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When *Jesus The Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Collins, London, 1973/Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993) first appeared in print, I claimed in all honesty that it was the work of detached scholarship, written without denominational bias. If it was a "Jewish" book, this was because it was based on "a specialized knowledge of the history institutions, languages, culture and literature of Israel, of the age in which (Jesus) lived." I fear that a fair number of Christian readers never really believed this statement, and suspected a hidden agenda in the book. Yet, having recently published the third volume of the trilogy *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993), I still wholeheartedly maintain that the fundamental inspiration of this research was to set the historical record straight concerning Jesus of Nazareth.

The main problem facing a sympathetic, yet religiously detached, historian who confronts the New Testament is this. The pocket book which contains the Christian Scriptures offers two different pictures of Jesus. The Gospels of Matt, Matthew and Luke, notwithstanding all their subsequent theological coloring, still allow a genuine glimpse of a first century C.E. Jewish holy man, preacher, healer, exorcist, delivering ad hoc moral exhortations to Galilean peasants and fishermen in the context of an intense expectation of the impending arrival of 'the Kingdom of God'. By contrast, the letters of Paul and the Fourth Gospel sketch an increasingly other-worldly redeemer figure, the center of the preoccupations of the primitive Church. When one sketch is superimposed on the other, it becomes clear that they have little in common.

*Jesus the Jew* set out to explore the figure of the historical Jesus against the backcloth of the political and social history of inter-Testamental Galilee and against Jewish Charismatics. Honi, the first century B.C.E. rain-maker, was one of them and so was also Hanina ben Dosa, who in the first century C.E., cured the sick and the needy and earned the reputation of being a benefactor of mankind. The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels is perfectly at home in their company and, in turn, they provide his picture with genuine credibility. What is more, when several of the titles given to Jesus in the Gospels, such as Prophet, Lord and even Son of God, are examined historically, they are all applicable to a holy man of this type. Hence, it would seem, Jesus can best be defined as an outstanding Galilean charismatic Hasid.

I know that my insistence on viewing Jesus in exclusively Jewish religion-cultural and exclusively Semitic (Aramaic-Hebrew) linguistic context contradicts present day trends concerning a thoroughly Hellenized Judaism and a deeply Hellenized Galilee, with Cynic-type street preachers propounding, not a Jewish eschatological message about the Kingdom of God, but words of wisdom of universal nature. I believe these trends are misconceived. Apart from Greek cities and the very top layer of the population (people like Josephus and Justus of Tiberias), Hellenization

in the cultural-educational sense was superficial in Palestine. No one is going to believe that Jewish children were brought up on a mixture of Homer and the Bible in Jewish schools!

The spread of the Greek language in the Aramaic or Hebrew speaking hinterland must have been equally limited.

As for the latest Cynic trend among New Testament scholars, I go along with Anthony Harvey's view that "there is no evidence of any kind (and, many would say, little probability) that Cynics ever penetrated into Galilee and Jerusalem or that Jesus could ever have encountered them." Henry Chadwick, one of the greatest living experts on Christian antiquity, sees the weakness of the Cynic theory not just in the lack of evidence for Cynics in Galilee, but in "the under-weighting of texts pre-supporting dissimilarity." With gentle British sarcasm he remarks, "We do not hear of missionaries copulating in the streets."

My claim that Jesus was an outstanding Galilean Hasid immediately provoked the question: Do you mean to say that Jesus was just one of the Hasidim and nothing more? But those who accuse me of such reductionism ignore the Postscript of Jesus the Jew, which speaks of the "incomparable superiority" of Jesus when his teaching is taken into account. Untouched in that volume, the message of Jesus was subsequently investigated in three lectures on The Gospel of Jesus the Jew in 1981 and more fully in The Religion of Jesus the Jew (Fortress, Minneapolis, 1993). The reconstruction of the genuine preaching of Jesus constitutes a grave challenge to historians because of the nature of the Synoptic Gospels. They incorporate many successive layers of tradition and contemporary New Testament specialists often shy away from what they see as a frightening conundrum. Yet if a comprehensive recreation of the message is beyond our means, it is not unreasonable to expect that by approaching it dynamically and critically within the evolution of the religious thinking of Judaism from the Hebrew Bible, through the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Josephus, rabbinical literature, synagogal liturgy and early Jewish mysticism, and focusing also on internal consistency something reliable and significant can be determined as far as the main lines of Jesus' teaching were concerned.

The salient points are as follows:

Jesus did not reject the Jewish Law. He sometimes disagreed with its interpretation or application by some of his contemporaries, but they also disagreed among themselves. As an heir of the prophetic tradition, he concerned himself above all with the Torah, inasmuch as it revealed a divinely ordained behavior towards men and towards God. He did not break the Sabbath or oppose the food laws as such. He clashed with others in cases of conflicting religious duties: they opted for one alternative and he for the other. But surely no Gentile Christian would ever have made Jesus proclaim that "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the Law to drop"! Yet it is in Luke (16:17) that this saying is found. Where

Jesus truly excelled was in his emphasis on the inner moral and religious significance of the Mosaic commandments, thus disclosing their ultimate purpose, an uninterrupted life of holiness before the Face.

The symbolic framework of Jesus' message was the Kingdom of God, a mysterious reality which he never bothered to define. Neither did he assert, or even suggest, when this Kingdom would materialize. For him, the only task of real significance was what he and his companions were to do in the present, convinced as he was that it was already part of the eschatological age. How figurative this "Kingdom" imagery is may be seen from Jesus' lack of interest in a "royal" God, or a heavenly war lord. His God, the one depicted in many parables is a forgiving and caring Father. For Jesus, "the eternal, distant, dominating and tremendous Creator is also and primarily a near and approachable God" (*The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, 180).

For Christianity, as creeds, dogma and councils show, Jesus is the object of religion, but in the earliest Gospel account he is first and foremost a religious man. The dominating feature of his religion was an undiluted eschatological enthusiasm in which future had no place, and everything had to be centered on the lived moment. His religion begins with teshuvah, or turning (repentance), feeds on einunah, or faith-trust, and expresses itself in the imitation of God: "Be merciful as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). This is an individualistic religion in which the penitent outcasts, the publicans and prostitutes, gain precedence over those professing bourgeois respectability.

In my judgment, oceans seem to separate the God-centered (theocentric) and existential religion, preached and practiced by Jesus, from Christocentric and dogmatic Christianity. The death of Jesus on the cross demanded an increasing exaltation of a Galilean holy man. The itinerant preacher, this familiar figure in Capernaum, Chorazin and the lakeside, would have been mystified by the Church's creeds, defining him as "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father". He would have been equally nonplussed if told that he was the founder of Christianity for "if he meant and believed what he preached, namely that the eternal Kingdom of God was truly at hand, he simply could not have entertained the idea of...setting in motion an organized society intended to endure for ages to come" (*The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, pp. 214-5).

Jesus challenges both Jews and Christians. Jews will have to confront the age-old taboo on Jesus, already declared "absurd" in *Ha'amtz*, a leading Israeli newspaper by Magen Broshi in his review of *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. As for thinking Christians, the greatest challenge which they have to confront comes not from materialism, agnosticism or atheism, but from within: from Mark, Matthew and Luke through whom speak the chief challenger, Jesus the Jew. Whether this challenge will be accepted only time will tell. But meanwhile, in the closing words of *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*: The magnetic appeal of the teaching and example of Jesus holds out hope and guidance to those outside the fold of organized religion, the stray sheep of

mankind, who yearn for a world of mercy, justice and peace lived in as children of God.