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## Brief Studies

Frederick W. Danker  
*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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## BRIEF STUDY

## JUDAISM IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD

When Paul stood before the Sanhedrin, he said, "The true issue in this trial is our hope of the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6). The liberal Pharisee faced the conservative Sadducee. In his warm and generous book Robert Gordis reminds us that the issue is still very much alive. "Whether or not we believe in immortality beyond the grave, we all know that we attain to immortality in this world through our children. When your parents contemplate the possibility of your marrying outside the fold, and realize that their grandchildren will no longer be Jews, it is the end as far as they are concerned. If they sound hysterical, it is because they are faced by the specter of their own extinction." (P. 205)

In answer, Gordis points the way for Jewish survival in terms of traditional strengths rather than isolationism. However, some of the stress on the distinctive contribution of Judaism is bought with some disregard for facts. Thus in his lengthy discussion of the celebrated case of "Brother Daniel" who endeavored, as a Jew, to reenter Israel under the law of return, Gordis states that the term *goy* is "virtually never" (p. 80) used to refer to the Jewish people, but see, e. g., Gen. 17:4; Ex. 19:6; Deut. 4:6; Joshua 3:17; 4:1; 10:13; Judg. 2:20; Jer. 31:36; Ps. 33:12; 106:5; Zeph. 2:9). The writer warns Christians not to conceive of Judaism in monolithic terms, and Christians do well to heed the admonition, yet he himself time and again treats Christianity in just such terms. "Classical Christianity, in the formulation of Paul, is strongly antinomian, denying the validity and authority of the Torah" (p. 158). This is a total distortion of Paul's own accent on his efforts to preserve the Law from self-determining casuistry (see, e. g., Rom. 3:31; 8:4). Paul also asserts that all must

appear before Christ's judgment seat and that each one will receive "good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10). No one ever spoke more eloquently about *mishpat* and *zidkab*, and even a slight acquaintance with Paul's letters reveals a strong indicative-imperative pattern. Gordis discredits Paul and Christianity by neglecting to observe that in Paul it is not a question of doing away with the Law but a matter of methodology in achieving what God aimed at in the Law. Indeed, anti-Paulinism seems to be a thread throughout the book, with little attempt at sympathetic understanding.

To judge Paul anachronistically in terms of aberrations of Pauline theology in some segments of Christianity is no more fair than to misjudge Judaism in such fashion. Paul must be judged on Jewish terms, within the context of Pharisaism, which stressed the legitimacy of the prophets on an equal level with the Pentateuch, in contrast with the Sadducees, who gave the nod to the latter. Gordis happens to be more sympathetic to the position of the Sadducees, but Paul's approach, on the basis of the prophetic expectation of a new law written in the heart (Jer. 31:33-34), was not at all un-Jewish in terms of his own historical context.

Equally incomprehensible is the assertion that "Christianity did not derive directly from the Old Testament but from rabbinic Judaism. . . . Thus the faith represented in the primitive Church rested upon the thought and practice of post-biblical Judaism" (p. 150). Apart from the oversimplification of earliest Christianity, this statement contradicts the writer's repeated reminder that Christianity diverges from rabbinic Judaism. Again, the statement that the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) does not hold so central a place in Christianity as in Judaism (p. 160) is erroneous. The history of Christianity is full of



polemical affirmation concerning the oneness of God, and the errors of the Schwenkfeldians are anathematized in the Lutheran Symbols. And how can it be stated that "poverty and wealth, slavery and the status of women are not of genuine concern to a man who seeks to achieve his salvation in the brief interval before the Divine cataclysm sweeps the world away" (p. 164)? What about Jesus' own critique of divorce casuistry and Paul's concern for Onesimus and James' strictures on oppression of the poor, not to speak of Jesus' concern about widows and their devoured houses (Mark 12:40)? Again, on pages 171—72, a contrast is suggested between "emotion" in Christianity and "the emphasis upon works and not merely upon faith, which characterizes Judaism," with the added observation that the latter is "a valuable corrective." Gordis forgets that Paul himself countered emotion with the "far better way" (1 Cor. 13), in words that echo the most passionate outbursts of the prophets in their concern for righteousness, not to speak of Luther's Large and Small Catechism with their marvelous expositions of the Ten Commandments. Gordis apparently has not read Luther, or he would never have written that Martin Luther emphasized the "efficacy of faith rather than works, thus contradicting the official teaching of the Catholic Church" (p. 175). The fact is that Luther called the church of his time back to truly Catholic teaching, and this is recognized today by objective Roman Catholic scholars, including especially Hans Küng. Indeed, it is doubtful whether anyone has ever written more fervently than Luther about ethical responsibility.

Gordis' answer to the conversion interests of Christianity is to affirm that Judaism does not believe that salvation is "exclusively 'of the Jews' (*pace* the New Testament!)" (p. 145). Yet in his answer to the problem of intermarriage he says that "*the Jewish community must make the effort to bring*

*the non-Jewish partner into the community through conversion to Judaism*" (p. 205). He supports this with the proposition: "That Judaism will ultimately be accepted by all mankind is basic to the vision of the future in the Jewish tradition in its most creative periods . . ."

What is disturbing about this book is that in a time when Christians are combatting anti-Semitism in subtle as well as overtly virulent forms, this book suggests that a primary ingredient of Jewishness is an anti-Christian stance, that Jewishness is by definition to be also non-Christian. This is to commit the error ascribed to Christians who are charged with defining Christianity in terms of rejection of Jewishness. This is further to deny one of the complex factors in the history of the Jewish people, for there was a time when priests, Pharisees, and others among the Jewish people embraced Christianity and did not consider that espousal a cancellation of their Jewishness. Persecution of such people stemmed not from the masses of Jewry but from a few leaders. It is true that many Christians make a mistake in defining Judaism in terms only of Old Testament history. At the same time, if Jews narrow the criteria for determining Jewish identity by making non-Christianity a fundamental issue, then some run the risk of erasing the totality of that very continuity that spells identity. Or must one admit that Jewishness is a precarious possession at the mercy of the vagaries of history? Some place along the line one ought to ask: "What is God's own criterion?"

The worst form of anti-Semitism is to affirm that Jews are invincibly stiff-necked, and a subtle form of such anti-Semitism is the patronizing approach taken by Christians who do not think a Jew capable of sharing in the blessings inherited through Abraham and his most eminent descendant, Jesus the Messiah. Conversion sought for the sake of personal achievement is unworthy of the



name, but love which embraces in the sharing of the prophetic blessings is philo-Semitism. Indeed, only by affirming their Jewishness can Christians be certain of their continuity with God's people, for salvation *is* of the Jews (Gen. 12:3; Is. 42:6). Yet there is no gainsaying the fact that Jews, also the Christians among them, have not seen too much of the Galileean in the lives of His people.

This book indicates that much conversation is necessary to dissipate much of the ignorance about Christianity displayed in this book as well as ignorance of the Jewish

heritage displayed by Christians. Gordis has done much to help Christians understand Judaism. His book offers the clearest expressions I know of in contemporary literature concerning Jewish identity, and it deserves to be widely read. If nothing else it will prompt Christians to ponder the question: "Do you know where I hurt?"

*JUDAISM IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD.* By Robert Gordis. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966. xxxiv and 253 pages. Cloth. \$6.50.

FREDERICK W. DANKER