
Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

Charlesworth, J H (ed) 1991 — *Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring the place of Jesus within early Judaism*

New York: Crossroad. 288 pages. Price unknown

Reviewer: Prof J Engelbrecht (UNISA)

This volume is the second in the series *Shared ground among Jews and Christians* published by The American Interfaith Institute. It contains contributions by nine scholars, ranging from Protestants (Cox and Charlesworth) and Roman Catholics (Küng, Meier and Harrington), to Jews from Israel (Flusser), Europe (Vermes) and the United States (Segal and Rivkin). These studies were not intended for this book; they were written over the last two decades and originally appeared elsewhere, but are republished here with corrections and additions. What they have in common is that they reflect on the importance for Jews and Christians of the historical fact that Jesus was a Jew, and on the implications this fact has for the future of interfaith dialogue.

The publication of this volume at the dawn of a new century and millennium is timely and meaningful. Charlesworth points out in the 'Preface' (p 14) that the nineteenth century ended with a three-pronged ideology, namely the denigration of the Old Testament and its replacement by the revelations of the New Testament, the galvanizing of hatred for Jews through the neologism 'anti-Semitism', and the tendency to assume that Jesus was no Jew. We all know what disastrous consequences this ideology had in the 20th century. Hopefully, as the new millennium approaches, this ideology has changed to a certain extent, and in the words of Charlesworth 'we can look forward to the dawning of a new century, which, once rid of all forms of hatred may herald the beginning of a better age' (p 16).

Although there is obviously no interaction between the different authors and chapters, the arrangement of the chapters is nevertheless appropriate. In the opening chapter Harvey Cox sets the mood for the rest of the book by relating some interesting experiences while on a pilgrimage in Israel. This is followed by several chapters which are of interest to anyone who is interested not only in the relations between Christians and Jews, but also in historical Jesus research.

The book includes two contributions by Charlesworth ('The foreground of Christian origins and the commencement of Jesus research', and 'Jesus, early Jewish literature and archaeology'), Meier ('Reflections on Jesus-of-history research today'), Vermes ('Jesus the Jew'), Harrington ('The Jewishness of Jesus: Facing some problems'), Flusser ('Jesus, his ancestry, and the commandment of love'), Segal ('Jesus the revolutionary'), and Rivkin ('What, crucified Jesus?'). The contributions are concluded by Küng's 'Christianity and Judaism'. An annotated bibliography added by Charlesworth at the end is very useful, containing particulars of some eighty books on Jesus research published since 1980. There are indexes of names and passages as well, and it may be added that the book also contains some illustrations, particularly of places and objects from Galilee.

What is obvious from the book is that there is a definite desire among scholars from different backgrounds and beliefs achieve a better understanding of each other and to have a greater tolerance of each other's beliefs. What is, however, also obvious is that the person of Jesus is still the biggest stumbling block in the encounter between Jews and Christians. This is exemplified in the words of Schalom ben-Chorin, quoted by Cox (p 40): 'The faith *of* Jesus unites us but the faith *in* Jesus divides us'. It is not a

matter of Jews not being interested in the person of Jesus. Several chapters in the book point out that there definitely is a growing interest in Jesus in many Jewish circles. There is, however, a difference in the way the person and role of Jesus are observed in the two religions.

Cox (p 46) spells out the fundamental ground rule for dialogue between Christians and Jews: there can never be a question of Christians attempting to convert Jews to Christianity. This is perhaps the most difficult point to accept in some Christian circles. I get the impression that the book had a lukewarm reception in some circles, and this view must apparently have something to do with this. If my impression is correct, I find this a great pity. I am of the opinion that not only Jewish-Christian dialogue should be encouraged, but also dialogue between Christianity and various other religions.

I can recommend the book to anyone who is interested in interfaith dialogue, but also to scholars interested in the historical Jesus problem. Because of the different backgrounds of the authors of the book, it makes for very interesting reading. Although some of the contributions presume some theological background, the book is nevertheless also accessible to a wider audience.