

**JEWISH APOLOGETICS:
CHRISTIANITY'S ONGOING AND UNIQUE CHALLENGE**

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Several months ago, a colleague in Arizona introduced me to a very sharp lawyer and debater who also taught apologetics at a local seminary. We began to talk about some of the debates I had had with Orthodox Jewish rabbis, at which point he asked, "But what objections could they possibly raise?" Having written more than 1,500 pages of answers to Jewish objections to Jesus, I must admit that his question surprised me, given his educational and apologetics background. I then began to explain to him some of the principal Jewish objections to Jesus, to which he replied, "It looks like you have your work cut out for you!" I've had similar conversations with pastors and Christian leaders who, initially, could not understand how Jewish people could possibly object to our presentation of Messianic prophecies or Christian evidence.

This observation reminds me of my experience as a new believer in Jesus in the early 1970s. The Lord graciously reached out to me when I was a heroin-shooting, LSD-using, marijuana-smoking, diesel-gas huffing, long-haired, rebellious, sixteen-year old, Jewish rock drummer with no interest in God and, of course, no faith in Jesus. In a period of several months, my life was radically transformed, and by the time I had known the Lord for one year, I was spending at least six hours alone with Him every day: three hours in prayer, two hours reading the Scriptures, and one-hour memorizing the Scriptures (memorizing 20 verses a day). Although I was certainly lacking in wisdom and sensitivity, no one in my high school could withstand my knowledge of the Scriptures, and I was even able to lead a neighborhood woman out of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization. Some time later, at the age of eighteen, I was introduced to some ultra-Orthodox rabbis in Brooklyn, men who had years of experience in dealing with Jews who believed in Jesus. They were not overwhelmed by my knowledge of the Word! In fact, it was very humbling to sit there with my King James Bible, which they politely critiqued as another one of those faulty English translations, while they sat there with their Hebrew Bibles open, Bibles they had been reading in the original since they were young children. For the first time, I was the one being challenged, both by their knowledge and by their lifestyle.

As a result of my time with these rabbis I began to look into contemporary Jewish-Christian responses to these objections, but almost everything I found at that time

tended to be very superficial, primarily popular in scope and tone (not to mention often marred by embarrassing errors). Thankfully, as I continued to search, I found that there were much more substantial, academic Christian responses to these objections. Nevertheless, in many ways, these learned Gentile responses failed to grasp the weight of the objections, being so sure of the correctness of their own position that they could not grasp the depth of the objection. They also appeared to be virtually oblivious to the terribly destructive impact of anti-Semitism throughout the course of “Church” history. Simply stated, it has been my observation for many years that Christians somehow think that by merely stating their position, they have thereby successfully responded to whatever particular Jewish objection has been raised. After all, the Jews are stiff-necked, blind, and hardened, so there can be little or no substance to their objections. They’re just stubbornly refusing to see the truth! Not surprisingly, Christian understanding of Jewish objections to Jesus has often been marked by superficiality, insensitivity, and triumphalism.

To give one typical example, while participating in a major biblical conference in Chicago in 1988, I entered into a discussion with some of the world’s top New Testament scholars. One of them had even written a book on the Jewish views of Jesus, so I asked him, “In light of Jewish fidelity to the Torah, how would you explain the gloss in Mark 7:19 which, according to many interpreters, indicates that Jesus abolished the dietary laws?” He responded, “That’s where we have to understand His authority as the Messiah. He changed the law by His Messianic authority.” Of course, that is an argument that needs to be considered, but I relate this story for a very different reason. This erudite scholar failed to realize that, according to the Orthodox Jewish understanding of the eternal immutability of the Torah, an understanding reinforced by the Lord Himself in Matt 5:17-20 and elsewhere, if Yeshua did change the law, He would thereby have disqualified himself from being the Messiah! Moreover, according to the clear reading of Deut 13:1-11, no amount of miracles or apparent divine confirmation – including, by implication, even rising from the dead – could be marshaled as sufficient cause to follow other gods, gods which were not known to the past generations, which, in the traditional Jewish view, would include the worship of Jesus. It is my goal, therefore, in this paper to illustrate the unique and challenging nature of Jewish objections to Jesus, pointing to the best way to respond to these objections.

Let me begin with the concept of a newer and better covenant displacing the old, inferior covenant. (Remember, of course, that to a religious Jew, there is no such thing as the “Old Testament,” nor is there anything inferior or lacking in their covenant with God as they understand it.) To us, living in the light and glory of that wonderful new covenant, a covenant confirmed by the death and resurrection of the Son of God, it is difficult to see how a religious Jew could not possibly recognize his spiritually incomplete state. But what do we say to a Muslim who claims that Muhammad is the seal of the prophets. and that it is we who are spiritually incomplete? We tell him, among other things, that anyone who seeks to add to the final revelation of God in Jesus, as spelled out in the New Testament writings, is a false prophet. We respond in similar fashion to the claims of those who say that so-and-so is a contemporary incarnation of the Christ. We remind them of Jesus’ words that false prophets and false christs would arise

who would deceive many, and we point out that the Lord clearly forewarned us, instructing us to wait for His coming in the clouds.

This, of course, is self-evident to us, yet we often fail to see the parallel response from Judaism to Christianity: “In the Torah, God warned us not to follow any prophet or miracle worker who in any way deviated from the words of this Instruction, and anyone that contradicts or adds to or takes away from the once-and-for-all revelation from God at Sinai – a revelation that He said was for all generations – must be rejected out of hand. We have been forewarned! And the last word He spoke to us in the prophets was to remember the Torah of Moses and to expect the coming of Elijah (Mal 4:4-6). As for your Messianic claims, when our Messiah comes and establishes peace on the earth and regathers the exiles, we’ll have no trouble recognizing that he’s the one. Until then, we reject all other false Messianic claimants.” Furthermore, while so much Christian practice bears little resemblance to the commands of the Torah and the calendar of the Torah, the traditional Jew points to many passages in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) which call on him to perpetuate the Torah lifestyle so that, when his children ask him, “Why do you do this?”, he can explain, “It is because the Lord brought our fathers out of Egypt . . .” (see, e.g., Exod 12:24-28). In this way, as stated in the Psalms and other related passages, one generation declares to the next the faithfulness of God (see, e.g., Ps 78:1-7). To a Jew, this is part of his sacred calling: Preserving the unbroken chain from Abraham to Sinai to the present. This, he would argue, is hardly an outmoded covenant!

In response, we point out that God Himself declared in Jeremiah 31:31-34 that He would make a new covenant, different than the covenant He had previously made with His people at Sinai. Yet here too, we fail to recognize two things: First, this new covenant was to be made with Israel and Judah, not with the Gentile world; and second, in this new covenant, God would put His Torah into the hearts and minds of His people. That is to say, it would not result in an abrogation of Torah but rather in a whole-hearted obedience to the commands of the law.

Responding again, we argue that it is now the Church which has taken the place of Israel and Judah, at which point we might expect a Muslim to jump in on our conversation and say, “You’re close, but not close enough. Islam has replaced both of your incomplete and faulty religions!” Putting this Islamic salvo – and my sarcasm – aside, do we realize that in claiming that another people has displaced the people to whom the promises came – the very people to whom God swore that He would never totally destroy or displace them, no matter what sins they would commit, and all that in a passage immediately following the new covenant prophecy in Jeremiah (see Jer 31:35-37) – we thereby impugn the very integrity of God?

“But,” you protest, “the religious Jew must surely know that he is in bondage to the law and under a curse. We can offer him liberty in Jesus!”

To this the observant Jew replies, “The Torah is a gift from God! Keeping His commands is my delight,” and he proceeds to quote verses such as Deut 32:47 (“[The words of the Torah] are not just idle words for you--they are your life”), Ps 1:2 (“But his

delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night”), not to mention whole passages such as Psalm 19 and 119 (to cite just one example, consider 119:72: “The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold”). And he reminds us in that in the Messianic age, Torah will go forth from Zion! (See Isa 2:1-4.) It seems that the more we present our case, the more we are presenting to a traditional Jew an alien religion.

Things only intensify when, at some point in our dialogue, we unashamedly declare that “Jesus is God.” (I want to make it perfectly clear that I am *not* here to deny that statement. I would ask, however, when we say that Jesus is God, that we should be aware that we could mean that He is the Father, Son, and Spirit, or that He is identical to the Father, or perhaps that we mean something more nuanced, such as is found in John 1:1-18? That is to say, there is more ambiguity in our statement that “Jesus is God” than we might realize.)

In any case, do you realize what a religious Jew hears when we proclaim that “Jesus is God,” especially when we remember that the great majority of traditional Jews associate historic Christianity with Catholicism, and therefore with crucifixes and icons? Jesus is God? A Jew would surely say, “This cannot be! Num 23:19 and 1 Sam 15:29 flatly state that God is not a man, yet you are saying that God became a man. Impossible! Moses warned us about this explicitly in Deut 4:15-19: ‘You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.’ Yet you worship God in the form of a man!”

We might then explain the Trinity, to which the Jew replies, “Our ancestors died with the Shema on their lips [referring to Deut 6:4ff.] rather than deny the oneness of the Lord. That for us is the highest honor: to die for Kiddush HaShem, the sanctification of the name of the Lord. And every day, when we recite the Shema, we focus all of our energy and intellect on the revelation of God’s uniqueness and absolute unity. How dare you tell me that He is three in one! That is not the God of Sinai, and that is not the God of our forefathers. I will not betray my God or my people!”

Sadly, at this point, the traditional Jew might begin to recount the horrors of Church history as he knows it, beginning with the demonization of the person of the Jew among some of the early Church fathers, then moving to Saint John Chrysostom’s infamous seven sermons against the Jews, in which he flatly declared that God hated the Jews and that the synagogue was worse than a brothel, then skipping to the Crusades and the Inquisitions, before quoting from Martin Luther’s venomous “Concerning the Jews and their Lies,” a little book whose strategies Adolph Hitler carried out with precision. As Daniel Jonah Goldhagen pointed out in his book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*:

One leading Protestant churchman, Bishop Martin Sasse published a compendium of Martin Luther’s antisemitic vitriol shortly after *Kristallnacht’s* orgy of anti-Jewish violence. In the foreword to the volume, he applauded the burning of the synagogues and the coincidence of the day:

“On November 10, 1938, on Luther’s birthday, the synagogues are burning in Germany.” The German people, he urged, ought to heed these words “of the greatest antisemite of his time, the warner of his people against the Jews.”¹

Thus, when Julius Streicher, one of Hitler’s top henchmen and the publisher of the anti-Semitic *Der Stürmer*, was asked during the Nuremberg trials for war criminals if any other publications in Germany treated the Jewish question in an anti-Semitic way, he replied:

Dr. Martin Luther would very probably sit in my place in the defendants’ dock today, if this book had been taken into consideration by the Prosecution. In the book “The Jews and Their Lies,” Dr. Martin Luther writes that the Jews are a serpent’s brood and one should burn down their synagogues and destroy them....²

So, according to Streicher, the Nazis only did what Luther urged them to do! Tragically, as expressed by the Catholic scholar Edward Flannery:

The vast majority of Christians, even well educated, are all but totally ignorant of what happened to Jews in history and of the culpable involvement of the Church. . . . It is little exaggeration to state that those pages of history Jews have committed to memory are the very ones that have been torn from Christian (and secular) history books.³

To offer you some Jewish perspectives on Church history – remember again that most Jews do not know the difference between the professing Church and the true Church, and that, more importantly, the true Church has also been corrupted at times by anti-Semitism – consider these words penned in the last third of the twentieth century. First, the perspective of an Israeli writer in his Hebrew book on false messiahs in Jewish history:

Instead of bringing redemption to the Jews, the false Christian messiah has brought down on us base libels and expulsions, oppressive restrictions and burning of [our] holy books, devastations and destructions. Christianity, which professes to infuse the sick world with love and compassion, has fixed a course directly opposed to this lofty rhetoric. The voice of the blood of millions of our brothers cries out to us from the ground: “No! Christianity is not a religion of love but a religion of unfathomable hate! All history, from ancient times to our own day, is one continuous proof of the total bankruptcy of this religion in all its segments.”⁴

Next, I cite the words of Reform Jewish scholar Eugene Borowitz:

¹ Cited in Michael L. Brown, *Revolution in the Church: Challenging the Religious System with a Call for Radical Change* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2002), 168.

² Cited in *ibid.*, 169.

³ Cited in Michael L. Brown, *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood: The Tragic Story of the “Church” the Jewish People* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1992), xii.

⁴ Translated and cited in *ibid.*, 89-90.

We might be more inclined to give Christian claims some credence had we seen Christians through the ages behave as models of a redeemed humanity. Looking through the window of history we have found them in as much need of saving as the rest of humankind. If anything, their social failings are especially discrediting of their doctrine for they claim to be uniquely free of human sinfulness and freshly inspired by their faith to bring the world to a realm of love and peace. . . . Until sinfulness ceases and well-being prevails, Jews know the Messiah has not come.⁵

As the great scholar Franz Delitzsch sadly noted, being himself actively involved in Jewish apologetics and evangelism in the 19th century: “The Church still owes the Jews the actual proof of Christianity’s truth. Is it surprising that the Jewish people are such an insensitive and barren field for the Gospel? The Church itself has drenched it in blood and then heaped stones upon it.”⁶ Yet we somehow think that by quoting an isolated Messianic proof text, one whose original context we have often not even explored, we think that we will be able to convince a religious Jew to “become a Christian,” or, if he rejects our words but is honest with himself, we expect him at least to acknowledge the truthfulness of our position.

Can you see now that, in his eyes, we are asking him to deny God, deny Torah, deny the eternal covenant, deny his people, and embrace an alien, idolatrous, and seriously flawed religion? And can you see how this insensitivity smacks of the very triumphalism that has been such a curse on our history? And isn’t it striking that we find the need to have a serious apologetic arsenal to address the cults, to address other major world religions, and to address post-modernism and evolutionism, yet we fail to recognize how essential it is that we massively shore up our Jewish apologetics? And isn’t this lack all the more striking when we remember that, according to Rom 1:16, the gospel is to the Jew first? And that according to Rom 11:17-24, the Jews are the natural olive branches who can be more readily grafted back into their own olive tree? And that according to Rom 11:11-15, a major reason for reaching out to the Gentile world is to provoke Israel to jealousy? And that according to those very same verses, “if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring,” and, “if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” Don’t these truths urge us to make solid and sensitive Jewish apologetics a mainstay of our teaching, not just for the specialist but for all apologists? And, given the Lord’s words in Matt 23:39, viz., that Jerusalem will not see Him again until it recognizes Him as the Messianic King, which by implication means that no one will see Him until Jerusalem welcomes Him back, shouldn’t we be working with God to help see this come to pass? How then should we respond to the challenge of Jewish apologetics? I would offer the following, general considerations, referring those interested in further study to a number of relevant volumes I have been privileged to write on the subject.

First, you should recognize that religious, observant Jews make up at most 10% of world Jewry, meaning that many of the issues I have raised here are *not* issues for the

⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, 90-91.

⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, 92.

majority of the world's Jews (although in a country like Israel, despite most of the population being secular, there is a gut level connection to many of the objections and issues I have raised here). That is to say, most of the Jews you meet will not be particularly religious or especially educated in their faith, and so there will not be a major, *Jewish* apologetic need when dealing with them. However, through internet and various other means, more and more Jews now have access to anti-missionary apologetics, and so, once they come to faith in Yeshua, they will often be assaulted with these issues; thus the need remains to address these questions at some point. But to repeat: For the vast majority of Jews you meet, solid Jewish apologetics will not be needed at the outset.

Second, given what religious Jews know about “Christendom,” before extolling the wonderful contributions of Christianity to society or lauding the powerful effects of Jesus’ teaching on humanity or proclaiming the great love for Israel found in many evangelical circles, it would be wise to begin with humility and a spirit of identificational repentance, asking forgiveness for the atrocities that have been committed by false Christians in Jesus’ name – and then seeking to demonstrate by personal and corporate example what the life-transforming power of the gospel is really all about.

Third, recognize that there is a zeal for God among many religious Jews (cf. Rom 10:2), despite customs and practices that often seem odd to us, and despite the occasional presence of legalism or religious hypocrisy (these exist in many other circles as well!). It is part of our triumphalist mentality to think that all religious-but-non-Christian people are walking around in total spiritual apathy and ignorance, with no light of revelation at all, and with no true desire for God. In the case of religious Jews, it is best to see them as “so near and yet so far,” praying to the same God to whom we pray (even if they do not truly “know” Him the way we do), reciting the same psalms, meditating on the same scriptures, seeking to emulate the same holiness and morality, and longing to see the fulfillment of the same prophetic promises. A daily prayer of religious Jews – often recited when at death’s door – ends with these two stanzas:

He is the living God to save,
My Rock while sorrow’s toils endure,
My banner and my stronghold sure,
The cup of life whene’er I crave.

I place my soul within His palm
Before I sleep as when I wake,
And though my body I forsake,
Rest in the Lord in fearless calm.⁷

How then should we respond to those who pray to Israel’s God with such pathos and conviction?

⁷ The prayer is called *Adon Olam*, meaning, “Lord of the World” (or, “Master of the Universe”), cited in full in *ibid.*, 110-111.

Fourth, when addressing the issue of the nature of God and the deity of Yeshua, I would strongly suggest that we speak of God's complex unity, opening it up as a mystery, and being very biblical in the language we use. There is a reason John 1:1-18 is written the way it is. Do we express ourselves in similar terms? This, of course, is a massive subject in itself, but I offer this as a seed for thought. Fifth, it is important that we understand the coming of the Messiah as the *fulfillment* – not abolition! – of the Torah and prophets, in both a holistic and specific sense, emphasizing the continuity of God's purposes for Israel. (This, of course, will also challenge us to recover some of the lost, biblical Jewish roots of our faith.) Yes, it is true that, in Jesus, God did a radically new thing, but it was the thing that was prophesied and anticipated in the Tanakh, which much of it, according to Paul, being a mystery that had been hidden in the Scriptures but was now being revealed. Again, God's dealings with Israel and the nations represents continuity rather than discontinuity. In keeping with this, it is important to emphasize that Yeshua the Jew brings to fulfillment God's destiny for Israel – making the one true God known to the ends of the earth, to be worshiped by Jew and Gentile alike. (To put this quaintly, "One of our boys made it!) Jews need to reclaim Him, but only on His terms.

Sixth, we should remember that, in reality, Jews do not hold simply to the written Torah but to their traditional interpretations as well. In fact, it is the oral traditions that are the heart and soul of Judaism – there is no traditional Judaism without the traditions – and so it is only fair to ask: Do the Messianic Writings (i.e., the New Testament) represent God's continuing Word to His people, or should we follow the rabbinic traditions? To press this point, we should emphasize that, just as Jesus predicted, the Temple has been destroyed and the Jewish people dispersed throughout the world, bringing about profound questions for the Jewish people with regard to Torah life. Is God's answer to these questions the Messianic faith in Yeshua or is it rabbinic Judaism? Certainly, the latter has helped to preserve the distinct identity of the Jewish people for the last two millennia, and this is no small thing. But has it brought the full realities of forgiveness of sins, intimacy with God, and life in the Spirit? In that sense, can we demonstrate that in Yeshua, there is something more? I understand, of course, that many religious Jews will claim to have a close relationship with God, but there *is* something divinely unique in our experience in Messiah.

Seventh, we should not treat Messianic prophecies in an atomistic, proof-texting form but should rather examine the original contexts of the prophetic words, looking for larger redemptive truths and for patterns of salvation history. While demanding, this approach will prove to be of inestimable value once objections are raised, not to mention the fact that it will certainly prove enriching in our own study of Scripture. We should also understand some basic keys to understanding Messianic prophecies, another large subject that I can only address in passing right now.

Eighth, rather than simply speaking of a suffering Messiah and a royal Messiah, we must develop the theme of Messiah as a priestly King, understanding that it is the priestly aspect of the Messiah's work – something almost totally lacking in traditional Judaism – that explains why he needed to suffer and die. This too is a critical insight that

requires much, further elaboration. It is also important to establish from the Hebrew Bible that the Messiah's foundational, *priestly* work had to be completed before the destruction of the Second Temple, an important apologetic point in itself.

Ninth, we can rightly press the issue that Yeshua is either the Messiah of everyone or the Messiah of no one, noting that God has, in fact, done something definite, intentional, and direct on behalf of the Gentiles, just as the Messianic prophecies proclaimed. (It is fair to ask a traditional Jew what God has done – outside of Jesus – to make Himself known to the nations in the last two thousand years, also asking what role religious Jews have played in themselves being a light to the world.) Succinctly stated, if Jesus did not fulfill the Scriptures, if He did not die and rise from the dead, if He is not seated at the Father's right hand, if He will not return in the clouds in the future and establish the kingdom of God on the earth, then the faith of hundreds of millions of Christians worldwide is a nothing less than a sham. But if He is indeed the one spoken of by Moses and the prophets, then every Jew needs to embrace him as well! It is only liberal Christianity and liberal Judaism that can claim complete mutual affirmation. So, let us emphasize God's calling on Israel to be a light to the nations, to be a priestly people themselves, and let us demonstrate that, through Jesus, God has fulfilled His Word. To repeat (and I as I often say to my fellow Jews): Yeshua the Jew is one of us, the one through whom Israel achieves its destiny.

Of course, there is much more I could say, but I hope that, in some way, you have gained a greater appreciation for the unique challenges involved in Jewish apologetics, along with the confidence that, in Yeshua, the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. I close with the words of Paul from Romans 11: "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! . . . If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. . . . After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (Rom 11:11a, 16, 24-27)