

Jesus Through Jewish Eyes

Colleagues,

Someone asked: Why don't you send us any of the stuff you're doing at the Overseas Ministries Study Center this semester? I have been working on mission themes. One product is an expanded essay on Luther's preaching on the so-called Great Commission. Another is a 34-page study book for my seminar running here this week. Today's ThTh #201 is a few pages from that seminar study book. FIRST is the outline of the week-long seminar.

SECOND is my book review handed to students in preparation for yesterday's meeting at "Simchat Yisrael" the Messianic Jewish synagogue in West Haven, the town next door. ["Messianic Jewish" here means: "Our congregation believes that Jesus is the Messiah."]

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

1. ITEM 1

***Overseas Ministry Study Center
2001-2002 Study Program
April 15-19, 2002
"In a World of Faiths, Why Jesus?"***

Seminar Description:

Today's world is "awash in a sea of faiths." So where does Jesus fit in amidst all those options? Why not New

Age? Or Moses? Or Muhammad? Or the Buddha? Or the many "other gospels" available today? Christians claim that Good News, something "good" and something "new," came into our world in Jesus. Is that still true vis-a-vis today's "sea of faiths"? This week we'll find out.

Session 1 – April 15 Monday – 2:00 p.m.

What answer did the New Testament writers give when Jews and Greeks asked that question in N.T. times? What was "good and new" compared with the Jewish and Greek alternatives?

Session 2 – April 16 Tuesday – 9:30 a.m.

The Reformation as a controversy within the Christian church about "Why Jesus?" Luther's answer and its implications for mission.

Session 3 – April 16 Tuesday – 2:00 p.m.

Why Jesus for a Muslim?

What's "good," what's "new"? Reflections on David Kerr's week-long seminar about Islam just completed at OMSC. A look at the answers given by Christians who have come from this tradition.

Session 4 – April 17 Wednesday – 9:30 a.m.

Why Jesus for a Hindu?

What's "good," what's "new"? An examination of answers given by Christians who have come from this tradition.

Session 5 – April 17 Wednesday – 2:00 p.m.

Why Jesus for the Jewish People?

What's "good," what's "new"? Conversation with Tony Eaton, Rabbi of Simchat Ysrael, A Messianic [= Jesus is the Messiah] Jewish Synagogue, at his place in West Haven, CT.

Session 6 – April 18 Thursday – 9:30 a.m.

Why Jesus for a Buddhist?

What's "good," what's "new"? A conversation with James Phillips, retired OMSC staffer, Missionary in Korea, engaged in dialogue with Buddhists.

Session 7 – April 18 Thursday p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Why Jesus vis-a-vis some "other gospels" in America today? Two Samples: Creation Spirituality and the religion of "God Bless America."

Session 8 – April 19 Friday – 9:00 a.m.

Strategies for Christian witness in today's world "awash in a sea of faiths."

2. ITEM 2 – A book review

***Jesus Through Jewish Eyes.
Rabbis and Scholars Engage an Ancient Brother
in a New Conversation.
Edited by Beatrice Bruteau
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books
2001. xvi, 191 pp., paper. \$20.00***

Nineteen voices from American Judaism, some of them "big names," talk to us about Jesus. Here's the editor's own summary: "The responses are varied. Some contributors are academics and give us historical and theological views. Some are congregational rabbis who speak out of their experience with people whose lives are affected by some of these issues. Some share quite personal feelings about Jesus. Most of them still have difficulty 'leaving Christianity out of it' when discussing Jesus. Some offer views that they hope will constitute a common ground with Christians. Many begin by reminding us of what has been

done to the Jewish people because of Jesus. A few remark that there is no call for them to be interested in him at all; he doesn't add anything that they don't already have. Others see him as a teacher to be honored within the Jewish fold." (viii)

Common ground among all is on two items: 1) Jesus is not THE Messiah (though perhaps "a" Messiah) since no peaceable kingdom arrived with him and our hell-in-a-handbasket world persists, and 2) calling Jesus God is a flat out no-no. Yet even here comes one exception. A spokesman for "contemplative Judaism" sees the divinity ascribed to Jesus as true of us all. So he urges us to "Christ-consciousness, the awareness that we are each and all manifestations of the One True Reality." Where does he find this Jesus? In the Gospel of John, the gospel most Jewish writers cannot tolerate for its relentless critique of "the Jews." Yet John's Jesus speaks the truth: "the 'I' and the I AM are one." (p.171)

Going for the jugular, the same writer says: "As a Jew I do not believe in original sin and have no need of a Messiah's redemption." (169) None of the other nineteen say it that crisply, but it is there. Sin is ignoring God's Torah. Salvation is Torah-faithfulness. Jesus was Torah-faithful, not anti-Jewish at all. He came to fulfill the Torah, not abolish it. He started no new religion.

Soteriology is indeed the jugular in Jewish-Christian conversation. What really is needed for salvation? What do the Hebrew scriptures themselves say? That's the question—totally ignored in these chapters—we need to pursue. One could just take the Psalter and ask: what's needed for salvation? Just take Psalm 90 with its grim

diagnosis of our sickness, sickness unto death. Psalm 90 proclaims that we must deal with God's wrath, which "sweeps us away." When God is our deadly critic, criticizing us "to death," how can we be rescued? Will Torah-faithfulness do it? Not at all. Even in the so-called "Torah-psalms"—with all the good words about the Torah—Torah-faithfulness does not save sinners. "In thy righteousness, O Lord [not my Torah-faithfulness], deliver me" —that is the major message for salvation in the Psalms. So I suggest: Christians should propose the Hebrew scriptures as the texts for continuing conversation with Jews. We Christians hesitate to do that, of course, since it's "their" Bible. But if they are telling us what they see in "our" Gospels, we should return the favor.

Nevertheless there are other voices in American Judaism besides the authors in this book. Here's one. Years ago a St. Louis rabbi—call him Arnie—did some graduate work at our Lutheran seminary. One day he told us: "I'm a minority voice within American Judaism. I think the Suffering Servant texts of Isaiah, not the Mosaic Torah, are the center of the Hebrew scriptures. Isaiah diagnoses the human problem—of Jews and gentiles—for what it really is. He proposes the Suffering Servant as God's rescue for all. As I then look at the four Gospels, there's only one conclusion: Jesus is that Suffering Servant. But I don't say this very loudly to my own congregation."

Imagine him as dialogue partner, both with Christians and the writers of this book. Is Torah good news or not? When Jesus says (John 5): "Moses is your accuser, on whom you set your hope," is he reading Torah right? Not that Moses is "bad," but for SINNERS, is Moses good news, or bad news? What do the Hebrew texts actually say? Isn't that

where the conversation must focus? If God's Torah is indeed the sinner's accuser, then Jesus "fulfills the Torah," not by following its legislation, but by assuming its condemnation. He "fulfills the law" on Good Friday. Easter is God's thumbs-up on his (Isaianic) Torah-faithfulness. Isaiah calls that Good News for us. Arnie thought so too. "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all By his stripes we are healed."

How to read the HEBREW scriptures—read them aright—that is the ultimate JESUS-question.