

STUDIES IN EXEGESIS

CHRISTIAN CRITIQUES OF JEWISH LAW AND
RABBINIC RESPONSES 70-300 C.E.

BY

HERBERT W. BASSER



BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON · KÖLN
2000

TO THE READER

I once read a story in Hebrew by a master story teller. In mystical fashion, the narrator tells of a Jewish youth trying to unify the world by standing naked in the river up to his neck surrounded by water: his feet on the earthy bottom, the wind caressing his face and the heat of the sun warming his head. And so he harmoniously joined the primordial elements of water and earth and air and fire. One day, he met an aged Pole in the woods who told him that while all things were possible one had to live optimistically. The youth then entered the river again in his daily rituals but was nearly drowned by the onset of torrential rains. Nature and optimism were not gods which could be trusted. His life had been a fools' paradise.

Eventually he saw a kind of new creation rising from these torrents. It was then Nisan, the first month of spring. The forest was not the same as it had been before the devastating flood. It was now dark and dank and ominous. Suddenly an escaped, Polish murderer—short and fat—confronted the young man on his return to the forest and eventually offered him a drink of whisky which the youth accepted. The young man, about to take some sips, dutifully recited the traditional Hebrew blessing of *shehakol*—"that EVERYTHING happens by the word of God." The murderer asked for an explanation of these words and received it. He thought—maybe it is true that everything happens through God's will. The Pole tried to commit the word to memory and repeated "*tshakal*" in his Polish accent. Before leaving he wanted the young man to swear that he would not tell anyone who he was.

A while later the young man watched the murderer being brought to the gallows in the city to be hanged. The young man refers to him as the *talui* (the Hebrew word used by Jews to refer to Jesus, "the hanged one.") The condemned man (the only character in the story given a name) refused the last rights of the priest and instead cried out "*tshakal*". Some of the crowd tried to make sense of what he had said in some fashion or other. Only the young man realised the anti-hero of the story had died confessing his ultimate insight. He had meant *shehakol*: God's justice is always active in the world and He alone is the true king. "Blessed are You, O King of the Universe—for EVERYTHING (*shehakol*) happens by His word.

In the final scenes one will recognize various literary allusions, or anti-allusions, to certain events told in the Gospels about the last days of Jesus. In Nobel-prize laureate S. Y. Agnon's penetrating picture of the general confusion over the Pole's final utterance of "*tshaka!*" there is a curious rendition of Jesus' ambiguous cry from the cross. In the Gospel of Matthew (27:46), Jesus cried out and uttered some words from the Jewish Bible as he dies. The Gospel writer says that Jesus expressed doubts and quoted the Book of Psalms, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." But others claimed the words he uttered were really his own call to Elijah for the final redemption; Jesus had expressed no doubts about God's providence. The author shows us, not without a touch of irony, a reversed picture of the Gospel's Jesus figure: a Polish criminal. He died, unlike Matthew's Jesus, professing perfect faith in God's providence, quoting the rabbinic formula of certainty in God's justice, although some interpreted his words in other fashions.

So runs S. Y. Agnon's tale "In the City and in the Forest." This tale I think but cannot be certain, reveals Agnon's reading of two approaches to life. In one, natural law rules and one must remain optimistic in the world's basic goodness. The physical, earthy world is essentially a happy place with some exceptions to be sure. Humans cause their own grief. In the second, one seeks comfort through one's absolute faith in God's control of history in a dark and dismal world. To my mind, the story contrasts these two approaches and gives the impression of seeing the victory of the latter approach as the better theology. But that is only my impression.

Agnon weaves a tale, pertinent to Jewish thought, between two poles (Poles?): the mystically open-ended expressions of natural optimism on the one side which sometimes leads to disasters but often does not on the one hand and the precise certitude of ultimate justice on the other. In Christian thought the ambiguity in the cry of the Gospels' Jesus is answered by the certainty of the Pauline Jesus, a Jesus whose death was framed by Paul's certitude of his divine destiny. For Jews, Agnon tells his tale to pose the ultimate question whether the failure to produce a better world through optimism in natural law, the idol of humanism, is best answered through accepting upon one's self the firm belief in God's ultimate kingship. Or did the hanged man hit upon some final insight that the hero only mistook for an utterance of firm belief? The Jesus story served Agnon as a literary device upon which to hang his query.

My book is not much concerned with opposing theologies. We are concerned neither with religious debates over the notion of divine sonships nor with those over the idea of divine incarnations. We skip the story only to worry over the last lines. For me these lines seem to pose a very serious problem. When Christians interpret *tshakal* one way and Jews interpret "*shehakol*" another way can we resolve the issue? Is early Christianity simply Judaism in a foreign accent? Do we have evidence from the Jewish side concerning over which biblical verses Jews and Christians bickered in their interpretations? What did Jesus and Pharisees really argue about? Just as in Agnon's tale if we can unravel the last lines from his perspective we can figure out his tale, so dealing with the above questions from the Jewish perspective may help us unravel the overall ambiguity in our story of Christianity's early debates with Judaism.

My book goes behind the words of the Gospels and behind the words of the Rabbis to decipher the sources upon which both are based and so to make sense of the strange idioms we encounter in their words. Our major source for the Church traditions concerning putative friction between Jesus and his Jewish opponents is based on three synoptic Gospels which have many close parallels with each other: Mark, Luke and Matthew. While there is a consensus that Mark and Luke were not Jews, there is no such consensus concerning Matthew. However, all are agreed that Matthew's Gospel is the harshest towards the Jews, particularly the Pharisees and it may well be that in spite of his sixty or so citations from the Jewish Scriptures he was a gentile Christian. It is also assumed by most academic scholars today, but not all, that all the Gospels were written after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70 C.E.. But that does not mean the Gospels did not use earlier sources. Whatever the real facts might be, our position here is to show that the strife between Jews and Christians developed after the death of Jesus and that the Gospels themselves seem to indicate that early Jesus traditions show us a teacher who had been well trained in pharisaic methods and could show he was obedient to them, not only in their own rules of tithing but in everything. It was only after his death that a revisionism set in that recast these traditions into bitter controversies showing a deep rift between Jesus and Pharisees, between Christian and Jews. That bitter controversy widened and increased with the passage of the centuries. One can only hope that the dawn of the new

millennium, when these words are being set down, will usher in a new understanding of the chasm separating Jew and Christian.

Herbert W. Basser
Queen's University
Kingston, Canada
January 1, 2000 C.E.