



Roberto Badenas, Ph.D.



Roberto Badenas has studied philosophy in Valencia, Spain, theology in Collonges, France, and received his doctorate in 1983 in New Testament Studies from Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA. As lecturer for New Testament Studies, he has taught at the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary in Sagunto, Spain (1971-1979), as well as at Salève Adventist University, Collonges, France (1985-1998). From 1990 to 1998 he has been Dean of the Theological Department of the Salève Adventist University, Collonges. Since 1999 Dr. Badenas has been working as Director of the Education and Family Ministries Departments at the Euro-Africa Division (EUD) in Berne, Switzerland, and as Chairman of the Biblical Research Committee of the EUD.

S *habbat Shalom**: Could you explain to our Jewish and Christian readers what took you to address the issues of Jesus? What are the reasons behind your book *Meet Jesus* (Autumn House, 1995)?

Roberto Badenas: To write my first book, *Meet Jesus*, I was pushed by my students. I used to teach a course on the life of Jesus, for theology students. Each year I took one interesting aspect of this fascinating life and character and asked my students to do some research on it. During about five years we dealt with what we called “the encounters,” these passages that narrate the story of the numerous people that Jesus met. The students observed that many people, after meeting Jesus, changed their life: fishermen became preachers, a lawyer learned about grace, an

adulterous woman condemned to death liberated. They wanted to know more about that special man. And I helped them by sharing with them my knowledge of the historical context, of the land of Israel, and of the rich Jewish tradition in which Jesus was born and lived. Then they wanted me to publish what I had found and shared with them in class. The reasons behind my last book, *The Parables of the Master*, are similar. I was impressed by the parables that Jesus used to tell to his audience, and I wanted to explore why he used this very rabbinic way of teaching, and how he used it in such successful way. The result was so interesting for my students and friends that they wanted I publish this too. Both experiences, I mean the writing of the two books, have been extremely rewarding.

Shabbat Shalom: There has never been so much written by Christians about the Jewishness of Jesus as in recent years. How do you explain this phenomenon?

Roberto Badenas: There are certainly many reasons for this new interest. For me, a very important one is that we know more about the Jewishness of Jesus than in the past centuries. The historical tensions between Christians and Jews that culminated with the Shoah have also worked in the conscience of many honest researchers. We have understood that we need to know better the rich Jewish tradition. In fact, we need to know each other better, if we want to learn to respect each other and to live together.

Shabbat Shalom: How would you explain the previous

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Christian silence about the Jewishness of Jesus?

Roberto Badenas: I would say that in general there was more ignorance than anything else. In Catholic countries, for example, most of the population knew very little, not only about Judaism, but also about Jesus and about the Bible! Some would even be surprised to realize that Jesus was a Jew! On the other hand, it was somehow difficult for those who had been told that “the Jews killed Jesus” to make abstraction of this terrible accusation and get interested in Judaism, even if Jesus was a Jew himself!

Shabbat Shalom: Do you think that Jesus should or could have been a part of the Jewish reflection?

Roberto Badenas: I am convinced that the too-long historical confrontation in certain parts of the world between the Christian

Auschwitz has made it impossible for many Jews to dissociate Jesus from Christians.

oppressive majority and the Jewish oppressed minorities has worked naturally against any special interest for knowing Jesus on the part of the Jews. On the other hand, I found quite natural that many Jews ask themselves “Who was Jesus? How did it happen that he ‘founded’ the Christian religion, being a Jew? Why did he become dissident?” I find that the present Jewish reflection on Jesus goes together with the new dia-

logue between the Jewish and the Christian religious traditions.

Shabbat Shalom: You have already mentioned the Shoah. Is there still some place for Jesus in any Jewish reflection after Auschwitz?

Roberto Badenas: Auschwitz represents the tragic ultimate outcome of too many centuries of anti-Semitic hatred. Auschwitz has made it impossible for many Jews to dissociate Jesus from Christians. Those who have been able to make this difference, and have succeeded in separating the two, have discovered with astonishment that they could feel very near to Jesus, and that there is an incredible gap between what Jesus did and taught and what many so-called Christians have taught and done. In any case, any reflection on Jesus after Auschwitz has to acknowledge that Jesus was also a victim. He is definitely on the Jew’s side, not on the side of the Nazis!

Shabbat Shalom: So far Jesus has been seen as the main reason for the Jewish-Christian separation. Could a new look at Jesus in the Gospels change this relation? What would you suggest to help in that direction?

Roberto Badenas: I am convinced that a new look at Jesus will show very clearly to all those who dare to read the Gospels in an open-minded attitude that the main reason for the Jewish-Christian separation does not come from Jesus but from the *bad* Christians. For me, the best way towards a discovery of Jesus comes from the personal reading of the four Gospels, which are

the oldest “biographies” that we keep of this amazing Jew. But in order to advance in the direction of a better understanding between the Jewish and the Christian communities, I believe that we have to continue to build the bridge of dialogue. There is no other way. We need to respect each other,

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to listen to each other, to learn from each other and to support and enrich each other. In the final analysis, we are all brothers and sisters, since we claim to be children of the same God.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Do you think that there are misunderstandings about Jesus on the part of Jews and Christians as well?**

Roberto Badenas: Of course there are. Very few Christians, and very few Jews, know much about Jesus. I have met many Christians that are shocked to learn from the Gospels, for example, that Jesus was circumcised, that he wore the traditional *tsitsit*, that he used to eat *kosher* and that he kept the Sabbath rest, etc.! Both Jews and Christians need to overcome many misunderstandings about each other and about their mutual traditions. They need to know and face the truth about each other. As Jesus himself said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). We both tend to forget that Jesus was at the same time Jew and Christian!

***Shabbat Shalom:* When you**

read the stories about Jesus in the Gospels, how do you assess Jesus’ behavior as a Jew? How did Jesus depart from the traditional views?

Roberto Badenas: By reading the Gospels one discovers very soon that Jesus’ behavior both followed and departed from the

traditions of his people. Although Jesus was a very pious Jew, we see that he challenged some attitudes, rites and practices common in his time, concerning, for example, some purity laws or Sabbath keeping, in the same way that the great prophets of Israel used to challenge their contemporaries. Jesus acts several times against certain traditions and customs (see his viewpoint on “what makes someone unclean” in Mark 7:1-23), but never against the teachings of Scripture. I see Jesus in this respect like an outstanding, courageous, intelligent and creative reformer.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Do you think that a Jew could benefit from such a reading?**

Roberto Badenas: Of course. Jesus’ way of interpreting the Torah or the Writings, although in all the essential points it remains very “classical,” often departs from rabbinic teachings, but more in its approach than in its essential content. His explanations always go right to the heart of Scripture in a very surprising way, full of new insights and of astonishing new perspectives. I am convinced that the Jews could ben-

efit from these treasurers of wisdom as much as Christians.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What can a Christian learn from the Gospels about the Jews?**

Roberto Badenas: Many things also. One very important thing would be to learn how to respect and love the Jews, as Jesus did! But there are many others. Reading the Gospels one can learn, for example, the value that Jesus acknowledges in the Hebrew Scriptures, the meaning of “election” to belong to God’s people, respect for the law, the primacy of the family, the importance of prayer, the spiritual benefits of repentance, the joyful celebration of Sabbath rest, etc.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What advice would you give to Christians to help them understand better the Jewishness of Jesus?**

Roberto Badenas: For my own understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus, my trips to Israel have been decisive. Once you have visited and lived in Galilee, Jerusalem, ancient Samaria, the Judean desert, you cannot separate anymore Jesus from his natural roots, from his country or from his people. They remain linked forever. But I have also received great blessing in my numerous readings of books related with the environment in which Jesus lived and preached, the riches of wisdom in rabbinic literature (I like particularly the parables), the old customs and traditions, the geography and history of the first century, etc. We should always remember that there never would have been such a thing as “Christianity” unless there had been Judaism first! Christianity is deeply indebted to Judaism from which it comes.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Could you**

in a few words remind us of the characteristics of the teaching and the life of Jesus that clearly reveal his Jewishness?

Roberto Badenas: All in Jesus reveals his Jewishness: His teaching by images; his use of parables and metaphors; his constant references to the Hebrew Scriptures; his reverence for the temple; the way he relates to prayer; his interesting perspectives on the ethical teachings of the Torah (see his “Sermon on the Mount”); the way he celebrated and reinterpreted the feasts, particularly the Sabbath, etc.

Shabbat Shalom: Now a very controversial question: Do you think that a Jew who takes Jesus’ teaching seriously can still remain a Jew, especially if he or she keeps practicing the Torah?

Roberto Badenas: This is indeed a very difficult question to answer, but not because there is any problem in taking Jesus’ teaching seriously and remaining a Jew. The question is controversial because of the controversial connotations that history and society have put on “accepting Jesus” and on “remaining a Jew.” It depends very much on how we define these two apparently exclusive alternatives. But personally I do not see them as incompatible, as if they exclude each other. For nobody can take seriously the teachings of Jesus without taking seriously the teachings of the Torah! For Jesus, following his teachings meant keeping on practicing the Torah. The difference brought by Jesus consisted in looking at the Torah in a way which is closer to the spirit of Scripture than to some forms adopted by some traditions.

Shabbat Shalom: It has been said that it is not the Messiahship of Jesus that is a real problem from a Jewish perspective and that really separates Jews from Christians, for there were many bold messianic claims in Jewish history which did not yet lead to a separation. How do you respond to that?

Roberto Badenas: It seems that this is the main and real problem for many. The messianic claims that Christians make for Jesus have been historically the stumbling stone that leads to separation

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and that still divides Jews from Christians. But I am personally convinced, on the contrary, that it is precisely around the messianic claims that Jesus made that both Jews and Christians could finally put an end to their differences.

Shabbat Shalom: Now a very personal question, if I may: Did your reading of the Gospels and your exposure to Jesus change something in your religious thinking? If yes, how? To what extent has this experience made you a better Christian and has drawn you closer to the Jews?

Roberto Badenas: I can say that many of my most decisive spiritual experiences are related to my own “encounters” with Jesus through my readings of the Gospels. This “exposure” to Jesus has indeed changed not only my religious thinking but also my view of life, my approach to spiri-

tuality, my set of values. I have the strong conviction that I have come closer to the Jews through Jesus, in a way that I could have never reached otherwise. If to come closer to Jesus is to become a better Christian, then, definitely, this has happened in my life.

*This interview was conducted by Martin Pröbstle (Sept 30, 2003).