

Jesus and Judaism

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The desire to consider Jesus from the perspective of Judaism may arise for various reasons. I have recently returned from New York City, where for years a formal and informal “Jewish-Christian dialogue” has been flourishing. Judaism is a major cultural force in New York, and the Church must relate to Jews if she is to engage the society in which she lives. Accordingly, this dialogue is not only historical and theological; its agenda is often determined by practical conflicts between Christians and Jews. A more purely theological root of the desire for such dialogue is, on the other hand, often expressed. The three great forms of biblical monotheism – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have so much in common, it is frequently claimed, that each should be able to learn from the others, and certainly should appreciate enough about the others to avoid the sickening instances of religious oppression which deface the histories of each. Finally, there is a sound historical reason for Jewish-Christian dialogue. Jesus was Jewish, and the New Testament was written during the most crucial period in the development of Judaism. As we will discuss, one cannot be adequately understood without reference to the other. This basic, historical side of Jewish-Christian dialogue is our present concern, although we would by no means deny the importance of its theological and pastoral aspects.

There is no doubt that Jesus was Jewish, not only ethnically, but also socially and theologically. We find him in the Gospels teaching and disputing as a rabbi, discussing questions of how Torah should be applied, using figures of speech and methods of argument also used by other rabbis. A recent volume by Geza Vermes, entitled *Jesus the Jew* (1973), represents a bold attempt to place Jesus in the context of Judaism. His work is subtitled, *A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*, and certainly to understand Jesus as a Jew is historically crucial.

Yet there are historical issues involved in his task which Vermes seems not to take adequate account of. He consistently uses the documents of rabbinic Judaism – Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash and Targum – in order to reconstruct a picture of Judaism in the time of Jesus. Such a practice makes some assumptions which are not justifiable. Mishnah was probably the first rabbinic collection to

take shape, towards the end of the second century A.D. It consisted of the views of various rabbis arranged by topic or by less evident principles of association. Mishnah was basic to rabbinic discussion, because it provided a precedent for the systematic preservation of what great teachers from the past had said. As Jacob Neusner observes in an article which appeared in the *Journal of Jewish Studies* (1980, p 146), "Mishnah is the first relevant document for the representation of Judaism as it presents itself, in the tradition it regards as authentic". In an earlier study, Neusner concluded that the rabbis had little interest in the development of Jewish religion in the time of Jesus, and only referred to individuals from that period as precedents in the attempt to settle disputes (*The Rabbinic Tradition About the Pharisees Before 70* [1971]). The characteristic concern of the rabbis was for the meaning of Torah in their own time; the past was for them a guide to that understanding, not a period of time about which one should have an historical interest. From the point of view of chronology, therefore, the procedure followed by Vermes is questionable. But this chronological difficulty is really only part of a larger issue. The Judaism of the rabbis developed in circumstances quite different from the Judaism of Jesus. Rabbinic Judaism differs from Jewish biblical religion largely because the institutional life of Israel was very different in the time of, say, Ezra from what it was in the time of a rabbi such as Johanan ben Zakkai, who was a key figure in the development of rabbinic Judaism. In the biblical period, the king and the Temple, both of which had their authorization from the Bible, were the foci of national devotion. In the rabbinic period, when both the monarchy and the cult had been swept away, a new orientation was necessary. This simple fact was openly acknowledged by the rabbis. Johanan ben Zakkai is said in Mishnah (Aboth 1:2) to have declared, as he looked on the site of the demolished Temple, that the atonement once made by means of Temple sacrifice was still available through deeds of faithful love. Incidentally, Johanan goes on in the passage to cite a text which Jesus also cherished, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). Judaism in the time of Jesus had an institutional element of Jewish biblical religion, in that the Temple cult still went on, but it also shared with rabbinic Judaism the disorienting lack of a biblically sanctioned ruler. For this reason, "early Judaism" seems to be the best designation for Jewish religion in this period. But whatever designation we use, we must observe that the Judaism represented in rabbinic literature is different in chronology and style from the early Judaism represented by such documents as the New Testament, some of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and the finds from Qumran. Vermes does not do justice to this fact, and his lapse is compounded by his insis-

tence on calling the fourth Gospel “remote from the Jesus of history in time and style” (p 16). It is difficult to avoid the impression that different standards are here being applied to the New Testament from those Rabbinica is subjected to, and this hardly helps his case.

The diversity of Judaism in the first century is obvious from the sources. Although the rabbis referred to their predecessors as if their Judaism progressed in an unbroken line of succession from Moses, Jewish documents from the first century and earlier present a different picture. A few examples will perhaps suffice to illustrate this point. The famous discoveries at Qumran evidence a style of biblical interpretation rather unlike the rabbis’, a peculiarly antagonistic view of contemporary worship in the Temple, and a model of Jewish hierarchy manifestly dissimilar to that described or presupposed in Mishnah. Books such as *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch* show us that some Jews – in a distinctly non-rabbinic manner – actually produced literary works in the names of prominent biblical figures which purported to depict the events leading up to God’s final intervention in history. The first century Jewish historian Josephus generally describes three groups of Jews, Essenes, Sadducees and Pharisees, which he likens to philosophical schools (*Jewish Wars* II 8; *Antiquities* XVIII 8), and he contrasts their teachings on such fundamental matters as the place of fate in Israel’s faith. As if this picture of diversity were not sufficiently complex, Josephus refers to all three groups in this context in order to insist that a certain revolutionary, Judas the Galilean, belonged to none of them. The early Judaism of Jesus’ time seems to have been so heterogeneous that to claim his continuity or discontinuity with the religion of his day in general terms is problematic in the extreme: in almost anything he did or said, he would have been accepted by some Jews and rejected by others.

The rabbis, however, did not invent Judaism *de novo*. They were methodical traditionalists who handed on the views of predecessors. This process, conservative by nature, occasioned rabbinic interpretation as old and revered principles were applied to new situations. One such principle, ascribed to Hillel, a first century rabbi, has an obvious analogy in the teaching of Jesus. In the Talmud (Shabbath 31a), a heathen is said to come to Shammai (Hillel’s contemporary and major competitor) asking to be taught the whole of Torah while the would-be proselyte stood on one foot (that is, in a very brief time). Shammai, true to his character as it is reflected in Rabbinica, repulsed the man with a measuring rod. Undaunted, the Gentile put the same proposal to Hillel, who said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole

Torah, while the rest is commentary thereon. Go and learn it". There is no question of an exact identity between this story and Matthew 7:12 (its nearest parallel in the New Testament), but that a kindred attitude is brought to expression in the two passages is obvious, as was discussed long ago by George Foot Moore (*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* [1927] II, 86-88). Nonetheless, recent books on the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish religion of his day, such as that by John Riches (*Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* [1980], 131), can refer to Matthew 7: 12 as if it were altogether startling in a Jewish context without even citing Shabbath 31a.

Moore also refers to a number of stories about Hanina ben Dosa, another contemporary of Jesus who was a notable healer (I, 377-378). Several of these are also mentioned by Geza Vermes (pp 72-78), who unfortunately omits to cite Moore's classic work. Perhaps the Hanina story most conspicuously similar to one told of Jesus (cf John 4:46-53; Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) is given in the Talmudic tractate Berakhoth (34b). It is there related that Rabbi Gamaliel's son fell ill, and he sent two emissaries to Hanina with the request that he pray for the child. Hanina prayed in an upper room, came down, and told the emissaries the fever had departed. They asked Hanina whether he were a prophet. He replied most emphatically that he was not, but that experience had taught him that when his prayer came easily, it was accepted. The emissaries noted the hour in writing and returned to Gamaliel, who told them that at just the time they had noted the fever had subsided and his son had asked for water.

Rabbinica abounds with material which is comparable with passages in the New Testament. Readily available volumes set out the evidence in a way which permits the reader to consider it fairly easily; the work of Paul Billerbeck (1922-1928) must be mentioned in this regard. Of course, when using compendia of this kind, one can form misimpressions of rabbinic teaching: passages are cited only briefly, and recourse to an edition of the work in question is necessary to put readings in context. Then, too, Billerbeck — along with many scholars in his time — conceived of Judaism as a legalistic religion, and his judgment does seem to have influenced his selection of the evidence. In a recent book, entitled *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), E P Sanders argues cogently that we should understand law in Judaism, not as a means of earning God's favour, but as a way of remaining within the covenant graciously bestowed by God on Israel. Accordingly, he calls in question the basis on

which Billerbeck worked, and rightly argues that this unrivalled handbook should be used as a means of access to Rabbinica, not as an excuse for not reading it (pp 42 ff).

Neither Sanders' criticisms nor those of others with a similar effect, however, have vitiated the essential insight which Billerbeck's monumental volumes so authoritatively convey: the Judaism of the rabbis is comparable to a great deal in the New Testament, especially when we set Jesus' teaching and ministry alongside the views and actions attributed to first century rabbis. This insight, and its substantial affirmation by Billerbeck, is what underlies contributions such as that by Geza Vermes. Neusner's strictures in respect of Mishnah as a basically specialist and, from the point of view of New Testament studies, late source are crucially important, however, since without them the student can be led to an anachronistic reading of the evidence. But we would be pressing Neusner's critique to the point of ignoring the evidence to hand were we to deny the degree of similarity and continuity which Billerbeck, Vermes and others have shown to exist between the New Testament and Rabbinica.

The New Testament itself is a vital source for the understanding of the development of Judaism: the earliest description of Palestinian synagogue practice, for example, is presented in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Not until the end of the first century (according to Berakhoth 28b), by which time the bulk of the New Testament had achieved a form which we would easily identify with the documents as we know them, was a clause added to the standard daily prayer (called the Eighteen Benedictions) which called down destruction on the *noserim* (that is, followers of the Nazarene). Of course, no disciple of Jesus could have participated in the liturgy of a synagogue in which such a form of prayer was used, and insofar as the innovation instituted by the rabbis at Yavneh was accepted, the mission to the synagogue, so prominent earlier in the century (as Acts attests), must effectively have been stifled. Although no doubt it was born of the growing tension between Jews who followed Jesus and those who did not (which the New Testament also reflects at many points), this official move was decisive both for Judaism and the Church. For the former it implied the programmatic rejection of Christian claims in the exposition of Torah; for the latter, already a largely Gentile movement, it meant that the umbrella of Judaism, under which shelter could be taken to avoid the requirement to participate in the im-

perial cult, was removed, and persecution by the Romans was no longer to be delayed. Of these events, however, neither Jesus nor his followers before the last quarter of the first century had to take account; for them the notion of a Church independent of the synagogue would have seemed as odd as that of a synagogue in which the claims of Jesus could not be discussed.

Just as the student of Jesus' life must take account of the fact that there is an element of interpretation in the Gospels which better reflects the faith of the Church than the teaching of Jesus, so the student of early Judaism must learn to sift through the literature of rabbinic Judaism without assuming that he has direct access to Jewish religion as it was in the first century. Although one might wish we had easier access to Jesus and the Judaism of his day, the simple fact is that we do not. Critical reflection on all the extant sources is required, and – because critical reflection can never take the place of hard data – even after this requirement has been met, there will be elements of doubt and uncertainty. Nonetheless, for both Christian and Jewish scholars, the rediscovery of early Judaism is a pressing task, and one in which co-operation is possible and practical.

Until scholars face up to this obviously important task, we will necessarily accept that some of our judgments on the nature and content of Jesus' ministry are provisional. But that gives us no reason to suppose that Jesus' relation to the Judaism of his day is completely unclear. The foundational importance of the Old Testament to his theology is evident, and such dominical contacts with the sayings and practices of other rabbis as we have mentioned are easily demonstrable. Unless and until Jesus' deliberate departure from the religious conventions of his day can be proven, a critical approach requires that we assume he was a monotheist who accepted the Torah as basic to his faith.

Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God tends to confirm the propriety of this assumption. I have argued elsewhere that this preaching finds its closest analogy in the Aramaic Targums, paraphrases of biblical books written in the language of the generality of Jews in order to aid their understanding of synagogue readings. In the Targums, "the kingdom of God" is the phrase used when God is spoken of as revealing himself on behalf of his people. Essentially, it is a matter of his powerful self-disclosure, and that seems to be the burden of Jesus' message (*God in Strength: Jesus' Announcement of the Kingdom* [1979]). Since coming to that conclusion, the majority of my research time has been spent on

the Targum to Isaiah, where most of the kingdom references in the Targums as a whole are to be found. In a volume which is to appear in the spring (*The Glory of Israel: the Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum*), I maintain that, although the Targum as a document did not take shape until the fourth century A.D. definite strata within it reflect early Judaism in the first century. This work has, in turn, served as the basis of a comparison between Jesus and the Isaiah Targum, and I hope this study – in which Jesus' use of Targum's tradition is cited and explained in detail – will be published shortly (*A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible: Jesus and the Targum to Isaiah*). A detailed consideration of the evidence I have discussed in those volumes is obviously not possible here, but the basic point can be made that, on the analogy with the Targums, Jesus' announcement of the kingdom was essentially an announcement about God himself. The tendency in Christian theology since the time of Origen (who explained Jesus as the kingdom itself) has been to attempt to reduce the kingdom to some other, preferably christological concept. This is obviously the case in the "realized eschatology" of C H Dodd, where the kingdom becomes equated with the incarnation. Less openly, but to the same effect, Joachim Jeremias has used the phrase "self-realizing eschatology" in order to describe Jesus' preaching of the kingdom. By speaking in these terms, Jeremias shifts the emphasis away from what Jesus says to the importance of the one who says it: the issue for him is more our reaction to Jesus' message than his actual preaching. Similarly, the emphasis of Bultmann and his followers, even though they speak of the kingdom as being purely future in Jesus' preaching, actually falls on the decision the hearer must make today in the face of the Christ event. Within all three systems, Jesus' kingdom preaching is used as the vehicle for christological assertions, and in each case the primary, religious meaning of his preaching, that God is in fact acting on behalf of his people, is overlooked. The point is not that Dodd, Jeremias or Bultmann has deliberately distorted his exegesis in order to accord with his own theological orientation. Exegesis must always be conducted within some more or less well-defined understanding of the basic reality which the texts in question are designed to address. In the absence of an appreciation of the early Judaism which nurtured Jesus, New Testament scholars will inevitably read their documents within the context of the faith which emerged at the *end* of the New Testament period. For certain texts, such as the Pastorals,

this is obviously all well and good. But viewed from the point of view of the beliefs and practices which he took as normative, Jesus was more a Jew than a Christian, so that his preaching is better contexted within the framework of early Judaism than within the Christianity which emerged as a result of the interaction between early Judaism, Jesus, and his Jewish and then Gentile followers. For far too long, Jesus has been seen almost reflexively as a partisan of Pauline Christianity, and he has been contrasted with all things Jewish in a most exaggerated and irresponsible fashion. But the power of Jesus' teaching and person was that he did not require such a prejudicial perspective for his hearers to appreciate his insights about God. Simply as Jewish monotheists, imbued with the Bible and God's promise to Israel, they understood his message, and enough of them assented to it and actively promulgated it so that Christianity had emerged by the end of the century. It would be narrow and doctrinaire to say that the whole of Christianity must be related directly to what Jesus said, or else shelved as a later accretion. But any faith which claims to be grounded in his message must surely attempt to understand his preaching in the historical context in which it was initially spoken. From that perspective, we will be in a better position to understand the development of Christian faith, and all the more so, as we will have had the chance to see whether we would assent to it from its wellsprings.

Reviews

ERRATUM

BREAKTHROUGH: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation. Introduction and Commentaries by Matthew Fox. *Image Books*. 1980. pp 578 \$7.95.

In the April 1982 number of *New Blackfriars*, page 197, column 1, line 16, "accuracy" should be "inaccuracy".

SIMON TUGWELL O P

BUBER ON GOD AND THE PERFECT MAN by Pamela Vermes. *Brown Judaic Studies* 13, *Scholars Press*, Chico, California, 1980. (Obtainable in G.B. from the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Oriental Institute, Oxford). pp 271 £5.25 paperback.

This is primarily a work on spirituality, and it abounds in deep insights into human nature, its needs and possibilities. As the title indicates, the author finds her inspiration in the thought of Martin Buber, but she reaches behind him to reveal the