

Comments at Israel Study Group Meeting, April 5, 1975
on Rosemary Ruether's FAITH AND FRATRICIDE

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1. There is a basic inconsistency between the viewpoint of the major author and that of Gregory Baum in his Introduction to the volume. Baum affirms what he calls the "aspect of absolute and universal significance" respecting Jesus (p. 15). The problem is that through his absolutist Christology in the context of the end of time (p. 17), Baum preserves the traditional Christian ideology that it is through Jesus Christ that the Jews will ultimately be saved. Ruether denies this -- or at least she does not assert it. Her validation of Judaism applies, implicitly, for all time, eschatologically as well as for the present. It is curious, therefore, that she should have permitted an Introduction so antithetical to her own viewpoint.

2. Professor Ruether's study combines a not very prevalent but nonetheless false historiographical conservatism (primarily through her effort to preserve partial Jewish responsibility for the Crucifixion; cf., e.g., pp. 67, 68, 249) with a conspicuous and false radicalism that, in effect, dispenses with the Christian faith. (There is, however, a refreshing radicalism with respect to Scripture [cf. p. 241 on Paul] and also an ecclesial radicalism [cf. p. 242].) To utilize the terminology of our Chairman's letter of March 5, 1975, we have here a "repudiational" theology rather than a "correctional" one. The peculiarity of Christianity goes out the door -- a consequence I have fought against for many years.

Ruether is quite right, of course, that the Messiah of the Jews has not come. The world remains unredeemed; sin and suffering are as rampant as ever. But what about the gentiles, those around this table? Ruether's relativization of the Christian faith tends to obscure the integrity of the event of Jesus of Nazareth, an event through which the one Covenant with original Israel is opened out. Here is realized eschatology. As Paul attests (or whoever wrote Ephesians), through Jesus the "dividing wall of hostility" is broken down, and we gentiles are no longer "without hope and without God in the world." Here is the uniqueness of Christianity, and in a sense other than a purely relativistic one. Here is one evil that by the event of Jesus, is conquered once and for all (in contrast to Ruether on p. 246). Much of the author's problem lies in failing sufficiently to separate out from universal, persisting evil the particular goodness of the gentiles' deliverance. For Ruether, the "Resurrection" -- she does not put inverted commas around the word, even though, on her view, she ought to do so -- means simply that evil as such will be overcome and God's will will be done (p. 249).

In truth, a special and essential evil has already been overcome: the hopelessness and loneliness of those who were once poor pagans. In this way Christology of some positive kind is preserved for the Christian church. It is just not true that the significance of Jesus is only eschatological and not historical (as we are told on p. 248).

3. I suggest that Professor Ruether offers a half truth in adjudging that Christian antisemitism, totalitarianism, and imperialism have their roots in the church's "historicizing of the eschatological" (p. 248). The sublime fact is that the "historicizing of the eschatological" -- or, better expressed, the historicity of the eschatological, the historicity of the Kingdom of God -- can mean for the gentile the very end of antisemitism, totalitarianism, and imperialism, for he now is one of the Jews -- a member of God's family.