

Helsinki Conference, June 22-25, 201

Theme: “Authority, Freedom, and Tradition in the life of Jewish Disciples of Yeshua.”

**“My Ambivalence towards Jewish Tradition”  
Dr Jacques B. Doukhan, D. Heb. Let., Th. D**

**Introduction**

My experience with Jewish tradition is an ambivalent one. On one hand, as a Jew who grew up in a traditional religious family I lived, received and enjoyed the lessons of Jewish tradition. As a former Yeshiva *haver* and former student of André Neher I learned to appreciate the depth and riches of the rabbinic texts. As a researcher of Jewish interpretation of the TaNaK I came to realize the value of this contribution not only for its method but also for the information it had retained through its memory. On the other hand my embrace of Jewish tradition has been challenged by my discovery of Yeshua and my confrontation with the Gospels and my rediscovery of the Hebrew Scriptures (in spite of the paradoxical Jewish ambivalence towards the Bible due essentially to the usurping place taken by the Talmud and the Jewish suspicion of biblical studies associated with Christianity). Thus, my recognition of Yeshua as my Messiah obliged me to reconsider the “authority” of Jewish “tradition,” even though I was still walking in its shadow, and then freed me from it, while it reconnected me to the authority of the Bible. Two occasions, in particular, marked this journey. The first occasion took place directly in connection to my “conversion” when I was opposed by the rabbis of my community, my Jewish friends, and my Jewish family with the argument that Jewish tradition, which was identified as *Torah be’al pe* was the ultimate authority not only in matter of interpretation of the Scriptures, but also and more importantly in regards to the identification of the Messiah. The fact that Jewish tradition

was not supporting my “Christian” reading of the biblical messianic texts and their application to the historical person of Yeshua and the fact that Jewish tradition did not historically recognize Jesus as the Messiah were used as fundamental arguments to question my interpretation and my choice. The second occasion happened at the burial of my father, when I was engaged in a discussion with the rabbi on the issue of the state of the dead. The point of contention was here also the conflict I saw between Jewish tradition which taught the dualistic idea of the immortality of the soul and the biblical Scriptures which taught about resurrection and held the holistic view of the human person. In this discussion, like in the previous one, the argument was still the same. It was about the authority of Jewish tradition. These two examples illustrate my embarrassment with Jewish tradition. In this paper I do not intend to argue for or against the rightness of my position, whether it is consistent with the Scriptures versus the position supported by Jewish tradition. Nor will I discuss the issue of the authority of Jewish tradition (*Torah be'al pe*) versus the authority of the inspired Scriptures (*Torah biktab*), along the lines of the Karaite controversy or the protestant *sola scriptura*. My approach will be positive and descriptive and will take the form of a mere personal testimony, almost like a biography; this is my understanding of the topic we have been assigned to: “in the life of Jewish disciples of Yeshua.” I will simply trace some of the most salient elements of my ambivalent experience with Jewish tradition; with the lessons I learned from this consultation I will mark the limits of this embrace as these lessons are confronted to my Christian orientation. I have identified three main domains where Jewish tradition has affected my life; these are my religious practices, my reading of Scriptures, and my thinking.

### **My Religious Practices**

*Eating Kosher* is an important imperative for me not only because it is a part of my habits since childhood, it is a profound expression of my Jewish identity, but also because this practice is clearly founded on Scriptures (Lev 11:1-47; Deut 14:3-21) and pertains to the biblical faith in creation (see structural and linguistic echoes between this text and the creation story). In addition, the prohibition of the consumption of blood is interpreted in the Scriptures as an affirmation of the sacredness of life (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:10-14). Furthermore, this dietary restriction had been retained by the early Christians along with the prohibition of blood consumption and this in connection to their Christian theology (Acts 15:29). My kosher eating is thus essentially founded on Scriptures and not on Jewish tradition. Although the biblical stipulation concerning the method of slaughtering of the animal “as I have commanded thee” (Deut 12:21) is traditionally interpreted as an allusion to the need for the oral Torah, it remains a very thin argument on behalf of the legitimacy of the oral Torah. My preference for the ritually slaughtered meat pertains, then, more to a subjective choice and a cultural habit than to the obedience of the divine law (whether written or oral). Although I may consider it for cultural reasons and personal habits I do not take it as divine authority as I would do it for a clear scriptural stipulation.

*Jewish festivals* are a part of my calendar. I mark the feasts, do the *seder* and fast at Kippur. I fully enjoy these traditions according to the liturgical and cultural habits of my Sephardic heritage. I believe, however, that unlike the dietary laws which are rooted in Creation, Jewish festivals are meant to be fulfilled in Christ and are therefore no longer binding to the Christian; I live these festivals, however, as a pedagogical occasion for deepening and enriching my Christian faith or the Christian faith of my guests. This is why I am not a slave to this observance and do not consider it a sin if I eat bread at Pesach or break the fast at Kippur. To add to the

complexity of the matter I must say that I like to celebrate Hanukah and Purim although they have no Christian significance, because they remind me of my childhood and also because they make me identify with the history of my people (a reason that holds also for the more recent *yom hashoah* which I mark whenever possible).

*Shabbat* keeping and celebrating is an important ingredient of my Jewish Christian life. I hold to the Shabbat not only because it is founded on Scriptures and rooted in Creation but also because the early Christians and Jesus Himself did not feel that keeping Shabbat was in contradiction to their Christian faith but was on the contrary in perfect harmony with the Christian truths of grace and hope. In my community of Shabbat keeping Christians who are anxious to keep the right day of the Lord versus the other day, my Jewish heritage has brought the dimension of celebration and the affirmation of the value of creation and of life enjoyment. The lightening of the candles to mark the beginning of Shabbat, the eating of the challah, the mixing of joy with the trembling of reverence in my worship services and the personal appreciation of this quality of time are the ingredients which I received and preserved from Jewish tradition.

I must say, however, that although I value these traditions, my Kosher restrictions, my festivals and my Shabbat are essentially controlled by my faith in the authority of Scriptures while they are free from all the multiple elaborations which have been accumulated through the centuries by Jewish tradition (I refer for instance to the meat and milk prescriptions and the detailed measures related to the two sets of utensils and dishes, the non-use of electricity on Shabbat or the strict reciting of all the prayers for the Jewish festivals). I may embrace some of them with spiritual interest and gusto, but I do not feel bound by them.

### **My Reading of Scriptures**

The first effect of Jewish tradition on my reading of Scriptures is precisely my profound and intense interest in the Hebrew Scriptures. For me the so-called OT is as valuable and as inspired as the NT. In my view the NT is not superior nor has it replaced the OT. This value is rooted in my Jewish education and was reinforced in my academic studies. Also, the way I learned to approach these Scriptures, with respect and the close reading methodology I developed, are undoubtedly indebted to Jewish tradition. I refer especially to my attention to all those rules, which were, for most of them enunciated in rabbinic sources (see for instance *Sanh* 7:11): the echoes in Scriptures (e. g. *lekh lekha*), the significance of the repetition of key words (cf. the *leitwort* of Martin Buber), the inter-textual connections. I also refer to the Masoretic testimony of the text which, I believe, remembers among many other things not only the vocalization of the word (morphology) but also the syntax of the phrase (system of disjunctive and conjunctive accents). I also take very seriously the interpretation of Jewish tradition as preserved in the *Miqraot Gdolot*, and especially care for the Rashi suggestions (see for instance the construct analysis of the word *bere'shit* and consequently the single breath reading of the first three verses of Genesis 1). Along these lines, I am interested in the memory of tradition of interpretations (see for instance the memory of Jewish interpretation of messianic texts). I must say, however, that my adoption of these traditions is not systematic, as it is submitted to the control of my scientific exegesis and to the perception of influence from the Jewish-Christian polemic. In other words I take Jewish tradition seriously in my interpretation of the biblical text insofar as it appears to be consistent with the data of the text, and free from any external influence, whether due to the cultural environment surrounding that Jewish source or to the Jewish bias towards a possible Christian reading of the text. But even if I include this tradition in my interpretation of the text it still remains a mere option or an illustrative support to my exegesis.

## **My Thinking**

This domain is perhaps the one where Jewish tradition had the greatest influence on me, as it hit at the deepest and most individual layer of my person. In a general manner, the testimony of my students and of my colleagues and scholarly peers who belong to another cultural tradition, attests to that particular contribution. As far as I am aware of I can identify at least two fundamental areas where Jewish tradition has affected my thinking (see esp. my *Hebrew For Theologians*, New York: University Press of America, 1993, 191-218).

1. *Thinking in Tension*. I am referring here to the traditional Jewish method of embracing opposites, the classical Jewish ability to hold both sides of the tension (see the rabbi's response in *The Fiddler on the Roof*: "you are also right"). This thinking was already present in my doctoral dissertation on Genesis 1 and 2 which consisted in interpreting theologically (transcendence and immanence) and exegetically/literarily (linguistic and structural echoes and parallels) the tension between the two creation stories, traditionally understood in biblical scholarship as deriving from two different sources (Documentary Hypothesis). My theological thinking which associates the particular perspective that is emphasized in Jewish thinking and the universal perspective that is emphasized in Christian-Greek thinking, is another expression of this tension-thinking. Of course, being both Jewish and Christian in a world that dissociates the two worlds is the challenge of my life and certainly the most visible place of my thinking and living in tension. This tension has taught me a number of theological lessons, such as the truth of the God who is far, the powerful God of creation and of the universe, who is also the God who is near and personal, as Yeshua put it in His model prayer "my Father in heaven," a God we worship with joy and reverence, a God we trust and we fear. Another application of this tension is my coupling of the notions of justice and love, which have traditionally been separated in

Christian thinking, thus dissociating and opposing the God of the OT and the God of the NT, and the categories of law and grace. Of course, my Seventh-day Adventist adoption played some role in that consciousness. Paradoxically, my “conversion” to Christianity has intensified my Jewish thinking in tension.

2. *Valuing Creation and History.* I owe to my Jewish training the importance I give to the concrete manifestation of religion in existence through my obedience to the divine intimations and my ideal of righteousness; see the Jewish principle of *na'aseh we nishma* ‘“we shall do, and then we shall understand”(Exod 24:7; cf. *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 24:7), which prioritizes the doing over the spiritual and theological understanding. In the same vein is my holding to the Jewish value of creation versus the Marcionite and Lutheran spiritualization of salvation (see my discussion in *Israel and the Church, Two Voices For the Same God*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004, 60-70). My “yes” to creation is a “yes” to the value of life and an affirmation of the value of this body, without which I will not have here and now a spiritual life, and without which I will not rise to the future new life of resurrection. Another important impact of Jewish tradition in my theological thinking is the importance of the historical ingredient in the event of salvation. Although I do not deny the significance of the memory of the past event of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the cross for my salvation and although I do not deny the existential and spiritual significance of the present Immanuel in my life, I believe that salvation remains essentially the cosmic event of the future which is the only one that makes salvation real and historical. With this emphasis on history I feel closer to Jews who associate the coming of the Messiah with the cosmic salvation of the world than to many Christians who associate the coming of the Messiah with a spiritual salvation of the individual; what made Leo Baek say: “Christianity is a romantic religion” (see his essay, "Romantic Religion," in *Judaism and*

*Christianity*, translated with an introductory essay, by Walter Kaufmann, Jewish Publication Society, 1958). The paradox is that what draws me near to the Jews, my historical expectation of future salvation, is what draws me far from them; for I am expecting, from their perspective, a Christian Messiah who has already come. And what draws me near to the Christians, my recognition of Jesus as my Messiah, is what draws me far from them; for I believe that my salvation is still to come (see Martin Buber's story).

### **Conclusion**

At the end of this back and forth meditation on the impact of Jewish tradition on my life as Jewish disciple of Yeshua, I come to realize that I may give the impression that I only treated one third of the topic we were assigned to, namely the "tradition" part. It seems that I missed two thirds of the topic, namely the "authority and freedom" parts. In fact, these two notions are implicit in the preceding discussion. Indeed, my struggle with Jewish tradition implies these two parts. For me, Jewish tradition (oral Torah) has no prophetic authority of its own. The Jewish sage or the rabbi is not a prophet. For me, Jewish tradition remains a human commentary, a human elaboration, on the inspired Torah, but it is not the Torah; it is, for the most, as the Mishnah, humbly, defines itself, only "a fence around the Torah" (*Aboth* 1, 1). As such it deserves my respect, my consultation and even my enjoyment; but it does not demand my devotion and my submission; it does not present itself as a binding "authority," and thus allows for my "freedom" towards it. This is why I am ambivalent towards Jewish tradition.