

EARLY CHRISTIAN
THOUGHT IN ITS JEWISH
CONTEXT

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER I

Introductory essay

C. F. D. Moule

Some women damage feminist causes by vociferating. Others are quiet, even diffident, and might not, in any case, wish to be reckoned as feminists; but they make the point impressively when they rise to the top, and by sheer ability come to occupy positions of responsibility and influence. Nobody who knows Professor Morna Hooker-Stacey can hesitate as to the category in which she belongs. Before I had met her, I recognized the independent mind of a scholar in her early book, *Jesus and the Servant* (1959). In it, and later, in *The Son of Man in Mark* (1967), she risked her reputation by unfashionable views. Subsequently, she devoted much attention to Pauline thought (*From Adam to Christ* is a collection of such studies between 1960 and 1989), though *The Message of Mark* (1983) and some of her articles in journals show that she was also continuing to work at material for what emerged in 1991 as her *magnum opus*, the A. and C. Black commentary on Mark. Since then, her Didsbury Lectures of 1994 expound the meaning of the Cross in all the main writers of the New Testament. In the Pauline area, Professor Hooker is known especially for her variations on the theme of 'interchange' in the theology of incarnation – Christ became what we are, that we might become what he is. It is noteworthy that many of the titles of her articles are questions: 'Were there false teachers at Colossae?', 'In his own image?', 'What do we preach about Jesus Christ?', 'Is the Son of Man problem really insoluble?'. She has always been questing, and critical of conventional methods: 'On using the wrong tool' was a characteristic title. Scrupulously honest with the evidence, no matter where it might lead, she has in fact found and followed a deep Christian faith, which in undemonstrative ways appears in her writings, and which she proclaims as a Methodist Local Preacher.

How many of her teachers in the early days, one wonders, foresaw any of all this in the North London schoolgirl? Perhaps she never

dreamt of it herself. Those who assembled in a hall a few yards away from that school, to drink her health on her sixtieth birthday, were able to feel something of the drama.

From school she went to Bristol University, where she was the first to graduate with first class honours in Theology. Her subsequent MA dissertation became the already mentioned *Jesus and the Servant*. She went on to work for a PhD degree first at Manchester, then at Durham, where she became a Research Fellow in Arts, and was elected in 1961 into a temporary lectureship at King's College London, which was converted into a permanent appointment in view of her proved ability. This, however, she left in 1970 for a University Lectureship in Theology at Oxford with a Fellowship at Linacre College. A Fellowship of King's College London, conferred in 1979, and an Honorary Fellowship of Linacre, testify to her reputation. In 1976, elected into the Lady Margaret's Professorship at Cambridge, she became the first woman to hold a Chair of Divinity at Cambridge, and was among the founding Fellows of Robinson College. She is also the first woman to become a President of the international *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, the first to become a joint editor of *The Journal of Theological Studies*, and the first to qualify for the Cambridge DD.

The only sorrow is that she cannot visibly and audibly share the occasion of this Festschrift with her husband, the late Dr David Stacey, who, himself a distinguished scholar, shared with her for so many years all that he thought and wrote, as she with him. It is in a spirit of deep respect for his memory that these greetings and congratulations are offered. Professor Hooker-Stacey's most recent honour – the Honorary Doctorate from the University of Bristol, 1994 – recalls not only her student days there but also the years when Dr Stacey was Principal of Wesley College, Bristol, and Professor Hooker 'commuted' between Bristol and Cambridge.

There is much to commemorate in this birthday present.

As has been observed in the Preface, the theme of these essays might be said to spring from a seed sown by Professor Hooker herself. In the Ethel M. Wood Lecture for 1984, she discussed the continuity and discontinuity between the Christian gospel and Judaism. Referring to the synoptic saying about new wineskins for new wine, she observed that the innovation it advocated was not unqualified. In St Matthew's version of the saying, concern is

shown for the preservation of the old wineskin as well as the new. St Luke's version adds the saying that the old wine is preferred (although that, of course, could be intended as criticism of conservatism, not advocacy).

Concern for the careful study of the Judaism within which Christianity first took shape is prominent in New Testament studies at present. It has become habitual, of recent years, for New Testament scholarship to repudiate as discredited the distorted view of Judaism which marred the teaching even of highly reputable scholars, when they presented it as a barren and legalistic way of life, and made of it a foil to the freedom and warmth associated with Jesus. Following the trend set, for English-speaking readers, by Professor E. P. Sanders, there has been a revival of interest in the nature of Judaism at the time of Christ, a reaction against the tendency to disparage it, and a concern to recognize the Jewishness of Christianity. Although Sanders allowed that, at certain points, there was conflict between the practice and teaching of Jesus himself and aspects of the Judaism of his day, there is at present a tendency, with some scholars, to minimize this conflict and to apply specially rigorous criticism to the traditions that suggest it, and, correspondingly, to reduce the gap between Judaism and the convictions of the early Christians. But this, in its turn, can too easily become an over-reaction.

It is timely, therefore, that important aspects of the question of old and new should be authoritatively reviewed. This collection of studies in that area by a number of scholars, in Britain and beyond, including Professor Sanders himself, should be of lasting value for future investigators, as well as an appropriate tribute to Professor Hooker and her work.

The book falls into three unequal sections. The first contains two studies of the social and cultural context of Christianity at its inception – one for Judaea and Galilee, which describes the social, political and economic circumstances in which Messianic and related movements came into being, and one for the diaspora, which demonstrates the important influence exercised by Jewish literature and culture on the nascent Christian movement and its literature. Although the strength of the Jewish presence varied a great deal in different areas and at different periods, yet 'whether as children, competitors, mimics or heirs, the early Christians can barely be understood except by reference to Diaspora Judaism' (p. 38).

Part Two makes the same point as it brings into focus each of the main components of the New Testament in turn, together with some of the early non-canonical writings. The importance of the study of Judaism for understanding the beginnings of Christianity is evidenced by the fact that practically every part of this literature is shown to bear the imprint of Jewish thought – or even, as Dr Sweet finds in the Apocalypse, of a whole mode of apprehension which is different from the more logical, more cerebral style of the ‘Western’ approach. So far from being limited to the obvious examples such as St Matthew’s Gospel or the Epistle to the Hebrews, the impact of Judaism is found, in some measure, and in various manners, in them all. In parts of the ‘Apostolic Fathers’ there is, of course, open and vigorous polemic against Judaism; but ‘only rarely’, writes Professor Stanton, ‘are there signs of bitter enmity . . . the lines of continuity and discontinuity are not always easy to determine with precision’ (pp. 188–9). There is, however, no denying that, in fulfilling the pattern of Jewish aspiration, Jesus is seen also to stretch and transform it. The novelty and originality of the Christian movement are as evident as the continuity. Dr Wright’s study of the Jewishness of Jesus himself exposes the paradoxical nature of the culmination of his ministry in death and – as Christians claim – in resurrection. So, too, Professor Sanders’ study of Paul, here and in his books, shows the conflict set up in Paul’s heart and mind by allegiance to Jesus, which is reflected in inconsistencies in the handling of the question of the Mosaic Law. It is the painful dilemma of one who, committed to Jesus as Christ and Lord, wants still to call himself a Jew.

Part Three studies the relation of Christianity to Judaism in several areas of thought and practice – the Scriptures; the land, sanctuary and worship; monotheism; apocalyptic; atonement and martyrdom; ethics. In each of these areas, the same paradoxical continuity yet also discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity is confirmed and illustrated. For instance, take Professor De Jonge’s study of monotheism and christology. While there are no passages in the New Testament which offer any foothold to unequivocal polytheism, yet the relation between Christ and God is such that the Fourth Gospel can show Jews complaining that Jesus makes himself equal with God, while Paul has to safeguard against misunderstanding the bowing of every knee to Christ, by adding that this is to the glory of God the Father. As Dr Sweet says (alluding to a

conclusion of Professor Bauckham's), in Revelation 'the divinity of Jesus is set firmly within Jewish monotheism' (p. 167). Again, in the essay on land, sanctuary and worship, Dr Horbury – like Professor Rowland on apocalyptic – calls for a reconsideration of the theory that literal, this-worldly expectations were, in Christian thought, totally 'spiritualized'. With persuasive learning he shows, for instance, how expectations of the restoration of worship, literally in Jerusalem, still left their stamp on Christian thinking, Gentile as well as Jewish. On the other hand, Professor Grayston's survey of Jewish views about the atoning power of martyrdom, while showing the importance of tradition, shows also how radical was the Christian conviction that God was the subject, not the object, of the work of atonement. Throughout this section, the newness of the Christian faith is clear, side by side with the continuities.

The generalizations to which this expert investigation points may not be new in principle, but are of the utmost importance in the present debate. The Christian movement emerges from it as amply confirming its roots in Israel and as aiming not at abolition but at renewal; not as 'anti-Semitic' (a misnomer in this connection), but as reforming. It is true, however, that the result is the supersession of certain Jewish 'identity-markers'. In a sense, as Professor Sanders observes in the case of Paul, this only means replacing an old exclusivism with a new one: those alone who accept Jesus as Lord belong in the People of God. But it has to be said also that, in Christian belief, Jesus is not only Israel fulfilled, but ultimate 'Adam' – that is, the fulfilment of all humankind. To belong in Christ is therefore to belong in what God intends through Israel for the human race. If that is exclusive, can it be by anything other than self-exclusion? Such is the programme which, with good reason, may be traced to Jesus himself. It led to his death; but as Christians claim, it led also to the achievement of that programme: through the fulfilment of Israel's prophetic vision comes the fulfilment of human destiny. It led to a new perspective in eschatology, with the death and resurrection of Jesus at the central point. It led to a new and radical understanding of atonement.

I speak only for myself, and do not intend to implicate the contributors, but it seems to me that these essays leave no room for a doctrine of two concurrent and equally valid covenants; yet neither do they justify attributing anti-Semitism, in its strict sense, to the early Christian writings. Bitterness, alas, there sometimes was against

certain (not all) Jewish persons, and radical criticism of certain Jewish convictions. But it is the positive note of fulfilment that, ironically, constitutes the real offence – the *skandalon*. Christianity is undoubtedly new wine. What, in the light of the facts, are we really saying about those wineskins?