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I'LL KEEP BOTH

A response to Samuel Levine, You Take Jesus, I'll Take God: How to Refute Christian Missionaries (Los Angeles: Hamorah Press, 1980).

This book was written by a Jew for Jews about Christians. It is a response, the author says, "to the many people that I have met who have either adopted Christianity or were seriously considering it" (p. 7). He states further in one of his characteristic generalizations that "all of them, without exception, did not know the Bible or their Judaism before they were introduced to Christianity," and as a result "they were easily manipulated by Christian missionaries (some of whom had converted from Judaism themselves)." With such an introduction the reader can hardly expect to read a friendly, unbiased type of book. And that is how it turns out: the author displays a deep-seated antipathy to Christianity and a strong bias against anything related to Jesus, especially his Second coming.

The book has three parts. Part One is the author's description and analysis of the twenty-five Bible verses, which "Christian missionaries will show you." The claim is made that this is the entire list of all the texts to which Christian missionaries appeal. No sources are given for the so-called Christian statements and interpretations so that none is able to check the accuracy of Mr. Levine's description nor who used the "proofs" for Christianity's claims.

Part Two lists "some strong questions that you could present to a Christian missionary," while Part Three is described as "edited correspondence with a Messianic Jewish missionary." Unfortunately this latter section was "edited," and the reader who has read discriminately and checked the author's accuracy where he could is left with the lingering suspicion that the editing was done with a strong anti-Christian bias. In fact, much of the alleged correspondence is irrelevant, its argumentation difficult to follow, and at times borders on extraneous issues rather than on matters central to both Judaism and the Christian faith.

Even poor books sometimes have redeeming features. This is true of this book also. But before we consider what these might be, we must have clearly in mind the five "important points" which the author asks the reader to keep in mind as he studies the book.

(1) The first bit of advice deals with the "method" to be used in dealing with Christian "proofs." We are advised to examine carefully the biblical sources quoted, and the context in which the Scripture passage was written. That is good advice, not just with regard to the Scripture texts that are referred to but also the book itself. It would have been to everyone's benefit if Mr. Levine himself had done this as honestly, faithfully, and unbiased as he asks his readers to do.

(2) He warns Jewish readers to be alert to all types of "psychological tricks," which, he writes, "Christians use in seeking to convert Jews to Christianity." This theme recurs with some frequency throughout the book. The Table of Contents includes a special reference to "the psychological reasons for becoming a convert to Christianity," even though there is no single section which treats this subject by itself. Levine admonishes his Jewish readers

...to realize that most people who accept Jesus into their lives did so for psychological reasons, and not because the verses of the Bible convinced them. Very often, if you probe deeply enough, you will discover a

broken home, a terrible marriage, an unloved person-- in short, someone who needs a Big Daddy to comfort them. Jesus fills that void for them (p. 11).

What Levine does not realize or is unwilling to admit is that we are not trying to meet human need in order to be able to preach the gospel and win converts. It is impossible to separate service from proclamation, because we cannot separate physical and material need from spiritual need. We believe that the gospel is for the whole man and speaks to his total well-being. Our motivation is that we are compelled by the love of God (2 Cor. 5:14). Even if our message is rejected, we are willing to serve and heal. I am reminded of a statement made by Bishop Stephen Neill in his book The History of Christian Missions to the effect that a missionary should not be surprised that converts come with impure motives, since, if they came with pure motives, they would not have to come.

Levine frequently charges Christian missionaries with "manipulation." What persons who are considering Christianity need, he says, "is most probably a good friend, not a psychological father figure who will be placed on the wall with hands stretched out on a cross" (p. 111), probably a reference to a crucifix. (3) Levine informs us that he uses the King James version of the Bible throughout, a choice which is unacceptable to many Christians since the appearance of several superior translations into English. He also uses the term "Old Testament" in spite of Jewish objections to the term, making the point that he does so to show the Christian attitude towards the Hebrew Bible as "that which is replaceable or that which was replaced." He also specifies that "Old Testament" (presumably all thirty-nine books) and "Torah" mean the same thing. In response to what he calls the Christian "proofs" and the King James translation, Levine appeals to extra-biblical sources such as the Talmud and sayings of the rabbis. It is clear that he and Christians have a vastly different view of revelation. (4) We are told that Christians "introduced an entirely different picture of what the Messiah would be like (son of God, incarnate, born of a virgin, two comings, etc.)" which differed from the status quo regarding the nature of the Messiah that had developed among the Jews and was current in the time of Jesus. What the author forgets is that it was not Jews but God who taught mankind about the Messiah and revealed what we know of him.

Not all Jewish scholars would agree with this statement in the sense in which Levine intends it, namely that there were no currents of thought in Jesus' day which believed in a virgin birth, vicarious atonement, resurrection from the dead, ascension, and Messianic reign. The late Rabbi Philip Sigal and others have consistently maintained that there was such a valid tradition among Jews of Jesus' day. Although there was a variety of differing traditions. Judaism, Sigal says, did not develop from the same tradition as Christianity, but from its Pharisaic heritage. I have frequently been surprised by many of the statements of the ancient rabbis who understood passages in the Hebrew Bible as being Messianic which I did not understand as Messianic in their reference at all.

(5) Finally, the author confuses and misrepresents the goal of the Christian mission in his concluding paragraph on page 12 of the Introduction. He writes:
I have nothing against Christian missionaries who try to convert pagans into becoming Christians. This is highly meritorious, because they are then transforming an immoral, primitive person into a more moral and

spiritual one. However, this is not true when a Jew becomes a Christian. ...The real objection is to the Christianity that the Christian missionaries are trying to convert the Jews to.

The fallacy of this argument is readily seen. Either God is the God of all peoples of the earth, and his grace and love all-embracing without distinction, as he represents himself in the Scriptures, Old and New, or he is merely a tribal deity who deals with his special people and mankind in different ways and whose promises are restricted to one people alone. No Christian may deny that Israel was and is still the "apple of his eye," or that Israel was and remains a specially favored people (cf. Romans 9). There is only one way of salvation, as Peter says. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Nor is it true, as Levine alleges a number of times, that the Jews of Jesus' day did not believe in him. This makes a lie out of the statements of the New Testament that increasing numbers of the people became followers of the Way, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7)..

THINGS WE CAN LEARN FROM THE BOOK

Though written for Jews, the book is not without value for the Christian. For one thing, we hear in it the response of a man who repeatedly and in various ways has been confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ but who continues to reject that gospel as inapplicable and unnecessary for himself and his fellow Jews. We are obliged to listen to him with patience as he tells us why this is so. While doing so, our own hearts, like that of Paul, must be filled with "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (Rom. 9:2). These are feelings we may not suppress, for here is a man and a people who have such great privileges and yet resist God's Spirit. The author has laid bare the condition of his heart and that of many of his people. There is something very evil and tragic behind all this: a man has made it his mission to prevent others from becoming followers of Jesus or to convince them to abandon the faith they embraced when they responded to his gospel. This is terrifying in its consequences.

The author collates and defines what he says are "all the basic 'proofs' of the divinity of Jesus or 'proofs' that he is the real Messiah." He then proceeds to give his response. Even though the "proofs" he cites may have been used by some Christians, not every Christian would agree that the positions he describes are acceptable to, held by, or used by Christians. Nor, I am sure, would all Jews agree with Levine's interpretations. Nevertheless, this is a record of what one man hears Christians saying to him, and he perceives these testimonies as representative of the Christian faith. We have a duty in all this, as Moishe Rosen states: in our witness to Jews we must be true to the Scriptures. We are not permitted to extend or limit their meaning. The power of our witness is in the Word blessed by the Spirit, and not in our own words or efforts.

Even though Levine does not accept Jesus as the Messiah, he nevertheless correctly judges that the person of Jesus is central to the Christian faith. It is not possible to judge from the book whether the Christian doctrine of the incarnation was ever clearly presented to him (he does not understand the incarnation, and even mocks the Christian faith by asking, "Does your God wear

diapers?"). His misunderstanding of basic Christian doctrines alerts Christians to the necessity for clear, accurate use of the Bible and of prophecy. It sometimes seems as though some Christians are so taken up with what the Bible says about the Jews that the Bible's message to the Jew is not fully presented.

I also appreciated the emphasis on the peculiar, special role of the Jews in God's redemptive plan. The gentile has not preempted the place of God's people nor replaced them (as I heard a professor of missions say recently). Salvation is from the Jews and God is not finished with nor has he written off his special people. Jew and Gentile will walk together into the kingdom of God with their Lord.

The book can also be read as a call to the Christian church to affirm that the Old Testament is still God's revelation to us today. The early church tenaciously affirmed this over against all challenges, Jewish and pagans. Yet it seems strange that after so many centuries, many Christians devalue the Old Testament or are unable to give an adequate description of the terms "Old" and "New" as used of the Testaments. One result of this has been a form of "Christolatry" which makes the godhead secondary to Jesus and results in a very spiritualized almost non-human Christ.

SOME STRICTURES

Levine makes a peculiar judgment on page 103 where, referring to 2 Samuel 12:24, he writes, "...but for sure, David did not commit murder or adultery." The reader is told to "study the Talmud for the reasons." The appeal to extra-canonical commentary makes it difficult to confine the discussion to the text of Scripture itself. Once again we have an example of the great gulf that today separates the Jew from the gentile Christian.

The author also refers to Moses' killing of an Egyptian (p. 104, note 8) and tells us that "the Bible always let us know when an act was wrong by specifically pointing out the sin, and so, if no condemnation is mentioned, it indicates that nothing wrong took place." This is a judgment we cannot allow to stand. Killing a fellow-man is forbidden by God and cannot be rationalized away by any argument. These and other instances show how different are the concepts of Jews and Christians as to the nature of sin, God's forgiveness, and God's purpose even when he elevates men like David and Moses to responsible ministries among his people. Just because persons are specially favored by God does not mean that they were without sin. Who but David sang more beautifully about the blessings of forgiveness and whose songs speak more frequently of sin?

The author is not careful in his quotations from the King James Version to which he consistently appeals. An example is the use of Acts 13:46 and Matt. 14:24. He uses these passages to show that "Jesus made it quite clear that the message was to go to the Jews only. In fact Paul said this explicitly in Acts 13:46. So it is clear that Jesus himself never preached to the Gentiles, which therefore excludes Jesus from being the subject of Zechariah 9:10" (page 20). Neither Jesus nor Paul said any such thing. The gospel, they said, was for the Jew "first," never "only."

Another issue that gives Levine a problem and which he uses in his apologetic against Christianity concerns the second coming of Messiah as taught by Christians. This will always be a difficulty to anyone who denies the validity of the New Testament revelation. What Levine appeals to, however, is that everything the Old Testament says about Messiah must find its fulfillment in a single coming (granting, of course, that a personal messiah is expected). The historical and redemptive working of God through history by which his revelation became clearer and fuller are significantly overlooked. In Christ Jesus we see all things coming to their head, but God's redemptive program is not finished. In Hebrews 2:8 we are told that "we do not see everything subject to him." That great day is still in the future. If some things are not yet fulfilled and we still only "know in part" and "see but a poor reflection" (1 Cor. 13:9, 12), this cautions us not to be too dogmatic about how that future will unfold. That our Lord is coming again is a cornerstone of our faith and redemption.

To respond to everything in the book is an impossible task. However, a few brief samples from the book may be helpful in further evaluation and discussion. 1) Considerable value is placed on extra-biblical sources. Schonfeld's The Passover Plot, is simply accepted as historical fact, not hypothesis. The Sanhedrin is cited as an infallible guide (p. 22) and its rejection of Jesus as normative for Jews today. The oral tradition is given undue, even erroneous, value (p. 22-23).

2) On what possible basis can anyone say that in Psalm 22 David was actually asking God "Why would the Jewish people be occasionally forsaken throughout history, especially when the Jews were suffering under the Nazis" (pp. 32-33)?

3) The suggestion is made (p. 34) that the New Testament was "doctored" in order to conform to the concepts the Christians had introduced into the nature of the Messiah. But what good is a deliberately "doctored" revelation, and why would those who doctored it be willing even to die for something they knew was a lie?

4) The "Attis legend" (p. 40) is in no way the source of the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus, as alleged. To say that Paul invented this doctrine (pp. 40-41) is false. What about the other authors of the New Testament? If Paul invented this doctrine because it was so crucial to his teaching, why are there so few references to this in his letters? No one denies that some other religions have parallel themes such as virgin birth. The question is the truth of the record. Nor is "the source behind the virgin birth theory," as Levine alleges, to be found in Isa. 7:14. It is based on God's revelation through the angel and God's subsequent fulfillment of his revelation (Luke 1,2).

5) We are told that Christians made "Sunday" into "Son-day"! (p. 41, note 14).

6) "There was no need for the death of Jesus while the temple still existed" (p. 43). The truth is, as the New Testament clearly says, there was no longer need for the temple and its sacrificial system after the death of Jesus.

7) A careful study of the book of Hebrews would have clarified for Levine the place of sacrifice and the death of Jesus in God's redemptive plan. It would also have kept him from making a caricature of the biblical position respecting the purpose, necessity, and meaning of Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice for sin.

Christians must also face honestly and biblically what to do with the "Ten Words" of Exodus 20. There is in contemporary, evangelical Christianity a strong antinomian strain which does not do justice to the covenant character of

Exodus 20. This puzzles me very much. Sinai was not for the Jews only; it is for all mankind and made participation of the gentiles in a new covenant which does not replace the former but enlarges to embrace all peoples and gives hope to both Jew and gentile together. If the covenant lifestyle of all God's people is the focus of Exodus 20, we must begin to speak of these Ten Words, not first of all as law and commandment but as the only appropriate form our lives must take in covenant with God.

There is not much new in this book that has not been repeated many times by Jew and Christian. There are, however, a few recurrent themes to which careful attention must be paid. Among these is the deity of Jesus. Recognizing that the first disciples were brought up as monotheists, we might find it helpful to approach the difficult questions of the unity and trinity of God through their experience. The New Testament gives us a few hints that the early disciples came to believe in Jesus' divinity by a gradual process. Mark 4:41 states, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" At his ascension (Acts 1) they were still not clear after three years about all matters relating to the kingdom. Perhaps we must look at Jesus through the eyes of the disciples so that we will have greater sympathy for the Jew who finds the confession of Jesus' divinity a stumbling block.

The same is true with respect to the atonement. Judaism finds the idea of atonement unnecessary and incomprehensible. Levine is offended by Christianity's testimony of the shedding of Jesus' blood (which he regards as human sacrifice, forbidden by God). We must remember that Jesus' disciples also needed a series of lessons instructing them as to why the Son of Man "had to suffer." No collection of Old Testament texts will ever be convincing in itself. We need to emphasize over and over that it is the Holy Spirit that prepares, illuminates, and convinces people that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." The Spirit's testimony is our strength.

Levine's book is a clear call to prayer for the Jews. The urgency of our task, the difficulties we face, the eternal issues at stake, and the opportunities before us should drive us to pray the prayer of the early Christian church:

Now, Lord, consider their threats, and enable
your servants to speak your word with great boldness.
Stretch out your hands to heal and perform miracu-
lous signs and wonders through your holy servant
Jesus. (Acts 4:29, 30)

Levine says the Jew cannot have both God and Jesus. We affirm from the Word of God himself that Jew and gentile need both.

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