

Why Christians and Jews Need Each Other

Jacques B. Doukhan. *Israel and the Church: Two Voices for the Same God*.

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002. x + 108 pages.

Reviewed by David R. Larson

Intense and violent hostility toward Jewish people is one of Christianity's greatest moral failures. It is difficult to exaggerate how early this ugliness began, how widely it has spread, how long it has lasted, and how many it has wounded and killed. It is even more difficult to understand why influential Christians have so often condoned or even promoted it.

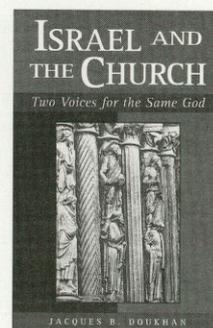
In this provocative, poignant, and often poetic book, Jacques B. Doukhan, professor of Hebrew Language, Exegesis, and Jewish Studies, and director of the Institute of Jewish-Christian Studies at Andrews University, ponders this legacy of bloodshed with an eye to the future. "After two thousand years of sad history and after the Holocaust," he asks, "is reconciliation between the two Jews, between Moses and Jesus, within the hearts, minds and lives of Christians and Jews, still possible?" (xx) Although we may not always be aware of it, this is an urgent moral question for all of us. For Doukhan, its importance is always felt. "It is the Jewish-Christian tension in my flesh and in my scholarly and professional life that has given birth to this book," he declares (ix).

Jews and Christians in History

Doukhan begins his own answer to this vital question by reviewing the history of Jewish and Christian relations. Making use of fascinating historical, archaeological, and sociological evidence, he easily

establishes that both the life and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth were thoroughly Jewish. So were virtually all of his first disciples, who were probably better educated than the uncouth rustics we so frequently imagine. We can say the same of most of the first Christian missionaries, especially the apostle Paul.

Although there were intermittent and sometimes intense conflicts between Jews and Christians from the time of Jesus onward, Doukhan reports, they did not actually part company until the fourth century, and then it was the Christians who forced the separation. This was the century of Constantine, the emperor who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Taking political advantage of religious trends, Constantine and his company hammered a wedge between Judaism and Christianity. They went so far as to make Sunday, a holiday or holy day in many pagan circles, and the memorial of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in a growing number of Christian ones, the empire's official day of rest. From then on, the relatively peaceful coexistence



and intermingling of Jews and Christians that had lasted so long was no longer possible. People had to choose; eventually making the wrong decision proved fatal.

Christianity's rejection of Judaism was for many years "only of a theological nature," Doukhan writes (39). Yet over time, particularly with the Crusades that began in the last part of the eleventh century, and with the formation of Jewish ghettos in Europe during the thirteenth, things turned violent in a systematic fashion. One historian whom he quotes summarizes the way things unfolded as follows: "(1) In the fourth century Jews were told 'You have no right to live among us as Jews.' (2) From the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, Jews were told 'You have no right to live among us.' (3) In the Nazi era, Jews were told, 'You have no right to live'" (53) Concepts have consequences. The outcomes of these ideas have been deadly.

After reviewing this historical evidence, Doukhan examines the doctrine of supersessionism, one of the most fatal of all ideas. In a refreshing expression of theological candor, Doukhan writes that "supersessionism is both the most pernicious and the most lethal theory. It contributed more than any theory to the Holocaust. It is anti-Semitism at its best (or at its worst). Its psychological mechanism is clear: because you are what I want to be, I wish that you do not exist.

And very soon, the crime or the support of the crime would follow" (59). Some may think that these claims are exaggerated. They aren't.

The apostle Paul insisted in Romans 9-11 that Christians are like branches grafted on to the *living* olive tree of Israel. Rejecting this view, the doctrine of supersessionism makes two hugely mistaken claims: "(1) God is finished with the Jews; and (2) the New Israel (the Christian church) takes the place of the Jewish people as the carrier of history" (55). Doukhan names the theological knaves that issue from the marriage of these two false notions: church replaces Israel, Spirit replaces flesh, grace replaces law, New Testament replaces Old Testament, Sunday replaces Sabbath. Sibling rogues include the specious convictions that sentiment replaces thought and action, individual replaces community, mournful asceticism replaces joyful living, and salvation replaces creation as the centerpiece in the architecture of Christian beliefs.

The so-called "final solution," the attempt by Christians and

others in the twentieth century to exterminate Jews and Judaism, was the practical outcome the doctrine of supersessionism. "I am acting in the sense of the Almighty Creator: By warding off the Jews I am fighting for the Lord's work," wrote Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (52). In a letter responding to questions about his racial policies, the Führer claimed that he was "only putting to effect what Christianity had preached and practiced for two thousand years" (ibid).

Relating to Each Other

In view of this appalling history and theology, how should Christians and Jews relate to each other today? At one time, Doukhan writes, the question was whether Gentiles have to become Jews in order to be Christians. Now the issue is whether Jews have to become Gentiles in order to become members of the body of Christ. Although he spends more time on the second, Doukhan's answer to both questions is "no." He contends that, in harmony with the precedent established by the early

Christian council described in Acts 15, Jewish and Gentile Christians should not try to separate each other from their cultural legacies except in matters of basic theological and ethical principle.

Doukhan is both clear and correct: Christian evangelistic endeavors are ethically unacceptable if they seek to separate Jewish individuals and groups from the Hebrew heritage and culture, if they intend to transform Jews into Gentiles as they become Christians. His judgments regarding Messianic Judaism are mixed. Its best expressions provide a way for people to be both Jewish and Christian in the full senses of both terms. Its worst amount to yet another opportunity for Christians to abuse Jewish people by making cosmetic concessions to Judaism while continuing to erode its independent and continuing legitimacy.

In a gesture I find rhetorically effective, Doukhan applies to Judaism and Christianity the counsel of both the Old and the New Testaments that at least two witnesses are required to establish a report's credibility. As this analogy implies, neither Judaism nor Christianity is as effective alone as both are together. They can both thrive only if each flourishes in continuing interdependence and cooperation with the other.

Doukhan holds that the Christian community needs the people of Israel on a continuing basis. Israel preserves Hebrew Scripture and models serious ways of studying it. It emphasizes the value of God's law as well as justice and righteousness in concrete words and deeds. It exudes a joy of life and a comfort with things physical that are often missing in Christian circles. It gives the world the concept of the Messiah and it understands that salvation

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is "not just an existential subjective experience" (92). Mindful that now all things are not as they should be, it nurtures a hope that is more credible and creative than both despair and wishful thinking. By its very continuation and success, Judaism also demonstrates the unnecessary and unfair character of anti-Semitism.

Doukhan also believes that Judaism needs Christianity. From the New Testament, Jewish people can learn about their own heritage in the first centuries of our era. They can also gain a renewed appreciation for what the Old Testament says about grace, incarnation, divine suffering, and the anticipatory presence of the ultimate future. Most importantly, Christianity makes the religious treasures of Israel available to billions of people who are not physical descendants of Abraham and Sarah. "One of the most ironic and interesting paradoxes of history," Doukhan observes, is that "without the church the Jews might have remained a small, insignificant and obscure religion that might well have disappeared" (94).

Questions

It seems clear, as Doukhan explains, that Constantine's endorsement in the fourth century of Sunday as the Roman Empire's official day of rest was, among other things, a concession to Christianity's increasing hostility toward Jews. But why did so many Christians want to distinguish themselves from Judaism in the first place? Doukhan traces the roots of anti-Semitism back to the soil of the first Christian centuries. To what extent, if any, was it also present in Greek and Roman cultures even before the time of Jesus?

What is the best way to understand the relationships between

Israel as a religious movement, cultural legacy, ethnic identity, and growing nation on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean? Although it is impossible and undesirable wholly to separate these four, I wonder if distinguishing among them somewhat more sharply than Doukhan does in this book might prove helpful.

How should Christianity relate to other world religions in addition to Judaism? There cannot be a perfect parallel between the way Christianity should correspond to Judaism and how it should interact with, say, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism. Nevertheless, when Doukhan rightly maintains that Jewish people need not become Gentiles in the course of becoming Christians, the thought occurs that in the same process Orientals need not become Occidentals, Africans need not become Europeans, Latins need not become Anglos, and so forth around the world. Separating the kernel of Christianity from its cultural husks is not always easy, however!

Doukhan serves us well in this book as an excellent Jewish *and* Christian theologian. Making use of Scripture, tradition, reason, and

experience in their proper relationships, he assesses the past and points the way forward with candor and courtesy. He writes in a cautiously hopeful voice, not merely as a mournful echo. All those who care about the future of humanity will benefit from studying and discussing his important contribution.

David R. Larson is a professor of religion at Loma Linda University.

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