

Efroymsen, D P, Fisher, E J & Klenicki, L (eds) 1993 — Within Context: Essays on Jews and Judaism in the New Testament

Philadelphia: The American Interfaith Institute.

Reviewer: Dr P van Staden

As stated in the title, the work contains essays by various authors, but all are devoted to basically two related aims: Firstly, the promotion of reading the New Testament 'in context' and thereby preventing the polemical passages relating to Jews from being read 'out of context,' that is, from being interpreted as if they were anti-Judaistic in intent. Secondly, a reading of those polemical passages 'in context' thereby preventing Christianity from becoming a carrier of anti-Judaism, which would distort Christianity itself.

The achievement of the first aim should conceivably contribute towards a more tolerant attitude on the part of Christians towards Jews and Judaism. The second aim would promote a better self-understanding on the part of Christians, thereby giving them a greater appreciation of their own tradition.

In the space allowed for this review it is not possible to discuss each one of the essays in great detail. It must suffice, therefore, to list the different contributions and then to devote more attention to the leading essay by Mary Boys.

- * *The Introduction* by the editors states the purpose of the collection and provides a short overview of the contents of each essay and its place within the collection itself, the order of which is said to be 'not random' (1993:xi).
- * *A more faithful portrait of Judaism: An imperative for Christian educators* by Mary C Boys.
- * *Within context: The Judaism contemporary with Jesus* by Anthony J Saldarini.
- * *The synoptic gospels and their presentation of Judaism* by Philip Cunningham.
- * *The Gospel of John and the presentation of Jews and Judaism* by Urban C von Wahlde.
- * *Jesus: Opposition and opponents* by David P Efroymsen.
- * *The passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth: Catechetical approaches* by Eugene J Fisher.
- * *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish people* by Terance Callan.
- * *Appendix: Within context: Guidelines for the catechetical presentation of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament.*

The issue under consideration by the essays in this collection is defined by Mary Boys as the concept of *supersessionism*. She points out that Judaism is a living tradition even today. Teaching about historical Judaism might, if not done carefully and responsibly, have a negative effect on the perceptions about Jews and Judaism in the present day. This would be especially dangerous when certain traits or past actions of Jews as a people or Judaism as a religio-cultural movement were designated and continually emphasized as wrong and/or evil.

She argues that the Jewishness of Jesus is not accidental to his mission and ministry, and that his deeds and words can only be fully understood in the context of first-century Palestinian Jewish life (p.1). Because Christians share part of their scripture with Jews and trace the origin of important Christian institutions such as the Eucharist to its Jewish origins in the Paschal background, 'Christian self understanding is inextricably linked to Judaism' (p.2).

Taking the centrality of Judaism to Christianity as her point of departure Boys argues against the concept of supersessionism that has taken hold in the church, namely that God's revelation in Christ is the further development of — and more complete than — Judaism, and that the church has superseded Judaism. She advances a twofold thesis:

- * Biblical and theological studies of the late twentieth century offer persuasive grounds for rejecting supersessionism. Jesus did not make Judaism obsolete, and its survival over subsequent centuries testifies to its vitality.
- * Argumentation is an inadequate method for the way the church should relate with Jews and Judaism. A church must reject supersessionism as incompatible with dialogue.

The problem that is debated in this work is a complex and sensitive one. It has to do with layers of perception. Mary Boys is no doubt correct in saying that 'a faithful portrait of Christian life cannot be based on a caricature of Jewish life' (p.9). Neither should it be the result of a narrow-minded bigotry towards any people, present or past, especially if such an attitude is based on deception or an inadequate understanding of all the salient facts.

However, that the Jews were ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus is perceived to be a historical fact within the New Testament itself and in subsequent history. Furthermore, there is no way to understand God's revelation in Jesus Christ other than as being a subsequent, more complete revelation than that reflected in the Old Testament, without seriously jeopardizing the cornerstones of the Christian faith. Even within the framework of the present dialogical age as opposed to a previous disputatious one (p.8), both the continuity and the discontinuity between Christianity and Judaism should be pointed out in the interest of a fair assessment of the problem. Of course Jesus as Jew is central to the Christian faith. This recognition, however, does not in itself preclude the possibility of interpreting precisely the fact of the historical life and fate of Jesus within a Jewish setting as the supersession of Judaism. Judaism does not regard Jesus as the expected Messiah — Christianity does. Even in the interest of an interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews, this fundamental and seminal discontinuity cannot be denied. In a sense the discontinuity is as necessary as the continuity to define both Christianity and Judaism.

In the end some troubling questions remain. Is this work an attempt to rescue Judaism from Christianity, or *vice versa*? Is it an attempt to vindicate Judaism as a complete faith *vis-à-vis* Christianity? Is it an attempt to sensitize Christians to the fact that it is not the present-day Jews who are responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus and that they should not be blamed for it? Is it a matter of perception, or is it fundamental to the faith?

Perhaps these questions in themselves should encourage the reading of this work, which contains excellent contributions and well-argued propositions, even though one may not agree with each one. I gladly recommend the book to the more serious reader, especially for the thought-provoking qualities of its basic tenets.