TOWARDS A NEW CHRISTIAN READING OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

by ROLF RENDTORFF

If we would try to establish and to develop new relations between Christians and Jews, there are three different aspects of the task before us from the Christian side:

The main and inclusive task is the Jewish-Christian dialogue itself, that is, to find and develop ways and manners of meeting, exchange and mutual understanding. But in order to have a fruitful dialogue we need to know something about the other, which means that Christians must learn and attempt to understand Judaism. Most Christians never had the opportunity to receive information about Judaism. Nevertheless, they believe that they know Judaism — on the one hand because they mistakenly identify the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, with Judaism in its entirety. When Christian theologians speak about Judaism, they often mean just the Old Testament, particularly its later sections and the periods of Israelite history following the Babylonian Exile until the times of the New Testament. On the other hand, in the New Testament Jews are mentioned so frequently that Christian readers often believe that they can find true and adequate information about Judaism from it. This is not only by error, but is the way in which Christian theologians are educated. I shall return to this problem later; at the moment I merely wish to draw attention to this fundamental lack of information and insight among the vast majority of Christians. For this reason, we started to

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arrange a year of studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for young Christian theologians from Germany, where they mostly study the Jewish tradition, Talmud, Midrash, etc., in order to obtain primary, basic information about Jewish thinking and self-understanding. We must learn what Judaism is from Jews. Otherwise, we cannot enter into a fruitful and meaningful dialogue. (Of course, the converse of this is also true, but I have no mandate to speak about that.)

But there still remains a third task, which is perhaps the most difficult and complicated one of all. There is not only a misunderstanding of Judaism among Christians, but the Christian theological tradition itself contains certain anti-Jewish elements. In the last ten or fifteen years, there have been the beginnings of a discussion among Christian theologians about the nature of this anti-Jewish tradition, particularly surrounding the question as to whether or not it is an integral part of Christian theology and belief, and how it might be possible to overcome it. The main problem is that this tradition is very deeply rooted in Christian thinking, and that the Christian self-definition itself is often formulated in an anti-Jewish way, explaining the nature of Christianity against the dark and negative background of Judaism. Thus, it is a fundamental necessity that Christians, as a precondition to Jewish-Christian dialogue, begin to rethink their own theological tradition, to examine its anti-Jewish components, and to develop a new self-understanding free of anti-Jewish elements. I know very well that this will be a long and difficult process and I have no illusions as to the strength of the opposition to such attempts. But if we do not confront this task, we shall never be able to lay the foundations for a renewal of Jewish-Christian relations.

One of the most important aspects of the whole problem is the understanding of the Hebrew Bible, which serves as both the Jewish Bible and as the first part of the Christian Bible. How do Christians read this part of their Bible and, in particular, how do they handle the fact that it is also the Jewish Bible.?

If we examine the history of Christian use of the Old Testament, we can distinguish two contradictory trends. On the one hand, there are attempts to declare the Old Testament as strictly Jewish and thereby to reject its use in the Christian Church. This was the claim of Marcion in the second century of the Christian era, a claim which was renewed even at the beginning of this century by one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the period, Adolf von Harnack. He noted that in the time of Marcion the Church had not yet been able to reject the Old Testament from the Christian Bible, and that even in the period of the Reformation it was their fate to keep it. If, however, in the 19th and 20th century the Protestant Church would continue to retain it as a canonical document, this would be a clear symptom of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis. He demanded that Protestantism finally carry out its rejection.

Harnack was not an antisemite in the political or social sense. Indeed, he opposed discrimination against his Jewish contemporaries. But his rejection of the Old Testament contained a strong element of theological anti-Judaism — as did already Marcion's. For him, as for many Old Testament scholars of the period, the Old Testament was the evidence of a decline within Judaism or, in their own terminology, the transition from Israelite religion to Judaism, as a petrified religion of legal and ceremonial traditions lacking in spiritual life or religious value. They referred to Judaism of the post-Biblical period, which was at the same time the period of the New Testament, as *Spätjudentum*, "late Judaism," by which they really meant that there was actually no Judaism after that late time. Here, we encounter the consequences of that lack of information which I mentioned before: all these theologians hadn't the slightest idea of Post-Biblical Judaism. Their condemnation of Judaism was based exclusively on the image of the Jews which they found in the New Testament or, strictly speaking, what they believed they found according to their exegesis, which was uninfluenced by any knowledge of Jewish literature. I could continue this presentation up to the present day, because this conception continued almost without interruption.

Neither in the time of Marcion nor in this century did the official church accept the demand of rejecting the Old Testament. But in reacting to Marcion's attack, they turned in the opposite direction. The Church claimed the Old Testament as totally and exclusively Christian. From the time of Marcion, who was declared a heretic, through modern times, the Christian character of the Old Testament was never called into question. The Old Testament became an integral part of the Christian Bible and served as a source for the development of Christian doctrine together with the New Testament, without any distinction of value or dignity. The consequence was that the Church had to deny the Jews' right to appeal to the Old Testament as their own Bible and Holy Scripture and to continue to deliver and to develop their own interpretation. The main purpose of the so-called *Religionsgespräche,* the forced theological debates between Jewish rabbis and Christian theologians, was almost exclusively to compel the Jews to concede that the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament was the only true one, and particularly that the Old Testament bore testimony of Jesus' messiahship. (It is beyond the scope of this paper to ask why Christians felt and often still feel the necessity for Jews to confirm the truth of their Christian faith. Do they feel so uncertain in their own belief that they are dependent upon such confirmations?)

After the Enlightenment, this unity no longer remained unchallenged; but because the New Testament was also challenged, this did not affect the religious and theological value of the Old Testament in particular. Only during the period of the National-Socialist regime did the attacks against the Old Testament become stronger and more dangerous. The so-called *Deutsche Christen* ("German Christians") claimed what Harnack had already demanded: the rejection of the Old

Testament by the Christian church. Now they had an additional argument: the Old Testament was in their eyes *undeutsch,* un-German.

The reaction was remarkable: the *Bekennende Kirche* ("Confessing Church") found a strong and convincing defender of the Old Testament in Wilhelm Vischer's book, *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments* (Vol. 1, 1934). He renewed the claim of the Old Testament as a Christian book and as an indispensible part of the Christian Bible. His main argument was that the decisive element of the message of the prophets was that Jesus is the Messiah of the Old Testament. The consequence of this reclamation was clear. Vischer wrote: "If this is true, if Jesus really is the Messiah, then the Old Testament belongs to those who believe in Him, that is: to the Church." He continued: "We, who believe Jesus to be the Son of God . . . we and not the Synagogue are the legitimate heirs of the divine testament."

I don't like to argue with Wilhelm Vischer, being fully aware that his book at the time was understood and perceived as a deliverance of the Old Testament from the attacks of the Nazis. Nevertheless, looking back today we must admit that the price for retaining the Old Testament as part of the Christian Bible was again the denial of the right of the Jews to use it as their own Bible. We can read almost the same thing in several more recent articles and books on Old Testament hermeneutics, e.g., of H.W. Wolff and Antonius Gunneweg. Thus, two main positions are discernible from the time of the early Christian Church through the present: to interpret the Old Testament as Jewish and to reject it, or to take it as Christian and to remove it from the Jews. (At the moment I am not concerned with the question as to whether these Christian theological positions are of any relevance to the Jews.)

I must briefly mention a third position between these two, namely, an eclectic use of the Old Testament. In a certain way, this is already found in the writings of Martin Luther. He distinguished between Law and Gospel, but found both of these elements in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. His criterion for Gospel was *was Christum treibet* (what promotes Christ), which he found already in parts of the Old Testament. Since the 19th century, another distinction appears: the earliest period of the Old Testament is seen as the age of the true and living religion, which Christianity can take as its legitimate predecessor, while after the Babylonian Exile, a decline occurred in Judaism (as mentioned before) which can only serve as negative background to the New Testament. Thus, one part of the Old Testament continues to be relevant for Christianity, while the other does not. This conception runs from de Wette and Vatke at the beginning of the 19th century, through Wellhausen, and up to Martin Noth and others. But in the last ten years, we observe an interesting change in German Protestant Old Testament theology: theologians such as Zimmerli and Wester-

mann have ceased to write about post-exilic Judaism in negative terms. Instead, they don't mention it at all. In their theologies of the Old Testament, they almost totally omit the post-exilic sections, they are silent about Judaism and Torah, they don't mention the name of Ezra, etc. Instead of polemics we find silence. The eclectic use of the Old Testament has been brought to its logical conclusion: only those parts of the Old Testament which are of relevance to the Christian theologian are mentioned at all.

This is the current situation in German Protestant theology; I am not in a position to explain in detail what is going on in other countries. From the theological literature I have seen, I receive the impression that there may be fewer explicitly anti-Jewish elements and that there are some scholars, e.g., in the United States, who declare that the Old Testament has a double post-history and who express respect towards the traditional Jewish reading of the Old Testament, but I did not find any elaborated hermeneutic conception with regard to the question under discussion at present. Thus, despite the restriction to German Protestantism, the picture here is more or less representative of Protestant theology in general.

But outside of academic theology, at the margin of the official churches, we find some groups and circles engaged in establishing new Jewish-Christian relations. I need not elaborate on this in this framework. For them, it is a simple matter of fact that the Old Testament is first and foremost the Jewish Bible and that it remained so after the rise of Christianity. In those circles, many people have ceased referring to it as the "Old Testament," and prefer the term, "Hebrew Bible." By this, they wish to express the Jewish character of the book and to avoid the traditional understanding of "Old" and "New" in which "Old" implies antiquated, obsolete or superseded by the New.

The antithesis of Old and New is one of the fundamental categories by which traditional Christian theology describes the relationships of Judaism and Christianity. By contrast, e.g., the Synod of the Church of the Rhineland (to which I shall return in a few minutes) declared in 1980 that through the centuries the word "New" in the exegesis of the Bible had been turned against the Jews and that we need to learn that it may not necessarily mean the replacing of the Old by the New.

At this point, it becomes evident how deeply the Christian understanding of the Jews is connected with the understanding of the Bible. Old is the opposite of new, and this often means that the old is no longer valid unless it is taken up and interpreted anew by the new. Therefore, it is an important first step to become aware of the implications of this terminology. (If we are aware of the problems then, in my view, the name itself is no longer that important, as the name Old Testament is used by Jewish Bible scholars as well. I don't think that a struggle over this

point is worth-while, but we do need to be conscious of the question raised here, because at this point we enter the heart of the problem.)

Therefore, my first question is: Can Christians agree that the Hebrew Bible is still the legitimate Scripture of the Jews? I feel that this is an odd question, because all of us know that this is in fact the case. But the question is not only a curiosity, but has a very serious background. The traditional Christian attitude is that Christians alone are in possession of the Bible, because they alone possess the truth. Therefore, they must decide who can make legitimate use of the Bible and how. This is a crucial point. If we agree that the Hebrew Bible is the Holy Scriptures of the Jews, we simultaneously relinquish a part of our Christian belief of being in exclusive possession of the absolute truth. If we accept that the Old Testament has its own value and its own theological meaning outside of the sense that it receives from the New Testament, then we accept that there is divine revelation outside of the Christian Church. Thus, the question of how one reads the Bible is one of the central questions of the Christian understanding of Judaism and, together with this, of Christian self-understanding. Here, we can see how closely interrelated are the different aspects of Christian understanding of Judaism and, together with this, of Christian self-understanding. Here, we can see how closely interrelated are the different aspects of Christian self-understanding. Here it becomes evident as well that the question of the Christian relation to the Jews is a very specific one, which in its crucial aspects is not comparable with its relations to people of other religions.

Now let me return to my original question: If we agree that the Old Testament, which is an integral part of our Christian Bible, is the Jewish Bible as well, what are the consequences? I wish to turn the question around. We should not ask what we, as Christians today, think about the question as to whether contemporary Jews are entitled to use the Old Testament as their Bible, but how it happened that the Jewish Bible became the Christian Bible. In other terms: I wish to turn the question from a dogmatic one into an historical one. When the Old Testament was completed, Christianity didn't exist; nobody challenged the obvious right of the Jews to use their own Bible as their Holy Scriptures. When Jesus lived, the Old Testament was his Bible. Today, in the aforementioned circles, it is often stressed that Jesus was a Jew. We should also add that the Hebrew Bible was his Bible. The same is true of the apostles, of the first Christian community and of the authors of all the New Testament writings. All of them had only the one Bible — whether in Hebrew or in Greek (I cannot enter here into the problems of the differences between the Hebrew and the Greek canon and of the reasons for the definite limitation of the Hebrew canon). Therefore, it is anachronistic to speak about "Jesus and the Old Testament" or "Paul and the Old Testament"; the only appropriate formulation would be "Jesus and his Bible," etc.; that is, Jesus (or Paul) the Jew and his Jewish Bible.

Now we must ask our question in a modified way: Did the Jewish Bible at any point cease to be the Jewish Bible? It obviously became the Christian Bible and began to be read by them in their own way. What were the consequences of this for its Jewish character? This last question has a double aspect. Some scholars suggest that the definite establishment of a Jewish canon of Holy Scriptures was forced by the intention of drawing a line of demarcation against the Christians. Perhaps there is an element of truth in this supposition, but this would only confirm that from the Jewish point of view the Jewish character of the Bible was beyond any doubt.

But what about the Christian view? Here we must repeat that Jesus, Paul and all the others were Jews. This means that when they began with their new interpretation of their Bible they did not intend to pit a Christian interpretation against the Jewish interpretation, but they developed a new interpretation of their own Jewish Bible to convince other Jews that this was the true interpretation and that Jesus was the Messiah announced in the Jewish Holy Scriptures. What happened during this period was the emergence of a new kind of Bible interpretation within the Jewish community, alongside others such as that of the Pharisees or of the Qumran community. Of course, each group was convinced that its own interpretation was the true one, but all of them took their interpretation as a Jewish one, strictly speaking as the true Jewish one.

Here again, it is obvious that there are close relations between the reading of the Bible and the self-understanding of the Christian community. So long as the Christians felt themselves to be Jews, "Messianic Jews," the problem of our theme tonight did not exist. They read their Bible from a messianic point of view under the presupposition that the messianic hope came to its fulfillment.

If this is correct, we must ask the question to what extent the interpretation of the *entire* Bible was affected by this new interpretation. This is an important point because Christians used to claim that their understanding of the Bible *in toto* was changed by this new approach. I don't believe that. To the contrary: I am convinced that the major part of the Bible was read by the Christians in the same way as by other Jews. Let us take, e.g., the Biblical view of creation. In the New Testament we do not find an explicit discussion of creation. Why? Was this of no importance to the Christian faith? Or had they nothing in particular to add to the Biblical texts and their Jewish understanding? I am convinced that the latter is the case — and I call your attention to the First Article of our Apostolic Creed, relating to the Christian confession of God as the creator of heaven and earth. This article is entirely based upon the Hebrew Bible, without any specifically Christian interpretation. On this topic — and it is a fundamental one — Jews and Christians read the same Bible in the same way.

Let me turn to another crucial point: the understanding of Torah. Christians used to say that the New Testament proclaims the end of the Torah. But both Jesus and Paul said the opposite: in almost identical words, they stated that the whole Torah is fulfilled in the one verse: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Certainly this is a very specific way of interpreting the Torah: to take the entire Torah as an explication of one single command. But there is not a word that the Torah should not — or could not — be fulfilled. To the contrary, in the Sermon on the Mount it is said (Matthew 5:17ff):

> Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete. I tell you this: so long as heaven and earth endures, not a letter, not a stroke, will disappear from the Law until all that must happen has happened. If even man therefore sets aside even the least of the Law's demands, and teaches others to do the same, he will have the lowest place in the kingdom of Heaven, whereas anyone who keeps the Law, and teaches others so, will stand high in the kingdom of Heaven. I tell you, unless you show yourselves far better men than the Pharisees and the doctors of the Law, you can never enter the kingdom of Heaven.

I could continue. The Christian tradition of reading the Hebrew Bible has for too long been preoccupied with dogmatic questions and has therefore failed to really read it as the first part of the Christian Bible, which Christians share with the Jews. Both have their own tradition of interpretation which leads to a different understanding of certain parts and certain aspects. But this does not affect the Hebrew Bible as a whole. It remains the common Bible of Jews and Christians. I mentioned earlier the important declaration by the Synod of the Church of the Rhineland from January 1980. It says: "We confess gratefully to the 'Scriptures,' our Old Testament, as a common basis for faith and deeds of both Jews and Christians." We can read it together, we can learn from each other, but first of all we as Christians have to understand that this is a part of our Bible *because* it is the original Bible of the first Christians and that we do not need a specific legitimation from the New Testament nor specific Christian hermeneutic rules for its reading.

Finally, I must return to the question as to whether the Hebrew Bible ceased to be the Jewish Bible. In one respect, the Hebrew Bible as the Jewish Bible became a part of the Christian Bible insofar as the Christian community developed out of the Jewish community. Therefore, the question seems to me to be less controversial than the Christian theological tradition has made it.

The second point is that within the Jewish self-understanding there was never the slightest doubt that the Hebrew Bible had not ceased and never could cease to be the Jewish Bible. Here, the main point is the Jewish self-understanding. The idea that the Hebrew Bible could cease to be the Jewish Bible exists only in Christian dogmatics. To say it clearly, it is the reverse side of the conception that the Jews, theologically speaking, had no right to exist as Jews after the Messiah had come.

I cannot deal with this conception now and am unwilling to do so at all because in my opinion the first and most important step Christians need to take is to once and for all overcome this anachronistic conception — anachronistic even from a Christian point of view, because its assumption is that Christians are the *beati possidentes*, the lucky possessors of the truth — and at least since the Reformation we should have learned that this is a fundamental misunderstanding of Christian faith. Thus, there is an interdependence between both these aspects: to accept the Jews as Jews and to accept their specifically Jewish reading of the Hebrew Bible as an expression of their self-understanding.

If we do so, there could be hope that instead of challenging the interpretation of the other we might find the way to a common reading of our common Bible with mutual help for understanding, and respect for the remaining differing views. After Christian failure during a history of nearly two thousand years, we need now to take the first step.

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