

# The Sermon on the Mount: a Jewish View

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The Jew is never more uneasy than when faced with a text from the New Testament. Aware of the scriptural authority that such a text holds for the Christian, the uneasiness is compounded when what, basically, the Jew is offering is an opportunity for Christians to listen in, as it were, on a Jewish interpretation of one of the most important texts in the New Testament.

There are, of course, historical considerations that determine how a Jew understands the New Testament. For much of the past, if Jews read or studied the gospels, it was only for polemical purposes. One of the first figures to abandon such an attitude was Claude Montefiore, an English Jew, founder of the Liberal Jewish movement in Britain. In 1909 Montefiore published *The Synoptic Gospels*, consisting of an introduction, translation and commentary on the first three gospels. The aim of such a book was two-fold: to dissipate the patronising and negative attitude which Jews held towards Christianity and to reveal the true spirit of the Jewish religion to Christians.

Montefiore's attitudes roused dissent and suspicion among the Jewish community. For him, Jesus linked on to the prophets and sometimes seemed to go beyond them. But as Montefiore revealed, for the Jew it was not the personality or life of Jesus that was important but the teaching:

We persist in separating the one from the other, whereas to Christians they form a unity, a whole. From his childhood upwards the Jew's highest conceptions of goodness and God have never been associated with Jesus. (Vol.1)

Though it was on this issue that his critics were to disagree with him, Montefiore even went as far as to describe Jesus as a prophet, whose teachings were in the tradition of Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

The two great points and poles of the prophetic teaching were, first, the exclusive worship and recognition of the One God; secondly, that the service and demands of this God consisted not in ceremonial or sacrifices but in justice, righteousness, mercy and lovingkindness.

(*The Old Testament and After*, p. 229)

Seventy or more years have elapsed. More recent scholarship, setting Jesus in a Jewish context in first-century Palestine, and historical

circumstances—the tragic events of this century have not been without their effect on Jewish-Christian relations—have dictated a new and more open attitude from both a Christian and Jewish point of view. It is precisely regarding Palestinian Judaism of the first century of the common era, that Jew and Christian can meet in dialogue, to discover more about each other's roots.

The Sermon on the Mount forms the most important collection of sayings and teachings in the New Testament. Yet what was the tradition out of which this extraordinary collection of sayings emerged? Were they 'original' teachings, or had they been culled from elsewhere?

By the first century of the common era, the Hebrew religion had been a powerful living force for over one thousand years. But the whole period of the Second Commonwealth (i.e. from 166 BCE) was, in the words of Bamberger, 'one of intense and vital interest in religion, and also of rapid political, economic and cultural change.' (p. 77) It is, therefore, exceedingly difficult to present a coherent picture of Judaism as a homogeneous religion in this period. And the Second Commonwealth was plunged into darkness in the summer of the year 70 CE, with the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. With such a catastrophe, it was as though the near-hysterical mood of those sects which yearned for an end to their troubles on a cosmic scale had finally been consummated. For the first century was also the great age of Jewish apocalyptic and eschatological yearning. Between the composition of the latest books of the Bible and the earliest redaction of Jewish law in the form of the Mishnah, lay five centuries of what Nickelsburg, in *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*, has called 'crisis, transition and creativity'.

First-century Judaism turned away from the influence of apocalyptic, for another kind of development was taking place in Jewish life and it is to this that we must now turn in our review of the Jewish setting of the Sermon on the Mount. Modern Judaism—orthodox and liberal—is rooted in the Pharisaic tradition. During the first seven decades of the first century, the Pharisees had been quietly, unwittingly sowing seeds of a new religious movement. The synagogue as a place of meeting and study had been in existence even before the destruction of the Temple; it did not emerge as a brand-new institution, but was there, ready-formed and able to take the place of centralised Jewish worship. The leader of this movement in the years following the destruction was Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai, a pupil of Hillel. A story is told of him:

Once when he was leaving Jerusalem, R. Joshua was walking behind R. Jochanan and saw the Temple in ruins. R. Joshua said: 'Woe is us that this has been destroyed, the place where atonement was made for the sins of Israel.' Said R. Jochanan: 'No, my son, do you not know that we have a means of making atonement that is like it? And what is it? It

is deeds of love, as it is said (Hosea 6:6) "For I desire kindness, and not sacrifice..." ' (Avot de Rabbi Natan 4, 21)

Thus it happened that the most important developments in Judaism were taking place side by side with the developments and growth of early Christianity. Neither apocalypticism nor a priesthood in whose hands lay the authority and control of the law were to be the answer to the threat of internal disintegration within Judaism, but a class of scholar Jews who embraced both the Written and Oral Torah and whose silent and hidden revolution was taking place during the first century of the common era. It was their authority and their influence that was to remain on all forms of Judaism, for, as Ellis Rivkin says in his book *Hidden Revolution* in no uncertain terms:

... only the Judaism of the Pharisees survived antiquity. It was this form of Judaism that confronted the medieval Christian Church. Hence, all the vicissitudes that have marked Jewish-Christian relations are rooted in antagonism which had its beginnings in the hostility marring the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees. (p. 27)

We must now turn to the Sermon on the Mount itself, but not all of it. Let me concentrate on three important themes from Chapter 6: charity, prayer and fasting, and in this way ask, was Jesus departing from contemporary Jewish attitudes to these subjects, or was he stating some new and radical teaching? It is important to set this chapter in its wider context in order to understand fully the import of these teachings and sayings of Jesus. Matthew opens his Gospel with a genealogy which begins with Abraham and works its way down through King David and thence to Jesus:

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations. (1:17)

The narrative describing Jesus' birth, baptism and period in the wilderness is clearly set within an authoritative framework which has the Hebrew Scriptures as its reference. As the Children of Israel were forced to spend forty years wandering in the wilderness before they were eligible to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, so Jesus is to spend forty days and forty nights tempted by the Devil in the wilderness before ascending the mountain, as Moses the lawgiver had done before him, to preach the sermon. It seems clear from this mirroring of the Hebrew Scriptures, that Matthew is concerned in the first place to set Jesus' teachings in a direct line of succession to the teachings of the Hebrew Bible.

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but (Gk. *alla*) to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is

accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.  
(5:17—20)

The Law, therefore, is to remain. But, as Ellis Rivkin points out (page 87) in his commentary to this passage:

The Pharisees are the measure of the Law! Their righteousness is undeviating loyalty to jot and tittle, to even the least of the commandments. The followers of Jesus are charged to accept the Pharisees as the models for the legally normative. The Christian is to ground his righteousness in Pharisaic righteousness. He must begin with the Pharisaic system of Law as the immutable foundation upholding his own mode of life. If he questions the Pharisaic concept of the immutability of the Law or the binding quality of its most minute commandments, he shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. And should he fail to exceed the Pharisaic standard of righteousness, he will not enter the kingdom at all.

In Chapter 6 of Matthew, the first eighteen verses are tightly structured into a triadic form with the use of formulaic statements so that one can see where one statement begins and another ends. Davies (*The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*) draws attention to this structure, which he says, 'suggests that Matthew is working under the influence of a traditional arrangement. He confronts the Synagogue with a triadic formulation which would not be alien to it.'

The chapter opens with a general statement about practising one's piety publicly. And this is the theme carried through the subsequent verses. Neither almsgiving, nor prayer, nor fasting should be conducted for the sake of display but in secret, so that only your Father who is in heaven may see what you do and reward you. It is interesting to the Jew that this statement about charity concentrates, not on the one who is to benefit from almsgiving, but on the giver and his reward. In Hebrew, the word for charity is *tzedakah*. Unlike the Greek, it does not come from a word meaning love, but from a Hebrew root which means right or straight. It is more correctly translated 'righteousness' or that which is correct. It is frequently used as a parallel for the Hebrew word *mishpat*, which means justice or judgement. Thus the famous exhortation *Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof* ('Justice, justice shall you pursue') conveys the sense that the giving of charity is doing only what is right and correct in God's eyes. There are, of course, many texts in the Hebrew Scriptures in which the Jew is exhorted to practise charity, not for his own sake, that he might

receive a reward, but for the sake of the one who is less well-off than himself and because, finally, as the Deuteronomist says (10:17–18): ‘The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.’ In other words, because God acts mercifully, so are His people called to imitate His attributes.

Charity, or deeds of lovingkindness, were enumerated as one of three things on which the world was based (Pirkei Avot 1:2) and a later saying listed charity along with prayer and repentance, all of which had the power to nullify an evil decree. *Tzedakah*, charity, was—indeed is—central to the observant Jew’s life. Maimonides, the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, listed eight degrees of charity, of which the highest was to help a person to become self-supporting. The objective of charity was not simply, therefore, to continue to maintain someone’s dependence on a beneficiary, but to render them self-sufficient.

As to how one should give, there are many statements in the Mishnah and Talmud bearing out the instruction in Matthew to give in secret. In the Mishnah (Shekalim 5:6) we are told that ‘there were two vestries in the Temple, one called the Vestry of the Secret Ones, the other was the Vestry of the Utensils. In the former the sin-fearing men used to put their gifts secretly, and the poor of gentle birth were supported from them secretly.’ And a story in the Babylonian Talmud (Hagigah 5a) tells how R. Jannai once saw a man give a zuz (one quarter of a shekel) to a poor person publicly, so he said to him: It had been better that you had not given him, than now that you have given him publicly and put him to shame.

The Jewish attitude to charity or the place of charity in the world, in fine, is that it should occupy no place. Let me offer you a contemporary Jewish view from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ paper *Wealth and Poverty*, published by the Social Affairs Unit in 1985, referring to Maimonides highest degree of charity:

Charity is adjudged a virtue, presumably because it is a sacrifice for the good of others; in this case, though, the sacrifice is non-existent—a loan, a partnership, finding him a job. Nothing more clearly defines the place of charity in the system than this: it may be the highest virtue, but better is the world where it is not needed. Charity is not justified by the good it does to the soul of the giver, but by the degree to which it removes the misery of the recipient, physical and more especially psychological. An act which enables him not to need charity is higher than any charity.

The second unit in this chapter likewise stresses the importance of praying in secret so that only God will see what the worshipper is doing. On this subject, it may be said that Jesus neither contradicted Jewish

teaching on the subject, nor did he agree with it. As I have mentioned before, there was no homogeneous view in existence on the subject of prayer, for example. Jewish teaching was at a stage of development where a number of different views existed side by side. The sages disputed with each other, different practices were in existence at the same time. Hillel was to teach 'Separate not thyself from the congregation' (M. Avot 2:5), emphasising the importance of praying with a community, while a later anonymous teaching announced: 'God says to Israel, "I bade you pray in the synagogue in your city, but if you cannot pray there, pray in your field, and if you cannot pray there, pray on your bed, and if you cannot pray there, then meditate in your heart and be still."' (Pesikta de Rab Kahana 158a) Many are the statements—legal and non-legal—on prayer. Strict conditions pertained to the recitation of daily prayers: one could not stand up to recite the statutory prayers while immersed in sorrow, or idleness or laughter or chatter; others maintained that one could only pray in the synagogue. The purpose of prayer was to direct the heart to heaven and although spontaneous prayer was not discouraged, the fixed daily prayer recited in the presence of a congregation of ten men spoke of the individual's acceptance of the divine yoke of the commandments.

The modern Israeli scholar Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitz presents us with one Jewish view of the purpose of prayer:

The meaning of prayer as a religious institution is none other than this: the worship of the Lord by man, through his acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven; an acceptance which reveals itself in action through the acceptance of the Torah and *mitzvot*; and any prayer which a man prays other than by reason of keeping the commandment can have no religious significance. Spontaneous prayer, which a person says out of personal choice, is indeed *permitted* by the halakha but like everything else which falls within the category of 'is not commanded but does' is of limited religious value ... The greatness and the power of prayer, statutory prayer as determined by the halakha, lies in the suspension of personal interests and particular motivations of man, circumstances which require expression in a variety of forms and manners according to each person's particular feeling in regard to standing before God...

The great religious duty of 'prayer with intention' can have neither meaning nor substance unless we understand it as the intention of man to worship the Lord when he prays and employs the fixed forms of prayer ... Yet, quite specifically that prayer which a man prays because he is obliged to do so and not because he is impelled to it by his feelings and needs, that prayer, and only that prayer, it is, which constitutes the

religious act of the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven and the yoke of Torah and the commandments.

(Translated by Jonathan Wittenberg)

Such a statement is not a Jewish catechism on prayer. As I have said, there are as many different views on prayer as there are sages who utter them. What makes them Jewish is (1) that they are uttered by practising and observant Jews; and (2) that they are adopted and integrated into the rich tapestry of Jewish life which allows for many varieties of practices and views on life. The Jew is rarely, if at all, given a creed for life. He or she is not told what to believe. To be sure, behaviour and observances are regulated and prescribed, one may not observe a festival on the wrong day, for example, but Jewish theology is not a systematic theology. It is, rather, an organic theology growing out of practices, out of the experience of the Jews throughout history—and if the experience of the Jews of Islamic Spain was different from the experience of Jews in seventeenth-century Poland, then the belief system was liable to reflect those different experiences.

We come finally to the statement on fasting—where again, Jesus emphasises the need for secrecy, contrasting such practice with the hypocrites' flaunting of their observances. That fasting took place in Palestine in the first century is undoubted. Leviticus, Chapter 16 prescribes the fast of the Day of Atonement and the tractate Ta'anit in the Mishnah deals specifically with fasts which are to be proclaimed when, for example, there is a drought. But, perhaps, Jesus recalls the words of the prophet Deutero-Isaiah when he criticises the behaviour of the hypocrites:

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a rush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke... (Isaiah 58:3ff)

If this is the essence of Jesus' message in this part of the Sermon on the Mount: namely, that his followers should feel in their hearts what is prescribed for their bodies, then his message is wholly a Jewish one. Though not a prophet, his teachings reflect the prophetic tradition, as indeed the Pharisees themselves were heirs to the prophetic tradition. There are, of course, many other texts similar in content and theme to those found in the Sermon on the Mount, as there are texts which depart from some of Jesus' teachings.

Perhaps where the Jew feels a sense of unease is with Jesus' sense of

personal authority. Pharisaic teaching, although not anonymously presented, is always careful to offer a Biblical and therefore authoritative proof text for a statement of opinion. It does not rely on the charisma or authority of an individual rabbi or teacher. Jewish law is much too precious a commodity to bandy around without careful referral to Scriptural authority. It is here that the Jew must depart from the Christian with perfect goodwill. There is no one in Judaism, not even Moses, who carries the personal authority that Jesus inevitably carries. To reiterate Montefiore, the Christian does not separate Jesus' teaching from the figure of Jesus. Though Jews may find much of their tradition in the Sermon on the Mount, at the end of the day, it is the figure of Jesus and two thousand years of history that will separate them from those teachings, so that they are recognisable as belonging to a different tradition; no less noble, no less idealistic, but different.

## What Kind of Relativism?

Ross Thompson

In his 1976 book *New Testament Interpretation in an Historical Age*, Denis Nineham advanced the thesis of cultural relativism in theology this way:

While the events of Jesus' career were such as to demand interpretation in terms of a unique—indeed literally final—divine intervention, *given the presuppositions of certain circles in first century Jewish culture*, they might not have seemed to demand such an interpretation given different cultural assumptions, for example to a modern western observer if such a one—twentieth century presuppositions and all—could be carried back to first century Palestine on some magic carpet or infernal time machine.<sup>1</sup>

Broadly speaking this is the theory that the relation between facts on the one hand and language and interpretation on the other is perpetually shifting. Facts that will demand one kind of description in one cultural context will require a quite different kind in another and conversely a