Judaism: An Introduction for Christians

Barry Bence
Judaism: An Introduction For Christians
Edited and Translated by James Limburg
Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987
285 pp.

Aaron Copland, Beverly Sills, David Barrett, Bora Laskin, William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, George Gershwin, Lorne Green, Rich Little, Mordecai Richler. These names underline the remarkable contribution of North American Jews to our culture, all the more impressive since Jews make up 2.5% of the population of the United States, or 1.2% of Canada’s.

But how much do we Christians really know about Judaism as a living faith? This book grew out of a series of essays prepared to help German Christians understand Jewish faith. A panel of North Americans, including Larry Denef of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, helped adapt and translate their work to our own setting. I’ve been a student of Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures) since day one in Seminary, and so I enjoyed several aspects of this book.

For instance, no one can write Winnipeg’s history without understanding the North End. But I didn’t know that Winnipeg is the third largest center of Jewish life in Canada—right behind Montreal and Toronto. Nor did I know that the first Jewish immigrants to the New World came from Recife, Brazil (the Portuguese took over that colony from the Dutch and gave the Jews three months to leave)! About 122 years after that first arrival in New Amsterdam, our American cousins took a quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures for their Liberty Bell. By contrast, the first Jews to settle in Canada came to Montreal just about eight years before the U.S. declared its independence. Limburg’s book doesn’t say so, but as late as the Holocaust in the 1940s, Canadian immigration officials were still making it almost impossible for Jewish people to settle here and survive. Maybe Canada should have poured a Liberty Bell herself?

I found three parts of this excellent book of real importance for my own spiritual pilgrimage. First, during the September High Holy Days when our Jewish brothers and sisters were praying the Day of Atonement and New Year prayers, I prepared a special Service of the Word for our parish’s Sunday morning worship, using various prayers from the Jewish liturgies, along with Hebrew Scripture readings, and an Israeli folk song we learned years ago in Vacation Church School. I really enjoyed the new way the Spirit helped us pray. Certainly, we will all be enriched as we read how worship in the Jewish home is as significant as synagogue worship. How many of us celebrate the feasts of our faith with family liturgies?

Second, back in my Seminary days I helped take part in one of the first Jewish-Christian dialogues that Gettysburg Seminary hosted. As Limburg’s book reminds us, the faith of Jesus (Judaism) unites us; faith in Jesus divides us. But I came away from these pages convinced that our own Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada ought to begin a similar dialogue
here in Canada as a matter of high priority. How many of us, for instance, can describe the “denominations” of Judaism to the same degree we can detail differences in Christianity?

Finally, the one spectre that haunts our century as does no other is the Shoah, the Holocaust. We Canadians need to be almost physically sick as we reflect on some recent headlines that tell us how hatred can thrive in Alberta classrooms or in Ontario society. Not only must anti-semitism be seen as a theological heresy, but as the spiritual question above all. Where was God in the concentration camps? Elie Wiesel saw him die on the gallows at the hands of a Nazi-Satan. No Christian should ever pray the 22nd Psalm as if it were only a Good Friday liturgical support piece, unless every syllable, every sound, be first heard echoed in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. How dare we pray this prayer as ours, unless we first pray it as theirs?

**Judaism: An Introduction for Christians** is easy to read, and a great source for what almost every major church body has ever said on anti-semitism. There are additional resources including, wonder of wonders, Canadian addresses for B’nai B’rith. How tragic if we Christians allow ourselves to see Judaism as having come to an end with the Pharisees, who, it turns out, were pretty great believers as believers go! Without their Rabbis and scholars, what a poor Bible we would have, an incomprehensible book apart from the living faith that gave its light to the world! Yes, this definitely is one book every Christian ought to read.

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**Reading the New Testament: Methods of Interpretation**
Christopher Tuckett

The work under review consists of an introduction to the main methods used in the interpretation of the New Testament, the primary purpose of which is to provide for students a discussion of the many ways the New Testament can be interpreted.

Tuckett begins from the premise that the whole purpose of biblical study is to enable us to bridge the gap between our day and the first century. Tuckett sets out a definition for the normative role of the Bible in Christian life. In contrast to earlier positions of Christians who used the Bible as a source of “proof-texts”, Tuckett stresses that the Bible is normative in the sense that the canon provides the basis, the starting point