

Write a Book review

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Review

Justice, Jesus and the Jews – A Proposal for Jewish – Christian Relations

Michael L Cook

A Proposal for Jewish- Christian Relations seeks to determine the common root of the Christian faith, Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. Michael L. Cook takes writers such as Rabbi Jacob Neusner, Cardinal Ratzinger, and Antony J. Saldarini to solve the problem of the church and how Jesus Christ, the

proclamation of God, presents a meeting point for both Jew and Christian alike.

The way we interpret the sacred tradition determines the outcome. According to Cook, Rabbi Neusner reads the Torah from a rabbinic point of view. Conversely, Cardinal Ratzinger reads the Old Testament from a Christological standpoint. Others, such as Professor Saldarini, read scripture through the eyes of hermeneutics.

Cook seeks to examine the foundational ideal of how justice is to be ascertained, as perceived through the written Torah of the Hebraic tradition and the oral account of the historical Jesus. The author argues that the reconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will in fact not be reconciled until God redeems the world as perceived through eschatological interpretation.

Cook makes the assumption that Jews can live without the Christian faith whereas Christians cannot live without the Jewish Jesus. Cook reports that denying Jewishness has distorted the very essence of the Christian faith leading to what we call anti-Semitism. In his view, it is the church that needs to bridge the gap with the Jewish people and somehow make amends for the Church's role in the Shoah.

Cook takes the reader through the topic of covenant relationship. God made his covenant with Abraham and his covenant was everlasting with Israel - a fidelity covenant, never broken or divorced from his people.

God's loyalty to the Covenant does not change and we have the fulfilment of messianic expectation: Christ, the humblest sage who fulfils the Torah.

According to Cook, Christ did not so much change the law but rather made the Torah a practical way of life, signalling a convergence and thus opening new models for Christian dialogue.

Cook reports that for a true and unique Jewish and Christian dialogue to take place there needs to be:

- community of shared experience that does not invent or cut out the other faith;
- a need for clarity about which issues in dialogue can be discussed;
- understanding where the other is coming from; being open to learn from the opponent;
- respect for one's own opinions
- and sensitivity towards the fact that if a Christian cannot fathom Jewish and Rabbinic texts, then a Jewish person is not going to grasp the classic texts of Christianity.

Cook gives the reader a strong biblical perspective by resolving key points in the Bible, showing that Christianity is the result of the Jewish faith. According to Cook, this can be a common ground for both Jew and Christian alike. His analogy of covenant relationship as fidelity helps the reader to grasp Israel's relationship with God.

Cook examines Christ's teachings from an agrarian perspective, giving a different idea of Christ. Taking the hypothesis of William Herzog and others shows Jesus not as a great stereotypical Christian figurehead, but as a Galilean peasant, a first-century Mediterranean Jew, honoured and yet shamed; a rural villager who experienced alienation caused not only by the Roman Empire but also by the wealthy elite who were associated with the temple aristocracy. He is depicted as a modern prophet who interpreted the Torah not as the great representative of generational tradition, but as someone who embodied teachings from rabbinical tradition of the remote villages and countryside of Galilee. This helps the reader to understand Jesus as an historical figure.

By taking views from scholars, Cook is in effect showing various forms of discourse and by doing so we are seeing a type of dialogue. For example, Rabbi Jacob Neusner claims that Judeo-Christian dialogue has never been achieved as neither side has tried to make sense of the other. In contrast, Cardinal Ratzinger's view is that Christ is in the Old Testament and if He is not then it is not a Bible for Christians. So in effect there is room for Jewish Jewish **Christian** dialogue. By using various points of discussion, Cook steps back and this allows the reader to make his or her judgment.

Cook makes it clear that this book is not set out to achieve a goal, but offers the theme of justice that remains sensitive to the traditions of both Jews and Christians (Cook, p34). Indeed, this is achieved. However, what the writer fails to do is to tackle the actual question - 'A proposal for Jewish and Christian

Comment [KE1]: Do you mean 'Jewish-Christian' ?

dialogue'. At the end of the book, one may be left wondering whether the author actually knows the answer himself. There is much looking at various forms of discourse, without however tackling some main points. For example, if a Christian is to believe in Jesus as the fulfilment of messianic prophecy, then a Jewish person does not truly grasp that Christianity is the fruit of the Judaic faith. And if this is so, then are we to believe that in Jacob Neusner's view there isn't a Jewish and Christian dialogue. In my view, the above needed to be addressed and was not.

Cook is coming from a stereotypical catholic point of view such as 'interfaith' – there is not one way, but many ways. And we must not look at the differences, but instead look for common ground where Jew and Christian can find similarities in their faith. So this book would not be beneficial for those who are coming from a more evangelical perspective. For example, Messianic Jews would not see this book as a valuable source of information. They would argue that when a Jewish person is confronted with Jesus as the fulfilment of messianic prophecy, there is no possibility of dialogue. In contrast, if a reader is of the view that we need to be respectful and walk carefully without offence, by stating the fundamental beliefs of who Christ was according to Christian faith, then in my view the book still does not really tackle how a Christian can have dialogue with a Jewish person.

Cook does not give the reader any indication of knowing what his views are. Through the various discussions, the author is far removed and the book reports more on facts, biblical exegesis, and the historical Jesus with only

Chapter 1 contributing to some sense of Jewish and Christian dialogue. If Cook were to show how covenant relationship for example is interlinked with the Christian through faith in Christ, then this would give some idea of how to bridge the gap between Jews and Christians. The writer mentions that the Church should feel remorse for anti-Semitism. However, this is counter-productive for a Jewish person, as any dialogue or dispute will cause offence. There was no real strategy on how to bridge the gap.

As the book has centered on the common root of the Hebrew bible, and the relationship of Christ to his ancestral heritage (Cook, p 114), I have highlighted that in my view Cook fails to show how to bridge the gap between the two faiths. Although he gives a strong sociological background of the Nation of Israel leading to Jesus of Nazareth, the reader may be left wondering what the right approach is and whether Jewish and Christian dialogue is possible in light of the conflicting viewpoints. If the reader wishes to obtain a good exegesis in Old Testament study and the gospels, then this is a recommended read. However, if the reader wants to gain an insight into how to bridge the gap between the Christian and Jewish faiths, then this book in my view does not offer any clear and logical framework in how to do so.