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Jakob J. Petuchowski

THE DIALECTICS OF SALVATION HISTORY

WRITING some time ago in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Markus Barth discussed, among other things, the reference Maimonides made to Christianity in his legal code, *Mishneh Torah*.¹ While certainly not conceding the claims the Church has made for Jesus, Maimonides does transcend the realm of polemics and apologetics by finding an important place for Jesus (and for Muhammad) in the divine scheme of salvation. Christianity and Islam, according to Maimonides, are the pioneers of the true Messiah, because they have brought the words of the Torah to the distant ends of the earth. (Maimonides adds, of course, that those biblical teachings were not transmitted by Christianity and Islam in an unblemished form, and that, when the true Messiah comes, the nations proselytized by Christianity and Islam will shed the errors they received together with the truth.)

For a medieval Jewish thinker, such an evaluation of Christianity marked a significant advance. Maimonides (1135–1204) was, after all, a contemporary of both the second and the third Crusades—with their attendant slaughter of the Jews. A much narrower outlook on his part would have been quite excusable. Nevertheless, Professor Barth is not altogether satisfied with the Maimonidean position. He writes:

But an element of condescension and self-excuse appears to mar the picture. While the Christians are not begrudged their success among the

1. Markus Barth, "What Can a Jew Believe About Jesus—and Still Remain a Jew?" in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, II, 3 (Fall 1965), pp. 382–405. The Maimonides passage is in *Hilkhoth Melakhim* 11:4. Barth's treatment of that passage is somewhat impaired by the fact that he did not consult the (uncensored) Constantinople edition of 1509. Yet, particularly when it comes to Maimonides' treatment of Jesus and Christianity, the text of the *uncensored* edition is crucial.

pagan masses and while the actual approach of the *goim* to the living God is hailed, the Jews appear to recline in their seats and feel excused from taking a stand for or against Jesus. While they "believe about Jesus" that he is good enough for the Gentiles, carrying out through his disciples the work they might have done, they may be tempted to leave well enough alone and not give God that honor which he deserves, nor their Christian brothers that support which they need.²

Had Barth consulted the uncensored edition of Maimonides' code, he would have found that Maimonides did not at all "feel excused from taking a stand for or against Jesus." He did take a stand. He pointed out that Jesus could not have been the Messiah, because certain biblical prophecies, such as those concerning the "ingathering of the exiles," had remained unfulfilled. But, within the present context, this is somewhat tangential. What concerns us, rather, is Barth's impression that the Jews were guilty of "condescension and self-excuse," and that they were "reclining in their seats."

What alternatives were there to the Jewish position Barth criticizes? He cannot possibly expect that the medieval Jews would have joined the Christian missionary endeavor, so that, through the Son, others might be brought to the Father. That would hardly have been a realistic option—as long as the Jews themselves felt no need for any mediatorship by the Son! The only other alternative would have been for the Jews to engage in Jewish missionary endeavors—as in the days when Jesus made fun of the Pharisees for crossing sea and dry land to make a convert (see Mt 23:15). But, in the days when Maimonides wrote, this was no live option, seeing that Christianity, once it had become the state religion of the Roman Empire (and right up to the modern disestablishment of religion), had made quite sure of the suppression of the Jewish "competitor" in the missionary field—by calling to its assistance the sword of the state.

I

THIS suppression explains only the medieval position. It does not account for the absence of any overt Jewish missionary effort *today*.

2. Barth, *loc. cit.*, p. 403.

Something else does. Judaism does not insist that the Gentile become a Jew in order to be "saved." The Gentile can attain salvation by living up to the demands of God's covenant with the sons of Noah (*Sanh.* 56a),³ and, from the Jewish point of view, Christianity can actively help him to do so. The Gentile can reach out to God from his own existential situation. He does not have to make his own the particular historical experience of Israel to which the Torah testifies and which it incorporates. (He does not have to; but he may, if he so desires. It is, therefore, not altogether impossible that, with the cessation of medieval restrictions, the Synagogue may again become more vocal in welcoming "the stranger who joins himself unto the Lord" [Is 56:6]. But this does not affect the basic Jewish position on the availability of salvation to the "righteous among the nations of the world.")

That Jewish position can, of course, be challenged—even as, in this writer's view, it can be defended. It might be argued, for example, that the Second Isaiah looked for something other than a passive mission by precept and example. Be that as it may, Barth still uses a most unfortunate metaphor when he depicts the Jews as "reclining in their seats." Jews, alas, did not do much "reclining" in the Christian Middle Ages. They were grateful simply to be left alone (by the majority of Christians) long enough to catch their breath, while standing on their feet between one expulsion and the next. If, therefore, some medieval Jews, like Maimonides, were able to rise above the pain and the harassment of the hour, and if, in spite of everything, they were able to discern Christianity's role in the messianic drama of salvation, then they ought to be commended for their breadth and depth of vision, rather than accused of "condescension and self-excuse."

If, on the other hand, by the use of his unfortunate metaphor, Barth merely wants to indicate that the Jews watched passively while their mission was (partially) carried out by Christians, then he is, of course, quite right. He is right in his statement of fact. Whether he is also right in his evaluation of that fact is a question we can only answer within the framework of our particular view of *Heilsgeschichte*.

3. See Steven S. Schwarzschild, "Do Noachites Have to Believe in Revelation?", *Jewish Quarterly Review*, LII, 4 (April 1962), pp. 297-308, and LIII, 1 (July 1962), pp. 30-65.

II

IT IS to an outline of our view of salvation history that we now want to address ourselves. The "fraternal conversations" between Christians and Jews, encouraged by Vatican II, may well take as their starting point a close look at what both partners mean by *Heilsgeschichte*. For, if Jews and Christians are really to take one another seriously, then the Christian must have a Christian theology of Judaism (which the Jew cannot reject as a mere caricature), and the Jew must have a Jewish theology of Christianity (which the Christian cannot accuse of being a distortion).

Such a Christian theology of Judaism would have to go much further than the affirmation of the truths of the Hebrew Bible and the sympathetic delineation of biblical Israel before the birth of Jesus. It would have to come to terms with the continued existence of the "old Israel," with its literature and its thought, its constant elements and the dynamics of its changes. Who, the Christian theologian would have to ask himself, is speaking in the Talmud and in the Midrash? Is it only the voice of the ancient rabbis, or is there discernible, behind their very human overtones and undertones, the Voice of Him who had spoken to the prophets and lawgivers of old, and who has not ceased speaking to the physical kin of the prophets and lawgivers—even though *diebus istis locutus est nobis in Filio*, "in these days He has spoken to us through His Son" (Heb 1:2)? Or is the entire phenomenon of rabbinical Judaism to be rejected *in toto*, as the mere invention of "scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites," altogether unwilling and unwanted by God? And what about the physical survival of the Jews themselves? Are they a spiritual "fossil," good only as a potential reservoir of souls ultimately to be "saved" by the Christian form of salvation? Or (without giving up the Christian's ultimate hope) can the modern Christian theologian see some intrinsic value in Jewish survival *per se*, granting the Jews recognition as coworkers in the vineyard of the Lord? Such are some of the questions that a Christian theology of Judaism would have to answer.

Similarly, a Jewish theology of Christianity would have to go far beyond the popular quip that "the New Testament is both new

and good; but what is new is not good, and what is good is not new." A Jewish theology of Christianity would have to evaluate Christian piety in its own right. It would also have to ask who is speaking in the New Testament. Can we discern, behind the very human overtones and undertones of disciples and apostles, the Voice of Him who bade Israel be faithful to His Torah and who wanted His salvation preached unto the ends of the earth? A possible Jewish approach to the place of Christianity within the divine scheme of salvation will be sketched below. Yet it is understood that we can only sketch the framework. Such a sketch does not absolve us from dealing with the details.

In order to construct such a Christian theology of Judaism and such a Jewish theology of Christianity, Christians will still have to learn much from Jews, and Jews much from Christians. Perhaps the present moment is the divinely appointed one for such an undertaking. It evidently was not possible before; and who knows whether, having missed this moment, it will be possible tomorrow. At any rate, the following lines are meant as a humble attempt to outline the agenda for a "fraternal conversation."

III

THE goal of history is the age when all men will acknowledge the rule of God. This we can take as axiomatic for both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.⁴ Being omnipotent, God could have imposed His rule on all mankind from the very beginning. For reasons only known to Himself, He did not choose to do so. Instead, He preferred a process which, in the words of Lessing, we might call "the education of the human race." The acceptance of God's rule by all mankind was to be a gradual process.

As part of that process, God "called" certain men as His "missionaries." He first "called" Israel, and bade them be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). The root meaning of *kadosh*, "holy," is being "set apart." Hence, to be God's "missionary" means to be *in* the world, and yet not altogether *of* the world. The missionary has to be *in* the world, or the world will take scant notice

4. See, for example, Zach 14:9, and 1 Cor 15:24, 28.

of him. Yet, he must be sufficiently different from the world so that the world will not only take notice of his existence, but also pay attention to the message he bears.

Thus, the Hebrew desert wanderers had to be established in Canaan as a nation among the nations of the world. Nevertheless, they also had to be sufficiently "set apart" in order to be "a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations" (Num 23:9). It is obvious, in retrospect, that this mission contained in itself the seeds of an inner conflict—of a conflict which sprouted forth for the first time when, in the days of Samuel, Israel demanded the institution of a monarchy, so that she might be "like the other nations" (1 Sam 8:5).⁵ The divinely sanctioned appointment of Saul as king was an uneasy and short-lived truce, but not a lasting resolution of the inner conflict. On the whole, the Israelite and Judean monarchies were a hindrance to, rather than a support of, the model society "under God" that prophets and law-givers had envisaged. Still, the accoutrements of statehood gave Israel that foothold within the world that enabled it to be known as the "people of YHWH," through whom YHWH made Himself known to others. Whenever the means were understood as an end, the prophets burst forth with their denunciations. Yet, the prophets were not Rechabites, that "unworldly" sect which rejected the "world" altogether (see Jer 35:6-10). Somewhere between total pagan absorption *in* the world and total Rechabite rejection *of* the world, the prophets looked forward with painful realism to the "remnant" that will be saved. And the Second Isaiah, the prophet of the exile, proclaimed a twofold message: The restoration of Zion *and* the role of Israel as "a light to the nations" (Is 42:6).

Israel continued to be God's sole missionary as long as, politically, it continued to be *in* the world, in both its first and second commonwealths, and as long as, spiritually, it refused to be *of* the world. A second missionary, however, was "called" at the very time that Israel's political existence *in* the world was nearing its end. With the loss of the Jewish state, in the year 70 C.E., Israel also lost its position *in* the world. Christianity had been on the scene for some years before. But it was only now that it gradually began to celebrate its greatest triumphs. By dominating the state, it had its opportunity to gain a foothold *in* the world; and it made ample use of that opportunity.

5. See Martin Buber, *Königtum Gottes* (3rd ed., Heidelberg, 1956).

Yet, for centuries, it also experienced that inner conflict which is inescapable for God's missionary, who must be *in* the world, but not altogether *of* it. And so, like the Israel of old, Christianity had its Sauls and its Ahabs, its prophets and its Rechabites. It was the old story all over again—only now on a grander scale.

While that story was being written into the records of world history, the old Israel, now deprived of its position *in* the world, could only watch, and hope, and pray. No, it did not "recline" in easy chairs. There were moments when it tried to storm heaven. Nor did it remain unaffected by what was going on around it. When the iconoclastic controversy stirred the Greek Church, the walls of the Synagogue resounded to the song composed by a contemporary Jewish poet of the Byzantine world (and the walls of the Synagogue are still resounding to it):

*All the world shall come to serve Thee
And bless Thy glorious Name. . . .*

*They shall build for Thee their altars;
Their idols overthrown,
And their graven gods shall shame them,
As they turn to Thee alone. . . .*

*And through all their congregations
So loud Thy praise shall ring,
That the utmost peoples, hearing,
Shall hail Thee crownèd King.⁶*

But, though, here and there, individual converts (and even a whole people, the Khazars) sought and found admission to Judaism, it was a passive, rather than an active, mission in which Israel was engaged. For the active mission, Israel lacked its place *in* the world. The Church now occupied that place; and it was the Church that missionized. God was not to remain without His messengers, without those who would further and promote the process of "the education of the human race." (Within that setting, Maimonides wrote what he wrote.)

6. For the complete text, in Israel Zangwill's translation, see *Service of the Synagogue. New Year*, ed. Adler and Davis (17th ed., London, 1949), pp. 151f. On the relation of this hymn to the iconoclastic controversy, see Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* (New York, 1959), pp. 243f.

IV

TODAY, a curious reversal of roles has taken place. Some Jews (although by no means all of them) have reclaimed the ancient territory, and have thereby, as a political unit, regained their place *in* the world. The State of Israel is a state among all the other states of the world. And again the spectacle is being repeated. The demands of statehood on the one hand, and the demands of God on the other, *Realpolitik* and the prophetic heritage of Israel, constitute the two poles between which the heart and soul of the new nation of Israel are being torn. This much, though, has been achieved: The flag of the State of Israel is flying among the flags of all the other members of the United Nations. Those Jews who make up the citizenry of the State of Israel are back *in* the world.

Yet, the creation of the State of Israel has taken place at the very time that Christianity is no longer as sure as it had been for centuries that the Church herself is still *in* the world. Christian states have been secularized. Christian belief is widely rejected, even in the so-called Christian world. And within an ever shrinking world, Christians have discovered that they are far from being the majority of the world's total population. Indeed, Christians are beginning to find out that, within the total world picture, they represent the kind of minority that Jews used to represent within Christian society. The Church has discovered that she, too, is in *galuth*, "in exile"—a discovery which may well have been one of the driving considerations that made the Church willing to engage in the current phase of the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

We are now on the threshold of a new chapter in God's "education of the human race." New "missionary" tactics may be called for, and a whole new missionary philosophy may have to be thought out. What, we shall have to consider, are the implications of a situation that finds both Christians and Jews more *of* the world than they have ever been before, and yet, politically and as corporate units, not really and fully *in* the world. For the vast majority of Jews will never become citizens of the State of Israel, and the vast majority of Christians are no longer living in a Christian state. *Galuth* is now the setting in which both faith communities will have to function.

This statement is made in full awareness of the "mighty acts of the Lord" that were wrought on behalf of the State of Israel in June 1967. To the extent to which one may at all reach *heilsgeschichtliche* conclusions on the basis of events that are still in the process of happening, Israel's recent victory of the "few" over the "many" is certainly of no less significance than the victory of the ancient Maccabees. The Synagogue celebrates that ancient victory every year by thanking God "for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds and the saving acts, wrought by Thee, as well as for the wars which Thou didst wage for our fathers in days of old, at this season."⁷ One might well conclude that it is indeed the will of God that Israel, too, be granted its share *in* the world; and the reunited city of Jerusalem stands as the symbol of historical continuity. "The place which the Lord has chosen" (Dt 15:20) is again administered by the sons of His chosen people—even as it was in the days of David.

But all of this does not mean that *galuth* has been ended. The position of the tiny State of Israel within the setting of the vast and hostile Arab world continues to be palpably pre-messianic. The internal problems of the State of Israel, which, one day and with the help of God, that State will yet solve, are still awaiting their solution; and the State of Israel is as far from realized eschatology as other countries are. For *galuth* is far more than a mere geographical concept. It is also a *temporal* concept, denoting the era in world history that is characterized by the "eclipse of God" and by man's inhumanity to man. Seen from this perspective, *galuth* is something in which all men are involved—Jews and non-Jews alike. And, according to the Jewish mystics, God Himself is suffering the pains of *galuth*. The Jews in Soviet Russia live in *galuth*. But so do the Jews of the United States—and, for that matter, the Jews of the State of Israel.

V

WHATEVER else *galuth* may imply, both positively and negatively, it clearly does mean a creative dissatisfaction with the present, and an openness to the future. Such an openness for the religious man, both

7. From the *Chanukkah* service.

Jew and Christian, means a willingness to listen for the word of God addressed to us in the here and now. (And, in this connection, we may well consider the recent events in the Land of Israel to be one aspect of that "word," compelling many Christians and some Jews, the present writer included, to revise their theological estimate of the connection between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel.) But the required openness does *not* mean an unending process of recriminations, or an attempt to reopen debates that have proved fruitless in the past.

As brothers in *galuth*, sharing the prayer, "thy Kingdom come," Christians and Jews must first of all avoid any note of triumphalism in their dealings with one another. The Christian may indeed continue his tradition of reckoning the years in terms of *anno Domini*. The Jew may be moved to regard the creation, and survival, of the State of Israel as *atbchalta dige-ullab*, "the beginning of redemption," (but it is still only a *beginning*). Neither Christian nor Jew, however, can possibly claim that ours is the messianic era, that the earth has become full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Under the circumstances, Jews and Christians could not possibly be called upon to convince one another. Rather will they both have to make common cause in an attempt to rediscover the still small voice of spirituality above the shrieking noise of a technological age. It is not at all unlikely that the dialectics of *Heilsgeschichte* are forcing us into cooperation "for just a time like this."