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Item Type	Article
Authors	Hagner, Donald
Publisher	APTS PRESS
Rights	All rights reserved
Download date	2026-11-02 04:13:47
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/167724

[AJPS 19.2 (2016), pp. 99-107]

How "New" Is the New Testament?: Continuity and Discontinuity Between the Old Testament (Formative Judaism) and the New Testament (Early Christianity)

Introductory Lecture

by Donald Hagner

The question of the relationship of the Old and New Testaments has been a much discussed issue in the church from the beginning. The NT frequently quotes the OT and even more frequently alludes to it; and the NT constantly stresses the fulfillment of the OT promises. These facts inevitably raise the challenging question of *continuity* and *discontinuity*—i.e., the extent to which the NT can be regarded as simply continuing or extending the OT,[1] and the extent to which the NT can be regarded as "breaking new ground" or taking us to a new reality that necessarily transcends the OT (although anticipated by it). A part of this question, and indeed a manifestation of it, is the important issue of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Although a priori it would seem clear enough that somehow both continuity and discontinuity are true and must be affirmed, the pendulum nevertheless has swung back and forth to extremes in the history of NT scholarship, depending on the climate of the times. Through most of the history of the Church, it is hardly surprising that the emphasis has been on *discontinuity.* Already in the early 2nd century, we encounter strong anti-Judaism (theological disagreement,

[1]I must here mention the new book by my Fuller Seminary colleague, OT scholar John Goldingay, titled "Do We Need the New Testament?: Letting the Old Testament Speak for Itself" (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015). I had nearly finished writing these lectures when I first encountered this book. While I appreciate Goldingay's opposition to Marcionism and his desire to value the OT on its own terms, I think he seriously underestimates the newness of the NT and its importance. His answer to the question posed in his title would seem to be something like, "Yes but just barely." He emphasizes continuity and downplays discontinuity. There are some good things and some important correctives to gain from reading his book; but in the main, I'm afraid I cannot recommend it.

which I distinguish from anti-Semitism) and, hence, stress on discontinuity plainly evident in the apostolic fathers Barnabas and Ignatius.

In the middle of the 2nd century, Marcion infamously posed the problem in the starkest terms by the rejection of the OT writings as Scripture and the differentiation of the God of the OT (the Demiurge) from the God of the NT. We gratefully note that the early Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, had the wisdom to resist Marcion and to affirm the OT as a vital part of its canon. Further to be mentioned in the 2nd century are Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* and the anti-Judaism of Melito's Paschal Homily, and in the 3rd century Tertullian. Particularly grievous is the *Adversus Judaeos* literature of the following centuries, represented by such fathers as Ambrose, Cyprian, Cyril of Alexandria, and especially John Chrysostom's homilities against the Jews.[2] Christian polemic against the Jews continued through the Middle Ages down to Martin Luther's venomous "On the Jews and Their Lies" and beyond.

As to be expected, there was corresponding polemic from the Jewish side (although nowhere nearly of the same volume as of the Christian polemic) also stressing discontinuity. First, we may mention the liturgical alteration known as the *Birkhat Ha-Minim* ("Blessing of the Heretics"). This Twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions of the synagogue prayer service was introduced at Yavneh (Jamnia) near the end of the 1st century in order to keep Jewish converts to Christianity from attending the synagogue. In a somewhat later form it read: "For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the minim[3] (heretics) be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant."[4]

More influential, however, was the scandalous *Toledoth Yeshu* ("Generations of Jesus" or "Life of Jesus"), written down before the 10th century but based on much earlier oral sources, including material from the Talmud and Midrashim. Although there is no standard version of the story, the basic plot runs like this:

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[2]For a survey and analysis, see L.M. McDonald, "Anti-Judaism in the Early Church Fathers," in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith,* C.A. Evans and D.A. Hagner, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 215-52.

[3]Although not perhaps later, apparently the word *nozerim* (Nazarenes) was included.

[4]This reading reflects that of a siddur manuscript found in the Cairo Geniza toward the end of the 19th century, but going back to a much earlier time.

Miriam, the mother of Yeshu, is seduced by one Joseph Pandira (alternatively, by a Roman soldier named Panthera). The illegitimate Yeshu, who fails to show respect to the Sages, steals the ineffable name of God from the Temple, by which he is able to work a variety of miracles, even the raising of the dead and proclaiming himself as the Son of God and Messiah of Israel. In reality, he was a sorcerer and deceiver. He was stoned and his body hung on a cabbage stalk, because no other tree would consent to bear his body. After his burial, a gardener took the body from the tomb and threw it into a ditch, leaving an empty tomb for the disciples to find.

For centuries on into the late Medieval Period and later, this was the only source of information about Jesus readily available to ordinary Jews. Looking at the big picture, it remains true, however, that the Jews were more content to ignore Christianity than the Christians were to ignore Judaism.

With the coming of the Enlightenment and the Emancipation of the Jews beginning in the late 18th century, the climate began to change, and now for the first time came the possibility of a more positive Jewish approach to Jesus. This new, open attitude (exhibited almost exclusively among Reform Jews and not among Orthodox Jews) gave rise in the 20th century to what would become known as the "Jewish Reclamation of Jesus."[5] These scholars emphasized the Jewishness of Jesus, attempting to show that Jesus could be fitted quite comfortably into the Jewish milieu of his day as a healer and prophet and even perhaps a (false) messianic claimant.

As for the material in the Gospels that did not fit their preconception of the Jewish Jesus, following in the steps of radical critical Protestant scholars, they suggested that the faith of the post-resurrection Church had been freely read into the Gospel narratives, creating at points a Jesus who did not correspond to historical truth. What is especially remarkable about the Jewish reclamation of Jesus, however, is that, with it, the pendulum swings away from discontinuity to emphasis on continuity, even if it necessitated the denial of the authenticity of much of the content of the Gospels.

Exactly because Jesus was so Jewish, it is not such a great surprise that Jews would be able to think of him as "belonging within the fold." With this "homecoming of Jesus," it was thought no longer possible for Jesus to be understood as the founder of Christianity. Rather, it was Paul who became regarded as mainly responsible for Christianity as we know it. Here again, however, Jewish scholars could appeal to

[5]See D.A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of the Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

Protestant critical scholarship, which had already driven a wedge between Jesus and Paul, making the latter the true founder of Christianity.

In light of this emerging perspective, what is perhaps most surprising is the rise of a parallel movement that can be called the "Jewish Reclamation of Paul."[6] Here again and startlingly, the pendulum has shifted from discontinuity to continuity. Given the hitherto common and seemingly self-evident understanding of Paul as having, in some sense, broken with Judaism (a view prevalent from Luther onwards until recent times), the emphasis was always on the discontinuity between Paul's Christianity and Judaism.[7]

The newer emphasis on continuity has gained considerable momentum in recent decades through revisionist readings of Paul among Christian scholars[8] and, to some extent, through the influence of the so-called "New Perspectives on Paul."[9] Starting with the conclusion (not really new, but earlier neglected) that Judaism is a religion of grace, not of works-righteousness (that is, a legalism wherein one earns acceptance with God through obedience to the Law), the argument is that Paul had no difficulty with the Law except for its establishment of identity markers that excluded the Gentiles from its scope. As Tom

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[6]An example may be seen in Pamela Eisenbaum's *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009). In many ways parallel is Amy-Jill Levine's book on Jesus, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006). From my perspective, both books are themselves models of misunderstanding.

[7]See D.A. Hagner, "Paul's Quarrel with Judaism," in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith*, C.A. Evans and D.A., Hagner, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993 128-150. See also idem, "Paul as a Jewish Believer in Jesus—According to His Letters, in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, O. Skarsaune and R. Hvalvik, eds. (Peabody: Henrickson, 2007), 96-120. See also idem, "Paul in Modern Jewish Thought," in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F.F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday*, D.A. Hagner and M.J. Harris, eds. (Exeter/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1980) 143-165.

[8]E.g., K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); and W.S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity*. LNTS 322 (London: T&T Clark, 2006). For the perspective of a Jewish scholar, see especially the writings of M.D. Nanos: e.g., *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); "Paul and Judaism: Why Not Paul's Judaism?" in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle,* M.D. Given, ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 117-160.

[9]The definitive essays are now collected together in J.D.G. Dunn's *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005; rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008).

Wright succinctly puts it, the issue for Paul is not grace but race.[10] This new view of Paul is, of course, largely possible only through the reinterpretation of much in Paul's letters, especially in Galatians and Romans.[11]

These developments stressing the full continuity of early Christianity and Judaism are consonant with the emerging view that Christianity from the beginning was and remained a sect within Judaism and that there never was a "parting of the ways" between synagogue and church.[12] This extreme view is not shared by many, but an increasing number of scholars would place the parting no earlier than the 4th century.

It is clear that nowadays the pendulum is swinging completely to the side of full continuity between Judaism and Christianity on the part of both Jewish and Christian scholars. This development accords not only with the relativistic spirit of our age, but especially with the concerns of post-Holocaust Jewish Christian dialog.[13] The recent remarkable stress on continuity between Judaism and Christianity raises the questions of whether and to what degree Christianity is to be regarded as new at all and to what extent (if at all) this newness creates discontinuity.

The Truth of Continuity and Discontinuity

I want to insist from the beginning that there is, without doubt, extensive and substantial continuity between Christianity and Judaism. There is hardly much need to document this or to review the vast discussion that supports this conclusion. Jesus and Paul are, of course, intensely Jewish, as indeed is the entire NT and so too the earliest

[10]*The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 168.

[11]For critique of this perspective, see S. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2004); and S. Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 12.

[12]See A.H. Becker and A.Y. Reed (eds.), *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003; repr. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007). For a defense of gradual parting of the ways, underway almost from the beginning, see D.A. Hagner, "Another Look at Parting of the Ways " in *Earliest Christian History: History, Literature and Theology: Essays from the Tyndale Fellowship in Honor of Martin Hengel*, WUNT 2.320. M.F. Bird and J. Maston, eds. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 381-427.

[13]The impact of Jewish Christian dialog on the conclusions of NT scholarship is worth pondering. It has become more difficult than ever for scholars to say anything negative about Judaism for fear of being labeled anti-Semitic.

church and its theology. A church that is truly biblical cannot affirm Marcionism. What happens in Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom of God is part of the one great meta-narrative of the history of salvation. Christianity is the goal and culmination of the story of Israel. Herein lies the *continuity*. For this reason, the biblical word "fulfillment" is the perfect word to describe the situation. It captures *the unity of the realization together with its promise*. It reaches both ways—to the past and to the future.

Christianity is not *other* than Judaism; it is the *fulfillment* of Judaism. Even the word "anti-Judaism" is not really the most appropriate word to describe the NT's attitude to Judaism (although it does express the disagreement that is there). The early church was at first entirely Jewish; and although it could not long remain a sect within Judaism, Christianity is to be understood as a *fulfilled Judaism* and could be described as a Judaism coming to its goal in the full inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God.

While all this is true, at the same time the extent of newness in the Gospels—and indeed the whole of the NT—is such that an unavoidable *discontinuity* with Judaism is caused. It is the eschatological/ apocalyptic character of what the Gospels announce in the coming of Jesus[14] that marks the pivotal turning point in salvation history. Roy Harrisville's conclusion remains valid:

> That which is concealed and only intimated here [in Mt 13:52] is that the new which Jesus embodies is not merely the chronologically new, but above all, the *eschatologically* new. The element of continuity between new and old is indeed present, but it is a continuity which must not be allowed to deprive the new of its uniqueness (its contrast with the old), its finality, and its dynamic, i.e., its eschatological character.[15]

[14]"Paradoxically, therefore, the greatest discontinuity is in the coming of Jesus. From one perspective he fulfilled the promises and hopes of the Old Testament, and yet from another he surpassed all expectations so that his coming inaugurated a new and final stage in the history of salvation." D.L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: The Theological Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments,* 3rd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 223-24.

[15]*The Concept of Newness in the New Testament*, 28, my italics. The concept of newness "with its attendant aspects of continuity, contrast, finality and the dynamic is central to the New Testament literature as a whole." Ibid., 108.

The extent of this newness makes it impossible to describe Christianity as merely a sect or a reform movement within Judaism.[16]

A Parenthesis on Vocabulary

ESCHATOLOGY. Noun: The study of last things. Adjective: [Gk.] *eschatos*, "last." Derived adjective/adverb: "eschatology," having to do with the end of the age. Derived noun: "eschaton," the last age. Note in NT studies: the oxymoron "realized eschatology," the experience of the future in the present and thus the tautology, "future eschatology."

APOCALYPSE. Noun: [Gk.] *apokalypsis*, "revelation," "unveiling," commonly a revelation of God, especially at the end of the age.

APOCALYPTIC. As an Adjective and a Noun: a dramatic, radical in-breaking of God into the historical process to transform it radically, particularly at the end of the age.

PROPHECY. Noun: [Gk.] *prophēteia*, forth-telling (the will or word of God), foretelling.

In contrast to apocalyptic, prophecy denotes what can take place in "ordinary" history—e.g., the restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Apocalyptic, on the other hand, requires the total transformation of the fallen world into the perfection of a new Garden of Eden existence.

Are there then two different expectations in the OT that we need to distinguish and keep separate—a prophetic one for national Israel and an apocalyptic one for an age of transcendent fulfillment amounting to a return to the perfection of Eden. Or can the latter somehow be understood to include the former? Or are those interpreters (e.g., Dispensationalists) correct who insist on a yet future *literal* fulfillment of the national promises to Israel in a putative millennium? Or can it be that the promises to Israel are of a more symbolic or spiritual nature, so that the reference to Israel's national hope amounts to a kind of "code language" that points proleptically to a full, universal realization of the eschatological promise of apocalyptic? It is furthermore important in this connection to remember that the transcendent expectations of apocalyptic naturally apply also (above all?) to Israel.

The situation we face is not dissimilar to the problem of the presence of both realized and future eschatology throughout much of the NT. The NT is, of course, very strong on the fulfillment that Christ has already brought in his first coming and his work on the cross. This

[16]Cf. M.D. Hooker, *Continuity and Discontinuity: Early Christianity in Its Jewish Setting* (London: Epworth, 1986), 23.

is vital to the entire perspective of the NT. But for all of the positive things that can and should be said about the Church, it is not yet in a time of *fully* realized eschatology. To be sure, some eschatologically tinged phenomena are experienced in the Church, primarily though the mediation of the Holy Spirit. And these experiences are in continuity with the coming transformed age in its fullest manifestation.[17]

The question that begs an answer is this—Is the story of the Bible basically or fundamentally about Israel or about the Church? Obviously, of course, there is a sense in which the story is about *both* Israel *and* the Church. But whereas one can understand Israel as preparatory to the Church, the opposite makes little sense. The Church, including within it Jews and Gentiles, is a manifestation of the greater goal of the whole narrative. According to Ephesians 1:22-23 (NRSV), the Church "is [Christ's] body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (cf. Col 1:18). Paul was called to preach Christ to the Gentiles,

> to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the Church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:8-11).

In light of a statement such as this (and others that could be mentioned), the conclusion of classic Dispensationalism that the Church is to be understood as a "parenthesis" in God's purpose and plan seems altogether inappropriate. If there is a parenthesis in the outworking of God's plan, it would have to be the Mosaic Law, which comes to an end with the coming of Christ (see e.g., Gal 3:23-25; Rom 7:4-6). Dispensationalism's a priori bifurcation of Israel and the Church is an example of finding extreme discontinuity in Scripture, not to mention in the purpose of God.

It is basically this problematic of continuity and discontinuity that will occupy us in these lectures. We will explore what is actually presented as "new" in the NT and what things, therefore, are left behind. I have traced the theme of newness through the whole of the

[17]Since the apocalyptic reality is not yet here, many of the biblical promises are often presently understood "spiritually"—i.e., maladies, such as blindness, lameness, darkness, and death, are taken as descriptive of our pre-conversion state. Turning to Christ we are delivered from our spiritual captivity, are brought from darkness into light, from blindness to sight, from death to life. These are examples of realized eschatology available to the Christian. But they hardly exhaust the realities to be experienced in the fully realized apocalyptic end time.

NT, although in my lectures, I will have time to look only at some of the most important material in the Gospels, Paul, Hebrews, the Catholic Epistles, and the Apocalypse.