

FAITH TO FAITH: A CONVERSATION

by *SHEMARYAHU TALMON* and *THOMAS IDINOPULOS*

Talmon: Since the end of the Second World War, the interest in Jewish Studies has spread, particularly in the United States and in Europe. It can be said that wherever an academic, and not only an academic, dialogue between Christians and Jews has begun, the interest in integrating aspects of Jewish studies into the program of universities has grown tremendously.

Idinopulos: The study of Judaism, and of course the study of the Hebrew Bible, is not something new. What is relatively new and very important, I think, is the concerted, conscious effort of Jewish and Christian academics and theologians to come together to discuss the role of Judaism, the Bible and the history of the Jewish people in the context of university teaching.

Eldar: How do you deal with modern Jewish history? When Christians study Jewish history, they tend to see it as ending with the destruction of the Second Temple.

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Talmon: I like your definition of modern Jewish history as starting from the destruction of the Second Temple. That is quite correct, but it goes counter to a traditional scholarly trend which differentiates between Biblical Israel and post-Biblical Judaism in an attempt to sever the latter from Biblical Israel. This trend is the basis of what is known as *substitution theology*, in which the New Testament is connected directly with the Hebrew Bible, Christianity rather than Judaism being presented as the true inheritor of Biblical Israel. I believe, however, that this has changed to a significant degree. What we attempt to do is to make certain that Jews are not simply considered as the *Children of Abraham*, a designation which they share with Christians and Muslims, but as a people that has been developing its own civilization from Biblical times to the present. Therefore, we chose as topic for our workshop a very sensitive period in the relationship between Christianity and Judaism: the age which we Jews define as the Second Temple Period, which Christians call the Intertestamental Period, and which in general parlance is known as the Hellenistic-Roman Period. One of our aims was to make those who teach that period more fully aware of the continuity which we see in Judaism from Biblical days to the present.

Idinopulos: As a Christian theologian, educated at the University of Chicago Divinity School, which is a very large and influential institution in American Christian studies, I have some appreciation of what it means to study the Bible in the context of Christian America. Over the years it was something of a revelation for me to realize that perhaps I had been reading the Bible wrongly. By this, I mean that I was educated to look upon the Bible as the primary datum of Christianity, the primary entity, in relation to which the Jewish people is secondary. The Jewish people happens to have been elected by God, but what mattered was the *election*, not the *people*; the people were, so to speak, the vessel of the election. Over the years, I have come to appreciate the fact that one cannot separate the Bible from the people who authored it and whose religious witness is contained in these books. Thus, the inseparability of Bible and people, Bible and nation, Bible and nation-people, is to me fundamental.

There is really a link between the Jewish wars against the Romans and the earlier Jewish revolt against the Greek rulers of this area, and between both of these Jewish rebellions in antiquity and modern 19th-century Zionism. They all prove that the concept of nation-state was always present in Jewish consciousness. Had it not been there since ancient times, it would be difficult to imagine that the belief in the rebirth of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel in modernity would have been as fresh and as vital as it was. What I am saying is that, contrary to the usual interpretations of the Jewish rebellion against Rome – that is, as a disaster, or perhaps even as a suicidal protest – I see it as springing from a heightened sense of national consciousness, a declaration to the world that the Jewish people was not to be subjugated by foreign rulers. I think that this is terribly important because, after all, the history of nationalism is the history of protest. We know of many, many protests that failed, and there is nothing peculiar or unique in the Jewish failures of

the two Roman-Jewish wars. What is important is the declaration of national consciousness, of national integrity.

Talmon: Which was strong enough to survive the failure.

Idinopulos: Yes, it survived. It survived the failure religiously, psychologically and socially, and also politically. In other words, Zionism was not invented in Western Europe to solve the Jewish problem, but has much deeper roots.

Talmon: I would suggest one small emendation of terminology. I think that we should use the term *Return to Zion* and not *Zionism*, in order to make clearer the deep roots of this modern movement. As you said quite correctly, modern Zionism is often presented as a political movement aimed solely at alleviating the hardships of Jews at the beginning of this century, especially of Eastern European Jews. What is overlooked is that it is profoundly imbued with the idea of *Return to Zion*, which had not ceased since the very first expulsion of Israel from its land following the Destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. While modern Zionism was conceived in modern political terms by modern thinkers, it was inspired by an age-old Jewish hope for a return to the Land of Israel.

Idinopulos: The very notion of Jewish nationalism, when applied to the Hebrew Bible and to biblical times, or to this important age called the Intertestamental Period, grates on the nerves of non-Jewish religious thinkers and theologians. It is important to remember that Christian thinkers, and I dare say also Muslim ones, tend to view Jews as the People of the Book, the People of the Bible. Turning around to say they are not the People of the Bible, but that the Bible rather constitutes that national self-expression of this people, can be viewed as a kind of Archimedean revolution.

Talmon: I believe that in our present day language, some terms have become bad words. The very term *nationalism* is pointed, not easily digested, certainly not by theologians. While I know that we cannot get away from that, I would like to see a new vocabulary created to avoid the bad taste that people feel when these words are thrown at them. The term *Jewish nationalism* is simply obnoxious to a good number of people who are otherwise very understanding.

Eldar: Was this the task of the workshop?

Talmon: No, that was not one of its tasks. What we had in mind, and what is the task of our Center, is to assist in the development, and in some cases to initiate the introduction, of aspects of Jewish civilization into the curricula of universities, colleges and seminars. We selected that period because it is so sensitive and because, in my discussions preceding the workshop with colleagues from various countries and members of various churches, I came to the conclusion that this period should be tackled first, because it is such a sensitive issue...

As for the future, I would at present consider going a little further chronologically to deal in the next workshop with the late Roman period, going into the Byzantine period, when Jewish rabbinical literature and the world of the Jewish Sages blossomed. Here, I again think we are dealing with a subject which to a degree is still *terra incognita*, a barely charted territory to many Christian theologians and university teachers.

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