

Jesus and the Gentiles

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If I were Jewish, so I imagine, I would be offended not so much by Jesus himself as by the gentile company he keeps. It must be galling for conscientious Jews to have to stand by as we goy party-crashers, simply on the strength of Jesus' unilateral invitation, invade Judaism's most sacred precincts and, like squatters, claim equal rights within the Jewish household. Or if it is Jesus who is objectionable, then that might well be why: not his reproaches to his fellow Jews or even his intimations of messiahship so much as the outsiders he presumes to bring home with him, apparently without consulting the family. I confess to loving this Jew surpassingly and, when I do, thinking of those moments as my better ones. But those are the same moments when I most dread being a homewrecker. I have read that he did, too.

By "homewrecking" I am not even thinking of the obvious Christian atrocities against Jews – the pogroms and holocausts, the evangelistic zealotry, the almost congenital prejudice. I am thinking rather of those liberties we take with Judaism when we Christians are not at our worst but at our best, liberties without which we could not be Christian. For instance, with only Jesus' precedent as permission, we rummage around in the

Hebrew Scriptures as though they had been written for us. That is like reading other people's mail. Then, after reinterpreting those Scriptures as eager anticipations of our own arrival, we reclassify them as "old." No matter how essential such editorial license may be for us, for the original addressees it must hurt.

Or: we help ourselves to the Passover supper in the belief that we Christians have had "the last" of those and have advanced to "the Lord's Supper." Granted, we do it ever so eucharistically, but it must come off as upstaging even so. Or: we approach the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – we have pre-empted them, too, as our ancestors – and dare to call him "our Father," addressing him even by such intimate nicknames as "Abba," our only entr e being, "Jesus sent us." How flip that must sound to the legal heirs. Or: with only the cross to go on, we tout a "new" covenant for which absolutely everyone is eligible, unconditionally. But what an affront that must seem to the divine Law for which Judaism has so long struggled and bled. Exactly by making ourselves so at home as "honorary Jews" we must be embarrassing to the charter members.

If such be the case, it would be understandable that some Jews might flee instead to a kind of non-particular theism. That way, with God being equally partial to everyone who can qualify, Judaism would no longer have to bear the burden of being special or the embarrassment of attracting intruders whom it cannot in good conscience accommodate. Not that I advocate this alternative. Actually, I find it quite goyish. But I do understand its appeal, just as I understand why some Christians might prefer the same way out: it would take the heat off.

Jesus would obviate our fear of being unwanted by our Jewish hosts, and would leave each of us free to reckon with God alone. But that, as I recall, was the problem to begin with.

Yet it does seem that we Christians should have something more consoling to say to our Jewish sisters and brothers than "Sorry, but you seem to be stuck with us." What we might do is to promise not to wear out our welcome. One way to keep that promise is to share in the costs of the household – the cost, for instance, of being Jewish when that incurs hostility. Houseguests should expect that that obligation goes with the turf, as Jesus promised. Moreover, Jews who are now welcoming us to serious interfaith dialogue are already showing promise of that ultimate Jewish hospitality for which we Christians hope. Probably the most Christian thanks we could render would be to quote these words: "It was I who was a stranger and you took me in." Knowing them, I believe they would take it with good humor as we identify the Stranger who said that for us.

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