

The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus

Editorial

This issue of *Mishkan* focuses on Jesus of Nazareth. *Mishkan* editors consider this very appropriate as we are still in Anno Domine (the year of our Lord) 2000. Throughout this year the world notes 2000 years since the birth of *This Man* from Nazareth. Our aim in this issue is - to use the German expression "die Heimholung Jesu" – the bringing home of Jesus. We wish to explore the Jewish reclamation of Jesus.

In the Jewish "Heimholung Jesu" (a term which I believe was first used by Schalom Ben-Chorin), one finds several very moving expressions about Jesus. This is especially true when these are seen in light of Church history and what has been done towards the Jewish people in the name of Jesus. Consequently we must consider how Jesus and his name historically have been made a taboo or been prohibited in many Jewish circles.

One is easily moved by the words of Martin Buber in his foreword to his book, *Two Types of Faith*. In the foreword, dated Jerusalem – Talbiyeh, January 1950, Buber writes:

From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Saviour has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which, for his sake and my own, I must endeavour to understand ...

I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories. Under history of faith I understand the history of the human part, as far as known to us, in that which has taken place between God and man. Under Israel's history of faith I understand accordingly the history of Israel's part as far as known to us, in that which has taken place between God and Israel. There is a something in Israel's history of faith which is only to be understood from Israel, just as there is a something in the Christian history of faith which is only to be understood from Christianity. The latter I have touched only with the unbiased respect of one who hears the Word...

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The Israeli author Schalom Ben-Chorin, who died in 1999, and who was well known in the Christian world for his many books on Jesus and on issues related to Judaism and Christianity has also found his "Brother Jesus" in the man from Nazareth. But to Ben-Chorin Jesus is not the Messiah of the Jews. Ben-Chorin's

“no” to Jesus as Christ/Messiah and his “yes” to be concerned with Jesus and give him a place within the Jewish history (perhaps even *the* place of honor) can be found in his often quoted words about Jewish and Christian perspectives on Jesus: “*The faith of Jesus unites us – faith in Jesus separates us.*”

This sentence is perhaps very appropriate for the contemporary tendency within Jewish Jesus-research vis-a-vis the Christian proclamation of Jesus. But it is much less appropriate and accurate for describing the situation in the first century. Looking at the situation at the time of the New Testament the sentence should rather be, faith in Jesus separates us ... Jews! And Jewish believers in Jesus today will still say, faith in Jesus separates us ... Jews!

Regardless of how sympathetic the picture is of "Brother Jesus" given by Ben-Chorin through his writings, there are certain borders which he as a Jew cannot cross. He therefore also criticized Pinchas Lapidé strongly in 1978 when Lapidé in his book *The Resurrection of Jesus* (English edition 1983 based on the German edition from 1977) spoke for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Here, according to the Ben-Chorin, Lapidé crossed the line of demarcation as a Jew.

Ben-Chorin himself experienced that some in Israel questioned his identity as a Jew because he engaged himself with the Jew Jesus. Along this line it can also be mentioned that he on several occasions defended Messianic Jews and Christian's right to evangelize in a democratic society like Israel.

Another of the 20th century's famous and important Jewish scholars on Jesus, Professor David Flusser, died in Jerusalem in the fall of 2000. Outside Israel Flusser was especially known for his short biography on Jesus. It was first published in German and later translated to many other languages. In 1999 he published a revised version of the book, which is reviewed in this issue of *Mishkan*.

In many of his articles Flusser argued against a Christian theology which claims that it is impossible to know anything about the historical Jesus. He begins his Jesus-biography by saying that “it is possible to write the story of Jesus' life.” For some lay Bible readers this might not sound radical, but in the Flusser's scholarly circles this was a remarkable statement. Furthermore Flusser argued that the historical Jesus had had a Messianic self-consciousness and seen himself as the Son of God – something which has often been questioned by Christian theology. More than anyone else Flusser has inspired Christian theologians to understand Jesus from within the Jewish context in which Jesus lived.

The Israeli author Yaron Avitov has a chapter on Flusser in his book *Shomea b'Moto et Hayam* [In his Death I Hear the Sea] published in Hebrew. According to the *Caspari Center Media Review September #2, 2000* Avitov maintains:

Flusser believed in the afterlife, and wasn't afraid of death, and was especially looking forward to meeting his favorite Jew, the crucified Jesus. Rumors of 'this Jewish wise-man, who knew more about Jesus than any cardinal', spread all over the Christian world and drew many

to his lectures. 'Jesus is close to me,' agreed Flusser. 'I have an affectionate attitude towards him. I know his religious and moral message, but there is one difference – I'm more pessimistic. If there is any similarity between me and anyone from that time period, it is more likely the elder Hillel. Most of the things that I appreciate about Jesus, are found in him.'

Again, these are moving words said by a Jew about the Jew Jesus. It is hard to believe that one can get any closer to Jesus without surrendering to him.

However, this is exactly what Joseph Rabinowitz did, the Russian Jew who during his visit to Jerusalem in 1882 came to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and would call him "our brother Yeshua." To Rabinowitz, however, Jesus was not only the brother of the Jews. He was also "the Messiah, the Son of God," the "Savior" about whom Rabinowitz could say that he "was crucified for our sins; for this Jesus is not a God who cannot save, for he is mighty to save ..."

Moving are also the words of Jakob Wechsler about what happened at Rabinowitz' services in Kishinev. Wechsler was one of the first in Kishinev to polemicize against Rabinowitz. But he, too, came to faith and writes about this in 1885 saying,

A few months ago who would have believed that the Messianic movement which is emerging among us would have assumed larger and larger dimensions from day to day? As an honest man [Nathanael] asked the honest question over 1800 years ago: 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?', so many asked: 'Can light come forth from Kishinev and the Word of the Lord from Bessarabia?' Others said: 'This movement has no viability, it will soon be blown out and extinguished'. But the words of the Lord the Messiah still apply: 'if these should hold their peace, the stones will cry out', in this case the stones of the prayer house, Betlehem, which Mr. Rabinowitz has erected – these shout and proclaim for time and eternity. They give our hearts hope of soon seeing a large Messianic congregation in Israel. Who would have believed before that around 100 Israelite men would each Sabbath assemble in a house built in honour of Jesus the Messiah? Who would have believed before that a Jew would hear from the mouth of his Jewish brother the name of Jesus the Messiah being lauded on his lips without pursing his lips and stopping his ears ...?

It is our hope that this issue of *Mishkan* will stimulate an interest in the Jewish reclamation of Jesus. It is important for anyone engaging himself with the New Testament to stay in touch with Jewish scholarship in this field and no less important for those involved in Jewish evangelism.

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