "the evil rabbi Paul".

For Jews, he is the Jew who became the great enemy of Judaism. Kaufmann Kohler says that his theology was "far more pagan than Jewish in type". Solomon Schachter says, "Either the theology of the Rabbis must be wrong, its conception of God debasing, its leading motives materialistic and coarse, and its teachers lacking in enthusiasm and spirituality, or the Apostle to the Gentiles is quite unintelligible".

For Christians, he is the pioneer who broke away from the old Judaism for something far superior. As summed up by Paul Johnson, "Paul moved right across the religious conspectus, from narrow sectarianism to militant universalism and from strict legalism to a complete repudiation of the law – the first Christian to do so: not even Jews had gone so far. Paul"s gospel... could be seen to be alien to traditional Jewish thinking of any tendency even though it contained Jewish elements. For him the coming of Christ automatically ended the old Jewish law" (*A History of Christianity*, pp.36-38)

Especially from the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, Paul was seen as positing two diametrically opposed alternatives – a) the religion of "works" – Judaism, which sought God"s approval by doing commandments, and b) the religion of "faith" – Christianity, capable of receiving the Divine grace of salvation. Protestant theology became obsessed by the inferiority of Judaism as a religion of works, not only formal, burdensome and arid, but a curse too, because no one could keep it completely. The denigration of Judaism did not begin with Luther, but he was one of its rabid exponents: witness the horrible words, "Their synagogues should be set on fire. Their houses likewise should be broken down and destroyed. They should be deprived of their prayer books and their Talmud, in which idolatry, cursing and blasphemy are taught."

One wonders how much real knowledge of Judaism and its Torah the Christian theologians ever had. Was it in fact true that Judaism laboured under the heavy weight of gloomy and impossible duty? (Schachter remarked that a Jew who keeps the law simply does not recognize himself in the anti-Torah slogans, stereotypes and caricatures). Where is the recognition of the basic Jewish concept of *simohah shel mitzvah*, the joyous, exhilarating inspiration of the life of Divine commandments? Was it ever true that through the commandments, the Jews were seeking to bribe God? Or that Judaism had no concept of Divine grace without necessarily using Christian terminology to articulate it? Above all, did Judaism regard salvation in the same light as did Christianity, or stress reward in the world to come as more significant and valuable than life on earth?

Abraham Joshua Heschel said,

When I walk through the streets of a city and a Christian missionary meets me, the first question he asks me is: "What do you do for the salvation of your soul?" I have never thought of salvation, it is not a Jewish problem. My problem is what mitzvah I can do next. Am I going to say barachah? Am I going to be kind to another person? To study Torah? How am I going to prepare for the Sabbath? Those are my problems. The central issue in Judaism is the mitzvah, the sacred act. And it is the greatness of man that he can do a mitzvah. How great we are that we can fulfil the will of God!

What, then, does Judaism say about the world to come? We might perhaps borrow another phrase from Solomon Schachter "Leave a little to God": i.e. our life after death is God"s problem, not entirely ours, and that in its own way, is a Jewish concept of grace.

What was Paul"s view?

The question is not really addressed by the guidelines [*Re-Reading Paul*]. What sort of Jew actually was Paul? What was the Judaism he knew? Hyem Maccoby in *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*, 1986, argues that Paul, despite his own claims, was not a Pharisee, did not have an extensive knowledge of Judaism, may not even have been a Jew, and was "a Hellenistic adventurer, on the fringes of Judaism". Maccoby may not be entirely right, but the question of Paul"s Jewishness remains.

Whatever the answer, the guidelines report some of the leading Christian scholars who, beginning with W.D. Davies, in his *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1948), agree that Paul never actually repudiated Judaism and the Torah; he remained a practising Jew; he was not responsible for "the

rejection of the old Judaism and the discovery of a new religion wholly antithetical to it" ... despite his polemics. But after he encountered Christ, he regarded this as "the advent of the Messianic age of Jewish expectation," i.e. "the advent of the true and final form of Judaism" (p.324).

Others go further and say that Paul"s discussion of the commandments is a side issue. He was not offering an absolute, unequivocal judgment of Judaism for all, but was dealing with a limited agenda, a specific practice issue. The question he was concerned with was, do gentiles have to adopt the Jewish laws when they become Christians? And his answer, for a variety of reasons, was "no", arguing that adopting Jewish laws would not keep converts from reverting to their old pagan ways.

If this is right, it restores respect, legitimacy and value to Judaism for the Jews, even though Paul feels that Jews are in error in not recognizing and adopting the new faith.

This is part of the motif of the new guidelines. We might have expected more use to have been made of Jewish scholarship, and more attention to have been paid to the Judaism of the time, with all its variety and richness, as well as an attempt to address Maccoby"s question of what sort of Jew Paul really was, and how accurate was his understanding of Judaism. But the guidelines will undoubtedly encourage further scholarly investigation of these issues; above all, they will refine and redirect Christian preaching and reading about the New Testament presentation of Jews and Judaism, and advance the cause of honest scholarship, tolerant understanding and human harmony. The council of Christians and Jews Victoria deserves every praise and credit for its initiative, and every support in sharing its noble aims with people of goodwill. I am honoured to launch the publication. I wish it well.

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