

Marcionism Revisited?

A Response to Alan Goldberg's "Setting Jesus Free"

MARVIN R. WILSON, PhD, MA

First, I am most grateful that Alan Goldberg has shown interest in and taken the time to respond to my article "The Relevance of Jewish Roots for Our Times."¹ I also wish to express my appreciation to the editorial staff of this journal. They have graciously provided space for this exchange of our ideas.

I applaud Alan Goldberg's effort to wrestle with a variety of Scriptures which at first reading seem to undercut the linkage of Jesus and his first-century followers to the Jewish Scriptures. In the end, however, from an historic Christian point of view, I do not believe that Goldberg's position is defensible. It is not supported by a full reading of the biblical evidence. Just as the second-century Church condemned the teachings of Marcion who sought to deprecate almost anything Jewish and to remove the Jewish Scriptures from the canon of the Church, so I believe today's Church must be vigilant and speak out. The Church must resist any temptation to embrace any form of Marcionism or any subtle or overt forms of anti-Jewishness which would contribute to the disengagement of the New Testament from the Old Testament. Let me be very clear: I do not wish to label Alan Goldberg as one who is a Marcionist or even anti-Jewish, though he does argue that "the Jewish Bible should be detached from the Christian canon." Some of Goldberg's views, however, when played out to their logical conclusion may well lead to such an identity

¹ *Journal from the Radical Reformation*, Vol. 4, No. 2.

should they not be brought into balance with other Scriptures and certain historical considerations. For me, in the end, Scripture must remain the most important authority in seeking resolution to this conflict of whether Jesus and the Christian faith can be set free from the Jewish Scriptures.

There is a solid rationale for the full acceptance of the Hebrew Bible by the Church. The statements on Scripture issued by every major council of the Church from the Middle Ages to this day have with one voice declared that all sixty-six books (both Old and New Testaments) are the authoritative Word of God. Historic creeds of the Church have never made a value distinction between the testaments; they have never presented the Old Testament as less inspired, less valuable or of an inferior status when compared with the New. Some Old Testament passages may have greater relevance for Christian thought and living than others, but it is all the Word of God.

Furthermore, and of even greater importance, is the position of Jesus and the early Church. They embrace the Jewish Scriptures fully as God-breathed writings. Jesus taught that he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill (i.e. to establish) them.² These Scriptures were “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”³ Likewise, in Paul’s words, the Jewish Scriptures were necessary and valuable in the life of the early Church, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”⁴ To be sure, the book of Psalms was the “hymnbook” of the early Church.⁵ Only one document was normative for Jesus and the New Testament writers; they lived their lives “according to the Scripture.” They knew no Bible but the Hebrew Scriptures, for the New Testament writings were not widely circulated until many years after the death of Jesus. The Tanak or Old Testament was the primary source used in teaching and the settling of arguments with opponents (including Satan). In the early Church it was through the Old Testament Scriptures that people were led to faith in Jesus as Messiah.⁶

If the New Testament appears in certain places to be somewhat negative or “cold” toward the Old Testament it is because the Old

² Matt. 5:17.

³ 2 Tim. 3:16.

⁴ Rom. 15:4.

⁵ 1 Cor. 14:26.

⁶ Acts 8:28-35; 18:24-28.

anticipates and points to the Christ event as the climax and fullest flowering of the Old. God's covenant of grace established and developed in Israel with Abraham, Moses and David is renewed and further expanded in Christ. The Law was and is beneficial; it is a gift of the Almighty to His people, an expression of His grace. The longest chapter in the Old Testament, Psalm 119, arranges acrostically all of its 176 verses in celebration of how great the Law of God is. In Christ, however, is found the fullest measure of God's grace to humankind. His followers take on a new Law, the Law of Christ. Nevertheless, in the process the earlier written Law of God is not discarded and totally left behind. The writers of the New Testament, however, sometimes view earlier expressions of God's grace and teaching among the Israelites as somewhat pale and incomplete when measured against the all-encompassing Christ event. From the New Testament perspective, the Messiah is everything that humankind has hoped for and needs. To look to types, figures and shadows which anticipate that event is no longer necessary; the real has come. But the Old is still useful and necessary in order to understand the historical background and theological preparation leading to the Messiah. Naturally, after waiting nearly two thousand years since Abraham's day, certain emphases will likely seem as but introductory or propaedeutic to the overwhelming greatness of the main event. In that sense, to Paul and others who had met the risen, divine Christ, everything leading up to this moment appears less significant in comparison. Why? He is the significant one; all is enhanced through him. Christ is the fulness of the revelation of God. He is unequalled and unrivaled by all previous expressions of power, wisdom, mercy, the priesthood and kingship. There is a Christocentricity to the New Testament and its message which no serious reader can miss.

The Old Testament is necessary in presenting for us the progress of revelation. The earlier events and teachings of Scripture are useful instruction in helping us understand how we arrived at the main event of Scripture, the incarnation. The Bible is like a two-act play. Part II without part I is incomprehensible. The Old Testament gives us the context leading up to the Messiah. What it taught Israel about monotheism, creation, covenant, election, atonement, family relationships and social ethics is not all of a sudden invalid or unneeded. The Church is grafted into Israel.⁷ It relies on Israel's inspired Scriptures in that the theology of

⁷ Rom. 11:17-24.

God's Word is timeless, applicable to every generation. But Christ is the focal point of Scripture. It all points to him and culminates in him.

In his response to my article, Goldberg states that my premise is that if one understands Judaism and Jews it will bring one closer to Jesus. This is not exactly my premise; nevertheless, it is true that the only way to understand the Bible is by studying it in its cultural context, emphasizing the way and life setting in which it was written. This means every Christian must be familiar with the Jewish world and words of the biblical authors. I submit that Jesus was a faithful Jew who lived a devout, torah-centric life. Therefore, studying his religion (Judaism) and his native Semitic languages (Hebrew and Aramaic) should bring one to a deeper appreciation of his life and teachings as well as those of his immediate followers.

I do not believe, as Goldberg suggests, that "understanding Judaism will cause doubt about the Messianic claims of Jesus, thus highlighting the need for Marcionism." I believe that the Jewish Scriptures and Judaism lay the foundation for understanding the concept of Messiah. Building on this, the Jewish authors of the New Testament sound the note of fulfillment, linking the Jewish Scriptures to the life and teachings of Jesus. As a Christian, I accept the New Testament as the inspired Word of God and as a trustworthy, credible, historic witness about Jesus and the Messianic claims it sets forth about him. Thus, Judaism — even with its "no" concerning Jesus' Messiahship — does not create doubt in my mind about who the Messiah is. The biblical witness to Jesus' virgin birth, miracles, resurrection and ascension testifies to the uniqueness of Jesus. Ultimately, however, the only way the biblical Messiah is known in the deepest personal sense by anyone is not by argument (the examination of ancient texts or other types of evidences — whether rational or empirical) but by faith. The New Testament makes this clear from Peter's experience. Peter observed Jesus perform many miracles. However, his understanding that Jesus was the Messiah came by divine revelation; it could not be *taught*: it had to be *caught*.⁸ I submit, therefore, that saving faith in the Messiah, Jesus, when combined with a knowledge of Jesus and Judaism, will not bring doubt but will allow the Messianic teaching of the New Testament to shine forth in its larger, rich, Jewish setting. Clearly, in the end, the watershed reason that Judaism and Christianity are two different religions is the Messiah question. Those who say "no"

⁸ Matt. 16:13-20.

concerning Jesus as Messiah stress that the world is not redeemed; they do not accept the New Testament as authoritative Scripture, a Scripture which proclaims that redemption has already begun in the cross and the resurrection and will be culminated at the end of the age at Messiah's return. It must not be forgotten, however, that despite this major point of disagreement, Christians and Jews still have far more in common than they differ on.

As for the author's point about the Messiah coming through the line of Solomon rather than David, the Bible emphasizes both. The promises to David are sometimes simply reiterated in regard to Solomon, David's son. They both are from the tribe of Judah. Clearly, the New Testament opens on David being the key name in the Messiah's genealogy: "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David."⁹ The connection of Jesus to David is also stressed in Acts 13:22, 23 and Revelation 5:5. When one compares the full genealogies in Matthew and Luke, Matthew seems to present the genealogy of Joseph as the legal (not physical) father of Jesus. As the legal or royal son of Joseph Jesus is a descendant of David. Luke, on the other hand, is a Gospel writer with a particular interest in women. Thus, he appears to trace the genealogy of Mary, Jesus' physical (blood) relative.

Goldberg often uses the term "Christian Bible" for the New Testament. It is an expression which creates a problem for many in today's Church, for what comprises the Bible used by most Christians? If it is only confined to the above New Testament definition, then to use this term may indeed be inadequate for it is too limiting in scope. The words may be misleading, implying that the Jewish Bible (Old Testament) is not part of a Christian's Bible. The Christians I know do not limit their understanding of the Bible to only the New Testament. Their canon of Scripture has at least sixty-six books.

I believe that Goldberg is incorrect in arguing that the "Christian Bible" (i.e. the New Testament) warns Christians "not to look to the Jewish Bible for knowledge about Jesus' lineage." The author seeks to substantiate his point by quoting two verses from the pastoral epistles which instruct Christians to avoid genealogies.¹⁰ Here it would seem, however, that Goldberg makes an impossible leap: he tries to relate Paul's warning about myths and genealogies to the ancestral accounts of Jesus. I hardly believe that Paul, radical Jewish voice that he was for the

⁹ Matt. 1:1.

¹⁰ 1 Tim. 1:4; Titus 3:9.

Messiahship of Jesus, would label the genealogies of Jesus “foolish” and “fables” — all the more so in that Paul is proud to emphasize his own ancestral ties to the Pharisees and to the tribe of Benjamin.¹¹ Paul’s mention of genealogies in the above texts may have little or nothing to do with Jewish stories and legends but rather may refer to philosophical teachings which would later develop into Gnostic thought.

The author further argues that “Christianity should support itself on its own theology.” To the early Church, however, this would have been an impossible demand. And it must remain so for Christians today. From its inception the Church based its theology on the Jewish Scriptures; it saw itself as *part* of Israel, not *apart from* Israel. Israel is that faith-filled root that nourishes and supports the Church.¹²

True, God says that Israel was not to add anything to the Mosaic Law.¹³ Goldberg wants us to use the above verses to support the position that the attachment of the “Christian Bible” to the Jewish is an unauthorized addition. If this application of Deuteronomy to the New Testament is valid, does not consistency require that other additions or expansions to the Law of Moses such as the Prophets, writings, Mishnah etc. likewise be declared unauthorized additions? The issue here is what is inspired Scripture and hence authoritative among God’s people. The New Testament does not replace the Old but complements it by further development of its theology and story line.

While Goldberg raises a number of important questions about Jesus, Paul and the Law, no attempt is made to distinguish between moral, civil and ceremonial Law in relation to Christian theology. Jesus did not come to destroy the Law. However, in his person as the new and living Torah, he often revealed its deeper meaning and showed in his life and teachings how the Law was to be applied. Every Christian is obligated to read the Law in light of Christ. The Law is teaching, guidance, direction. Whether applied prescriptively or principally, the truth of the Law is eternal. Christ is the goal of the Law in that he perfectly fulfills its demands and prophecies. It all points to him for in him we find the Law’s deepest meaning. Christians, however, are no longer under the judgment of the Law. They are now freed in Christ to live out by his power the moral and spiritual expectations of the Law. Jesus, for example, is the ultimate meaning of the word Sabbath. While a day of physical rest is of great

¹¹ Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5.

¹² Rom. 11:18.

¹³ Deut. 4:2; 12:32.

benefit, he as our Sabbath is greater. We must come into his rest. Our rest of faith is in him.¹⁴

It will be difficult for most Christian interpreters to accept Goldberg's argument for the need to eliminate the Jewish Bible from the "Christian Bible." If this is done, insists the author, it will "give the Christian Bible credibility." I, for one, would argue to the contrary. The "Christian Bible" or New Testament loses credibility? Why? Jesus establishes who he is, his teachings, and the direction of his ministry from the whole Hebrew Bible — the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms or writings.¹⁵ Goldberg states that the "historic link will always exist" between the Christian and Jewish Bible. True, but there is a profoundly theological link as well. In the coming of Jesus and the birth of the Church no new way of salvation was announced. Rather, the whole burden of Paul's argument to the Church at Rome is that people who would identify with that Church must get right with God the way Abraham did. "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness."¹⁶ The first Jew, Abraham, becomes a theological model for every Christian. Salvation comes through faith, and it is to the Jewish Scriptures Paul looks to substantiate his point.

The author suggests that the God of Israel says that Christians are "permitted" to believe in Jesus as a deity. But the New Testament teaches that Jesus is divine. No concessions are made to Christians in Scripture as if God is willing to overlook their ignorant attribution of divinity to Jesus as long as they follow the seven Noahide laws. The seven Noahide laws were not formulated in writing until the rabbinic period.¹⁷ They have nothing to do with that which the New Testament writers say is the basis of Gentile salvation and acceptance before a holy God. Although the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 lists some of these laws, they were not the grounds for being known as a righteous Gentile, one worthy of the life to come. Rather, when Gentile believers in Jesus followed these requirements they would help to build more sensitive relationships between Gentiles and Jews in the early Church. In that first-century ethnic mix of Jews and Gentiles, the Jews could be easily repulsed by certain pagan practices of Gentile culture. Therefore, by respecting these requirements, Gentiles helped create a greater unity of the body.

¹⁴ Heb. 4.

¹⁵ See Luke 24:26, 27, 44, 45.

¹⁶ Rom. 4:3; cf. Gen. 15:6.

¹⁷ Sanhedrin 56a-60a; Genesis Rabbah 31 etc.

Did Paul abrogate the Law? Alan Goldberg argues that he did. I disagree. I maintain that Paul, a believing Jew to his dying day, recognized the Law's authority throughout his life.¹⁸ Paul upheld the validity and relevance of the Law for Christians. He quotes from the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint on his missionary journeys. Paul considered himself under God's law and also Christ's law or teachings.¹⁹ In his words, "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law."²⁰ Some eighty times Paul quotes from the Law to establish the authority of his arguments. He emphasizes that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."²¹ He also says "I delight in God's law."²² He recognizes that the Law is "good"²³ and "spiritual,"²⁴ and he builds his theology by drawing heavily on the Mosaic Law.²⁵

In his last main paragraph Goldberg seems to suggest that salvation was possible for the Jew of Bible times by the Law. I would insist, as does Scripture, that observance of the Law has never been the grounds of acceptance before God.²⁶ No one has ever perfectly kept the Law except one.²⁷ The Law remains in effect because it brings structure to our lives, guides and directs us in godly paths, helps to restrain evil and propels us toward our need for the Gospel.²⁸

Again, I wish to commend Alan Goldberg for the constructive manner and good spirit in which he has voiced his disagreement with my article. With clarity he has demonstrated his position, one apparently influenced to some degree by the earlier thought of Marcion. My hope is that this published dialogue between us will help to clarify some of the issues involved. For I am convinced that for our day, the relevance of the Old Testament and the Jewish origins of the Church are foundational issues which deserve ongoing study and thoughtful discussion on the part of every Christian.

¹⁸ Cf. Rom. 15:8.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 9:21.

²⁰ Rom. 3:31.

²¹ Rom. 7:12.

²² Rom. 7:22.

²³ 1 Tim. 1:8.

²⁴ Rom. 7:14.

²⁵ Rom. 13:8-10.

²⁶ Gal. 2:16.

²⁷ Heb. 4:15.

²⁸ Gal. 3:24.