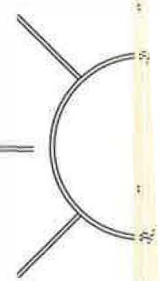


Gregerman, Adam. "A Response to 'The Jewish Question'." In *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths*, edited by Paul Louis Metzger, 239-242. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012.

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CHAPTER 19

RESPONSE TO "THE JEWISH QUESTION"



*Adam Gregerman*

The dramatic contemporary changes in many Christians' views of Jews and Judaism have minimally affected evangelical Christians. While many Catholics and mainline Protestants have reevaluated millennia of anti-Jewish Christian teachings, evangelicals have often remained on the sidelines. Among the various reasons for this is the nature of the reevaluation. Other Christians' rejection of anti-Judaism prompts painful and even radical questions about, for example, exclusivist views on salvation, missions to the Jews, and the covenant between God and Israel. Evangelical beliefs about salvation through Christ alone and proselytism are potentially undermined by affirmations of the legitimacy of Judaism after the coming of Jesus. It is tempting for many evangelicals to dodge the hard questions raised by Judaism and especially by Jewish rejection of Christian claims.

I therefore welcome Paul Louis Metzger's essay and the chance to respond to it. While there remain profound and even unbridgeable disagreements between us, our honest and sometimes tough discussions are an achievement to celebrate. He plumbs some of the core theological issues that

relate to Jews and Judaism, opening up a dialogue that should be encouraged. Though I have limited space to reply, this context is important, for my criticisms below should not detract from my endorsement of the project. My comments are intended to cultivate a more sympathetic awareness of what matters deeply to the other, especially as the Jewish-evangelical relationship takes its next steps.

I want to focus on a few tensions in the essay, beginning with Metzger's assessment of Judaism. He insists on the inherent and enduring value of Judaism, in which "God is at work." Briefly, he mentions the Jews' "profound sense of mystery, observance of Torah, and celebration of life" despite suffering. However, the bulk of his essay is an exploration of the claim that Jewish existence *as such* is essential for Christian faith. Jewish religious life, by contrast, is seldom mentioned. The closest he gets to an extended discussion of this inherent value of Judaism is his discussion of Jewish suffering (though it is largely connected with questions about Christ's passion). While it is not illegitimate to consider Judaism as he does—he is, after all, a Christian theologian—his praise for the value of Jewish survival sits awkwardly alongside the little attention actually given to Judaism itself. In light of his affirmations, then, I miss a fuller exploration of the ways that his faith life is enriched by contact with Jews and Judaism. He need not affirm Judaism's ultimate truth. However, I yearned for more reflection on Judaism as a "living tradition" and a vibrant covenantal reality beyond its relevance to claims about Jesus.

A related tension is present in Metzger's claim that Jews and Christians are "inseparably bound together." On the one hand, this has admirable practical implications. Christians are obligated to care about Jewish safety and security. I would add that this humanitarian obligation holds for Jews as well, in a duty to pursue social justice jointly with and in concern for Christians who face religious and social discrimination, most especially in places where they live as vulnerable minorities.

On the other hand, while I welcome Metzger's honest desire not only to end Jews' suffering but if necessary "to suffer with them," I am discomfited by his motivation. His emphasis on the threat to Christian belief posed by the suffering of the Jews reflects an overly abstract and theological rather than humanitarian or secular motivation for preventing this. He says Jewish

persecution and even extermination would be a victory for religious nihilism and would abrogate the "ontic basis for [Christians'] existence." I do not want to offer a false dichotomy and deny any humanitarian motivation for Metzger. However, the prominence given to theological justifications, in which Jewish existence serves to safeguard Christian claims, is unsettling, especially in light of our anguished history. Abrupt shifts in Christian theology, as Metzger rightly notes, have often entailed dangerous practical consequences for Jews. My concern reflects my wariness of Christian theological scenarios in which Jews are assigned roles they did not ask for, even ones favorable to Jews. I'd therefore prefer to see Christians emphasize an ethical basis that honors and protects Jewish life.

Finally, on the freighted topic of the status of the Jewish covenant with God, Metzger's views are puzzling. In a break with centuries of Christian teaching, he accepts the Jewish no to Jesus without rancor and resentment. Even more, he boldly insists, citing Paul, that God will "never" reject the Jews despite their "unbelief." However, without further explanation, he fails to explore the implications of this supposedly unconditional divine acceptance. Are Jews ultimately saved even if they refuse to believe in Jesus? In light of his insistence on Jesus as their "destiny," it seems unlikely that unbelieving Jews can escape condemnation. If he expects that a "day will come" when Christ will return and will be recognized by all, God's acceptance of the Jews seems not to be eternally unconditional, but only temporary. That is, Jews will be expected to recognize Jesus and convert. If they do not, how could rejection not follow? Metzger, like Paul before him, seems unable to reconcile two (perhaps irreconcilable) claims. His defense of the Jewish covenant is noteworthy but only partial, for his insistence that salvation is in Christ alone—even at the end of days—must inevitably include the demand that Jews cease to be unbelievers or face divine rejection. My enthusiasm for his defense of the Jewish covenant is diminished by the idea that Jews must eventually change their no to a yes.

I appreciate the generous invitation to respond to Metzger's essay. I hope that my critical comments can be constructive. This young relationship between Jews and evangelicals is important to both communities and will rest on a firmer foundation when we engage in frank and serious discussions. Rather than seek out simplistic areas of commonality, it is precisely

this type of inquiry—delving into complex and even painful issues—that holds the most promise for growth and learning.

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