

JESUS 2000, again

How does Jesus look from the West's other two religions?

I wrote these 2pp for a journalist, with no intention of their being a Thinksheet-- which, as you behold, they now are. I hope you find my notes helpful.

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THE OTHER JESUS

1 As I said, there isn't only one even in the West. The Jesus in Judaism is so different from the Jesus in Islam that one must speak, I think, of

THE OTHER JESUSES

or

OTHER JESUSES

or (my preference)

JESUS OUTSIDE OF CHRISTIANITY

2 As I said, we can get no substantial picture of Jesus from the Talmud. As THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE JEWISH RELIGION (Adama/86) puts it, "Jewish references to Jesus (e.g. the Talmud and Toledot Jeshu) are late and merely polemical; the reference of Josephus is probably a Christian interpolation....the life and teachings of Jesus...had no direct effect on Jewish thought; nevertheless their reconstruction by New Testament scholarship helps to illuminate the religious movements and messianic ferment in Judaism at the end of the Second Temple Period." The Toledot Jeshu ("History of Jesus")? This encyclopedia (p386) calls it a "scurrilous" medieval Jewish "vulgar polemic" against Christianity, an "ignoble" work. It picks up dirt from pagan attacks (especially Celsus) against early Christianity.

3 Post-Holocaust Jewish scholarship has developed an increasingly positive view of Jesus, some of it re-possessive ("He's one of *our* boys."). Two Hebrew U. of Jerusalem scholars have even come out for Jesus' resurrection! The old absolute stiff-arming of Jesus is a thing of the past except in Jewish Orthodoxy. The remarkable Morningside Hts. friendship between Rein.Niebuhr & Abe Heschel softened both their postures vis-a-vis each other's religion (so much so that Reiny became an antisuper-sessionist: instead of trying to convert Jews, Christians should co-affirm with them the continuing life of God's covenant with Moses).

4 Abe's daughter's opening up to the possibility of Christian influence on Judaism is not in disobedience to the spirit of her father, a hasid (an 18th-c. mysticism-for-the-masses movement, kabbalah being a major source). The divine "indwelling" (Heb., "shekhinah"), as a doctrine, developed in several dimensions throughout Jewish history: (1) from locative (shrines, tabernacle, temple) to universal (18th-c. hasidism's founder, the Baal Shem Tov, understood the traditional saying "There is no place empty of Him" to mean God's perpetual presence with his worshipers, to be celebrated by song, dance, ecstasy [early Jewish pentacostalism!]); (2) from a particular people (the "chosen" nation) to all people; (3) from outward manifestation to inwardness; (4) from the holiness of special days to the holiness of everyday; (5) from earth to cosmos (slipping off, their orthodox opponents said, into pantheism); & (6) from the rabbi with no special spiritual powers to the tzaddik, thought to have power in the celestial as well as the terrestrial (opening this inflation to the accusation of magic).

Certainly this doctrine developed in awareness of the Christian surround, but we cannot expect to find Jewish evidences of Christian influence on it. (When I pointed out to the editor of a Jewish prayerbook that a certain unidentified item was Christian in origin, he replied "I know it, but the editorial committee would not let me make that attribution.")....And of course the influence the other way was maternal: Mother Mary was Christianity's second mother (Judaism itself being the first--especially with its doctrine of shekhinah-immanuel [Jesus is Immanu-el, "God-withus"]). In Matt., Jesus is the Second Moses: in the NT, the Holy Spirit is (chronologically) the Second Shekhinah (though in Christian doctrine the shekhinah is proleptic, a protevangelical receptacle).

5 Before the end of the 1st c., Judaism had defined itself over against Christianity: at Jamnia (AD/CE 90), rabbinism emerged as the canonical shape of Judaism--so one might even say that Christianity *preceded* Judaism-as-(Pharisaic)rabbinism.

From the influence of his Christian uncle, Muhammad was strongly inclined to Christianity (somewhat less, to Judaism), but (1) he was turned off by Christian intellectual sectarianism (vigorous doctrinal debates among Christians) & (2) insufficiently turned off from his native Arabic religion, viz. jinnism.

The Bible remained big for him, & he versioned both OT & NT in light of his personal ("cave") religious experience, which I would describe as ecstatic-jinn.

Here are some Qur'an quotes on Jesus from the subject index I made (p numbers are to the Arberry tr.):

1 In his cradle, the virgin-born Jesus says (13) God "hath given me the book of the gospel, and hath appointed me a prophet." 17: "Verily, I am the servant of God; He hath given me the Book, and He hath made me a prophet...blessed wherever I may be; and hath enjoined me prayer and almsgiving so long as I shall live; And to be duteous to her that bare me: and he hath not made me proud, depraved. And the peace of God was on me the day I was born, and will be the day I shall die, and the day I shall be raised to life." 10: "he hath not made me either violent or malicious, praised shall be the day of my birth, the day that I shall die, and the day of my resurrection." (Different translations, same Arabic text.) Here the incarnation is not of God in Jesus but of Gabriel in a "perfect man," who (?) fathered Jesus (a different twist, if so, on Jesus' "virgin" birth).

2 "Torah...Gospel...Qur'an" (220), but Islam "the true religion" (50-53, 75).

3 The real Jesus not crucified (123): "they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them--they slew him not of a certainty--no indeed; God raised him up to Him....There is not one of the People of the Book but will assuredly believe in him before his death, and on the Resurrection Day he will be a witness against them."

4 Jesus not divine, & no Trinity (125): "The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that he committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His Messengers, and say not, 'Three.' Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God."

5 On my yesterday's fax to you (225): Islamic mysticism, as Jewish & Christian, sees the divine presence as inward (225): "It is He who sent down the Shechina into the hearts of the believers, that they might add faith to their faith."

6 A parallel with Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity: Muhammad taught that the divine message, from which the Qur'an was "sent down," is co-eternal with God.

7 The standoff from "the Peoples of the Book" (136): "O believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other." Muhammad expected Jews & Christians to welcome his message, & was deely disappointed: was there not a continuous flow of revelation? 134-5: "We [i.e., God] sent down the Torah....And We sent, following in their [the Jewish Prophets'] footsteps, Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah before him; and we gave to him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and light." Then God sent down the Qur'an. "Whoever judges not according to what God has sent down--they are the ungodly." So, as for those who try to convert Muslims, "slay them wherever you find them" (113). 210: Christians are "perverted" in saying "'The Messiah is the Son of God.'"

8 39: "We gave Jesus son of Mary the clear signs, and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit." But for rejecting the Qur'an, "the curse of God is on the unbelievers."

9 Christology was an alien rival to Muhammad's protoArab theology (239): "I have not created jinn and mankind except to serve Me."

10 Jesus' character is reflected in this (261): God "sent into the hearts of those who followed him [Jesus] tenderness and mercy."

11 81: "God said, 'Jesus, I will take thee to Me and will raise thee to Me....I will set thy followers about the unbelievers till the Resurrection Day.'"

12 204: Jesus is "only a servant"; God "made him to be an example to the Children of Israel."....274: Jesus predicts Muhammad, "a Messenger who shall come after me."....161: Having no consort, the Creator has no son....147: Jesus did not say "'Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God.'"