

Over the last century or more questions of Jesus' place within Judaism and Christianity have been fiercely debated. Was Jesus a devout Jew firmly located within the Jewish traditions he inherited and within the ongoing tradition of the Mishnah and the Talmud? Or was Jesus the founder of Christianity, the figure to whose profoundly innovative religious insights Christianity owes its very soul? Some scholars who take the second point of view insist that Jesus is to be sharply contrasted with his contemporary Judaism.

Classic examples of this latter, Christian, approach can be found in Adolf von Harnack's book *What is Christianity?*, which attempts to answer the question in the title historically, by giving a sketch of Jesus' religion which is starkly contrasted with the religion of his contemporaries: 'They [the Jewish leaders] thought of God as of a despot guarding the ceremonial observances in His household; he [Jesus] breathed in the presence of God. They saw Him only in His law, which they had converted into a labyrinth of dark defiles, blind alleys and secret passages; he saw and felt Him everywhere'.¹ Among Jewish scholars Geza Vermes has given an account of *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*² as faithfulness to and imitation of God. He sees it as central to the Jewish tradition and asserts sharply the gulf between such a religion and the Christological beliefs of the Christian creeds.

One of the features of these debates which has led to confusion is the assumption that there is a direct correlation between Jesus' assumed Jewishness and the extent to which he took over and made his own Jewish beliefs and language of the time. Harnack was willing to acknowledge that there were analogies between Jesus' use of the term 'Kingdom of God' and contemporary apocalyptic uses, but he saw such language [and the beliefs which it expressed] as only the husk of Jesus' true religion, whose kernel was to be found in his teaching of the coming of the Kingdom of God into men and women's hearts 'as a still and mighty power'. (56)

Other scholars have portrayed Jesus as someone who adopted largely unchanged the ideas of at least one contemporary group. Weiss³ argued that, like the writer of the Assumption of Moses, he proclaimed that the expected triumph of God over Satan was at hand and that men and women needed only to repent and to await the coming glory. Geza Vermes has argued for the close similarities between Jesus and Galilean 'men of deed:' Jesus should be seen as a 'charismatic healer-teacher-prophet'. Neither of these two latter scholars wishes to deny that there is a freshness to Jesus' use of language but nevertheless they both present it as fundamentally in continuity with contemporary use.

But must there be identity between Jesus' linguistic use and that of his contemporaries if he is to be seen as a faithful, devout Jew? Religious traditions are constantly undergoing change [and development] and this is reflected in the language which is used to give them expression. It is true that language works on the basis of an agreement among its speakers to use words and sentences in a certain regular way. But linguistic conventions are flexible: substantial modifications occur with some frequency; irony, humor and metaphorical uses are other more common ways of stretching the semantic range of a given language. Was there linguistic innovation by both Jesus and other contemporary Jewish figures?

The early first century figure, Judas the Galilean, was using kingship language in one way when he proclaimed that God alone was King and urged Jews therefore to refuse to pay taxes to Caesar and to take up arms against the Romans. Similarly, when Jesus announces the Kingdom of God at the same time as sharing table fellowship with 'tax-collectors and sinners' he is not only questioning the belief that God's rule would be established only when his enemies were defeated, but prompting his contemporaries to think through the meaning of God's forgiveness, which is of course a notion central to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Further evidence for this attempt to deepen understanding of God's justice and mercy is to be found in Jesus' often very sophisticated use of metaphor in the parables. None of this is, however, to suggest that either Judas or Jesus were not devoted Jews.

The implications of such an approach for Jewish-Christian understanding are I think considerable. Faithfulness to a religious tradition is not simply a matter of conservation of inherited forms. In so far as a religion is a living tradition which enables men and women to make sense of their experience under God and to continue their search for the truth, in the light of changed circumstance and fresh insights. Jesus is by no means unique: the question which his freshness and originality poses for both Jews and Christians who

wish to claim him for themselves is how far they are willing to listen to the deep and disturbing questions which he has to put. How far do they have ears to hear?

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1 A. von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986, p. 50.

2 London: SCM 1993.

3 *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.