

The author of this essay is lecturer in Religion at the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

## REVIEW ESSAY

### LOUIS JACOBS' DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

Jewish theology seems to be enjoying something of a renaissance today. It reached its high-point in the middle ages with the Jewish Aristotelians and their critics. Its marked decline since that period has been interrupted only by the brief flourish of kabbalistic creativity centered around 16th century Safed and the work of some of the early hasidic masters. Shallow eddies of theology were associated with the rise of Reform and Conservative Judaism but these were almost always banal and invariably tainted with polemics.

Recent years, however, have witnessed an exciting recrudescence of serious Jewish theological activity. One of the most prolific of today's Jewish theologians is Louis Jacobs. His most recent work, *A Jewish Theology*,\* is the first systematic presentation of Jewish theology to appear in more than half a century. It is distinguished by its comprehensiveness, the author's lucidity of style, and his stunning erudition. It is neither narrow nor sectarian in perspective. Jacobs' methodology is intelligent and simply stated: for

each of the problems he discusses he presents brief but responsible descriptions of the relevant Biblical, rabbinic, and medieval materials. In this he follows the structure of his earlier *Principles of the Jewish Faith*. In the present work, however, he extends his discussions to include representative kabbalistic and hasidic views.

He presents his theology as an "invitation to others to consider, to criticize, to improve on, to challenge. At present the important thing is to get theology on the move again in Jewish circles" (p. 6). I shall, therefore, try to consider and criticize some of the material he presents in this book.

Jacobs sees his task as discovering what it is that Jews can believe in the present. This conception of the task of Jewish theology has respectable antecedents. Jewish theology, and especially medieval Jewish philosophical theology, has always tried to demonstrate that the teachings of Judaism do not conflict with whatever the dominant philosophical conception of the world happens to be at the time. This is as

\* *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1973).

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true of Ibn Gabirol and neo-platonism, of Maimonides and Aristotelianism, as it is of Hermann Cohen and neo-Kantianism. Thus, Jacobs argues,

the contemporary theologian must endeavor, however inadequately, to do for our age what the great medieval theologians sought to do for theirs. He must try to present a coherent picture of what Jews can believe without subterfuge and with intellectual honesty (p. 4).

The problem that I find with this methodology is the way in which Jacobs applies it. He seems too willing to judge the teachings of Judaism by what he takes to be the standards of "modernity" and not willing enough to judge these standards by the teachings of Judaism.

This problem is further compounded by the fact that the author's criterion for what is acceptable to "moderns" (a term he uses constantly) really seems to boil down to what is acceptable to Louis Jacobs. The book thus threatens occasionally to degenerate into a highly idiosyncratic or possibly even narcissistic affair.

These points can be illuminated by examining Jacobs' treatment of the question of why one ought to keep the *mitzvot* once it is recognized, as he insists it must be, that there is a human element in the Torah. He distinguishes five answers to this question. The first is that of the "fundamentalists" whom Jacobs identifies with the followers of Samson Raphael Hirsch. Their answer, he says, is to deny the problem. Nothing has changed, they maintain, since Maimonides' time to make us reject his claim that the

Divine authorship of the Pentateuch is a fundamental principle of Judaism. "Either you accept the view that every word of the Pentateuch was dictated by Moses or you might as well give up Judaism altogether" (p. 216). Jacobs disdainfully rejects this position on the grounds that it denies to Judaism any intrinsic (as opposed to divinely commanded) value and because it so totally fails to deal with the evidence of contemporary historical scholarship.

Classical reform takes a position diametrically opposed to that of the "fundamentalists." Since no convincing reason can be given for observing the *mitzvot*, they maintain, Judaism should be conceived of as basically a religion without ritual, a purely ethical or prophetic faith. Jacobs faults this understanding of Judaism with a failure to take seriously enough the complexity of the human psyche: "there are depths in the human soul which only ritual can reach" (p. 219).

The historical school is associated with scholars like Frankl, Graetz, Schechter, and Ginzberg. The adherents of this approach to Judaism follow Schechter in claiming that "the source of Jewish authority is not in the Bible but in the historical experience of the people of Israel" (p. 222). Jacobs recognizes the important contribution of the historical school but criticizes it for its lack of theological clarity and insists that to render it satisfactory the theologian must build upon it and go beyond it. This he does himself, after describing the fourth approach to the question, that of Mordecai Kaplan.

Kaplan describes the *mitzvot* as

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beautiful, intrinsically valuable, significant and meaningful folk-ways. They are thus worth observing for their own sakes and because they foster human values. Jacobs criticizes this view in the following words:

Our objection to this solution of the problem is to its excessive emphasis on human values as the true aim of religion. What has become of the Jew's eternal quest for God with the *mitzvot* as the means for its realization? Is it not true that, for all the laxity in the matter of observance today, the modern Jew still wishes to observe the *mitzvot* as *mitzvot* (the word means, after all, "Divine commands")? The believing Jew wishes to know how his Creator wishes him to behave. The whole point of the Jewish emphasis on Torah and *mitzvot* is that there is a splendor in the idea of submission to the will of God (p. 223).

Jacobs' "theological approach" builds on the findings of the historical school.

It will see the whole area of Jewish observances as growing naturally out of Israel's experience. But it will see the hand of God in all this, will see the "tree of life" that is the Torah as yielding no less nourishing fruit because it began its life as an acorn. We believe in the God who speaks to us out of Israel's experience; Israel, the covenant people, dedicated to God's service and the fulfillment of His purpose. We believe in the God who, as Frankl said, reveals Himself not alone to the prophets, but through *Kelal Yisrael*, the Community of Israel, as it works out and applies the teaching of the prophets. Yes, it is true, in a sense the whole of Torah is *minhag*, custom, growing through the experiences of human beings and interpreted by them in response to particular conditions in

human history. But we go on from there to say that since this happened, since this is how God revealed Himself then the *minhag* of Israel is Torah.

Either one sees power in the idea of submission to God's will or one does not see it. If one does, and very many sensitive religious people do, then there can be no greater value than the idea of a *mitzvah* as an opportunity of doing God's will . . . We need a vocabulary of worship and this is provided by the *mitzvot*. That is their sanction (pp. 224-225).

I have quoted this beautiful passage at length because I think that it is radically misconceived and I want to allow Jacobs to speak for himself before I criticize him.

The problem here is that lurking under all this beautiful prose we find very fuzzy theology. Jacobs seems to be trying to have his cake and eat it, too. He is trying to preserve the idea that *mitzvot* are commands while discarding the idea that the Torah in which these *mitzvot* find their original source is the direct expression of the will of God. He is quite right in trying to preserve the commanded character of the *mitzvot*. Without it there is no reason to observe the halakhah in the face of persecution or if better means can be found to achieve the same ends. It does not, however, seem that he has succeeded.

Either Torah is *minhag* or *mitzvah*. It can't be both. Jacobs tries to account for this by saying that the *minhag* of Israel is God's revelation. But if we are to take seriously the claim that the actual practices of the Jewish people are Torah, and if we are to understand this assertion literally — and Jacobs

gives no reason to assume that we should interpret it any other way — then we must ask a number of questions. It is clear that this Torah is constantly changing. Are we to infer that God's will is constantly changing and evolving? If Jacobs replies that it is not God's will which changes, but merely man's perception and understanding of it, how do we preserve the *commanded* nature of the *mitzvot*?

There are many technical problems with the idea that God reveals Himself through *K'lal Yisrael*. These problems relate to the fact that Jacobs does not describe the mechanism we must use to determine which practices of Israel are to be taken as normative. Jacobs' attempts to explain this position are not terribly helpful. Louis Ginsberg observes the Sabbath "because it can bring him nearer to God as it brought his ancestors" (p. 225). But what if there are other tools available? Similarly, Jacobs claims that the *mitzvot* provide a vocabulary for worship. That hardly preserves or explains their *commanded* nature: many other vocabularies are available; why should we choose this one? Indeed, most contemporary Jews have shown by their actions that this vocabulary has little relevance for their lives. In the face of this testimony of *K'lal Yisrael*, why preserve it?

That Jacobs fails to preserve the commanded character of the halakhah is made clear by his admission that one who observes what he calls the "significant" halakhot will likely be less scrupulous in his observance than his "fundamentalist" brother, "since on his view, the fear

of transgressing a direct Divine command does not affect his choice of what and what not to keep" (p. 226).

This admission that Jacobs' Jew does not obey the *mitzvot* because they are direct Divine commands raises another question: why does he obey them? To answer this question Jacobs introduces the concept of "religious significance" and the test of modernity. These two ideas follow directly from his general position. Having downgraded the status of Torah he must, to balance the traditional triad of God, Torah and Israel, elevate Israel (assuming that God is beyond elevation). By making the contemporary practices of the Jewish people normative he is left with no choice but to adopt as the test for the normative character of *mitzvot* the decision of the Jewish people that these *mitzvot* are or are not "religiously significant." Similarly, since God's revelation is constantly unfolding through the historical experience of the Jewish people, and the Jewish people are now participating more fully than ever before in the cultures around them, it follows that the latest stage of historical development is the latest revelation of God's will: hence we must apply the test of modernity to our concepts and practices.

There are a number of serious problems with these ideas. How can the test of "religious significance" avoid the charge of subjectivity? Are we not treading dangerously close to the idea that Israel is a second God, a partner rather than an agent in the working out of the Divine will? Is not the whole idea

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based on the typically 19th century idea of constant human progress? There is no way Jacobs can avoid adopting some naive idea of progress or other. If not, why ought the conceptions of contemporary moderns count more heavily with us than the conceptions of hellenist moderns who thought the Sabbath ludicrous and circumcision downright barbaric? Are we not further in the danger of falling into a fit of premature self-congratulation: after all, *our* contemporary practice is Torah; what *we* do is the latest

manifestation of God's will. It is the best and most complete manifestation of that will. Instead of seeing how far short of achieving that will we are we elevate our present practices and make them identical with it. But I don't want to end on a critical note. The publication of *A Jewish Theology* is a significant event in Jewish intellectual life. If the questions I raise here are of any value or interest it is a tribute to Louis Jacobs and his stimulating invitation to Jewish theology.