

A Jewish Reaction to «The Ways of God»

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Introduction

I am happy that the Swedish Theological Institute was honored with the debut of *Guds vägar*¹ in English and salute its 50 year history of contributing to Jewish-Christian understanding.

It is an honor for me to be here today and a source of pleasure to participate in this conversation with my friends Dr. Jesper Svartvik and Fr. Michael McGarry. It is also a privilege to have this opportunity to go beyond teaching the students of this institution (which I always cherish) but also to address the community of friends of the STI, the «interfaith community» in Jerusalem, the Lutheran Church of Sweden and those who may later read these thoughts.

My joy is dampened only by the absence, due to illness, of our friend and mentor Bishop Krister Stendahl.

¹ While my Swedish is rudimentary at best, I was privileged to review the English translation with Rev. Dr. Göran Larsson and Rev. Dr. Jesper Svartvik. As a result, not only were some errors prevented but — no less importantly — ambiguous phrases were rendered with the most favorable English meaning in regard to their implications for a Christian view of Judaism. For me, this was an application of the rabbinic dictum «one must judge others with meritorious presumptions» (*Pirkei Avot* 1:6). If this has left me with fewer issues to address I consider it a tribute to the process and a contribution to Jewish-Christian relations.

General Comments

My favorable impression was initially formed by the document's title: *The Ways of God*. I appreciate that the document is entitled *ways* in the plural. I presume this was intended to be — and I certainly read it as — a pluralistic statement embodying a measure of humility. From the outset this document acknowledges multiple understandings of God and therefore leaves room, *ab initio*, for a Jewish understanding.

In the same vein, I note that it is subtitled «a document for discussion» and speaks of «starting points.»² This language implies an ongoing process of deliberation and maturation, which I applaud. The document's very conception is testimony to the strides that have been taken in Jewish-Christian relations and the subtitle acknowledges the work yet to be done.

The Church's statement is humble not only in acknowledging that it is part of a process rather than a final product. It is humble also when it uses a phrase such as «according to the faith of the church»³ thereby accepting the possibility of other faith-truths (and true faiths).

I strive to be humble as well and have entitled these remarks a Jewish response, rather than *the* Jewish response. I relate to the document from my personal perspective — that of an observant Israeli Jew, with awareness of the times in which we live and with a commitment

² § Introduction (§ indicates a section title in *The Ways of God*.)

³ § A Common Heritage

to furthering Jewish-Christian understanding. My method in this response is not to examine the document with a checklist, assessing it according to some Jewish standard of what Jews expect Christians to say at this time. Neither shall I compare *The Ways of God* to statements of other church bodies.

My brief discussion will center on three points:

1. The common heritage—in which I will address two issues:
 - A) The Bible; and
 - B) Reconciliation and Atonement as an example of a common principle.
2. The Definition of Judaism.
3. The Land

1. The Common Heritage

A. Bible

Even though the significance and legacy of the Jewish canon (the Tanakh, «Old Testament») is cited several times, it is seen through very Christian spectacles. This is natural. But does this portrayal help the Christian congregation to appreciate the power of the *Tanakh* for the Jewish people and its relevance to themselves as Christians? If Archbishop Hammar speaks only of «the Psalms and the Prophets [which] carry a message about God and his ways»⁴ does that hint at a dismissal of the five books of the *Torah*, which are the very core of the Jewish Bible and the heart of the *Tanakh* as experienced weekly by Jews in synagogue? These, at least as much as the Psalms, are the words which are «upon the heart»⁵ of every Jew.

Even the phrase in the body of the document «He [Jesus] included the words of the Psalms in his prayers,»⁶ which seems so appropriate, is not without difficulty. Despite the subsequent passage that explicitly acknowledges other debts to the «Holy scriptures of the Jews,»⁷ I suspect that

⁴ § Foreword

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:6

⁶ § A Common Heritage

⁷ Referring to, but not enumerating Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18.

this does not effectively convey to the Christian reader (many of whom see the Psalms printed in their «New Testaments») the depth of Jesus' Jewish grounding in the *Tanakh*. The absence of explicit mention of the Pentateuch—indeed the term *Torah* itself—remains an inadequate portrayal of the Jewish relationship to Bible.⁸ I regard *The Ways of God's* introduction of Hebrew terminology as positive; perhaps the key terms *Torah* or *Tanakh* could have been included as well?⁹

It is too facile to dismiss the difference between the Christian Church and rabbinic Judaism as only a matter of scriptural interpretation.¹⁰ The differences in the roles of scripture in the two faith traditions are greater than and not limited to the interpretation of passages regarding the messiahship of Jesus. As stated, it was the operative implication of the differing interpretations that drove the communities apart. But it is insufficient to present this as merely a divergence in interpretation:

[W]as Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah whom the Old Testament scriptures foresaw, and the New Testament proclaims—or were the scriptures to be interpreted from the viewpoint of *Torah*-observance as it is expressed in rabbinic texts?

without presenting what is meant by «*Torah*-observance» in the rabbinic tradition. Where the early Rabbis continued and elaborated upon the Pharisaic traditions of interpretation and *application* of the *Torah*, the early church departed from the notion of *halakhah* (law) as binding upon the people (and incorporated Gentiles into the community).

⁸ The biblically-inspired appellation «land [of the] prophets» is also problematic. I will address this infra in my discussion of the section The Land.

⁹ *Torah* is used in the document in the phrase «*Torah*-observance» but this is not a substitute for introducing the term in its own right. I am not judging the document against external standards, e.g. the Vatican's use of *Shoah* (*We Remember: A Reflection On The Shoah*, Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1998), but by its own standards which are set by the use of *tikkun 'olam*, *teshuvah*, and *tse-dakah*.

¹⁰ § A Common Heritage

When *The Ways of God* states that «to identify merely the Old Testament system of thought with Judaism, and that of the New Testament with Christianity, is erroneous» it negates an early Jewish-Christian gap by indicating that Jesus was also a party to «the Old Testament system of thought,» himself being a second Temple period Jew. Unfortunately, the ensuing elaboration of the developed role of Jesus in Christianity that follows:

The Christ that the Church confesses in Jesus is something more—crucified, dead, buried and risen. He was and is, according to the faith of the Church, the truth about God—God's *logos*—incarnated in the world. He is the Son of God and is worshipped as true God and true human being.

may leave the reader with an image of Judaism as a stagnant faith. Subsequent Judaism is not presented as a developing and equally vibrant phenomenon.

B. Reconciliation and Atonement (*Försoning*)

The only elaborated illustration of Jewish thought that is adduced in *The Ways of God* pertains to Yom Kippur and atonement. I suspect that in the desire to provide an example from Judaism that could be compared with familiar and central concepts in Christianity an error ensued. This error is not due to any inauthenticity regarding the concept of reconciliation/atonement in Judaism. But this example is not representative, as the concept does not bear the same degree of centrality in Judaism as it does in Christianity.

Yes, reconciliation/atonement is a central concept in Judaism. During the era of early Christianity the Rabbis grappled with the crisis of the loss of the Temple as means of expiation, a necessary precursor for reconciliation/atonement in Jewish thought. Nevertheless, it is not as pivotal to Judaism as it is for Christianity. The central themes of God's relationship to the Jewish people are abundant love, and the manifestation of God in history as experienced in the Exodus, at Sinai and through the Land. A comparison of Christianity with a Judaism that does not recognize these aspects is flawed and incom-

plete. This unbalanced equation is not consistent with Bishop Krister Stendahl's wise admonition that in interreligious dialogue we must be vigilant always to compare equals.

But this is the less serious problem that emerges from the comparison. This section includes the statement «The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, was—and is—the peak of the Jewish ceremonial calendar.»¹¹ The emphasis on the continuity of Jewish thought and practice over time, which is expressed in this sentence, is appropriate. Regrettably this continuity in Judaism is not sufficiently evident throughout *The Ways of God*. A statement that follows «From the perspective of the Day of Atonement an ethical idea becomes clear as well»¹² gives the impression that Christianity and the New Testament developed the Old Testament concept of atonement to a higher ethical plane. We are told, «Jesus relates to and develops, in word and deed, the Jewish motif of atonement and forgiveness.»¹³ But it will not be clear to the Christian reader that Jesus' «development» is paralleled in rabbinic Judaism. I think it necessary to point out that comparable thoughts are basic to rabbinic Judaism.

While this ethical idea is attributed both to Jews and Christians one might easily misunderstand the Jewish aspect to be no more than the earlier, undeveloped, biblical level, while the Christian tradition, as demonstrated by the Lord's Prayer, represents a progressive innovation. Matthew's phrase «... and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors»¹⁴ in which people are called to *imitatio Dei*, by exhibiting God's quality of forgiveness in their own lives is closely paralleled by an early rabbinic statement recorded in *Pirkei Avot*: «One who is hard to provoke and easily pacified is godly.»¹⁵ *Sifre*, an early Midrash on Deuteronomy echoes this idea: «To walk in God's ways»¹⁶ is understood as «as

¹¹ § A Common Heritage

¹² § A Common Heritage

¹³ § A Common Heritage

¹⁴ 6:12

¹⁵ 5:11 Based upon the translation as rendered in S. R. Hirsch, *The Hirsch Siddur*, (Jerusalem 1978) p. 499.

¹⁶ Deut. 8:6

God is called merciful, you too shall be merciful.»¹⁷ And lest one think that the development ceased in the early rabbinic period we can adduce the writing of Maimonides in his 12th century code of Jewish Law the *Mishneh Torah* in which he writes:

It is forbidden to be cruel and unforgiving. Rather one should be easily placated and not quick to anger. When a person who has transgressed seeks another's forgiveness s/he should forgive with a whole heart and a willing soul.¹⁸

Without mention of the continued development of Jewish faith, spirituality, law and culture a reader could easily form the impression that only the heirs of the New Testament were the bearers of a vibrant tradition.

2. The Definition of Judaism

Let me temper my remarks with the acknowledgement that Judaism is notoriously difficult to define. Notwithstanding the very auspicious initial clarification that

the terms «the Jewish people» and «Judaism» ... do not primarily mean historical phenomena. Rather we speak of a contemporary people and the faith of this people ... who call themselves Jews, and the traditions ... that are at the core of Jewish religious and ethnic identity.¹⁹

it remains unclear if *The Ways of God* presents a coherent definition «Judaism.»

To pick a nit, the Introduction commences by presenting *The Ways of God* as the fruits of dialogue between «representatives of the Church of Sweden» on the one hand and «Judaism» on the other. What exactly is the «Judaism» which was partner to this dialogue? This disparity is indicative of some of the ambiguity that ensues.

The negative definition, that «to see [only] the Old Testament system of thought as identical with Judaism ... is wrong»²⁰ is quite correct

¹⁷ *Sifre* on Deuteronomy, Section 49 (Finkelstein edition, p. 114)

¹⁸ Laws of Repentance, 2:10

¹⁹ § Introduction (emphasis in the original)

(though insufficient). Indeed I believe that the underlying laudable intention of this phrase was to reject the supersessionist implication of replacement theology that nothing coming after the Old Testament is valid, or even «true» Judaism. But what of other characterizations such as: «the rabbinic [approach] which developed into what we today call Judaism?»²¹ Surely we are not to understand from this that before the destruction of the Temple there was no Judaism for it has been recognized that Jesus was a Jew.

While I would agree that Israelite faith and cult were not Judaism, they are the roots of Judaism (and, of course, Christianity). Judaism, as a distinct phenomenon, is a product of the exilic and post-exilic second Temple periods. The Pharisaic school (which nurtured Jesus as well) gave birth to what we recognize as rabbinic Judaism, which has been the dominant Jewish identity for nearly 2,000 years. But this disparate picture of three distinct eras (biblical, second Temple, rabbinic) does not do justice to Jewish self-perception. In a meaningful (though not entirely accurate) way Jews see everything «from the *Tanakh* to the *Palmah*»²² as comprising a developing phenomenon, continuous from biblical and second Temple times to the present.

3. The Land

This is the section of *The Ways of God* that falls shortest of the mark. The statement

Very early—even during the Babylonian suffering—a tradition emerged, according to which the people could live a satisfactory Jewish life in a religious and ethical sense anywhere on earth. This tradition has become a dominant influence in Jewish thought.²³

²⁰ § A Common Heritage

²¹ § A Common Heritage

²² The *Palmah* (an acronym for *plugot mahats*, striking force) was an arm of the Jewish militia during the British mandate. This phrase, common in Israeli parlance to describe the entire arc of Jewish history, rhymes in common pronunciation.

²³ § The Land

is simply unacceptable to virtually all Jews and is not representative of Judaism.

This very same period of Babylonian exile, during which Jeremiah spoke the words²⁴ leading to the conclusion *ut supra* is far better known to Jews as the setting in which the Judean exiles sang:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.
There on the poplars we hung up our lyres,
for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement.
«Sing us one of the songs of Zion.»
How can we sing a song of the eternal on alien soil?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither;
let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.²⁵

These are the words that have echoed through Jewish thought, literature and practice for more than two millennia. While Jews may have stayed away from the land of Israel and refrained from realizing the dream and observing the commandment to live in *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel), at almost no point would a Jewish community have considered this «a satisfactory Jewish life in a religious and ethical sense.»

It is not tenable to support the claim, «To determine theologically what role the land plays in Jewish faith and ideas is hardly possible» with the fact that «among Jews around the world, there is a very wide spectrum of thought regarding this issue.»²⁶ While it is true that the greatest of Jewish scholars (e.g. Maimonides and Nachmanides) disputed the details of the commandment to dwell in the land of Israel, and that by no means all Jews in modernity were swept up by Zionist fervour, the paramount centrality of this land in Jewish thought and for Jewish identity is unassailable. Indeed the wide spectrum of Jewish reflection dedicated to the role and signi-

ficance of the land of Israel is evidence of the land's vitality for the Jewish people. To portray this diversity as putting Israel's centrality in question is a misrepresentation. It seems disingenuous to avoid accepting the fundamental role the land plays for fear of treading on political ground. *The Ways of God* is quite correct when it states that there is a «covenantal bond» (*förbundenhet*) between the land of Israel and its name-sake the children of Israel.²⁷ Even a positive phrase

the land, in which the prophets worked and the Temple stood high on the holy mountain, is an inseparable part of the life and history of the Jewish people

is an inadequate depiction of the people of Israel's relationship to the land for it cites only shallow «history» and is conspicuous in not mentioning the present and future. While «the land of the prophets» is important to Jews, so is the land of the Kings, the Judges, Ruth, Ezra and, I am afraid, also Joshua. Neither can a Jew forget the members of the Sanhedrin, the Galilean Rabbis of the Talmud, the grammarians of Tiberias, the mystics of Safed or the pious of all generations who sought to live, or be buried, in *Eretz Yisrael*. Neither can we omit those modern Jews who sought to live on, rather than being buried in, as their ancestors often dreamed, the soil of the holy land. As for the future, the Land of Israel is the locus where the dreams of daily prayers

Rebuild Jerusalem speedily and in our day,
Gather in our exiles from the four corners of the earth,
Bring us upstanding to our land²⁸

and many more, are to be realized. I recognize that the drafters of the document chose not to discuss «political Zionism or the present State of Israel»²⁹ but—at the very least—I must challenge them regarding the acknowledged covenantal bond between the People of Israel and the

²⁴ Jeremiah 29:4–7

²⁵ Psalm 137:1–6 (adapted from the New Jewish Publication Society translation).

²⁶ § The Land

²⁷ F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem*, Princeton 1985, p. 3.

²⁸ From the daily prayers

²⁹ § The Land

Land of Israel. Even if the church chooses not to discuss political Zionism is it unwilling to accept the phenomenon of the Jewish people's connection to the land of Israel—even if it does not endorse all the aspirations of some Jews? It seems to me that this masks another instance of under-appreciation of Jewish peoplehood.

4. Conclusion

I hope that these thoughts will contribute to the discussion of *The Ways of God* and to the furtherance of Jewish-Christian relations in the Swedish Lutheran Church and, perhaps, beyond.

I would like to conclude by referring to Archbishop Hammar's foreword. The Archbishop wrote:

All genuine dialogue must rest on a well thought-through self-understanding. The document ... is one step towards creating a proper environment for such dialogue.... [I]t is our duty to [see] a person of another faith as a gift and a challenge to self-reflection and growth...

This accords well with my own understanding of dialogue—one that I presume I share with many others present. Through dialogue one gains a better understanding not only of the other but also of oneself and one's own faith tradition. Reflecting on this document has been such an experience for me and I am optimistic that discussion of these thoughts will be fruitful for the Jews, Lutherans and others who join in this Godly Way.

It is appropriate to conclude my words on *The Ways of God* with the words of King David:

For I have kept *the ways of the Eternal*
 And have not been guilty before my God;
 I am mindful of all His rules
 And have not departed from His laws.
 I have been blameless before Him,
 And have guarded myself against sinning—
 And the Lord has requited my merit,
 According to my purity in His sight.³⁰

³⁰ 2 Samuel 22:22–25 (NJPS translation)

