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A Response by JOHN T. TOWNSEND

to

JUDAISM: THE CHRISTIAN PROBLEM

by

COERT RYLAARSDAM = "The Two Covenants
and the Dilemmas of Christology" (7)
Oct. 1971

My basic response to Coert Rylaarsdam's paper is one of agreement. We Christians indeed increasingly need to take other religions, especially Judaism, into account as we do our theology. Rylaarsdam is certainly right in warning us against religious imperialism, and we tend to foster such imperialism in many seminaries by not exposing our students to serious encounter with other religious traditions.

Before proceeding with a discussion of the central issue of Rylaarsdam's paper, let me list some relatively minor points which appear doubtful.

1. In view of our history of anti-Jewish persecutions, it is difficult to agree that "Judaism has constituted a far more serious problem to the Christian than Christianity for the Jews" (p. 1). Of course Rylaarsdam is thinking only in theological terms, but for most Jews Christian actions have spoken louder than Christian theology.
- q. I doubt whether many New Testament scholars would agree that "The New Testament was produced by Jews" (p. 1). One can hardly be certain that the authors of Luke-Acts

or Hebrews were Jewish born.

3. Regarding the belief that the Church displaced the Synagogue (p. 3), there may be some exceptions, especially if one considers groups no longer regarded as orthodox today. Such groups would include sects labeled today as Jewish-Christian, but even within New Testament versions of Christianity there are hints that the concept of an exclusive Christianity displacing Judaism may be an oversimplification.¹
4. Regarding the universalism of the prophets (pp. 3f.), apart from Jonah, were the prophets so evenhandedly ecumenical as Rylaarsdam implies? First Zechariah (= Zech. 1-8) concludes with "Thus says the Lord of Hosts: In those days [it shall come to pass] that ten people from among all the tongues of the gentiles shall grasp the skirt of a Jew, saying: Let us go with you for we have heard that God is with you."²
5. Regarding the new Christian sect being "almost exclusively preoccupied with an interpretation of the 'Christ event' . . ." (p. 5), such a view ignores Christian apologists like Theophilus of Antioch (d. after 181), who

¹Re Jewish Christians, see, e. g., Eusebius, HE 2:23 on James the Just. Re. New Testament, see James, also below, p. 9.

². See also Is. 45:14ff.; 47:1ff.

far from stressing the Christ event, even explained the name "Christian" as meaning "Anointed with the oil of God" (1:12).³

As for the Christological emphasis within the New Testament, one should remember that unlike Marcion, a large number of Christians never intended the New Testament to stand apart from the Old. In fact, one might have described the New Testament as the Christian supplement for interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. In a similar way Rabbinic Jews have seen Torah she-be'al Pe (oral Law) as the key to interpreting Torah she-bikhtav (Scripture).

6. Finally, it is doubtful whether one can explain all the religious exclusivity within the New Testament as merely "the language of the faithful within the community" (p. 11). It is certainly true that the New Testament books generally represent documents to be read by the faithful, but there is little reason to suppose that such statements on occasion did not represent what their authors really believed about the exclusiveness of the Christian message. Rylaarsdam is certainly correct, however, in affirming

³See also the apologies of Tatian (d. after 172), Athenagoras of Athens (d. c. 177), and Minucius Felix (2nd or 3rd century), along with the Epistle to Diognetus (2nd century).

that such statements offer "no firm guidance for defining the Christian relationship to other faiths, least of all to Israel" (p. 11).

The last point can also be seen as central for both this paper and for Jewish-Christian dialogue more generally. There is a conflict between what Christians have traditionally believed and what many of us are now experiencing in our encounters with people practicing other religions. Significant theology tends to arise out of two such areas of apparent conflict, and the conflict here lies between what we once may have learned regarding Christian exclusivism and our experience of Jews in our daily lives. On the one hand we read in John 14:6 that Jesus is the one way, the one truth, and the one life leading to the Godhead and that there is no other way. On the other hand, many of us have come to know intimately quite a few Jewish saints, saints who exhibit the fruits of a life in God. Yet the way of such saints has been Torah and not Christ. Of course, such a conclusion about a person's relation to God can only be based on personal experience, but this experience is what God has given us to work with. I for one cannot deny the fact that certain of my Jewish friends have a relation to God as intimate as that of any Christian I have known. They have arrived where the way of Christ leads, but they have come by a different way. Another statement of the

lies behind an honest question put to me after a church service several years ago. "Why is it," a parishioner asked, "that the most Christian women in my Red Cross group are Jews?"

One way to face this conflict is to reconsider the nature of Christian election. In what sense are we Christians God's chosen people? Traditionally Christians have assumed that to be of God's elect is to be saved and not to be of the elect is to experience something less than full salvation. In the past those who have held this view of election have tacitly assumed that the world already was or soon would be essentially Christianized.⁴ The early Church, of course, was fully aware that it represented but a small minority in the Roman world; nevertheless, they expected to rectify the matter without undue delay. Such a view seems to prevail in Luke-Acts, where Acts 1:8 gives assurance that the witness of Christ is spreading from Jerusalem, throughout Judaea and Samaria, till it reaches the end of the earth (presumably Rome). Later, after the influx of new Christians following the Edict of Milan (313) and still later throughout the middle ages, we Christians proceeded on the assumption that the largely Christian "civilized" world⁶ was the

⁴ There are, however, sects like Jehovah's Witnesses who are quite ready to believe that the number of elect are very few indeed.

⁵ Origen also believed that one might turn to salvation after death (*De princ.* 1:6:1; 3:4-6; *Contra Cels.* 8:72. For a somewhat similar view of Paul, see my "I Corinthians 3:15 and the School of Shammai, *HTR* 61(1968), pp. 500-504.

⁶ At least intellectually the Byzantine-Muslim areas were the maintainers of civilization during the middle ages.

only world that really mattered. Exceptions were readily explained. The few Jews who had managed to survive our persecutions had to survive until the eschaton so as to fulfil the prophecy of their conversion at that time. As for Islam, whenever we thought about that, we could always send another crusade. Then a few centuries ago we suddenly awakened to the fact that whole segments of humankind had never heard the Christian Gospel. With great industry we set at work to correct the oversight as quickly as possible. "The world for Christ in our generation" ultimately became our slogan; yet today such slogans have a somewhat hollow ring. After a couple of centuries of the most intense missionary effort, the current World Almanac lists those recorded as Christians to comprise slightly over twenty-two percent of the world population. Even in terms of salvation history, two millenia seems a reasonably long period, about eight hundred years longer than from Moses to Christ. If God really intended all peoples to confess Jesus Christ, the plan is hardly succeeding.

Considering the present state and extent of the Church and considering the fact that many Jews, as well as followers of other religions, exhibit the fruits of righteous God fearers, we ought perhaps to rethink the purpose and mission of the Church. More specifically, we might consider what we mean by Christian election. Such consideration can gain from observing how Jews

have traditionally approached election. They have had to face being a minority at least from the destruction of the Second Temple in the year seventy up to the founding of the modern state of Israel. Moreover, their minority status has generally been accompanied with various forms of persecution. It is not surprising that Jews commonly believe that election like ordination need not, indeed should not, imply privilege. Only too often the Jew has found himself in the position of Tevye from the Fiddler on the Roof and crying out words like, "God, if this is how you treat your chosen people, I prefer not to be chosen." As early as New Testament times there were Jews who saw their election in terms of a priesthood ministering to all peoples.⁷ In other words, for the Jew election has tended to be something other than a ticket to salvation (cf. Rom. 8:28-38); and such nonsalvific view of election makes possible the views of people such as Franz Rozenzweig and more recently our colleague Paul van Buren.

This nonsalvific view of election as well as Coert Rylaarsdam's major thrust raises several questions, but let me limit my treatment to three of them along with their implications for continuing Jewish-Christian dialogue. The three questions are

1. Does such a theology rule out evangelism?

⁷For example, the Jerusalem temple was understood by many Jews as an institution partly for the benefit of gentiles, and there the water rites of the Feast of Tabernacles provided rain for the whole world. Note that such a view of Jewish election is alluded to in Rom. 3:1, but cf. Rom. 9:4f.

2. Can it be regarded as biblical?

3. Cur Deus homo? or, more generally, what need is there for a Christ?

The question of evangelism is very much a sore point with Jews as evidenced by the antiproselytizing legislation passed not too long ago in Israel. Given past Jewish experience of Christian proselytizing, Jews have every reason for suspecting any Christian overture in their direction. For practical reasons, therefore, missionary efforts involving Jews are likely to do more harm than good. It is possible, however, and necessary to discuss the question of evangelism more generally.

Other religions besides Judaism also have their saints who have been led to God apart from Christ. In India, for example, one thinks of Mahatma Gandhi or other holy people who exhibit the fruits of knowing God. Surely it would be an error to evangelize such people; yet, many others in India have never shared the joy of knowing God. Certainly it is our ministry to provide the opportunity. Christ may not be the only way to the Godhead, but Christ certainly is a true way that many have successfully travelled. We ought to recognize, however, that there are also many in our own land, many even from Christian homes, who have never come to know God despite their having heard the Gospel. Perhaps, therefore, we should welcome representatives from at least certain other religions into our own communities. Where we have failed, they may succeed; and we should rejoice in their success. Whenever anyone is led to

God, we ought to rejoice, even if the end was achieved through the ministry of a religion other than our own.

The problem of whether this new view of election is biblical or not can be exaggerated. In spite of the traditional Anglican insistence that our teaching be founded upon Scripture, we must recognize that we cannot go back in time to the world of the New Testament and ignore all that has happened since. Even as a teacher of New Testament, I can hardly expect thinking Christians to accept all of its teaching. For example, we no longer share the New Testament expectation for the return of Christ within a single generation. Experience has shown the belief to be false. Similarly, no matter what the New Testament teaches, experience stands in the way of the belief that Christ is the only true way to the Godhead; however, it is by no means certain that the New Testament is unanimous in this belief. For example, the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:31-36) speaks of righteous gentiles (ἐθνῶν) inheriting their kingdom without recognizing Christ. Also Krister Stendahl is stating in his classes that according to Rom. 11 Paul expects the unconverted Jews to gain salvation apart from accepting Christ. It certainly is true that, in speaking of the Jews who were cut off from God's olive tree being grafted back, the Apostle never mentions Christ although in vs. 23 Paul can speak of such Jews as not persisting in their unbelief.

The question of whether limited views of evangelism and election obviate the need for Christ can be raised in various ways. The question sometimes confronts me quite personally. From the Jewish side, mirabile dictu, I occasionally hear an invitation to convert. When the invitation is not too serious, I usually answer that I prefer Jews to regard me as a surprisingly learned goy than as an surprisingly unlearned Jew. Sometimes, however, I must answer in a more serious vein. To a troubled Christian friend who once asked me why I remained a Christian, I explained that, while there may be various ways to God, the way I have travelled is Christ Jesus. Thus for me to deny Christ would be to deny my own experience, and throughout almost two thousand years millions have found Christ the way that brought them to the Godhead.

Now let us turn in more detail to the impact of the above on Jewish-Christian dialogue. From the Jewish point of view, I have already mentioned the problems of Christian evangelization no matter what our theological justification. We need, therefore, to be hesitant in proclaiming the Gospel to Jews, even Jews who have rejected their Jewishness; yet, I personally find it difficult to forswear the joy I know in God through Christ with anyone who would seek it (cf. I Pet. 3:15).

Another problem in Jewish-Christian dialogue, one that has perhaps loomed too large, concerns traditional christologies. Even apart from the "metabiblical" christologies of the christological controversies, Jesus is occasionally spoken of as theos within the New Testament.

Must the kind of christology that one finds in the Johannine prologue necessarily alienate us from Jews? Perhaps so, but Judaism also can so glorify human beings in divine terms. Philo speaks of Moses in somewhat more than strictly human terms,⁸ and even Rabbinic Judaism can affirm that Moses shares the glory and name of God.

For example the following passage appears in Midrash Tanhuma, Buber recension:

What is the meaning of (Ps. 24:10): "The Lord of Hosts is the king of glory"? That he shares some of his glory with those who fear him according to his glory. How? He is called elohim (God). So he called Moses elohim, as stated (in Exod. 7:1): "See, I have made you a God to Pharaoh."⁹

Christology in and of itself need not be an ultimate stumbling block in Jewish-Christian relations, but at present less than ultimate barriers (e. g., the support of the state of Israel) tend to separate us. As suggested above, one reason is that Christians tend to approach Jews theologically, but Jews often prefer to approach Christians with an eye to history. For Jews Christian actions have always spoken louder than Christian theology. We Christians often prefer to avoid the anguish of our past persecution of Jews; Jews find the anguish

⁸Wayne Meeks, The Prophet-King (Leiden: Brill, 1967).

⁹Beha'alotekha § 15 // Midrash Tanhuma, traditional recension, Beha'alotekha § 9 // Benidbar Rabba 15:13.

difficult to avoid; as a people they have lived it.

We offer theological schemes; they seek signs of remorse.

Let me close this paper in good Jewish fashion with a parable that sets Jewish-Christian dialogue in a wider perspective. The parable tells of the future coming of Messiah in all his glory. There he sits on his great white throne in glorious majesty with the whole of humankind gathered before him. Suddenly there is a stir in the crowd. Two dignitaries are approaching. Side by side they process, the pope and the chief Rabbi of Israel. They speak:

"We have a very important question to lay before you."

"What is it, my children?"

"Is this your first coming or your second coming?"

Suddenly Messiah's eyes well up with tears as he recalls the hatreds and persecutions over this very matter. Then, in a sad voice he asks,

"Does it really matter?"