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SUBJECT: A review of Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein's book, What Christians Should Know About Jews and Judaism

My assignment for this session is to review (i.e. react) to Rabbi Eckstein's book, What Christians Should Know About Jews and Judaism. This text was notably published by Word, a sometimes Christian publisher, in 1984. The author is an Orthodox rabbi deeply entrenched in Jewish-Christian relations in the United States. He has accordingly founded an organization named, "The Holyland Fellowship of Christians and Jews," whose said purpose is "to institutionalize (Jewish-Christian) dialogue and to bring about better understanding between the (Jewish and Christian) communities."

This book consists of two major parts: (1) Jews and Judaism and (2) the Jewish-Christian Encounter. The first provides an excellent introduction to the fundamentals of Judaism and exposes the Christian reader to many of the crucial issues Jewish people face, i.e., the Holocaust, Israel, the survival of the Jewish people, etc. The second portion of the book accents the history, dialogue and tensions surrounding contemporary Jewish-Christian relations.

Rabbi Eckstein is anxious to simply explain the basics of Judaism to his modern Christian reader. Eckstein's work is comprehensive, highly readable, designed for popular consumption and marvelously persuasive.

Eckstein's first chapter addresses "The Foundations of Jewish Belief," i.e., Torah, the Oral tradition, religious authority, law, prophecy, covenant and mitzvot. Carefully the author rehearses the history and development of the multi-faceted foundation of Jewish belief and provides a well-conceived brief on each one. Recognizing Eckstein's readership is Christian, we note his discreetly expressed differences between traditional Christianity and traditional Judaism. For example, Judaism encourages Israel to study Torah. By one's own initiation of movement toward God, God responds with love and grace. Then Eckstein reports, "In contrast, the predominant Christian view is that man is shackled by his sinfulness and incapable of self-regeneration." (p. 33)

While explaining the necessity of an oral tradition for a self-perpetuating Jewish peoplehood, Eckstein castigates Christian replacement theology and effectively uses Paul and Romans to do it.

Eckstein surprisingly reveals with all candidness that religious authority has been given to the rabbis by God and that

God forfeited his right to additionally correct his people. "Biblical authority rests not with God, but with the rabbis who were given that authority by him." (p. 41) Eckstein also declares that guidance by the Holy Spirit is necessarily always suspect but the rabbinic analysis of the literature (both biblical and oral) is responsible as well as reliable.

Again in contrast to traditional Christian persuasion, Eckstein declares the Law is not to be regarded as burdensome but as the happy agency of bringing the religious Jew "closer to the spiritual realm." (p. 48) He points up Yeshua's healthy respect for Torah (Matthew 5.17-21) and suggests Judaism agrees with Paul's ambition of going beyond the letter to the spirit of the law. The author suggests that through mitzvot the Jewish people become cleansed and purified.

When Eckstein addresses "covenant," it seems he is at least familiar with dispensational theology. But sharing one Jewish perspective, he claims the covenant was as much Israel's doing as God's. Then, perhaps to shock his Christian reader, he states the covenant is eternal although periodically God Himself has proven to be unfaithful to His Word and to His covenant people. Therefore Israel has the right and is somehow expected to call God into account for His actions.

In his discussion of "The Jewish Paths to Sanctification," Eckstein emphasizes the value and dignity of the human being in Jewish thought, and man's innate purity. Man's inclination to evil does not destroy or alter his essentially good nature. The Yetzer ha-ra can, in fact, be overcome by the study and practice of Torah.

The author points up that the dichotomizing of life, i.e., physical vs. spiritual, holy vs. profane, is not a concept of Jewish origin. Jewish faith encompasses the whole of life and all is to be sanctified. God needs man's cooperation to sanctify the world.

In his well-rounded introduction to the history and practices of the Sabbath and Festivals, Eckstein interestingly makes frequent reference to the Messiah and the messianic expectation accented on any particular holiday. For example, "The message of Shavuot is that we are never too estranged or distant from God that we cannot accept him. (Note the Christian terminology.) We can even help bring the Messiah, the son of David, and hasten the redemption of the world." (p. 109) This type of included emphasis strikes me as patronizing and clearly for the Christian reader's benefit.

In conjunction with many of the holidays, Eckstein is anxious to quote passages familiar to Christian Bible students to demonstrate a certain qualified compatibility with Christian faith.

In Eckstein's chapter on "The Jewish Life Cycle," he deals with the rites of passage, i.e., birth, circumcision, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, marriage, divorce, death and mourning. He rehearses the basics of what we would expect here regarding the codes governing these various practices. He is careful, however, to authoritatively misrepresent Paul suggesting that Paul, without any theological qualifiers, claimed circumcision was no longer necessary. Eckstein loves to capitalize on any excuse, i.e., while discussing circumcision, to take ignorant and/or misleading shots at Christian theology.

To counter Christian criticism of religious externalism, the author explains to his Christian readership that liturgical prayer prevents chaos and that religious dietary laws foster self-control and therefore obedience to God. By means of these explanations, Eckstein offers Christians a rationale for what may otherwise strike Christians as bizarre or even senseless behavior. He is seeking to break their stereotypic notions regarding Jewish legalism, etc.

In his chapter on "Facing the Challenges of the Holocaust," Eckstein reveals a certain Jewish anger with God; a sense that God miserably failed to keep covenant with Israel. Says he, "For many Jews, Israel is God's final chance to redeem himself from his breach of the covenant in the Holocaust." (p. 208) Through the Holocaust, "Nothing less than the very existence of the covenant with God has been brought into question." (p. 210)

Eckstein then moves on to consider challenges to traditional theology in the wake of the Holocaust. To him, there was no sin among European Jewry that God would need to punish. Therefore the traditional Jewish theological understanding of the relationship between sin and suffering is wrong. Since European Jews were innocent, there obviously is no "cause and effect" relationship between sin and suffering. To even suggest a potential correlation is to be guilty and to make one's God guilty of heinous crimes.

From here Eckstein turns to Israel. He carefully shares the historic Jewish emotional and spiritual attachment to the land of Israel as witnessed throughout Scripture and in Hebrew liturgy. He explains the imperative of the state of Israel so many recognized with the rise of European nationalism in the 19th century. He briefly records the birthing of modern Israel out of the ashes of the Holocaust. He includes in his short but well-rounded discussion such themes as Antisemitism and Zionism and deals with personalities such as Theodor Herzl and Leon Pinsker.

Eckstein explains that Zionism (as a political movement) was generated as Jewish people despaired of God taking any messianic redemptive action on their behalf. He wrote, "(Zionism's) primary goal was to build a national homeland for the Jewish people through human initiative and not to wait for God to send his Messiah." (p. 218)

The Holocaust, the author explains, has resulted in a Jewish repudiation of pacifist martyrdom and in a Jewish resolve to powerfully defend the Jewish state and the Jewish people universally.

As we enter the second portion of the text entitled, "The Jewish-Christian Encounter," we note the progression of the 5 chapter titles:

- (9) The Parting of the Ways
- (10) Jewish Views of Jesus, Christians, and Christianity
- (11) Christians and Antisemitism
- (12) Christian Missions and the Jews
- (13) Jewish-Christian Relations Today

In my opinion Eckstein's treatment of his Christian readers borders on patronization. He seems to recognize Christian gullibility and seeks to capitalize on the theological vulnerability of those rethinking their theology of Israel.

Eckstein realizes the total implausibility of evangelical abandonment of its commitment to worldwide messianic redemption which must, of course, include Jewish people. Therefore he urges an evangelical resolve to limit Christian witness to Jewish-Christian dialogue. This is the arena, he suggests, where points could be eloquently made for the Christian cause and where Christians could still satisfy their biblical obligation to be a witness to the House of Israel.

Eckstein is smooth. The real danger is that many "peace-at-all-costs" loving Christian leaders whose commitment to Israel's redemption is minimal or even questionable could fall victim to this ploy and begin to parrot the rabbi's call.

Obviously such an evangelical compromise would restrict our witness to a very few Jewish "advance" men and effectively destroy our ability to proclaim the Good News to the common Jewish people who are very often ready to hear us gladly.

Eckstein does not seem to allow for the sincere faith convictions of Jewish people who recognize Yeshua as Messiah and Lord. He fully disallows the rights of believing Jewish people to foster the continuation of their cultural experience as Jews. He seemingly demands that they despise and abandon Jewish culture as a punishment for their sincere faith.

By what authority does he take such a posture? The very rabbis he has elsewhere suggested can accuse God of breach of covenant, the rabbis who can even "outsmart" God, the rabbis who can demand of God that he render an account of himself to them, these are the very rabbis who somehow also fantasize they have the power to make a Jew a non-Jew.

Who gave these mortals the power to nullify the authority and truth of God's Word? They are obviously deluded by their own imaginings and have believed their own publicity. When Jewish people universally cannot agree on who is a Jew, the poor attitude exhibited toward Messianic Jews seems a silly thing and certainly confusing to Christians. How can Jews not be Jews? Better we should let God have his authority back.

In his expressions of the human danger in simply trusting God, Eckstein refuses to scrutinize Judaism to search for the possibility of flaws or historic human mistakes which could have led to needless Jewish suffering. He fully rejects the possibility of Jewish covenant breaking. It is much easier for Eckstein to simply fault God.

This should raise questions among Christian readers. What kind of God does Judaism really profess to worship? The God of Moses and Torah, the God of the Patriarchs and Prophets, is not an arbitrary, unfaithful, even trickster God. The God Eckstein describes sounds more like a Canaanite deity, a pagan idol, or an imaginary mythical being.

The God of the Bible is an altogether consistent God, faithful and true to His Word, a God who puts His Word above His Name. All this should point up to Christians the profound need and the Messianic Jewish responsibility to call Jews and Judaism back to the worship of the Only, the True, the Living God of Israel.

Is Eckstein holding out a sugar coated pain killing drug to a Christian world still suffering from the theological shockwaves and guilt associated with the European catastrophe?

Will Christian readers agree with his vain imaginings that our withholding the Gospel from the Jewish people would be an act of Christian love?

It is blatantly clear to anyone wholly committed to the redemption of Israel and to anyone who recognizes the classic diabolic ploys to sustain Israel's spiritual bondage, that Eckstein is attempting to drive a wedge between Messianic Jews and the balance of the Church.

In his attack upon Messianic Jews and Jewish evangelism, he has the audacity to dub Messianic believers, "Judaizers." Is such name-calling a deliberate attempt to stereotype and misrepresent our faith and practice? Is his purpose to incite a Christian theological riot against Messianic Jews? Could he really be so genuinely ignorant of our theological posture?

And is Eckstein so historically naive that he does not see that he may well be fostering the forces of antisemitism? The effective isolation of Messianic Jews from both religious camps in the second century did not improve Jewish-Christian relations.

The attempt of the Church to rid itself of "judaizing" influences during the Inquisition soon spilled over the walls of the ecclesiastical court into a general popular antipathy toward Jews. What began as theological purification resulted in forced conversions, national expulsions, and death for thousands in Israel. Why would the cry of "Judaizing" improve Jewish-Christian relations now? Does he think it so because Christians bear a great sense of guilt in our generation? The sense of guilt won't last--but antisemitism may and probably will.

The Messianic Jews are the best agents for promoting ethnic and cultural tolerance in the Church and for fighting antisemitism in the Christian world. To stifle their contribution to the welfare of the Jewish people is to wrecklessly endanger future generations of Israel.

Had the Nazarenes of the second century been embraced by both Israel and the Church, how different would our world be today? How different the histories of both Israel and the Church?

The fostering of artificial divisions between believers God has called to work together in the past have led to the worst of imaginable catastrophes.

Doesn't Eckstein and the other anti-missionaries understand that religious suppression fostered by the American Jewish community against the sincere faith efforts of Messianic Jewish believers would only translate into the eventual religious suppression of all American Jews? This is a natural course of development. Remember the words of Hillel, "What is hateful to yourself, do to no other." Or, if I may paraphrase, "Do not do to others what you do not want done to you."

I want to summarize by offering my analysis of Eckstein's strategy for the text.

I believe he first wants to excite the Christian reader with explanations of Jewish faith and practice which definitely strike a responsive chord in the Christian's psyche. He is thrilled to not only learn about Jews and Judaism but to also better understand what he regards to be his own distant heritage. Biblical images are flashing on the mind's eye of the Christian reader.

But then suddenly Eckstein destabilizes his hitherto happy reader by (1) reminding his readers of Christian involvement in the Holocaust and (2) by portraying God as unfaithful to Israel. This accusation of God's infidelity to Israel fosters confusion in the Christian bosom. His assumption of total Jewish faith in God is challenged. Being off balance, the Christian retreats.

Eckstein next highlights the history of the (man-made) division between Israel and the Church. He suggests Jesus is a false Messiah and that Paul is an antinomian spirit.

On the heels of this he offers the "Jewish view" of Christianity, especially in light of the Holocaust. By now his Christian reader is reeling. But then Eckstein goes a step further and uses all this as a springboard for his attack on Christian missions to the Jews. He throws words around like deception, fraud, forced conversions and he appeals for sympathy, i.e., "leave us alone."

By now the Christian is almost ashamed to present the Gospel. "Jews have had such a hard time with God, how can I tell them of Jesus especially in light of history?"

Then Eckstein offers the "clincher": the rejection of Jesus as Messiah is the key to Jewish survival. (As if God needs faithlessness and disobedience to the biblical revelation to sustain Jewish peoplehood.) But, of course, our Christian friend wants Israel to survive!

Recognizing that upon further reflection Christians cannot agree to totally disregard their witness to Israel, Eckstein offers guidance to Christianity. He first recommends a two covenant theology which precludes the need for Jews to believe in Jesus and secondly, counsels Christians to witness only by means of (officially sanctioned) dialogues. He encourages Christian rejection of anything the Jewish community would find offensive and most especially Jewish evangelism.

But Eckstein outdoes himself when he patronizingly suggests that Jews and Judaism may well get behind Christian efforts to evangelize the world. But this, he warns, would only be on the condition the Church swears off Jewish evangelism.

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein is no doubt a brilliant, suave, politically astute, personable and diplomatic young rabbi. His early years have brought him far reaching goodwill in the Christian world. But he may prove to be not only most dangerous to Israel spiritually but also socially for years to come. For try as they may, the House of Israel can never have shalom shalom (perfect peace) without the Prince of Peace, the Messiah Jesus.