

Jewish Disciples of Yeshua -- The Sacrament of Messianic Communion
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The Basic Question

The topic of our conference touches on the deepest concern of the Helsinki Consultation. What, in God's providential design, is our distinct vocation as Jewish disciples of Jesus?

The fact that we are asking the question is itself noteworthy. From the fourth century to the modern era the question could hardly have arisen, since baptism was assumed to nullify the existential significance of Jewish identity for the one baptized. Even apart from baptism, Jewish identity had lost its positive theological significance in the divine plan as a result of the new economy inaugurated by the crucified and risen Christ. Consequently, the Jewish people (along with its obsolete religious tradition) and the Christian Church (along with its divinely-bestowed religious tradition) were understood to constitute mutually exclusive realms. This principle of mutual exclusivity, accepted also by the Jewish world (with a radically different perspective on its meaning), seemed self-evident to all. It no longer seems so, at least to us. The fact that we are asking about our distinct vocation as Jewish disciples of Jesus means that we no longer find this longstanding presupposition to be axiomatic.

The principle of mutual exclusivity, which formerly rendered our conference question unaskable, points us to an even more basic question: *If the Jewish people/tradition and the Christian Church/tradition do not constitute mutually exclusive realms, with one occupying a positive pole and the other a negative, how do we conceive of their relationship and their relative status in God's providential design?* The most common answer to this question offered by self-consciously-Jewish Christians in the modern era has been to validate Jewish identity but to *subordinate it* to Christian identity as its destined fulfillment. In this view, the Jewish people

retain a unique status among the nations of the world, and that status is perfected rather than annulled when Jews affirm their calling by receiving baptism. At the same time, the Jewish religious tradition and way of life are left behind as the Church's religious tradition and way of life are embraced. The Jewish people have enduring theological significance, but only in relation to the Christian Church and her more perfect identity and vocation.

But the *subordination* of Judaism to the Church is not the only possible answer to the question concerning the proper relationship between the two communities. Other views began to emerge in the early 20th century which proposed a *coordination* of these two traditions. One perspective of this sort (originating with Franz Rosenzweig) rendered Jewish Christian identity problematic or meaningless by confining the salvific significance of Jesus to his mediation on behalf of gentiles. However, a rival perspective coordinated the two traditions *on the basis of a high Christology with universal significance*, and proposed this coordination as the ultimate justification for Jewish Christian identity. One of the most articulate exponents of this latter position was an Orthodox priest from France who was steeped in the theological and spiritual world of Russian Christianity—Fr. Lev Gillet. I would like to explore his thinking on this topic, for I believe he lays a sound foundation upon which we all can build.

Communion in the Messiah

When I first encountered Lev Gillet's *Communion in the Messiah* almost two decades ago, I was shocked that such a book on Jewish-Christian relations could be written by an Orthodox priest in the middle of the Second World War.¹ I was not then familiar with the writings of Vladimir Soloviev (with whom Gillet identified) or Sergei Bulgakov (who was Gillet's friend), and so this author's profound appreciation of Judaism seemed to be a *creatio ex*

¹ The book was first published in England in 1942.

nihilo. Though I now have a better grasp of the historical context which made his work possible, I still marvel at its prophetic insight.

Gillet's primary concern is not with the Judaism of the bible, but with the historical reality of the Jewish spiritual tradition over the past twenty centuries. He makes the audacious claim that Jewish tradition as a whole is part of God's unfolding revelatory work in the world:

The whole message of Israel is an authentic part of God's Revelation and can be, without the abolition of a single jot, brought together with the message of Jesus. Nothing of the true Jewish tradition—from Hillel to modern Hasidism—needs to be altered in order to adjust itself to the Gospel: it needs only to be complemented. (186)

Gillet thus *coordinates* Jewish and Christian tradition, treating the former as a necessary partner for the latter. This does not make Jesus superfluous for Jews, for Gillet insists that the Gospel is “the fruit and completion and crown of Judaism.” Where he differs from most Christian missionaries to the Jews is in his assertion that the “Judaism” which Jesus “crowns” consists not merely of the “Old Testament,” but includes also the entirety of post-biblical Jewish religious tradition:

[D]o missionaries bring to Jews the Gospel *as* the crown of their faith, when they consider as non-existent or unimportant the whole of the Jewish tradition of belief and worship which accompanies and supplements the Old Testament? To bring to the Jews the crown of their faith means to show them the continuity between Christianity and the whole line of Jewish religious thought, rabbinical as well as Scriptural... There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in Jewish belief that a Jew turned Christian ought to reject. Christianity is, in relation to Judaism, a completion and a fulfillment.” (180, 196)

From these citations, we see that Gillet emphatically subordinates Judaism *to Jesus and “the Gospel”*—but he refuses to subordinate Judaism to the historical reality of the Christian Church.

But is that Church not the mystical “body of Christ”? How can Gillet ascribe such value to Jewish spiritual life, even when it has not yet been “crowned” by faith in the Gospel? To answer this question, Gillet draws upon the thinking of his Catholic contemporary, Jacques

Maritain, who proposed that the Jewish people are likewise a *corpus mysticum* (i.e., a mystical body).

The *corpus mysticum Christi* is not a metaphor; it is an organic and invisible reality. But the theology of the Body of Christ should be linked with a theology of the mystical Body of Israel. This is one of the deepest and most beautiful tasks of a “bridge theology” between Judaism and Christianity. (215)

Maritain had distinguished the historical planes on which these two mystical bodies function—with the Jewish people serving “secular history” and the Church “sacred history.” Gillet rejects this facile distinction, contending that faithful Jews “belong to sacred history and achieve a redeeming work in the *diaspora*” (157). This perspective on the Jewish people as a *corpus mysticum* enabled Gillet to perceive Jewish suffering—which had reached an unprecedented crescendo in the period in which he wrote—as a realization of Isaiah 53:

If we do ascribe a religious significance and purpose to the existence of the Jews, we must consider their sufferings as part of this purpose...we must interpret Israel’s woes in the light of the teaching about the Suffering Servant...By its many sufferings, Israel may help the consummation of the divine purpose in history... (160)

Gillet thus affirms the traditional Jewish reading of Isaiah 53 (i.e., the Servant is Israel), but only in conjunction with the traditional Christian reading (i.e., the Servant is Jesus). The life of the Jewish people in history is bound inextricably to its crucified and risen Messiah.

To describe the character of Israel’s enduring relationship to Jesus, Gillet employs the concept of *communion*. While he observes that most Jews have lost an expectation of a personal messiah, he also asserts that they have retained the hope of a coming messianic kingdom, a hope which inspires among them the practical pursuit of righteousness, justice, and peace. In this hope and pursuit, Gillet contends, faithful Jews experience communion with Messiah Jesus, albeit in a partial and mysterious manner:

[T]here is no action whatever, sincerely made for the sake of the Messianic Kingdom, which is not made for and in the Messiah. There is no Messianic communion which is not a communion in the Messiah. The Jews who work for the Kingdom may perhaps not know with Whom they have to do. When the Messianic Kingdom appears, they will learn the truth and the Messiah will manifest Himself. (107)

So, despite appearances to the contrary, pious Jews are not cut off from Jesus. Furthermore, and also despite appearances to the contrary, many Christians experience a constricted communion with Jesus because they fail to recognize him as a *Jewish* Messiah, and because they have lost a vision of the messianic kingdom that he establishes.

The Christian attitude in relation to Messianism is rather strange. Christians believe in a personal Messiah. Notwithstanding this belief, they are far less messianically-minded than the Jews. Their lack of Messianic consciousness takes two forms. They have largely lost the sense of Jesus' Messiahship. And they have, largely also, lost the Messianic vision. (104)

This defect in Christian communion with the Messiah—combined with Israel's real yet hidden communion with the same Messiah—results in a *coordination* of the roles of the Jewish people and the Church of the nations as two bodies jointly *subordinate* to Jesus. Moreover, their partial yet genuine communion with Jesus the Messiah also brings the two bodies into a partial yet genuine communion with one another.

What about the pious Jew who (without any guilt) has not accepted Jesus? What about the pious Christian entirely unconscious of his Jewish inheritance? Is there no communion between them?

They communicate, to a certain extent, in the Messiah... This communion is partial and implicit. God will make it some day total and explicit." (196)

This vision of Jewish and Christian coordination, founded in and directed towards "communion in the Messiah," is also reflected in Gillet's conception of mission. While retaining the notion of a Christian mission to the Jews, he places it in a context of mutuality that transforms its meaning.

[W]e think (and in this we differ from most Christian missionaries) that the word "mission," used in connection with Israel, has a twofold meaning: there is, and there

ought to be, a mission of the Christian Church to Israel; but there is also a Mission of Israel to the Christian Church, and this (as we think) divinely appointed mission must not be overlooked. (172)

Israel is nowadays used and will, to a greater extent still, be used in the service of the Revelation. The people of the Law and the Prophets is perpetually sent (*missus, missio*) by God to the Christian Church in order to witness to certain truths and powers. (191)

This mutual mission has as its goal *full and explicit communion* with the Messiah, and with one another.

A Jew who accepts (not only intellectually) Jesus as Messiah enters into communion with the Messiah *as Jesus*, and with the community of the followers of Jesus. Reciprocally, a Christian who becomes aware of the Jewish contents of his own faith and inwardly responds to this new awareness enters into communion with Jesus *as Jewish Messiah* and invisibly with the Messianic community of Israel, insofar as the Messiah displays an immanent activity inside it. Thus the Mission—the two-fold Mission—ends in communion. (196)

The Jewish and Christian communities are sent by God to one another, that together they might fulfill a common mission in the world as servants of the Messiah.

When the Christian mission succeeds in enabling individual Jews (if not entire communities) to “accept Jesus as Messiah,” what then? Consistent with his coordinated vision of Jewish and Christian “communion in the Messiah,” Gillet rejects the view that Jews should be absorbed and assimilated within the existing churches, surrendering their distinctive identity and vocation.

Generally speaking, we are very far from considering the adhesion of a Jew to one of the Gentile Christian Churches as an ideal solution. It may sometimes be the only possible one, but we do not think it either normal or desirable. The appearance and diffusion of a Jewish Christianity, inside the Church universal, is, as we believe, the only true solution. (191)

For many Jewish disciples of Jesus today, “adhesion...to one of the Gentile Christian Churches” still seems to be the only practical option. While acknowledging this fact, may we not also agree with Gillet that such an arrangement is neither “normal or desirable”?

What does Gillet have in mind when he speaks of “Jewish Christianity”? In his estimation, Jewish Christianity could legitimately develop along two distinct ecclesiological lines. The first he calls “unsynagogued Jewish Christianity” (206). He defines this as “a Jewish Christianity which has broken its ties with the Synagogue.” (The term “Synagogue” here refers not to a particular local Jewish congregation, but instead to the wider Jewish community as a whole, especially as embodied in its life of common worship.) Such a form of Jewish Christianity would exist either as an autonomous branch of one of the historical Christian Churches, or as an independent Christian Church. The second possible ecclesiological expression of Jewish Christianity he terms “synagogued Jewish Christianity” (206-8). In this model Jews who believe in Jesus would seek to remain as much as possible within the Jewish community and to express their religious life in traditional Jewish forms. In his openness to various models, and in his vision of “Jewish Christianity” as “inseparably linked with the development, among Christians, of a new ecumenical consciousness” (209), Gillet anticipates the convictions of the Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Christ.

Thus, Lev Gillet *coordinates* the Jewish and Christian religious traditions in *subordination* to a high Christology (or, more precisely, high “Messianology”). He then employs this coordination/subordination as the fundamental justification for the restoration of what he calls “Jewish Christianity.” In so doing, he lays a sound foundation for our attempts to answer the question that is before us as this conference: What is the role of Jewish disciples of Jesus in the providential purposes of God?

A Sacramental Calling

As Jews who have experienced a life-transforming encounter with God through the person of Jesus, we properly subordinate all things of this world to our Messiah—including our

Jewish identity. It is common for us, then, to equate Jesus with his Church (not only in its dimension as a universal mystical reality but also as a concrete historical phenomenon), and to draw the conclusion that our identity as part of the Jewish people should likewise be subordinated to our identity as part of the Church. In recognizing the indissoluble connection between Jesus and his Church we do justice to the Church's reality as the mystical body of Christ, but in subordinating our identification with the Jewish people to our membership in the Church (considered empirically) we fail to do justice to Israel's reality as a *corpus mysticum* in communion with the Messiah.

Our ecclesial location as Jewish disciples of Jesus varies greatly. Many of us live as members of what Gillet calls "one of the Gentile Christian Churches." Some in that circumstance also participate regularly in ecclesial groupings which Gillet would consider "Jewish Christian" in character. Others among us live as members of Messianic Jewish congregations which would be categorized by Gillet as expressions of "unsynagogued Jewish Christianity." Some in that circumstance also are involved regularly in the wider Jewish community of our region, and thus exemplify in modest form what Gillet calls "synagogued Jewish Christianity." We all have some contact and relationship with the "Gentile Christian Churches," and most of us also have some contact and relationship with the mainstream Jewish world (if only through our extended families).

On a practical level, rarely will any of us perfectly coordinate our commitments and participation in these two bodies. One will almost always be subordinated to the other. Which body is so subordinated will vary among us. This accords with our particular life circumstances and vocations. Nevertheless, as Jewish disciples of Jesus we may all learn from Gillet that such necessary practical expressions of subordination should not be universalized and interpreted by

us in ways that set one community and tradition over the other. All must be subordinated to the Messiah, but the two forms in which the community of the Messiah is expressed are mutually ordered in a complementary rather than a hierarchical manner. When Jewish Christians associate only with other Jewish and gentile Christians, they may lose sight of this fact. When Messianic Jews associate only with other Messianic and mainstream Jews, they may likewise lose sight of this fact. When Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews gather together, as we do today, the reality of the coordinated twofold *corpus mysticum* is far more difficult to ignore.

So, what is our calling as Jewish disciples of Jesus? Drawing from the work of Gillet, I would propose that our significance lies not in who we are in ourselves, but instead in our role as witnesses to the coordinated calling of the Jewish people and the Christian Church in communion with the Messiah and with one another. In ways that vary according to our particular circumstances, we express the two-fold mission in which Israel challenges the Church, and the Church challenges Israel. We are called to be instruments and efficacious signs of the messianic communion which God desires for the twofold people of God, and for all creation—sacraments of that communion which is now only partial and implicit. May this communion in the Messiah be perfected soon, speedily and in our day.