

NEW APPROACHES TO OLD PROBLEMS?

**Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism
Annual Meeting, North American Branch
Atlanta, Georgia**

March 15-17, 2000

INTRODUCTION

I don't know how you feel, but I have come to this gathering with a feeling of buoyancy of spirit, intermingled with genuine hopefulness touching the worldwide encounter between the Jewish people and their Messiah in this new Millennium. You might wonder what happened to turn me on. Actually, early in January in the mystery of God's providence, this retired oldster was sent three books. All were unsolicited. Actually, I did not even know these books existed. But they have truly sent my mind soaring and have flooded my heart with optimism as I think about our common calling to Jewish evangelism. But let me first introduce these books to you. Then I will seek to indicate their significance in terms of our calling and the future.

HISTORY

This book followed correspondence with Torkild Masvie, the director of the Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. He shared the wonderful news that Drs. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik of the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology (Oslo) are currently taking the first steps to gather together more than thirty competent scholars from Europe and North America to produce a three volume record (550-600 pages each) of the history of Jewish Christians from antiquity until today. Masvie sought my assistance in contacting the administration at Fuller and securing its endorsement of this project. It awakened my hope for the possible participation of one of Fuller's historians.

I am sure you will immediately recognize the importance of reversing the long scholarly tradition that has ascribed only limited significance to the Jewish origins of the Christian faith. Many academicians have practically convinced the world that Christianity has virtually been a non-Jewish religion from its inception. But this unwarranted bias or long-

standing oversight(?) will now be completely exposed and vigorously replaced by multiple evidence for the Jewish roots of the gospel and the contributions of Jewish Christians to congregational order, etc. The first workshop will be convened in September 2000 at the Tantur Ecumenical Center in Jerusalem, and expectations are that Volume I will be print-ready by summer 2002. This means that we shall have – at long last – the beginnings of a comprehensive history of Jewish Christians based solely on the criterion of ethnicity – people who were Jews by birth or who became Jews by conversion, circumcision and acceptance into the Jewish community.

This correspondence with Masvie in Jerusalem was soon followed by my first unexpected surprise – the receipt of a manuscript sent to assure me of the quality and style of scholarship that will characterize this proposed comprehensive history of Jewish Christians. It was the rough draft of a 1998 manuscript Dr. Skarsaune had submitted to InterVarsity Press (UK). It deals with the Jewish roots of our faith and the involvement of Jewish Christians during the first five centuries of the Christian movement. Quality indeed! And to think that Dr. Skarsaune will be the Chief Editor of the larger three-volume work along with Dr. Reidar Hvalvik as its Project Director. What a gift! Ever since it arrived I have been reading and re-reading this 420 page study. Some of its startling conclusions leave one breathless.

Dr. Skarsaune's book, The Jewish Roots of Christianity, is designed for the general reader to show that throughout the entire period between 70 A.D. and on to the biblical exegesis and systematic theology of Cyril of Alexandria, a fifth-century bishop, not a few major documents bear witness to nuances and even direct statements regarding continuous encounter between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. During those centuries gentile theologians had to keep updating their arguments because of the input generated in Jewish Christian circles. Indeed, I began to see major reasons behind the need for the larger scholarly history being contemplated. The question of Jewish roots cannot be so easily left behind once one enters the second century, as the traditionalists have long told us. Even in the Medieval period, and on into later Church history, there is further evidence of contacts with Jewish Christians and even of their criticisms of misrepresentations of evolving Judaism in their day.

The more I studied this mss, the more I have become aware of the unwarranted frequency with which most church historians either minimized or totally ignored the presence and witness of Jewish Christians, especially after the first century. They seem to have been incapable of realizing that for long centuries, Jewish Christians exercised a positive influence on the

Christian movement. And they hardly appear to have realized that the consummation of all human history shall be nothing less than "the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Its gates shall bear the names of the twelve Jewish tribes of the sons of Israel and its foundations shall bear the names of the twelve Jewish apostles of the Lamb (Rev.21:12-14). Not a gentile among them! All Jews and all bearing witness to God's faithfulness in carrying to completion his covenant promises to Abraham and to his seed!

APOLOGETICS

The second gift was a book that bears the date of 2000. Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan) is but the first of three volumes that will together comprise a comprehensive study of the many objections Jewish people and their scholars have raised over the centuries against accepting Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. The author is Dr. Michael L. Brown, a Hebrew Christian of increasing prominence in Jewish evangelism and church renewal ministries. Many have long awaited this first volume, knowing of the many years Dr. Brown has devoted to discussing with his people the validity of biblical faith in Jesus as their Messiah. The next two volumes will soon follow.

Dr. Brown's background is impressive. He has a doctorate in Semitic languages coupled with extensive knowledge of the Mishna and Talmud, and broad exposure to other Jewish religious writings. He is widely known for his writings - over ten books, many articles, and even a recent contribution to the Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion.

This first volume is devoted to nineteen general and sixteen historical objections (270 pages). His proposed second volume will discuss theological objections and objections based on Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. The final volume will deal with Jewish objections to the New Testament and to criticisms of Jesus found in their traditional religious writings, such as the Mishna and Talmud. All together more than 150 objections will be thoroughly dealt with.

Dr. Brown candidly states that three separate objectives constitute his overall purpose in producing this series: First, to assist all who are interested in reaching the Jewish people with the good news of Jesus the Messiah; Second, to help Jewish believers who have become confused and befuddled by anti-missionaries; Third, to help Jews of every background -- Reform and Hasidic, Humanist and Conservative, Orthodox

and Reconstructionist – who do not yet believe that Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah. Moise Rosen of Jews for Jesus enthusiastically endorses this first volume as "incisive and to the point." Indeed, he heralds that Dr. Brown "will surely be acclaimed as the new expert in Jewish Christian apologetics."

MISSION

The third book is Not Ashamed (Multnomah Publishers, Inc., Sisters, Oregon) by Dr. Ruth A. Tucker. It will appear in July 2000, and is the story of Jews for Jesus. In the Foreword Dr. James I. Packer reminds us that the birth of this unique Jewish Christian mission in the early '70s took place "against the background of the California Jesus movement." He stresses its two formative principles as follows: First, that Jewish people who receive Jesus as their Messiah, Lord and Savior do not need to leave behind their Jewish identity or break with Jewish ways. He admires the manner in which Jews for Jesus has firmly maintained this principle against official Judaism, which Dr. Packer pointedly describes as "a post and anti-Christian mutation of the Jewish religion that Jesus knew." Second, that Jews should be evangelized with as much humor, chutzpah, and goodwill as possible, moving beyond the cool, low-key evangelism of most Gentile evangelicals.

As one reads this engaging book, the conviction grows that the selection of Ruth A. Tucker to produce it was most providential. She is an evangelical Christian by conversion, training and perspective. Her graduate education culminated with a PhD in American history. A contemporary, she comes from the same American culture that shaped Jews for Jesus. On the basis of these credentials one can readily agree that she was admirably qualified to undertake this demanding task. But she did not think so, despite having written almost a dozen books and scores of articles, along with holding a faculty position at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. One gathers that the awareness of her German roots and active family connections in Germany influenced this hesitation. As a result she deliberately sought to prepare herself intellectually and emotionally before tackling this demanding research assignment. This entailed saturating herself with the dominant elements of the Jewish experience in Germany as well as in America. One feels her sense of outrage over the Holocaust, over antisemitism (why don't we just call this imprecise term just plain Jew-Hatred?) and the varied forms of social discrimination Jewish people have experienced, particularly from gentile Christians down through the centuries. Since my roots are also German, you can be sure that as I read this fascinating and disturbing story of Jewish people today, I could not but resonate with her sense of identity,

and enter anew into her sense of shame over the ways in which Christians have abused this gifted, though tormented people.

Although Dr. Tucker recognizes that “organizational histories” are frequently boring, I found Not Ashamed! to be both moving and illuminating. It records how a group of Jewish college students in California fell in love with Jesus, despite being rejected by their families and Jewish people at large. Even so, they bonded themselves together under Moishe Rosen, an older man they could trust. As a result they were willing to go out on the streets and share with fellow Jews a message their people were already convinced was both false and utterly unbelievable. And they met with what often surprised them: multiple evidence of spiritual hunger, genuine inquiry and the appeal of Jesus, the greatest living Jew. It is not without reason that Tucker ends her extensive, personal introduction as follows: “My life has been transformed – for the better – through this encounter with some of the most sensitive, devoted, and clear-thinking people I have ever met. To them, ‘Shalom!’ To them I dedicate this book.”

SUMMARY

As I began to grapple with the substance of these three most timely books, it was natural to wonder what their influence might be on Jewish evangelism in the days ahead. Will their insights provide new approaches to old problems? In this connection I would like build our reflections on the three motifs these books represent. They follow --

1)- History and Identity

I firmly believe that the proposed history of virtually two thousand years of Jewish people in salvific encounter with Jesus Christ will have a particular appeal to Messianic Jews engaged in Jewish evangelism. One can hardly expect either secular or religious Jews, or even their leaders, to become immediately interested in reading about what they have long regarded as of no consequence. Even so, Jewish scholars, particularly historians will be unable to ignore this recovery from obscurity of a significant element in Church history. More important, these volumes will enter the academic programs of all institutions concerned with “Jewish studies.” On the basis of current enrollment figures in both Europe and America, these volumes will even have an impact on the increasing numbers of gentile students currently enrolling in these programs.

But this also means that all Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries, along with mission training facilities will find this basic

resource most helpful. Imagine the impact it will have on Jewish students who have already come under the rule and blessing of Jesus. They will now have a strikingly new sense of their identity within Jewry. They will see themselves as part of a long historic continuum of Jewish people who identified themselves with biblical faith in sharpest contrast to the followers of rabbinic Judaism with its loss of biblical authority and preoccupation with the traditions of elders who did not claim authority comparable to Israel's ancient prophets.

Think also of the sense of responsibility that will come to these Jewish students when they realize their God-given responsibility to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (vs3). This mandate came to the followers of Jesus (Jewish saints!) through his Jewish brother Jude (better known as "Judas" in Matthew 13:55). And think of the inspiration and sense of challenge that will come to them when they ponder the obedience and fruitfulness of the lives of earlier Jewish believers who served the Christian movement as evangelists, pastors, missionaries and theologians. At long last they will no longer need to seek inspiration solely from the lives of earlier gentile saints!

2)- Apologetics and Evangelism.

Before one can appreciate the full significance to Jewish evangelism of Dr. Brown's comprehensive grasp of Jewish objections to Jesus, one should take note of the different use made of Messianic prophecies by Jesus in the Gospels and by the apostle Paul in the Acts. Jesus himself emerges from the Gospels as the ultimate reference point of the Kingdom of God. He embodied its authority and message, displayed its service and ministry, and made his redemptive death and resurrection its central focus. On the basis of what the disciples increasingly saw and heard through their association with him, Peter perceptively spoke for them all when he confessed: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

In contrast, we learn that Paul's efforts to persuade Jewish people who had not experienced such direct and privileged association with Jesus, consisted of reasoned interaction through direct appeals to the Messianic passages in Scripture. Luke states in the Acts that upon arriving at a synagogue in Thessalonica, "Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks argued with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead, and saying: 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Messiah'" (17:2,3). It is this latter method that we use today. Our conviction is that as Jesus following his resurrection directly "opened the minds (of his disciples) to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24: 44,45), so by his Spirit today he

continues to reveal himself through reasoned appeals to these same Scriptures, as the Messiah and Savior of all those who believe.

Certainly, anyone involved in Jewish evangelism will greatly profit from a careful study of Dr. Brown's utterly reasonable and valid biblical analyses of Jewish objections to Jesus. None of us is so completely informed on this complex subject that we have nothing more to learn. Even so, as we all know, there is more to evangelizing people, whether Jews or gentiles, than merely engaging them in friendly dialogue and then refuting their objections. Our task is not merely to "open their eyes" in the sense of making clear to them the truths of the gospel. According to Acts 26:18, what follows is to "turn them from darkness to light." I can only assume that whether we are witnessing to Jews or gentiles, all people are conscious of what C. S. Lewis called "Sehnsucht – the longing which haunts every man and entices him toward God." In their search for solutions to their inchoate sense of need, they invariably are facing the wrong way. They must be turned around, since they are not facing the One who is "the Light of the World," the living Messiah who alone can meet all the hungerings of the human heart. This element in evangelism involves bringing people face to face with his appealing reality and his desire to be their Savior and Friend. Evangelism should hardly be confined to merely coping with the objections people raise.

Certainly, that was not the way Jesus dealt with people. Reflect on the sequence of his conversation with the woman of Samaria recorded in John 4. He began by opening her eyes with a friendly request for a drink, then spoke of God's provision for her ("living water"). This aroused her curiosity. She asked questions which he answered. In no time at all she became aware of the possibility that he, the self-confessed Messiah, could meet her inward need. This precipitated her request "Sir, give me this water." Rather than respond, he asked her to "call her husband." Her response revealed the total marital disarray of her life. She needed a change of allegiance -- "to turn from the power of satan to God". Only then could she begin to receive the blessings he had for her: the "forgiveness of sins" and "a place" in his community of faith (this five-step sequence is detailed in Acts 26:18). Hence, to use responsibly the excellent assistance Brown's study of Jewish objections provides, we should not confine our evangelistic task to refuting objections, but should rather think of linking our refutations to further witness to Jesus. In other words in every objection there is the possibility of responding in such a way that the conversation can be moved directly to Jesus and the gospel. Being content merely with giving solid answers to objections can too easily lead nowhere.

In this first volume Brown frequently gives us natural ways for using a good refutation as a means whereby we can move the gospel witness forward. But here is where I feel we all need, myself included, to assign ourselves a serious bit of homework, and study Brown's studies one by one and at fixed intervals. Follow his sequence, but set your own pace, and be loyal to it! First, study Brown's analysis until you are in a position to give the same good or even better (!) answer, but confine yourself to own thought-pattern and vocabulary. Then, ask the Lord to give you insight into the manner in which you might turn the objection into good for the sake of the gospel. If I have learned anything from studying our next book – (about Jews for Jesus) – is that every expression of opposition to Jesus that Jewish believers encounter, can be turned into an opportunity for spiritual victory. But don't forget to master Brown's answers first, and only then pray and consider how you might turn the conversations back on track! Dr. Brown will help you even in this regard, but not always. Just mastering his refutations is not enough! Of course, I am not suggesting that you work up your own transitional lines and then memorize them. Hardly! What I am calling for is the discipline of constantly keeping clearly in mind the fact that every refutation should be followed with gracious and persuasive words to turn the conversation back to Jesus.

3)- Mission and the Cross

What profit may we derive from Not Ashamed with its fascinating disclosure of the inner workings of a leading Jewish mission today? Please pardon a personal "aside" but this study vividly confirmed what I've long suspected: Jewish missions today are not what they used be! I can speak from experience! As I studied this book I frequently encountered matters that reminded me – in contrast – of several summers from 1939 to 1941 when I served under the banner of The New York Gospel Mission to the Jews on the lower east side of Manhattan. In those days I was led to believe that this was a top-level operation. True, the gospel, the Bible and prayer were the same then as now. But everything else was different. Instead of broadsides, we used tracts crowded with Bible information but which reflected little understanding of Jewish people, their cultural and religious heritage, their use of rabbinic tradition to divert attention from the gospel, and their preconceived thoughts about Jesus. Furthermore, the issue was never raised by the mission staff as to how concerned gentile volunteers like ourselves might best reach them. Our chief method was street meetings. Because I had the loudest voice I was given the task of gathering a crowd, describing our organization and its schedule of meetings, and ending with a personal testimony of how I had come to faith in the Messiah of the Jewish people and the Savior of gentiles. Unfortunately, the Jewish founder of the mission had died some time

before, and one of his two middle-aged, unmarried daughters ran the mission with the help of several untrained Jewish believers who largely spoke to their people in Yiddish. My spare time was devoted to two tasks, either preparing window displays for our store-front mission hall that gave what I thought were irresistible reasons why Jews should believe in Jesus, or going down up and down the streets handing out tracts and hoping that conversations would develop with those Jewish people with whom I managed from time to time to establish friendly contact. Our inside meetings were adaptations of gentile church meetings, pleasant to attend but not particularly soul-stirring. You can be sure that I found Jewish evangelism to be hard work. The mission was doubtless in its decline then, for it seemed to have neither vision nor plans for the future. It has long since closed its doors.

Not Ashamed presents a candid and comprehensive picture of Jews for Jesus and opened my eyes to what an effective Jewish mission can be all about. Although I had enjoyed contact with a group of Jews for Jesus personnel when they studied with us at Fuller in the School of World Mission, I had had almost no direct contact with their inner workings or mission activities. This book truly opened my eyes. No restraints were apparently placed upon Dr. Tucker when she was commissioned to produce this study. As a result she ranged widely and made sure that all aspects of the total life and service of Jews for Jesus were carefully observed. In theological commitment she encountered a distinctly Jewish embodiment of the essence of biblical faith. Overall, you gain the impression that she found Jews for Jesus to be a happy band of brothers and sisters. This strong sense of community she frequently attributed to what she stresses as its "attitude" or "collective personality and mentality." Moishe Rosen, its superb founder and leader during its first 23 years expounded this in the following fashioned: "Our attitude is not 'How to Win Friends and Influence People.'" On the contrary, "If you really care about people, you want to win them to Jesus, not to yourself." This sense of self-abnegation, which is accepted by all members, accounts in no small way for their amazing success and productivity. Indeed, all of us recognize that Jews for Jesus is an effective, first-class Jewish organization.

As a mission agency Jews for Jesus consists of superb leadership, a solidly crafted organizational structure, and the determination to utilize all possible means via their own literature, the public press, music, drama, and now the internet (etc. and etc.), to attract the attention of Jewish people. Its sole objective then is to communicate the gospel to them in ways that reflect prayerful application of the best insights drawn from communication theory and practice. But what particularly impressed me – and I have been around mission agencies for most of my life – is the care

exercised in establishing all new converts in the faith, and the manner in which this is related to their pattern of membership recruitment. It is not enough that they express an interest in seeking association with the mission. Many questions are asked, such as: How have they responded to the demands of the structured follow-up regimen that is used with all who profess to respond to the gospel? This would include observations of their acceptance of instruction in biblical discipleship, personal evangelism, and the challenges related to spiritual gifts. Have they begun to evidence a measure of spiritual productivity in their witness to others? Do they indicate the potential for creative evangelism, for charismatic leadership, or for assisting in community relationships? Has their previous secular training developed any distinct or unusual capabilities that could be utilized in furthering the basic task of Jewish evangelism? Do they recognize and heartily accept the "attitude" of Jews for Jesus? Are they truly willing to submit to mission leadership at every level and recognize that although Jews for Jesus refuses to manipulate its members and force them into any uniform mold or to restrain in any way the free exercise of their gifts and capabilities, it has the right to demand their unquestioned loyalty? On and on.

How do we interpret this? It seems to me that in this selection process, Jews for Jesus almost unwittingly follows Jesus' method of discipleship selection. As one ponders the questions with which they examine and test all volunteers, one feels they are actually looking for evidence of willingness to accept the prime condition that Jesus laid before his Jewish disciples before he permitted them to follow him and belong to his community of faith and service. You all know to what I am making reference. Jesus said: "He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me ... and he who loses his life for my sake will find it"(Matt. 10:38,39). Those who become members of Jews for Jesus know that continuous care will be exercised by its leaders not only to train them in everything that has to do with evangelism. They will also be seeking to enable them to "find their lives" and "live their lives" to the full. The encouragement will be directed toward their increasing engagement in those types of service most congenial to their background and temperament, their education and social environment, and which will especially fulfill their individual calling and destiny under God.

Actually, when I first scanned this book, I imagined that its focus would be on the pain and suffering encountered through parental rejection, community derision and personal shunning, and intermittent opposition on the streets. But after much thought I came back to the cross, the solitary door that leads to the assurance of a life that will not be wasted. Hence, it is my prayer that all leaders in Jewish missionary work shall read this book

and ponder its underlying lessons. They will find that towards its end it speaks of something I have not yet mentioned – the certainty that the whole Jewish scene in our day is in a state of flux and rapid change. In the wisdom of God Jews for Jesus is vividly conscious that it must not dwell upon its past, glorious though it has been under the wise and creative leadership of Moishe Rosen. No, the present thought and concern of Jews for Jesus must focus on the future. This caused Moishe to seek early retirement. As the executive director, he felt that his service at that post had come to an end. He then left it to the council to seek and appoint a younger man to lead the mission into the future. In 1996 it unanimously appointed David Brickner to replace Moishe. As I read Brickner's inaugural address (Appendix A) it became patently clear that his vision and initial plans were already in process of extended development. He humbly yet clearly intimated that certain changes would have to be made in response to tomorrow's challenges. And I for one could not but wonder whether his staff members will readily respond to the dislocations and other adjustments that will inevitably be demanded of them by this new man at the helm. Then I recalled -- have they not triumphed over other dislocating changes in the past? Did not their commitment to the cross and Jesus enable them to persevere then? Why should their reactions in the days ahead be any different? So I relaxed, and said to myself: Regardless what temptations may then seek to lure them into acts of disobedience or disloyalty, can we not believe that as we support them in prayer, we shall learn that they are persevering in the will of God? Let us believe that their response will remain resolute: "In Jesus we died, in his name we refuse everything that might hinder our commitment to the task of carrying to completion the evangelization of the Jewish people worldwide." And this same resolve can enable us all in our separate missions and churches to become more committed than ever to this unfinished task in the days ahead!

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