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JESUS AS A JEW

The first three Gospels not only present a reasonably faithful picture of Jesus as a Jew of his own time, but consistently maintain his style of speaking of the Savior in the third person. An impartial reading of the three gospels results in a picture, not so much of a redeemer of mankind, as of a Jewish miracle-worker and preacher.

The Jesus portrayed in these gospels is the historical Jesus, not the "kerygmatic Christ." (The only gospel that teaches a post-Easter Christology is the gospel according to St. John, and so it is of less historical value than the synoptic gospels.)

For Jewish Christianity (even in later centuries when the Church in general regarded the view as heretical), Jesus the miracle worker, teacher, prophet, and Messiah, was more important than the risen Lord of the kerygma. (At a very early date, things had been different among the Hellenistic Christiansx congregations founded by Greek Jews, and composed predominantly of non-Jews. In these congregations, redemption ~~in~~ ^{and risen} through the crucified/Christ was the heart of preaching. It is no accident that the writings originating in these communities - for example the letters of St. Paul - scarcely mention the life and preaching of Jesus.)

In order to understand the historical Jesus, it is absolutely essential that one know the world of first century Judaism in Palestine. The Jewish material is important not just because it allows us to place Jesus in his own time, nor because it allows us to interpret his saying accurately, but because it enables us to comprehend the distinctive features of early Christianity as well as the significant changes that took place in first century Judaism itself.

FIRST CENTURY JUDAISM: THE NEW RELIGIOSITY

In an essay entitled, "A New Sensitivity in Judaism and the Christian Message," Prof. David Flusser of Hebrew University writes:

The latter-day Judaism as well as Christianity did not evolve from the religion of Israel in the Old Testament, but from the Jewish religiosity that flourished during the Old Testament period. This type of religiosity is no longer identical with the creed reflected in the Old Testament. The investigation of this new type of religiosity can lead us to ~~the~~ warranted conclusions only if we pay due attention to the diverse trends and movements within Judaism of the Second Commonwealth. By encompassing all these data we shall realize that in spite of all the respective shades of difference among the groups and sects, we can, on the one hand, formulate ideas and attitudes, trends and approaches common to them all which, on the other hand, distinguish them all clearly from the world of thought and belief that prevails in the Old Testament."

We cannot deal here with the entire complex of structural and ideological changes which the Judaism of the Second Commonwealth underwent. We shall confine ourselves to only those points of clarification which bear directly on our topic.

In about the year 175 B.C., a Jewish scribe bearing the Greek name Antigonus of Socho, who flourished prior to the Maccabean uprising, authored the following logion:

"Be not like servants who serve the master for condition of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master not on condition of receiving a reward."

And may the fear of heaven be among you."

This ~~change~~ saying is characteristic of the change in intellectual and moral atmosphere that had taken place in Judaism since the time of the Old Testament. It is also the expression of a new and deeper sensitivity within Judaism, which was an important precondition for the preaching of Jesus.

Jewish tradition hands down this logion of Antigonos with the conclusion, "And let the fear (or awe) of Heaven be upon you!" In the days of Antigonos, the awe of God was synonymous with the love of God. This equation can be traced to the doctrines of Deuteronomy, and can be followed through Ben Sira (who also lived prior to the Maccabean ~~war~~ uprising and who writes interchangeably and indiscriminately about the love and awe of God - up to Rabbi Meir of the second century CE (AD). However, already in the days of the ²Second Temple there were rabbis who differentiated; The Talmud (Jerusalem Berachoth IX, 14b) lists seven types of Pharisees: the two positive types are the Pharisee of awe (like Job) and the Pharisee of love (like Abraham). The latter typology is the more remarkable when we bear in mind the very significant passage during the "Binding of Isaac," in which Abraham is told (Gen. 12:22): "Now I do know that you are God-Fearing."

It is important to recognize that there are many references in rabbinic literature that compare the ^eawe and the love of God as superior modes of worship (Studies in Sin and Atonement, A. Buchler) and that in the majority of these passages love is rated superior to awe in the service of God. Scholars such as Flusser postulate that there emerged a faction among the Pharisees, known as "the Pharisees of love", who brought charges against the veteran Pharisees that they were serving God, motivated merely by dread of punishment and

retribution, but failed to be devoted to him in unconditional love. This superior rating of love over awe prevailed and took hold upon all Jewish groups. The date of the oppositional love-Pharisees was approximately contemporary with the first controversies within the school of Hillel, more than a century after Antigonus.

This novel discrimination and differentiation between love and awe, with preference for the former, finds its reflection in the early prayer texts of rabbinic Judaism, which contain a plea for divine assistance in serving him in awe, to which now "love" was specifically added and even put first.

The new emphasis on love for ^{own}love's/sake, irrespective of any compensation, would indicate a relaxation of the commensatory doctrine and perhaps render circumstantial evidence for a growing discontent and uneasiness over the black-and-white presentation of good and evil in the doctrines of the Old Testament. This was the new Jewish sensitivity concerning divine justice as manifested in the world.

This same lack of discrimination between serving God in love or in awe is also found in the Book of Jubilees. In Chapter 36, Isaac is reported to have addressed his sons Jacob and Esau before his death:

And love one another, my sons, your brothers
even as a man who loves his own soul (himself),
and let each seek in what he may benefit his brother...
And I shall make you swear a great oath -
for there is no oath which is greater than it
by the glorious, honored, great, splendid, wonderful and mighty
name of him who created heavens and earth and all therein -
-that you will fear him and worship (serve) him,
and that each will love his brother

The Book of Jubilees is the earliest document for the juxtaposition in Midrash fashion of two Torah commandments which start with the word VE'AHAVTA, "you shall love"; i.e., you shall love him, your God (Deut. 6:5) and you shall love your neighbor (or fellow man) (Lev. 19:18).

~~Next is the~~ Although the author of the book of Jubilees has equated or substituted the love to God by law, he still is the first known proponent of juxtaposing the commandments of divine and altruistic love the "great commandments" that were preached by Jesus. For the Pharisaic circles (of love) who preached unconditional love in serving God, independent of compensatory calculations, also taught that altruistic, social love achieved the highest value by being considered the very essence of Judaism during the days of the Second Temple.

We see readily from New Testament passages (Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:25-28

that there was no controversy between Jesus and the rabbis concerning the dual commandment of love, divine and altruistic.

Just as it was remarkable that certain circles among the Pharisees should elevate loving God above the awe due him, so it was remarkable that during that era of the Second commonwealth the commandment "Love your fellowman as yourself" should have been singled out of the Pentateuch to serve as the matrix and foundation of the entire Mosaic law, particularly when we bear in mind that at that time the complex edifice of directive and restrictive commandments was successfully erected. This was an exceedingly important development of the new religious sensitivity of contemporary Judaism.

In the first century CE (AD). Rabbi Hanina, an important

Pharisee who was appointed to control the Sadducee high priest, declared:

"The word (Love your fellow man as yourself), on which the entire world is depending, was proclaimed on Mount Sinai with an oath: If (you) dislike your fellow man whose deeds are evil as your own, I, your God, shall visit judgment upon him who dislikes; and if you love him since his deeds are as right as your deeds, I can be ~~xxxx~~ relied upon to bestow my mercy upon you for loving my creatures (Abot de Rabbi Nathan 53).

The compensatory idea is now conducive not to awe of God, but to the love of fellow men. Similar teaching is reported of Jesus (Luke 6:37-38)

Judge not - and you will not be judged yourselves/ condemn not - and you will not be condemned/Pardon - and you will be pardoned yourselves/ Give - and you will have ample measure given you; they pour into your lap measure pressed down, shaken together and running over/ for the measure you drag out to others will be dealt back to yourselves.

This logion of Jesus may well be considered to illustrate and reflect the contemporary Jewish concept. The first part of the logion calls to our mind what Hillel used to say: "Judge not your fellow man until you yourself come in his place."

Thus we find the concept of loving our fellow man for better or worse, with his only too human frailties, which we all share, since none of us is perfect; as well as the concept of loving our fellow man with the same interest at heart that we reserve for ourselves, and that whatever we are averse to, we should avoid doing to him. Both these concepts belong to the emerging

emerging religious sensitivity of the Second Commonwealth. The typological classification of humanity into the righteous and the sinner lingers on as an often repeated shopworn stereotype. In the egalitarian solidarity of the evolving sensitivity it would no longer be gainsaid that there are no perfect righteous and no completely wicked men - for in every human heart the noble and the base impulses are vying with each other. Failure and straying from the godly way of life can be corrected by returning to God and the straight path. Virtue and vice are relative terms in light of this humanism.

During the time of Rabbi Abbahu, a contemporary of Origen, a humanistic statement more radical than that of Antigonos had been accepted and reported in the Talmudic tradition (Taanith, 7a):

Greater is the day of rainfall
than the day of resurrection
for the latter benefits only the pious
whereas the former benefits pious and sinners alike.

The time honored doctrine of theodicy has been here exploded, just as in the Gospel (Matthew 5:44-47):

But I say to you: Love your enemies, and pray for those that persecute you so that you may be (truly) sons of your father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those that love you, what reward have you?

Rabbi Abbahu observes in the natural phenomenon of providential rain a kind of temporary suspension with regard to the formalism of divine, compensatory justice; the resurrection of the end of the days was to represent the spectacular rewarding of

the just, whereas the reviving rain (a miniature resurrection) deals by egalitarian nonchalance with the just and the unjust. This must have been understood as a challenge to the old doctrine.

The dialectic reflected in these and similar statements demonstrates the intricate struggle within Jewish circles that provides the matrix for discussions in the days of Jesus. The theocentric philanthropism of certain Pharasaic circles, mainly the disciples of Hillel (Beth Hillel), served Jesus as one of the two pillars of his doctrine of love. This did not emerge in Pharasaic circles out of some vague humanism, but it evolved in dialectical transformation out of the Biblical doctrines and world image without exploding the boundaries of the Old Testament structure.



The second source of Jesus teaching about the righteousness of God is the doctrine of the Essenes and related groups.

