



Qumran and Supersessionism — And the Road Not Taken

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The driving force behind supersessionism is the claim to the true, authentic, and only legitimate continuity to the inherited history. But when Christianity - and less directly Islam - fell heir to the Biblical tradition and coupled their supersessionist claims with universal assertions, the road was open for a mind set that led to crusades and jihad, pogroms and worse.' Is it possible 'for Christians and Muslims to fathom that Christianization, or Islamization, of the world might not be God's ultimate goal.'

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And the Road Not Taken

By Krister Stendahl

The topic that has been assigned to me — Qumran and Supersessionism — sends me to reflect not so much about the Qumran material as such, but about how my exposure to the Scrolls from Cave One in André Dupont-Sommer's seminar at l'École pratique des Hautes Études in Paris in the spring of 1951, started me on a life long quest for a better way to understand Jewish Christian interplay, and lack of interplay. Actually, from the beginning and through history and in the present that interplay is to a large extent marked and marred by supersessionism and its replacement mechanisms.

I. The Problem of Supersessionism: Qumran and Christianity

The Qumran texts and that whereof they speak can sharpen the analysis needed in a search for better ways. For in those texts one can see with great clarity that the driving force behind supersessionism is the claim to the true, authentic, and only legitimate continuity to the inherited history. At Qumran we see this claim intensified by high voltage eschatology with all the habits of demonizing the Other that comes with the territory; and the heightened standards of purity add weight to the claim as it is buttressed by divinely authorized (re)interpretation, (re)assessment and (re)adjustment of that tradition to which one claims to be the legitimate heir. The claim to exclusive continuity is the very spine of supersessionism.¹

The evidence for the analogous Christian claim to the true, exclusive, authentic, and legitimate continuity is certainly the Christian Bible itself with its Old and New Testaments. As James Sanders already has pointed out so well, the fact that the Church's Bible absorbed the Scriptures of the Jews, should not be seen as an act of a positive evolution of Judaism, but as *the* expression of Christian supersessionism

The way most Christian scholars today distinguish between the two Testaments is a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. It has also academic-sociological dimensions. Old and New Testament scholars keep different company. Even in the Society of Biblical Literature they seldom take part in one another's sessions. For scholarly purposes the Bible of the Christian Church is not any longer a unified whole. This relatively new development — after all, even Julius Wellhausen found it incumbent on himself to write significant commentaries on the Gospels — has intensified with the well-intentioned term "Hebrew Bible," which inadvertently feeds into a new form of Marcionism — giving Adolf von Harnack a posthumous victory. While it affirms the integrity of the Tanakh, it suggests that Christianity is equivalent to the New Testament. But the Christian Bible has two Testaments, an old and a new; by that very structure it makes its claim to continuity and hence legitimacy, i.e., it is exhibit A of Christian supersessionism.

In Qumran studies one finds extensive discussions about the status of the sectarian material. I would place much of it equal to the early Christian texts that became the New Testament. For these texts are the very material in which and by which the two communities make their respective claims to authentic continuity.

In the Christian case, the "sectarian documents," also known as the New Testament, show both the joy and the strain of a remarkable development, one that could not have been anticipated and that did not make it easy to claim continuity.

Take, for instance, the Galilean, self-evidently Jewish, Jesus movement, which in a surprisingly short time turns out to be what for all practical purposes must be seen as a predominantly Gentile movement. In any case the latter is the "Christianity" that produced the New Testament and for which it claims legitimate continuity. The "shift" is most stylized in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus forbids his disciples to go beyond the confines of Israel — but the final words of the Gospel send the apostles out to "all the Gentiles."

In this perspective "the parting of the ways" is perhaps best understood in "demographic" terms rather than due to specific questions of doctrine or even praxis. Already some twenty-five years after Jesus' ministry, Paul is puzzled by the phenomenon that only a small "remnant" of Jews have joined the movement while the Gentiles seem to be in the majority. And already in Paul's writings — which is to say in the earliest we have — Christ ("Messiah") is a name, not a messianic title, and the confession is not "Jesus is the Christ" but "Jesus is Lord." The operative theological terms are "Lord"² and "Son of God." To me, all this points to the ways in which the "Christianity" of the New Testament is a primarily Gentile phenomenon with its writings all Greek originals. The transition/transmutation must have put strain on the claim to continuity, a strain that could be expected to intensify the claim.

It must have gladdened the heart and mind of Paul when he came to think of how, in the book of Genesis, Abraham's faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness" — and that while Abraham was still a Gentile, circumcision occurring only "two chapters" later.³ What an exegetical/theological find! He introduced it by writing: "Do we then make Torah obsolete by our understanding the faith of Gentiles? God forbid! We claim to be true to the Torah (that is the Pentateuch), see Gen. 15..." (Rom. 3:31).

The logic of this thinking could actually have opened up a future in which Christianity could have both seen itself and been seen by Israel and the Nations as a "Judaism for Gentiles." But this was one road not taken. In such a model the supersessionism would have been overcome by a *benevolent* typology: There is a familiar shape to God's ways with the world, God's ever repeated attempts at the mending of what was broken, even restoring the *imago dei* in which humanity had been created. Such a benevolent typology would rejoice and marvel in the analogous shape of Passover and Easter, of Aqedah and Golgotha, of Sinai and the Sermon on the Mount. But the supersessionist drive forced typological interpretation into adversary patterns where the younger

had to trump and trounce the older.

In his study, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*,⁴ Jon D. Levenson has taken the discussion of supersessionism to a provocatively deeper level. He sees Judaism and Christianity “as two rival midrashic systems, competing for their common biblical legacy.” That competition “reenacts the sibling rivalry at the core of ancient Israel’s account of its own tortured origins.”⁵ In such a perspective the strain by which the Jewish Jesus movement became the Gentile Church looks less strange. But it is in the final paragraph of his preface that Levenson deepens the agenda most boldly for the relations between Judaism and Christianity:

Radically transformed but never uprooted, the sacrifice of the first-born son constitutes a strange and usually overlooked bond between Judaism and Christianity and thus a major but unexplored focus for Jewish-Christian dialogue. In the past this dialogue has too often centered on the Jewishness of Jesus and, in particular, his putative roles of prophet and sage. In point of fact, however, those roles, even if real, have historically been vastly less important in Christian tradition than Jesus’ identity as sacrificial victim, the son handed over to death by his loving father or the lamb who takes away the sins of the world. This identity, ostensibly so alien to Judaism, was itself constructed from Jewish reflection on the beloved sons of the Hebrew Bible, reflection that long survived the rise of Christianity and has persisted into the post-Holocaust era. The bond between Jewry and the Church that the beloved son constitutes is, however, enormously problematic. For the longstanding claim of the Church that it *supersedes* the Jews, in large measure continues the old narrative pattern in which a late-born son dislodges his first-born brothers, with varying degrees of success. Nowhere does Christianity betray its indebtedness to Judaism more than in its supersessionism.⁶

So what else is there? There is Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over his older brothers, Israel over Canaan — and the pattern continues, not only Church over Synagogue, but Islam over both Judaism and Christianity, Protestants over Catholics in the Reformation. In no case is complementarity or coexistence an option chosen; there is always the claim to exclusive legitimacy.

One of the meaningful events in our Qumran Jubilee celebration is the lifting up of passages from the writings of that community and using them for timeless reflection and even prayer. The beauty and spiritual insight in these selections and many others found in those caves is *awesome*. My Lutheran heart is warmed indeed when I make these words my own:

As for me,

my justification is with God.

In His hand are the perfection of my way

and the uprightness of my heart.

He will wipe out my transgression

through His righteousness.

For my light has sprung

from the source of His knowledge;

my eyes have beheld His marvelous deeds,

and the light of my heart, the mystery to come.

He that is everlasting

is the support of my right hand;

the way of my steps is over stout rock

which nothing shall shake;

for the rock of my steps is the truth of God

and His might is the support of my right hand. (1QS 11.2-5)⁷

Awesome indeed is such a hymn, full of spiritual beauty. But much is *awful* rather than awesome as Qumran eschatology escalates into apocalyptic hatred of the Other, an “(e)verlasting hatred in a spirit of secrecy for the men of perdition” (1QS 9.21-22).⁸

Such sentiments remind us that we are heirs to traditions which have — it seems — in their very structure the negation if not the demonization of the Other. So the serious theological question is: What to do? How to counteract the undesirable effects of the supersessionist instinct. Actually, “undesirable” is a pale euphemism when considering the cost in humiliations, sufferings, and lives throughout history.

Yet there is irony here in the ways supersessionism functioned when it was complete and when the reality of the Jewish people was not part of the conscious consciousness in Christian piety. I can witness to that from my own experience and that of the vast majority of Christians in the world where I grew up. A much beloved hymn for Holy Week can illustrate what I have in mind. It was written by Johann Hermann (ca. 1630) and is representative of the spirituality that forms a bridge between Medieval and Pietist spirituality:

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended,

that man to judge thee hath in hate pretended?

By foes derided, by thine own rejected,

O most afflicted.

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?

Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.

'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;

I crucified thee.

"It was I, Lord Jesus ... I crucified thee." That is how I remember my stance and mood on Good Friday. And the haunting questions in the refrain of the *Reproaches*: "O, my people, what have I done to thee? Or in what have I afflicted thee? Answer me!" — those questions likewise were heard as chastising our sins, made more grievous in contrast to God's generous acts — just as such words do when they first occur in the book of the prophet Micah.⁹

For generations that is how Christians have read their Bible. Generations were taught to apply the rule: *tua res agitur* — "it is your case that is dealt with." They have read the words of their Old Testament as directed to themselves, be it as human beings in general or as Christians in particular. Especially in their hymns and their liturgies have they spoken of themselves as Zion, as Jerusalem, as the sons (and daughters) of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as Israel. They have done so without feeling the need to supply "the New" before those glorious self-designations.

Yet one should note that there is a difference when this unconscious move of hermeneutics applies to New Testament texts. For here the designation "Jews" is locked into the construct "Jew = sinner = me qua sinner," including the sin of self-righteousness. The word "Jew" has negative tenor in the New Testament. Thus it is striking that when a positive connotation is called for as in the famous words about Nathaniel, then it says: "See, there is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile" (John 1:47). That is also consistent with the ways in which the church's identification with Israel in its reading of the Old Testament oscillates between the pattern of promise/fulfillment and of a more thoroughgoing supersessionism where the texts are read directly as about "the church" or "us" or "me." Often the same text can function in both ways simultaneously.

The irony with this type of supersessionism is, of course, that it is chemically free from any conscious anti-Judaism, but this is "achieved" by making the Jews and the Jewish community invisible, as if they did not exist. There is a mental obliteration. To use an anachronistic and heavy-laden term, such Christian readings of the Bible are *Judenrein*. Here is the ultimate supersessionism. Yet, it is harder to unmask since the subjective experience of its practitioner — and I was brought up to be one and must still admit to the spiritual power and beauty of that practice¹⁰ — is one of transcending the very anti-Judaism of which this spirituality is the ultimate expression. Here is irony indeed, or to use Jon Levenson's words, here is another "enormously problematic" facet of supersessionism. Thus I place another irony side by side with the irony that Levenson ponders when he speaks of supersessionism as a common bond. It is an enormously problematic bondage.

II. One Road Not Taken

I think of myself as writing an essay in the original sense of that word, an attempt, just trying to ask if there are insights in our traditions that point toward roads not (yet) taken.

One such insight comes from Israel's self-understanding, no doubt intensified by 2000 years of diaspora. Israel knows itself to be "a light to the Nations," to the Other; it knows itself to be a particular people, faithful to its covenant. Jews have never thought that God's hottest dream was that all people become Jews. I do believe that such faithful particularity is the key to religious existence in an irreducibly plural world, but since the Enlightenment such particularism, and not least Jewish particularism, has been much maligned for being parochial, tribal, and worse, while Christianity sought glory by claiming New Testament universalism over the particularism of the Old Testament. The Enlightenment loved the universal and loved the individual, but had little patience with anything in between. Hence the famous French dictum: "To the Jew as individual, everything — to the Jews as a people, nothing."

In a plural world, not least a religiously plural world, the universalist instinct and drive must come in for reassessment. To know oneself to be — at best — a light to the world, leaving universalism to God in whose eyes we are all minorities, is the humility that behooves all who have been touched by God. To believe Matthew's story, Jesus shared this perspective. "You are the salt of the earth" — but who wants the whole earth to become a salt mine? "You are the light of the world ..." All is striking minority language. In Maimonides the same perspective engenders the vision of Christianity and Islam as bearers of Torah to the Gentile world, and a venerable scholar of Rabbinic Judaism writes: "In their relations with other nations, most of the sages would have satisfied themselves with the declaration of Micah (4:5): 'For all people will walk every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.'"

When the Sages of Rabbinic Judaism increased the emphasis on covenantal faithfulness to Torah and *de facto* spurned apocalyptic and even eschatological speculation — the very trait that Qumran and Christianity have most in common — this particularism was affirmed and proved formative for 2000 years of diaspora living.¹¹

But when Christianity — and less directly Islam — fell heir to the Biblical tradition and coupled their supersessionist claims with universal assertions, the road was open for a mind set that led to crusades and *jihad*, pogroms and worse. In milder climes that same universalism makes it difficult for Christians and Muslims to fathom that Christianization, or Islamization, of the world might *not* be God's ultimate goal.

It is moving to remember that it is in the writings of Paul the Apostle — *the* missionary to the Gentiles — that one finds an unexpected opening, a door ajar to a road not taken. Toward the end of his ministry in the East he reflects on how the success of his mission to the Gentiles has made his converts feel superior to the Jews — to Israel, as he says, consciously using the more religious nomenclature. This makes him upset and he conjures up various metaphors to counteract such Christian hubris. Then he tells them a "mystery, lest you be conceited," and the mystery is that the salvation of Israel is assured and hence none of their business. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God." (Rom 11:11-36).

So Paul saw it, he had an inkling of the whole tragic history of Christian supersessionism. He who definitely was not ashamed of the Gospel, he saw what could go wrong with it. Perhaps because he had been burned once — it was out of religious zeal that he had persecuted the followers of Jesus, and he did not want to have it happen again — now in reverse.

Is there a road not taken? Yes, I think there is. For perhaps there is no need for Jews and

Christians to legitimize one another, nor to de-legitimize one another. Much of Jewish and Christian scholarship during the last fifty years, as it has been vitalized by the Scrolls, has stressed in various ways the Jewishness of Jesus and we do need to stress again and again that “Christianity” is a construct that had not yet been formed — especially in New Testament times¹² — and that the Jesus movement existed once as a Jewish “way” in Palestine and in the Diaspora. But with the problem of supersessionism before our eyes, by stressing the Jewishness of Christianity, the problem with Christian supersessionism is inadvertently intensified. The intra-Jewish tension intensifies the search for legitimizing one’s true continuity. Hence something must be said about the need for disentanglement of the two. In order to break the spine and the spell of supersessionism, we should carefully think about whether that habit of claiming continuity must not be coupled with an awareness that new things do emerge, developments that do not call for the legitimizing or de-legitimizing of the Other.

The road taken, the road of supersessionism has proven to be a dead end, even a road to death. The road not taken, but to which some signs within our traditions point, is worth our serious consideration.

Notes:

[1.](#) See James Sanders’ contribution to *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Volume I, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1998).

[2.](#) By “blessed ambiguity” the Septuagint’s (LXX) way of using *kyrios* for Yahweh allowed for “high christology” as Scripture’s words about God were applied to Jesus whenever it was deemed appropriate.

[3.](#) As usual, Paul quotes the LXX with its common translation *dikaiosyne* for *sedaqa* (Gen. 15:6). The JPS translation takes the verse into the continuity of Jewish tradition: “And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.”

[4.](#) Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, 232.

[6.](#) *Ibid.*, x.

[7.](#) The translation is taken from Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1997), 115.

[8.](#) *Ibid.*, 111. The combination of (secret) hatred and non-retaliation here and in the hymn in 1QS 10 has its New Testament parallel in Paul’s famous passage on non-retaliation as a “heaping of burning coals on the head of one’s enemy” (Rom. 12:20). See my article, “Hate, Non-retaliation, and Love: Coals of Fire,” HTR 55 (1962), 345-55, also in my *Meanings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 137-49.

[9.](#) The *Reproaches* and their precursors, dating back to Melito of Sardis¹ Sermon on the Passion (second century), are patterned after Micah 6:3: O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? For I brought you up from the land of Egypt ..."

[10.](#) While I have referred to my own experiences from growing up in Sweden, my work over the years with Christians from Asia and Africa has taught me that the hermeneutics I describe here seem to be a natural one even where there is no significant Jewish presence. The establishment of the State of Israel is changing all that by giving the Jewish people a presence on the global scene, making Jewish invisibility obsolete also in hermeneutics.

[11.](#) E. E. Urbach in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, 3 vols., eds. E. P. Sanders et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 2.298. I note with interest that Urbach renders the Micah text “*and we will walk,*” not “*but we will walk.*”

[12.](#) See Donald Juel’s contribution in *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

A paper delivered on 12 November 1997 at the conference on "Biblical Theology and the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Jubilee Celebration" at Princeton. It appeared in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, 1998, and is reproduced here by permission of the author.

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