

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS PAST AND PRESENT

THESES ON THE EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIANITY FROM JUDAISM

by

Prof. David Flusser*

1.

Jesus was a Jew, lived the Jewish faith and died for it. He was "made under the law" (Gal. 4:4) and did not want to become a reformer of Judaism.

2.

One can determine Jesus's place in the contemporaneous Jewish streams. He has not preached and done anything which could arouse resistance and hate among Pharisees. His criticism of the Pharisees does not distinguish itself in any way from their own self-criticism. If he has considered himself the Messiah, then this was in fulfilment of Jewish hopes and could not become a reason for a tension between himself and Judaism.

3.

Jesus has not invented a new idea of God. His God is the God of Israel. God's mercy towards the sinners and the love of the neighbour are Old Testament concepts and were then mainly emphasised by many Pharisees. His love of the enemy is indeed an extreme demand and his religious favouring of whores and publicans and "bad company" scandalised people in the Judaism of his time much less than it would scandalise Christian society. His teaching of individual morality is significant and could be understood in a revolutionary sense, but was not seen at the time as subversive. It was hardly noticed, either by Jews, or later on by Christians. Therefore, except in the sayings of Jesus himself, we find already in the New Testament hardly any trace of Jesus's personal message.

4.

Jesus has had a high opinion about his own person. As it cannot be concluded from the synoptic Gospels that he has considered himself to be God, his claim was no blasphemy.

* These theses have been prepared for a seminar of Belgian and Dutch theologians held in Jerusalem in January 1975, sponsored by the Dutch organisations "Interkerkelijk Contact Israel" and the Institute for International Excursions.

5.

Jesus was crucified by the Romans as "the king of the Jews". Those who have extradited him to Pilate were Sadducean high priests. In the synoptic Gospels the Pharisees are never mentioned in the "trial" of Jesus. The execution of the Lord's brother James by the Sadducean high priest enraged the Pharisees to such an extent that they achieved the deposition of the high priest.

6.

That Jesus was a Jew who did not oppose Judaism, and that Jews have not brought about his death, was already intolerable for those circles in early Christianity who have pursued an ever-growing self-affirmation of Christianity over against Judaism. Therefore as early as in the synoptic Gospels an attempt is made, by means of small but numerous changes, to play up the opposition between Jesus and the Jews and Jewish guilt for Jesus's death.

7.

Jesus's disciples, the "primitive Church" and the Jewish Christians form proof of the fact that Jesus did not want to destroy Judaism and that he lived according to the Law. They also did not believe that Jesus's concept of God was contrary to Judaism. Moreover, many Jewish Christian groups did not accept the Christology of the Church; their Christology was "poor". The break between the Jewish Christians, who did not belong to the main body of the Church, and Jewry, took place because the rest of the Jews did not become Christians; they did not accept what appeared evidently true to Christians. One of the main reasons for Christian anti-Judaism is the fact that the Jews to whom Jesus belonged did not become Christians. The existence of non-Christian Judaism compromises Christianity.

8.

Christianity was not at first monolithic: the articles of faith formulated by the mainstream Church are the consequence of internal discussions. An important, though not exclusive, factor in this was Paul. The history of Paulinism to the present day is a constant series of unsuccessful attempts to revert to Pauline doctrine.

9.

The relationship of Christianity to its Jewish heritage is always ambivalent: on the one hand, there is a desire to be the true Israel; and on the other, one does not want to identify with Judaism and particularly with Jews.

10.

It is a fact that nobody can inherit unless his predecessor is dead. But if the Church had exterminated the Jews, it would have compromised

itself still more; no jury would assign an inheritance to anybody who is proved to have gained it by means of murdering the one from whom he would inherit.

11.

Had all Jews become Christians they would have attained a place of honour, like that of the Brahmins in India: no baptism, wedding, burial or Mass could be celebrated without the presence of a Jew. But Jewry did not become Christian.

12.

The accusation against the Jews of having murdered Jesus is a more effective form of the true accusation, that Jews did not become Christians. This charge of "Deicide" almost certainly dates back to early Jewish Christianity; it was readily accepted by many Gentile Christians since by this means they could dissociate themselves from the wicked Jews.

13.

Ancient Judaism was predestined to generate out of itself a world religion. At that time there were everywhere half-Jewish God-fearers who did not become proselytes. Most of the Gentile Christians came initially from among these God-fearers and other sympathisers with Israel's religion.

14.

The difficulty for Gentiles to be fully included in Judaism lay in the yoke of the Law, which was heavy for non-Jews and would have separated them from their compatriots. But neither would Judaism have become a world religion if it had adopted a more liberal interpretation of the precepts and prohibitions. For the problem was not the Law but the fact that Jewry was a separated, and often hated, group of people. The proselytes joined themselves to the Jewish people and the Jewish destiny. Therefore it was necessary for an independent religion to be born which would free those Gentiles tending towards Judaism from the yoke of the Law, and would not make them Jews.

15.

The inferiority complex felt by God-fearers before "full" Jews could most easily be overcome if one was convinced not only that the new religion was the only true one but also that Judaism was in fact erroneous, that God had rejected the Jews and that Jewish laws were false and either null or a hindrance to salvation. This historical mission of creating a world religion that would be both Jewish and independent was fulfilled by Christianity. The - to put it mildly - ambivalent tension of Christianity towards Judaism in the past is therefore not accidental but logical.

16.

Jesus's attitude towards the non-Jewish world was more extreme than that of the Pharisees, whom he criticises as proselytisers. He even refuses to heal Gentiles. At the same time, he acknowledges righteous Gentiles such as the Queen of Sheba and the Ninevites, admitting that at the end of the ages they will be among the redeemed. As for the present, he was most reserved as far as non-Jews were concerned. It is a historical paradox that this very Jesus has become the God of the Gentiles.

17.

Judaism recognises equality of rights for the non-Jewish God-fearers as far as salvation is concerned. There were of course social barriers: for instance, God-fearers could not marry Jews.

18.

In ancient times, Jews were pleased to see God-fearers performing Jewish precepts. There was not a maximum; the minimum were the Noachic precepts. The Apostolic Council (Acts 15) granted to Gentile Christians the status of God-fearers.

19.

Thus, it was not improper that there were men in the primitive Church who told Gentile Christians to accomplish more precepts than the Noachic ones. The God-fearers, and the Gentile Christians, for their part, were inclined to accomplish if possible at least some Jewish precepts, both out of love for Judaism and in order to overcome their inferiority complex before Judaism.

20.

If Christianity was to become a world religion it had to become "free from Law" and not "Judaising". Only a Christianity free from the Law could separate itself from Judaism.

21.

Judaism belongs to those religions that have a system of prescriptions and prohibitions, which include ritual laws. To this type belonged also several religions to the east of the Roman Empire, such as the Parsee and Indian religions. Religions within the Roman Empire and those in the rest of Europe did not know any such legal system regulating daily life.

22.

Thus, if Christianity wanted to conquer the Roman Empire, it had to become "law-free" for this reason too. Therefore, in order to make itself independent from Judaism, it could not devise any new system of law dif-

ferent from Judaism. This would make impossible an integration in the area in which Christianity operated.

23.

It was therefore necessary first to promote abhorrence among Gentile Christians for life according to the Law, and then to forbid it to them. This first historical mission fell to many, among them Paul. When Paul speaks depreciatingly of "works" he means the Jewish precepts. This theological, and later also emotion-based, promotion of abhorrence for the Jewish way of life is one of the mainstays of Christian anti-Judaism and an important motif of antisemitism.

24.

At first there were also thousands of Christian God-fearers who, though not living according to the Jewish laws, showed a respect for the Law. To these belonged Luke, who thought that Christians of Jewish origin were committed to the Law. He rightly saw that the non-acceptance of the Christian message by the Jews had led to the emergence of Gentile Christianity.

25.

The promotion of abhorrence for the Jewish Law necessarily led to the prohibition of the Jewish way of life, first for the Gentile Christians and very soon also for the Jews who had become Christians. Already at the end of the first century it was taken for granted that the Jews who had entered the Church stopped keeping the Sabbath and celebrated the Sunday. In the middle of the second century there was in the main body of the Church only a minority that permitted those Jews who became Christians to live according to the Law, provided they confessed that the Law did not lead to salvation. This minority held as well the opinion that the Law was forbidden to non-Jewish Christians. Later on, everything was done to forbid the Law as a whole to all Christians. This development has nothing to do with the hellenisation of Christianity; it was actually completed even before that process took place.

26.

The turning-away from the Law, and promotion of abhorrence for it, not only made Christianity an independent religion, but also brought about a radical alienation between Judaism and Christianity.

27.

The next consequence of this step was the turning of Jewish-Christian groups into heretics. These people now lived in tension with the main body of the Church, emphasised their faithfulness to the Law according to

which Jesus and the Apostles had lived, considered the mission among the Gentiles by the main body of the Church as a disaster, maintained that one had first to approach the Jews in a more intensive way. The anti-Paulinism of Jewish-Christians not belonging to the main body of the Church was general.

28.

For the God-fearers who had become, or wanted to become, Christians the radical turning-away from the Jewish Law was no doubt a painful step, but in the end they gained from it. For now they could fully compensate their inferiority complex. Since life according to the Law led to condemnation, the Jews were by no means equal to those who would be saved. Moreover, their law-free way of life enabled them to be integrated into their law-free environment. The attempt to consider themselves as a "third kind" next to Judaism and Christianity did not succeed. Although the Christians were hated and bloodily persecuted by the Gentile world, they felt a basic solidarity with their environment.

29.

The second reason why Christianity has become a world religion of non-Jews is the specific Christian faith, which generally speaking the Jews did not actually hate, but did not accept either. Through this specific faith in Jesus Christ, the Christians distinguished themselves from the Jews. Soon one had to come to the conviction that whoever did not accept faith in Christ was condemned. After Christianity had become the religion of the law-free Gentiles, the former God-fearers and other Christians could also for this reason regard themselves as highly superior to Judaism and develop anti-Judaism.

30.

Jesus did not demand faith in himself. He decidedly opposed the cult of personality.

31.

The foundations of Christianity are all Jewish and not Hellenistic. Yet Christology could develop more freely in a non-Jewish environment, because there it was not inhibited by the *reservationes mentales* of Judaism.

32.

The same is true for the rest of Christian doctrines. The separatist Church concept of the Essenes, now consistently thought through, could lead to the idea of *verus Israel* in the main body of Gentile Christianity. The Essene dualism between "flesh" and "spirit" could stamp as "fleshly" the Law of the Jews and the Essene doctrine of grace could firstly be joined to

Christology, and secondly create the contrast between "works of the Law" and "justification by grace".

33.

The typological interpretation of biblical verses is characteristic for Judaism of the time of Jesus. It is a heuristic method, whose results are not binding in Judaism, either practically or theologically. Philo based his theological philosophy on the allegorical exegesis of the Pentateuch, and the Essenes found through the typological interpretation of the Prophets and the Psalms confirmation of the *historia sacra* of their sect. In Christianity, already in the New Testament, some verses of the Old Testament were interpreted in Jewish typological way, particularly in support of Christology and ecclesiology. Already in the New Testament is the theological and religious relevance of these interpretations mostly higher than in Judaism. Later on, the conclusions drawn for typological exegesis take on a pre-eminent meaning for Christian faith and theology. The outcome of such interpretation is often understood in Christology and ecclesiology as a concrete historical fact.

34.

It is only natural that the centrifugal Jewish tendencies have alleviated the birth pains of the process of Christianity becoming independent.

35.

Jesus had a very high self-awareness: Son of God, Son of Man. When such concepts were further amplified Jesus could, already in Paul's mind, become super-human and then divine, so that at least as early as the end of the first century he was called God.

36.

The idea that a martyr atones for the sins of Israel is Jewish. The atoning death of Jesus was later thought of as the exclusive act of salvation, as the main purpose of Jesus's coming. This is how the *theologia crucis* came into existence.

37.

Already in Paul, "Christ" is the surname of Jesus. Thus people soon forgot that "Christ" is the Messiah of the Jews. Only recently have certain Protestant groups discovered it.

38.

The by-motifs in Christology are also of Jewish, not Hellenistic, origin; in Christianity, already in Paul and John, they were only more emphasised, regrouped and applied to Jesus Christ. The motifs of the Messiah's pre-existence, of the creation of the world through the Logos, the doctrine of the hypostases, and others, are Jewish.

39.

The fact that these motifs also could be enhanced and freely developed in Gentile Christianity did not make Christianity acceptable to Judaism, which possesses a stricter monotheism.

40.

Christianity was spread as a world religion for the non-Jews. From a certain point of view, it was "a cheaper Judaism". This is why in the time after the Apostolic Fathers, in the second century, pagans became Christians. The main reason was not craving for salvation through Christ's blood, but because Jewish monotheism appealed to them. On this account, and also because the rigorous Christology was alien to pagans, the Christological elements were played down in favour of the Jewish preaching of an invisible moral God. This is so both in the Apologists and in most of the Apocrypha of the second century.

41.

With the exception of modern times, the second century was also the only period in Christian history in which not only are the Jewish elements of Christianity acknowledged but also Judaism is praised.

42.

Later on, at the end of the second century, when the great wave of Christianisation had subsided and a wide Church had emerged in which there were already Christians by birth, a start was made to stress in much more intensive way the Christology which previously was just "part of the package". Accordingly, this was done during the Christological discussion between the different streams. It was only then that Christology became helienised under the influence of philosophy.

43.

After Constantine, a popular Christian religion emerged, particularly in the west, where the Jewish element no doubt existed, but monotheism did not appeal too much to the barbarians. People very seldom knew that Jesus and the Apostles were Jews.

44.

Since the Reformation, a new development has taken place. On one side a theological anti-Judaism emerged, dressed in Pauline garb and simultaneously directed against the Catholic Church. On the other side, a deepened erudition, together with a biblical piety for Jesus as a preacher of morality, discovered the Old Testament and the Judaism of the past and the present.

45.

In Christianity there are streams and groups which have more or less revived the structures of the doctrine of Jesus and the Apostolic Church. Milleniarist groups are also sympathetic to Jews. Depending as they do on the Old Testament, and having rediscovered the messianic dimension of Christianity, they understand and welcome Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews. Frequently they defer conversion of the Jews to the eschatological age.

46.

Since the sixteenth century many have believed that Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, has really meant that in the end Israel as a whole would be redeemed.

47.

After the shock of the Hitler Holocaust, conscience has been awakened. People do not want to feel guilty of Jewish blood. Often attempts have been made to exonerate Christianity as such, and anti-Judaism in Christianity is seen as a derailment. Sometimes the blame is laid on the Middle Ages, sometimes on the hellenisation of Christianity, sometimes on the Church Fathers. In most cases, with some exceptions, the New Testament is left out of the picture.

48.

In Jewish-Christian dialogue it is advisable for Jews to quote whenever possible from the New Testament rather than the Old Testament in order to convince Christians of scriptural support for the very existence of the Jews. Romans 9-11 is in this context preferable to the Pentateuch.

49.

Even for most Christians of today, Judaism is at best an object, not a subject of faith.

50.

The idealistic philosophy of the last three centuries has moved Christian thought, even among the semi-educated, further away from the Jewish way of thinking than Patristic medieval thought. The conceptual world of a Christian antisemite of the Middle Ages is much nearer to the Jewish way of thinking than the ideas of many well-meaning Christians of today.

51.

The new interest in Jesus's message is sometimes similar to the birth of an ugly rat: Jesus, who loved the sinner, has allegedly hated the good people, and in Jesus's name the murdered and not the murderer is declared

guilty. This is in fact in accordance with the concept of the Antichrist in many Church Fathers.

52.

Kerygmatic theology is at best "a-Judaic"; it is suspicious of the Old Testament and the Jewish element in the New Testament. It facilitates an anti-Judaic, allegoric explanation of the Gospels.

53.

Not only kerygmatic theology is today "a-historic". There is an increasing tendency to turn away from the historic element of Christianity, and the New Testament is losing relevance in many circles, although Christianity, like Judaism, is a historic religion. Ancient anti-Judaism in Christianity was "pseudo-historic", the new one is "a-historic", or even "anti-historic", although the old anti-Jewish elements have hardly changed.

54.

This is particularly clear in today's political Christian anti-Judaism. The existence of Judaism as a reality is a continual embarrassment. Judaism as a tolerated religion is played off against the right of Jewry to a full existence. Here too words of the prophets are made into a caricature: it is the old caricature already employed in several passages of the New Testament against Jews.

55.

Christianity can again become attractive to the masses provided it is Christian. Only then can it prosper, when it is historically rooted. The Bible is a more interesting book than the works of the "God is dead" theologians.

56.

Christianity and Judaism are really one faith.

57.

Christianity holds within itself a new possibility, if it is prepared not only to purge itself of anti-Jewish tendencies but also to examine critically its tradition from the beginning. One should not even shrink from re-examination of the New Testament.

58.

Tension with Judaism was a historical necessity for Christianity to become a world religion for former pagans. Such a necessity no longer exists. Christianity can renew itself out of Judaism and with the help of Judaism. Then it will become a humane religion.

Jesus has been the cause of separation between Jews and Christians, although this would have been completely contrary to his intentions. The emphasis in the real message of Jesus is the hope for Christianity. Then Jesus the Jew will not divide Jews and Christians, but unite them: Jesus, not Caesar!

Professor David Flusser is professor of Judaism of the Second Temple period, and of early Christianity, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.