

Christianity is Jewish

Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus.
Volume One – General and Historical Objections
by Michael L. Brown
Baker Book House, 2000

Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus.
Volume Two – Theological Objections
by Michael L. Brown
Baker Book House, 2000

In view of the unspeakable tragedy of the Holocaust under Hitler's Nazi regime, no one could have predicted the radical change in relationship between Jews and Christians. Evangelicals have increasing contacts with the Jewish community. Evangelical colleges and seminaries are offering courses on Judaica, modern Jewish culture, rabbinic backgrounds to the New Testament, and anti-Semitism. In 1977 Dr. Billy Graham spoke on "The Evangelical Christian and the Jew in a Pluralistic Society" at a major gathering of two hundred Jewish leaders. He also received the National Interreligious Award for "strengthening mutual respect and understanding between evangelical and Jewish communities."

The evangelical Anglican Dr. John Stott stresses the importance of getting involved in a serious dialogue with the Jews. He believes that dialogue is a token of genuine Christian love, because it indicates our steadfast resolve to rid our minds of prejudices and caricatures, which we may entertain about other people. David Novak, professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto, comments in an article in *First Things* (February 2002) that "the theological and political encounter between Jews and Christians has only just begun, but it promises to provide each of our communities with innumerable opportunities for original and fruitful discussion." He also notes that Christians and Jews now face a very real common enemy in Islam. This enemy despises both Judaism and Christianity. And he is convinced that Jews and Christians should work together on protecting the traditional family, which is currently under siege by secularists.

I believe cooperation to preserve the sanctity of life and the family is laudable, but the truth claims of Jews and Christians alike must still be dealt with. Although we may have much in common, the yawning chasm between Judaism and Christianity is real and deep. Even the question "Who is a Jew?" is controversial. On the one hand, David Novak claims, "even nonreligious Jews, even atheistic Jews, are considered part of the Jewish people because to be a Jew is to be a member of community elected by God." Author Michael Brown, who at the age of sixteen found Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, has a different perspective: "Who is a Jew? It's important not to use a double standard here. For example, if you're a secular Jew and you do not live by the Torah or the Rabbinic traditions, how can you tell me that I'm not Jewish because I believe in Jesus?"

Our Jewish roots

Since the television mini-series "Roots," a few decades ago, many people have become more interested in their family history. However, at the same time many Christians don't seem to be aware of their own spiritual roots, which can be traced back to Bible times and their kinship with the Jewish people. To gain a deeper understanding of our faith, a deep appreciation of its Jewish roots is not a luxury but a necessity. The early followers of our Lord were referred to as "the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). They were described as "enjoying the favor of all the people [Jews]x (Acts 2:47). The Jewish scholars Samuel T. Lachs and Saul P. Wachs state that Christianity "began as a sect within Judaism." And they note that Jesus' followers saw themselves as being part of the people of Israel. David Novak observes that through sound historical scholarship, more Christians than ever before have learned how close Christianity has always been to its Judaic roots. Michael Brown would say: "What else is new? Biblical Christians have never denied their Jewish roots." And Brown refers to Edith Schaeffer's popular book *Christianity is Jewish* and Marvin R. Wilson's excellent work *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, which is widely read by both Jews and Christians.

Denial of Original Sin

The crucial differences between contemporary Judaism, which is different from the Jewish religion in Old Testament times, and Christianity should never be forgotten. Two key doctrines stand between these two religions. Christians cannot abandon their belief in original sin and the deity of the Messiah. Jews don't believe in original sin nor in the fall of man. Therefore, they don't see the need for repentance. Judaism is optimistic about human nature. Salvation is not by faith alone but through one's own personal actions. Good works, virtue, morality and righteousness count. God has faith in mankind's capacity for shaping the world in such a way that He can pronounce it good. Men strive to regain paradise. Christianity is considered pessimistic. The Jewish historian Michael Shapiro even argues that the gravity of sin is so overwhelming in the eyes of the Christians that "one unique person had to pay for it. And he claims that the apostle Paul's "obsession with the Crucifixion arises directly from his novel theory of original sin."

Jewish Persecution of Christians

Jews have often accused Christians of hatred towards the Jews. Brown points out, for the sake of fairness and balance, that there was anti-Jesus hostility among the many first-century Jews. The New Testament records the martyrdom or persecution of Jewish believers at the hand of fellow Jews (cf. Acts 7,14,17). And even in our time some of the ultra-Orthodox Jews believe that a Roman soldier was the father of Jesus, and portray Jesus as an idolater, magician, and Israel's arch-deceiver.

Anti-Semitism in Gospel of John

Jews and even some professing Christian scholars claim that the New Testament is the seedbed for anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust. The Jewish scholar Ellis Rivkin charges that the Gospel of John is a harsh and bitter polemic against the entire

Jewish people for having crucified Christ. Shapiro declares that the foundation of "Christian hate for the Jews was laid in the Gospel According to Saint John." But Brown points out that there is simply too much recognition of God's gracious purposes for the Jewish people in the New Testament including the Gospel of John - to give any credibility to the sweeping claim that it is an anti-Semitic book. And he adds that true Christians around the world would be utterly shocked to learn that anyone in history "who claimed to be a follower of Jesus the Messiah could ever hate or persecute the Jews."

Messianic expectations

Jesus once asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" This is still the question that decides the destiny of men and nations. The disciples replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matt.16:13f.). The Jews in Jesus' days were well acquainted with prophecies concerning a coming Messiah. But their hopes were often dashed! Throughout the centuries false Messiahs arose who led many Jews astray. Even before the time of Christ, there were false Messiahs. The famous Gamaliel told the Sanhedrin about the false Messiahs Theudas and Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:34-37). Jesus Himself warned that "false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible" (Mat.24:23). The Romans, who could not make any sense out of the Jewish belief in a Messiah, considered any messianic claims as a camouflage for rebellion against their rule. The Bar Kochba uprising in AD 132-136 was inspired by Old Testament messianic prophecies. Bar Kochba claimed that he was the "Son of the Star," in fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy "a star will come out of Jacob" (Num.24:17). Rabbi Akiba (AD 50-135), perhaps the most respected scholar of his time, supported his claim and hailed him as the Messiah. He was going to usher in the Messianic Kingdom. Many Jews welcomed him as their Savior from their Roman overlords. At first Kochba had considerable success with his military campaigns. But Jewish Christians, who refused to deny their Jesus, suffered greatly under his rule. In 135 AD Kochba was routed by the Roman armies. The emperor Hadrian destroyed Jerusalem completely: every wall was leveled and the city plowed. And he forbade Jews to come near the city at the pain of death. Thousands of prisoners, mostly women and children were taken into slavery. Instead of victors, the false Messiah Kochba and his followers were vanquished by a pagan people more powerful than they.

In our own day, Lubavitcher Grand Rabbi, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was hailed by devoted followers worldwide as "Messiah ben David." When he had a stroke in 1992 and could not speak, his followers pointed to Isaiah 53:7, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth." When he died in 1994, without being revealed as the Messiah, thousands of his zealous followers still believed that their rabbi was actually "King Messiah." Even now some talk about him as "Master of the Universe." They claim that he died as an atonement for our sins, and are eagerly awaiting his resurrection.

The Atonement

Traditional Judaism is still waiting for the Messiah to come. Schneerson is not the fulfillment of Isaiah 53. Edith Schaeffer comments that in chapter 53 the death of the Messiah is so clearly pictured that it could be recognized by people when it took place, and can be recognized as we have the prophecy and the fulfillment both to look back on and to compare. Through Christ the atonement for sin has been completed. The real Messiah already came two thousands years ago. He is the Lamb of God, our perfect sacrifice. He "was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him"(Heb.9:27-28). Our mission then is to preach to a Jew not as a Jew, but as a sinner in need of the Savior. As Brown points out, the Jews need saving as much as anyone else. The good news is that God has provided for our full salvation through the Messiah Yshesua, the Savior of Jew and Gentile alike.

Christ Alone

The stumbling block for the modern Jew is still Christ's atoning death. David Novak observes that despite all that we have in common, our greatest difference concerns Jesus Christ. The Jewish scholar David Flusser claims that because of the Jew's own religious feeling, he is virtually unable to comprehend the central Christian experience of the redemptive power of Jesus' death and resurrection – "unless, of course, he experiences a conversion to Christianity."

Who is Jesus? He claimed divine sonship (John 10:30,36,38). He declared, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"(John 14:6). After our Lord's resurrection, the apostle Peter proclaimed, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"(Act 4:12).

In our pluralistic society, many people find the Christian claim that Christ is the only way to God as arrogant, and small-minded conceit at its worst. Brown says that it is no more arrogant than it is for others to say that Jesus is only one way among many – "thereby declaring the beliefs of more than one billion Christians, the largest single religious group, to be wrong. For if there are many different ways to God/the gods, then Christianity is wrong. If Christianity is right, then the other faiths are wrong."

Mission to the Jews

Jews recognize that Christianity is a missionary faith. But they have little patience with the "Jews for Jesus" whose converts they call "victims of deception." A prominent American Jew, A. James Rudi, even urged "the evangelical community to end any support it may be giving to the Hebrew Christian groups." But for Christians, missions is not an option. Our Lord, who is the Jesus of the Scriptures, gave the solemn commission to the church to bring the Gospel of salvation to both Jew and Gentile (Acts 1:8). For the Jewish Christian Michael Brown, the Gospel is Christ, and evangelism is communicating Him. Brown is confident that if a Jewish person earnestly and honestly seeks God and His truth, he will find them.

Conclusion

Dr. Michael Brown, a missionary, theologian, apologist, and author, is not ashamed of his Jewish background. He states, "I was born a Jew and I will die a Jew." He considers himself a Jewish Christian whose life's ambition is to interpret Christianity to the Jewish mindset through means of an earnest dialogue. In his fascinating and eloquently written first volume, Brown lists numerous Jewish general and historical objections to Christianity, which are most common and often emotional. In the second volume, which is more technical, he lists objections, which cut to the heart of the difference between Jews and Biblical Christianity. They point to the nature of God (the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the person of the Holy Spirit), the doctrine of sin and the need for salvation. He answers each question by digging deep into history and the traditions of Judaism as well as the Scriptures. He offers straightforward answers to show why Jews should believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. I do question though his position on the temple in Jerusalem. He seems to promote the view of erecting a third temple in the end time, replacing the one destroyed in 70 A.D. Although I have some reservations about Brown's theology, which is apparently influenced by premillennialism, his phenomenal knowledge of Judaism and his clear writing style will make his books an excellent resource for Jewish Christian apologetics, showing that indeed Christianity is Jewish.

Johan D. Tangelder
October, 2002