

The Study of Judaism

Terminology

Study of Judaism involves unusual problems of terminology. The word 'Judaism' is a case in point. It is a Greek term first found in 2 Maccabees, where it is used by contrast with Hellenism. Both Judaism and Hellenism expressed religious outlooks favoured essentially by rival groups of Jews. Moreover, we find the word 'Judaism' has a controversial, almost sectarian, ring when it is used by the apostle Paul to describe his pre-Christian days as a Pharisee (Gal. 1:13-14).

Thus, to describe Judaism, with some writers, as the religion of the Jews is fraught with problems. Some Jews have not practised Judaism though they have not in any way wished to obscure their Jewish identity. Then today we have the phenomenon of secular Judaism, that is of ethnic Jews who have and wish to maintain a living attachment to the Jewish community, but do not believe in any transcendental aspects of Jewish identity. They may well persist in certain religious festivals and practices because they believe they strengthen Jewish communal life, not because they bring the Jews closer to God.

In our pluralistic age it is not surprising that some scholars have talked of modern Judaisms in the plural, with at best very loose family connections. Other Jewish scholars have not been happy with this development, since they fear that it overlooks the common threads of Jewish experience and the common Jewish respect for tradition, however differently that tradition may be interpreted. Even more fundamentally, some Jews do not like the term 'Judaism' at all because it leads in their view to outsiders looking on Jews as closely analogous to Christians or Muslims. They claim that Judaism is more a way of life than a religion.

After all, it has no generally recognised creed or authoritative body with full power to determine what beliefs or ethics Jews should follow. Moreover, for a long time the Hebrew language lacked an equivalent for what we mean by 'Judaism'. Today the abstract noun *Yahadut* serves that purpose, but originally it meant Jewish identity, the condition of being a Jew. Even now some Jewish scholars are uneasy about an identification between Judaism, a religious term, and Jewishness. It is worth being alert to the usages of different authors on this point. One error, however, should be avoided at all costs – the identification of Judaism with the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures. These Scriptures certainly are important to Jews, but what gives Judaism its peculiar character are rabbinical traditions which developed at a later stage. In view of the diversity of views among the Jewish community it is worth exploring the stance of individual Jewish writers. Are they happy with a plurality of Judaisms or do they prefer to talk of an essential essence of Judaism? Then, where do they stand within the Jewish community? This is not the place to describe the main contemporary movements in Judaism; to obtain that information, you might usefully consult a writer like Dan Cohn-Sherbok in his *Modern Judaism* (Macmillan, Basingstoke 1996). But it may be helpful to highlight some leading characteristics of the main Jewish outlooks you are likely to encounter among their religious writers –

(a) Orthodox Judaism: holds to the belief that God gave the Torah (in both its written and oral forms) to Moses on Mount Sinai – Torah MiSinai. Thus, the Torah is divinely inspired and immutable. It may not be added to or subtracted from, though Jews can and will differ on its

precise application today.

(b) Reform Judaism: denies the divine inspiration of the Torah in the most straightforward sense. It sees the Torah as a product of the encounter of God with the Jewish people in which both have played their part. Revelation is to be seen as a continuous process, confined to no one group and no one age. Reform Jews have been eager to espouse positive aspects of Gentile society, and have stressed more than others a universal mission of the Jewish people.

(c) Conservative Judaism: was originally designed as a middle way between Orthodox and Reform Judaism. It holds a variety of different views on revelation, but tends to the view that the human element in interpreting the divine revelation is part of the revelation itself. It is inclined to focus on the historical experience of the Jewish people as the key element in Jewish distinctiveness.

Since a variety of stances are found among contemporary Jews, it is good practice when studying any Jewish author to seek out another Jewish writer with a different stance on the same question. Thus, if you are studying Jewish-Christian Dialogue, more than likely you will meet Jewish writers with a Reform perspective who are enthusiastic about such an enterprise. It would be wise to complement this by searching for Jewish writers (often in the Orthodox school) who are sceptical about or positively hostile to such dialogue.

Finally, be wary of writers, especially from some Christian background, who identify anti-Judaism with anti-Semitism. The two phenomena are best distinguished not least because of the amount of internal criticism by Jews of Judaism in one form or another. Nor is this phenomenon confined to the present day, as the cases of the apostle Paul and of Baruch Spinoza from the 17th century illustrate.

The distinctives of Judaism

Commonly Jewish writers suggest that Judaism has three inter-connected planks: belief in God, God's revelation of the Torah to Israel, and Israel as the people which lives by the Torah in obedience to God. These three aspects are implicit in the most fundamental text of Judaism, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 - 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord, is one.'

God

Judaism has insisted on the oneness of God – oneness not only in the sense that he has no partners or rivals, but also in the sense that he is unique, totally unlike any other being. Most branches of Judaism (apart from mystic Kabbalism) have ruled out the idea that it is possible to distinguish different aspects or powers in the Godhead. Hence their denial of the Trinity. But their insistence on the uniqueness of God probably has the more serious implications as far as Christian theology is concerned, because it excludes the possibility of an incarnation of God.

Judaistic concepts of God contain paradoxes which Christians would believe can only be fully resolved in the incarnate life of Jesus. For example, God is pictured by the rabbis as transcendent, remote and unknowable, and yet he is active in the world, close to those who call on him, and knowable in some sense by experience. We might ask – how is the gap bridged? Or again, God is seen as majestic, and strict in his justice, and yet he is also loving, kind and forgiving. This paradox is all the more difficult to resolve since Judaism has dispensed with the sacrificial system which was a key part of Old Testament religion. The Christian, by contrast, can see how God can be both just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus (Rom 3:26).

Another paradox with important practical consequences concerns God's relation to the Jewish people. Though God is the God of all mankind, he has entered into a special relationship with the

people of Israel at Sinai. Many modern Jewish academics are inclined to treat this as a myth. That, in effect, was also the position of the early Zionists who wanted a Jewish nation to take its place among the other nations of the earth without any essential differences. It is difficult, however, to avoid the charge that Judaism is a form of tribalism, if this line is taken. Besides, traditional Jewish liturgies do highlight the distinctive privilege and responsibility of Jews before God.

For example, at the Bar Mitzvah ceremony the Jewish boy will say (amongst other things), 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has chosen us from all the peoples and gives us his Torah. Blessed are you, Lord, who gives the Torah.' For their part Christian writers have been slow to question the rationale and the implications for Jewish distinctiveness, apart from its political ramifications in the state of Israel. Deeper study of Paul's excursus on the Jews in the plan of God from Romans 9-11 would be helpful here.

Torah

Jewish distinctiveness, as we have seen from the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, is bound up with the Torah. The reason becomes clear in a further statement made by the boy, 'Blessed are you Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given us a Torah of truth and has planted eternal life in our midst. Blessed are you, Lord, who gives the Torah.' Eternal life comes by way of obedience to the commands of this Torah. It is no exaggeration to say that for Judaism the Torah occupies the place Christians give to Jesus Christ.

But what is this Torah? The word 'Torah' is used by Jews in number of senses, but for our purposes we can concentrate on two of these – (a) the narrow sense where the Torah refers to the Pentateuch, the most important part of the Jewish Bible (Tanakh); (b) a wider sense where the Torah denotes the whole body of Jewish teaching, not only the Mishnah and the Talmuds, but all subsequent attempts to provide guidance on the meaning and application of the Pentateuch.

There are some Jews who claim that the Pentateuch alone has full divine inspiration and all the rest is commentary. This may lead to a dismissal of even other Scriptural writings like the Prophets as mere commentary. But more commonly it implies that the Pentateuch is itself opaque and in need of clarification and application. (There is a marked contrast with the Reformation principle of the perspicacity of Scripture.)

In practice, these clarifications become more important than the original Pentateuch. Thus, Jewish tradition becomes a powerful and flexible tool in the hands of religious scholars to bring Jewish practice in line with developments over history. The bitter debate between the Orthodox and Reform sections of the Jewish community may obscure this. But the debate centres more on the extent to which Jewish practices can be updated rather than the basic principle; in Jewish circles the notion of application is a broad one extending to all areas of life. Though Orthodox Jews would not put it this way, in effect Jews have sought for the revelation of God in the historical process generally rather than in specific acts where God has taken an initiative and given his own commentary. Moreover, in practice Jews have now such a vast store of traditional and diverse wisdom that some selection becomes inevitable whenever Jews are serious about the practice of Judaism. From the Christian standpoint it is not only the content but the function of Torah which is important. Judaism sees the Torah as designed to purify and sanctify the Jewish people in its special service to God – and possibly in due course to do the same for other peoples. The Jew is to express his or her loyalty to God by keeping the Commandments. It is assumed that Jews have the inherent moral strength and religious disposition to carry this through successfully.

Judaism does take the reality of sin seriously; it is a highly ethical religion. But it denies Original Sin, that the whole human race has been religiously and morally corrupted as a result of Adam's

disobedience. Rather, each man is endowed with free will, and stands or falls on his own merits. Often, Deuteronomy 30:19 is adduced in support of this. Judaism is particularly optimistic about man's moral capacity, stressing the continuing efficacy of the image of God. This is an image may have been tarnished by sin, but it has not altogether been corrupted.

Certainly, a man may fall into sin and that is no light matter. However, he can assure himself of God's forgiveness if he truly repents. Such is the power of repentance, according to rabbinical teaching, that not only are the sins of a repentant sinner forgiven, they are turned into virtuous deeds. Thus, in the modern Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) ceremony the emphasis turns on human activity and attitude in repentance. Gone is the stress in Leviticus on a mediator in the form of the high priest with an offering which is carefully prescribed by God. Indeed, Judaism in all its modern forms has banished any note of mediation. Franz Delitzsch has outlined the implications in these terms, 'According to the Jewish doctrine God lets himself be reconciled through repentance; according to the Christian doctrine, he is reconciled through the mediation of Christ, and the individual man is reconciled to God when in faith and repentance he accepts the mediation, which is common and general for all mankind... Repentance is not the factor which atones, but only the way to receive atonement.'

For its part Judaism finds the biblical idea of vicarious atonement unacceptable on two counts – (i) the individual must pay the penalty for his own sins; vicarious sacrifice is immoral; (ii) it would be an unnecessary and an improper interference with the free will of the being God has made in his own image.

Israel – the people of God

Judaism is inconceivable without a Jewish people, or better an Israel, who are the objects of God's special love and the recipients of God's Torah. This special love or election was often thought to have originated before the creation of the world and to last for eternity.

That means that anyone born into the Jewish community is at a distinct advantage. Indeed, the fact of his or her birth is an act of God's grace. This mirrors the attitude of the traditional Jewish prayer which gave thanks to God that one had not been made a heathen, a slave or a woman. Effectively, the Jewish community has become a repository of grace which automatically accrues to each individual member. To many Jewish scholars this has implied that all Israel will have a share in the world to come, and that not because of any merits of Israel but because of God's unconditional election. This would imply that even bad Jews benefit from the destiny of the whole community – 'What the community does or as the community as a whole acts can affect for good or for evil the individuals of whom the community is composed... The unity of the community is a unity which is an advantage to its evil members.' (C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe *A Rabbinic Anthology*).

In effect, the corporate election of Israel has been allowed to overshadow any concept of individual election. It is with this that the apostle Paul took issue at Romans 9:6f. – 'Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children...' But the overwhelming tendency among Jewish writers has been to accentuate the genealogical or racial aspect of the identity of the people of God. Franz Rosenzweig, for example, claimed that Abraham's physical descendants were in some mystical way involved with him in the covenant he entered with God – 'Abraham, the ancestor, the individual (Jew) only in Abraham's loins has heard the call of God and answered it with his "here am I". From now on the individual is born a Jew and needs therefore no more to become one in some decisive moment of his individual life.' It is little wonder that Rosenzweig affirmed that Christianity had no message for the Jew, though he believed it did have a message for the Gentile. Jews and Gentiles really have separate histories before God. We must expect them to follow different religious paths. Today, in those church circles which deny a Christian mission to

the Jewish people, ideas such as those of Rosenweig have become very popular. It is doubtful, however, whether their advocates have seriously considered the implication that the Jewish people must be somehow intrinsically and spiritually distinct from the rest of humanity. The apostle Paul devotes chapter 2 of Romans to showing his fellow-Jews that this is a serious and dangerous error.

This is not to deny that some Jews (especially in Reform circles) are conscious of a universal mission of the Jewish people, but even within that vision Israel itself has pride of place. Nor would I deny that the Jewish community has found a space, albeit a limited one, for Gentile proselytes. But the emphasis remains on the priority of Jewish family ties. For many centuries having a Jewish mother has formed the essential basis of being considered part of the Jewish community, though with current Jewish diversity alternatives are being suggested and implemented. It would also be fair to add that following the Hebrew Scriptures, which speak of various individuals or categories of people being cut off from Israel, Jewish authorities have excluded some who were born Jews for offences of one sort or another. Converts to Christianity, for example, were traditionally regarded as apostates. Any consideration of the fearsome anathemas imposed by the Amsterdam synagogue on Baruch Spinoza, whose religious views were regarded as beyond the pale and yet who did not espouse Christianity, should leave no doubt that the threat of excommunication was real and left the person outside the prospect of the life to come. In effect, individual Jews could opt out of their bond with the Jewish community and so fall from the grace with which membership of that community was associated.

Today, however, long after the ending of Jewish ghettos and the advent of political emancipation, the sort of rabbinic authority which could ensure the excommunication of a Spinoza belongs to a bygone era. The reality of different denominations within Judaism and the popularity of mixed marriages mean that it is a moot point who exactly is to be considered a Jew. There is even a proposal to welcome as a Jew 'any person of Jewish descent and any person who declares herself or himself a Jew and who identifies with the history, ethical values, culture, civilisation, community and fate of the Jewish people.' Though such a proposal, emanating from the more secular forms of Judaism, has not met with universal acceptance and is unlikely ever to do so, it does raise acutely the question as to why there should be a separate Jewish community. If being Jewish is simply a style of life into which anyone can opt much as I might choose to go to another country if I find its way of life preferable, where is the place for the Jews as a people specially chosen by God? Is this notion to be quietly dropped, as indeed some Jewish groups have done from their thinking and from their liturgies?

Given the Christian acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures and given the apostle Paul's consideration of the Jewish people in God's plans for the world (cf. his Letter to the Romans), Christians cannot dismiss these questions about the nature and extent of the Jewish people as none of their business. Unfortunately, a number of Christians who engage in dialogue with Jews do so without raising the important issue of Jewish distinctiveness. Indeed, the various Jewish-Christian dialogues have emphasised Jewish concerns about Christianity; they have done little so far to encourage a fresh appraisal of Judaism. Perhaps this has been thought unnecessary because of the intense debates among Jews themselves.

The Messiah

Understandably the question of the Messiah is a sensitive one as far as Jews are concerned. We need not be surprised when Jewish scholars gladly latch on to any suggestions from their Christian counterparts that Jesus may not actually have claimed to be the Messiah and that such an identification may have arisen with the early church. Vigilance, however, is also necessary in assessing Jewish claims about the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures. They do have a vested interest in downplaying the role given to the Messiah.

It is true that Maimonides makes the future advent of the Messiah one of the cardinal beliefs of Judaism. But he does not say much about this figure other than 'he will be superior to all kings who have preceded him'. Nor is his coming necessarily tied to the life of the age to come. Moreover, other Jewish authorities would not have included the Messiah among the fundamentals of their faith. A good case, in fact, may be made that the Messiah is subordinate to the Torah within the whole scheme of Judaism. There is no suggestion that the Messiah will achieve something which cannot be done by the Torah (contrast Romans 8:3).

Israel's relationship with the immutable Torah is strengthened, not ended by the Messiah. For the Messiah not only obeys the Torah, but studies and expounds it. It is characteristic of the messianic age that schools for Torah studies will spring up even in gentile lands. Whatever the Messiah may achieve for the Jewish people, and this may involve him in suffering as he overthrows their enemies, there is no suggestion that he suffers vicariously for the sins of his people or that his obedience to the Torah can be imputed to the account of others. For it is axiomatic in Judaism that each person is responsible for the obedience he/she renders to the Torah which God has graciously given to Israel.

A further indication of the relative unimportance of the doctrine of the Messiah in Judaism is the fact that no consistent and systematic theory has ever been worked out on the Messiah, his person and his work. (The same may be said generally of Jewish eschatology, though it is noteworthy that the messianic age is essentially thisworldly and is almost always distinguished from the life of the age to come.) Throughout Jewish history different views have been held, perhaps owing as much to the political conditions under which they have laboured as to careful study of their own authorities. Perhaps we can identify minimalist and maximalist trends in Jewish attitudes. According to the minimalist view the messianic age would be much like the present with the only difference being that the Jewish people would be returned to the land of Israel and the Davidic monarchy restored. The maximalist view, by contrast, claimed the messianic age would be unprecedented and would be qualitatively different from the present.

Similar tendencies are apparent in modern Judaism. At the one extreme the idea of a messianic age, without a personal Messiah, has been popularised by Reform Judaism. This outlook was the fruit of evolutionary optimism from the late 19th century that the messianic age would appear gradually through human progress rather than a supernatural intervention. At the other end the more traditional view of a personal Messiah remains and certain Hasidic groups (particularly the Lubavitch) have encouraged excited anticipation of the imminent arrival or disclosure of the Messiah.

Understandably, since they work with similar authorities, there are close resemblances in some Jewish ideas of the messianic age with those which Christian Dispensationalists say will be characteristic of the millennium. Of course, Christian Dispensationalists believe the millennium will be inaugurated by Jesus, which is different from the Jewish view. But in terms of the Jewish theocracy which Dispensationalists believe Jesus will establish, there are certain formal similarities with Judaistic ideas. It is worthwhile remembering that despite their very different religious presuppositions Christian Zionists (often the same as Dispensationalists) and Jewish political Zionists have attained a remarkable degree of agreement on the place of the state of Israel. This means that the area of eschatology, as far as the Jewish people are concerned, is particularly problematic and requires a lot of detailed study on Hebrew prophecies and their New Testament developments.

Books

Jewish doctrine and evangelism

Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (SPCK, London, 1949)

Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ after Auschwitz* (Grand Rapids, 1981)

Lausanne Occasional Papers 7, *Christian Witness to the Jewish People* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1980).

Websites with useful information

www.cwi.org.uk (Christian Witness to Israel – specially theological section)

www.jews-for-jesus.org (Jews for Jesus – apologetic and theological sections)

For anti-Semitism

Graham Keith, *Hated without a Cause?* (Paternoster, Carlisle, 1997)

Graham Keith

Graham Keith teaches Religious Studies and is author of a book on anti-semitism, *Hated Without a Cause?* (Paternoster, 1997).

Academic, Judaism