Transcript of Rabbi Danny Rich's SIFRE / UCS Lecture

A Jewish View of Jesus

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There are a number of reasons why I am honoured and delighted to be with you this evening. First, I have been for many years involved in various aspects of Inter Faith dialogue, including as the founding Chairperson of the Inter Faith Forum of the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames in Surrey which brought together two types of Jews, several expressions of Christianity, two schools of Islam, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Quakers as well as a large number of interested public bodies. I no longer hold that post but have nevertheless had a busy week. In my capacity as a president of the Council of Christians and Jews –and marking its 70th anniversary- I was honoured to be introduced to Her Majesty the Queen last week, and, only this morning, I sat on a panel at Europe's largest mosque, the 12,000 member East London Mosque in Whitechapel, London as a founder member of Britain's first recognised Council of Imams and Rabbis.

Second, I am currently researching my first book about the life and work of the first Liberal Rabbi in England, Israel Mattuck. Born in Lithuania in 1883, Mattuck was ordained at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, arriving in England 100 years ago next month to take up post as the Rabbi to the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, St John's Wood. An idiosyncratic liturgist and a charismatic preacher, Mattuck founded in 1927 with the then Dean of St Paul's the oldest inter faith dialogue organisation in this country, The London Society of Jews and Christians, which is today headquartered at my own offices at the Montagu Centre.

Israel Mattuck was invited to England by the founders of Liberal Judaism in this country, Claude Montefiore and Lily Montagu which brings me to my third reason. My current post is as the Chief Executive of Liberal Judaism in England, Scotland and Ireland, and, although I speak here in a personal and not a representative capacity, I am clearly influenced by a Liberal Jewish upbringing and a 20 plus year career as a Liberal Rabbi.

Liberal Judaism is on the radical wing of what is known as Progressive Judaism. Founded in Germany in the early years of the nineteenth century, it seeks to combine the best of Jewish tradition with the best of modernity and, in keeping with its German predecessors, remains an advocate of the school of modern biblical scholarship which showed that the Biblical writers, however divinely inspired, were fallible human beings and children of the ancient Near East in which they lived.

If this were not enough, Liberal Judaism in this country was founded by Claude Montefiore who was himself a New Testament scholar and instrumental in the

foundation of the London Society of Jews and Christians (to which I made reference a moment ago). Despite suspicion from his own community, Montefiore sought to introduce Jews to the New Testament and called for what Edward Kessler (1989, p.167) described as a 'Jewish theology of Christianity'. Daniel Langton (2002, p.173) observes, 'the degree of tolerance and even admiration with which Montefiore approached Christianity marked him out as a highly unusual Jew of his time even on an international level.'

If Claude Montefiore was the towering intellectual of the first phase of Liberal Judaism – he died in 1938 – in its second phase the mantle was taken by my teacher, Rabbi John Rayner, who served as Senior Minister at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (which Montefiore had founded in 1911), and I have been much influenced by his lecture (titled 'A Jewish View of Jesus and delivered on 2 February 1999) which was published posthumously in *Signposts to the Messianic Age* in 2006.

Before I turn to the substance of this address I want to make one further observation. There is some danger in selecting a topic which is at the centre of another's faith since one may cause offence unintentionally; to then make comment on such to an audience of people for whom Jesus is a real and living presence is higher risk; to do so in an a academic setting (in such a beautiful church as this) could only be described as pure *chutzpah!* In my defence I can say only this. I shall approach tonight's lecture in the same manner as I would were I addressing a wholly Jewish audience on a topic of mainstream Jewish interest. I would make the distinction between what I understand to be fact, faith and absurdity. Fact is something that, given all the circumstances, seems to be using shared knowledge demonstratably true – the existence of the Second Temple, for example. Faith is for me something which it is not possible to demonstrate in the modern scientific sense but which is at least possible and better probable and which has an impact on my daily life – my faith in an immanent and transcendent God, for example. Absurdity is the circumstance where I am asked to suspend my critical faculties. Thus the traditional Jewish idea that a man called Moses was involved in the writing of the first Five Books of the Hebrew Bible would require me to ignore what I understand about anthropology, linguistics and so on, and so a belief in such would be absurd, much as I might respect that it is the faith of others.

It is perhaps pertinent to ask why any Jew ought have an interest in Jesus. After all, in terms of Jewish practice Jesus has no relevance, and in the context of Jewish history Jesus – or at least the accusation of Jewish responsibility for his death or his rejection - brings with him associations of supercessionary theology, or public disputation, the end result of which was 'heads the Christian wins; tails the Jew loses'.

It is, of course, true that it is only in the last 150 years or so with the advent of Biblical criticism that it has been possible to consider Jesus in a non-polemical

manner, to separate the historical Jesus from the doctrinal one. Both Christians and Jews had a mutual but differing interest for not so doing. For traditional Judaism the application of the tools of critical scholarship to Christian scripture might undermine its rejection of similar treatment concerning the Hebrew Bible, and it took some time for Christians to concede, in the words of Braybrooke (1990, p.44) that '(t)he pursuit of the historical study of Jesus…was no longer a threat to faith'.

The fact that something is possible may not, of course, make it desirable but it seems to me there are two major reasons for a Jewish study of Jesus. First, as I shall make clear as we proceed, the Gospels are one of a number of accounts of Jewish life in the first century and, whilst they must be treated with caution, it would be surprising if, in comparison with contemporary rabbinic and Roman literature, they were not able to assist in building a picture of Jewish life of the period. Second, if one is an advocate of serious inter faith dialogue and truly committed to living as equals alongside Christians, a study of Jesus ought to yield a number of benefits. It will help the Jew understand what makes his or her Christian neighbour tick; it ought to lead to an appreciation of Christian scripture and what follows from it; and it may help explain and understand where the traditions differ.

No view of Jesus could be expressed without a comment about the Gospels which are virtually our only source of information about the life of Jesus. It does not appear that Jesus wrote anything in his life time, nor that much was written about him whilst he lived. The Gospels were, of course, written at least a generation after his death, that of Mark in c60 CE, of Matthew and Luke a decade or so later. They have some significant difficulties. They tell us little about much of Jesus' life, concentrating primarily on his short career of public ministry. They are targeted to different audiences, and, notwithstanding the portrayal of the Pharisees in particular and the Jews in general which are deeply problematic from at least a Jewish perspective, they appear to be propagandist in nature by which I mean that Jesus is invariably the hero and the Romans are limited to a cameo role.

Having said that, and taken together with their divergences which strengthen their value, the Gospels seem to me to both accord with – and reinforce – what is known elsewhere from contemporary Jewish and other sources. They may be of further interest to Jews because of their inherent closeness to that which Jews find important. They describe places and incidents in the Land of Israel; their characters and authors are conversant with Hebrew and Aramaic, with a knowledge of, and a regard, for the Torah and Hebrew Scriptures; and their subject material is the welfare of Jewish society and its relationship with its God.

In studying the Gospels and other contemporary literature it is possible, I therefore suggest, to make tentative conclusions about Jesus from a Jewish viewpoint.

Jews have no reason to doubt that Jesus existed but affirm that he was fully human in the same sense as his Jewish and Roman contemporaries. That is not to say that he was not charismatic, spiritual, talented – indeed extraordinary

but no more than, say, Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leader of German Jewry who survived Thereseinstadt, Mahatma Ghandi or Nelson Mandela. By which I mean to say that whilst it is possible to identify men and women in every generation whom, in ancient Biblical Hebrew, would be described as having *ruach elohim bo: the spirit of God within them,* Jewish theology wishes to make a clear distinction between the human and the Divine. Just as the Genesis flood story portrays Noah as failingly human in contrast to its Babylonian equivalent where in the Epic of Gilgamesh its hero, Utnapishtim, becomes a god, so Judaism cannot entertain the idea that Jesus was both human and divine. Thus a Jewish view rejects as mythological those incidents of Jesus's life recorded in the Gospels which lead to such a view: the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, for example.

Real man and Jew! It is, of course, no longer controversial to say that Jesus was a Jew. It is glaringly obvious but for centuries was rarely expressed or all but ignored in campaigns to condemn the Jews of the relevant period. But let us state it clearly. Jesus was born, lived and died a Jew, and there is no attempt by the Gospels to portray him as anything other. Indeed Luke's Gospel (2:21) records his circumcision on the eighth day, Mark relates his visits to synagogues (1:21, 1:39 and 6:2), and Matthew in Jesus' name declares that his mission is to the Jews. As one reads the Gospels Jesus' Jewishness is so evident. In the main Jesus teaches Jewish values; he utilises Jewish texts and methodology in his instruction; he engages with the Jewish community; he gets passionate about the things that Jews would and even today get upset about; and all those who encounter him – Jew and non Jew alike – know he is Jewish!

As it happens Jesus lived, as a Chinese Christian might have said, in 'interesting times'. The conquering of the Near and Middle East by Alexander the Great some 330 years before Jesus' birth had introduced to the Jewish world new and controversial Greek theological and political ideas including, for example, the separation of the soul from the body after death, and democracy. Hellenism had led to far- reaching sociological change too including the growth of an educated middle class and urbanisation. On Alexander's death the Empire was divided amongst his generals who were unable to retain the same hold on power, and within 150 years the Jews had (re)-established new institutions including an independent monarchy from c164 to 60 BCE and the synagogue. The synagogue was to become a rival institution to the Temple: more participatory, a new class of leaders, and ultimately a threat to the centralised power of the priestly families who maintained the cult at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Civil war among the Jews, and the intervention of Roman general, Pompey, which was to end nearly a century of Jewish independence as the Jews came under Roman domination, added further to an increasing volatile mix in the

Jewish community. Inevitably there would be those who would gain from the occupation, those who were prepared to live under Roman rule, and those (who became known as zealots) who wished to resist Roman occupation. Furthermore there were those who liked none of the above and retreated – the Qumran community, the authors or custodians of the Dead Sea scrolls, and the Essenes – plus, of course, the Samaritans whose dispute with the Jewish establishment went back centuries.

Out of these conditions emerged the two most populous groups: the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were primarily aristocratic and priestly – the establishment – who had most to gain from co-operation with Rome and who sought to protect their existing rights both to interpret Hebrew scripture and to minister at the central shrine, the Temple in Jerusalem. Their opposition was the Pharisees who tended to come from the new educated middle class without hereditary influence and power and whose base was the synagogue. As a footnote it is important to say that, following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70CE and the consequent loss by the Sadducees of their raison d'etre, the Pharisees became mainstream Judaism and were the Jewish authorities by the time the later parts of the Gospels were added or redacted.

Was Jesus a Pharisee? This may come as a surprise to Christians who see in the Gospels a pattern of disputation between Jesus and the Pharisees in which the Pharisees would be a suitable case for treatment by Freud! There are two modern views. An early opinion of Parkes (1960) is that Jesus was 'an independent preacher and teacher' (p.167). Maccoby (2003), however, is not in any doubt and makes a powerful case that Jesus was actually a member of the Pharisaic movement. Rayner (2006) more modestly observes that 'Jesus clearly had much in common with the Pharisees' (p.133). He was evidently not a Sadducee, being neither of a priestly family nor of aristocratic stock, and there is much evidence of his ambivalent view of the Temple. If one is familiar with rabbinic material, particularly the parables and other midrashic texts, it is hard not to agree with Young (1989) that 'one finds a remarkable similarity between gospel parables and those of the rabbis' (p.319) or at least concur with Hilton and Marshall (1988) that '…the Gospels and the rabbis use the same fund of stories for their parables' (p.75).

In addition to the genre of the parable Jesus in common with the Pharisees, but very much opposed by the Sadducees, believed in resurrection of the dead, and, in nearly all cases shows affiliation with the legal tradition of the Pharisees –although, as we shall see his skill was more as a preacher of *aggadah* (sermonic material) rather than as a *decisor* of halachah (which is law).

Until now I have been reluctant to utilise Gospel texts but I want to do so in order to reinforce one point which is often misunderstood by Jew and Christian alike. Whether Jesus was or was not a Pharisee can be debated but the Gospel impression that he was in some sense an enemy of the Pharisees is not

only, in my view, mistaken, but has made it harder for Jews to appreciate the Gospels themselves and is a literary device reflecting a change in circumstances. Jesus's dispute about healing on the Sabbath and his views on divorce are not fundamentally incompatible with Pharisaic teaching (however the Gospels or later commentators would like to think so) but in one case it is arguable that a story recorded in three Gospels and omitted from the fourth shows a growing animosity to the Pharisees which may reflect the views of the author rather than of Jesus. The matter concerns which is the greatest commandment. In Mark's Gospel (12:28-34) Jesus is asked, 'Which commandment is the first of all'. He responds in a typically Pharisaic manner and the challenging Pharisee replies, 'You are right'. A similar incident is reported by Luke (10:25-37) whereby a Pharisee seeks to test Jesus but a satisfactory answer is arrived at. The Gospel of Matthew (22:34-40) appears to be a combination of both accounts but is quickly followed in the following chapter (23) by Matthew's denunciation of 'scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites'.

Whether a Pharisee or not, Jesus had other gifts too which he shared in common with other Jewish groups of the day. First he may well have been a faith healer which would place him inside both the Hebrew Biblical tradition, the rabbinic tradition, and indeed contemporary in his own times with the Essenes. Many of Jesus's miracles were of the faith healing type, and, whilst I have little more belief in faith healing than I do in virgin births, it is proper to say that the evidence from both the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic legends indicates that faith healing was an important tool in the armoury of some religious leaders of the day.

Jesus, from a Jewish perspective, was also a preacher in the sense that rather like the Pharisaic teachers of the Talmud he conveyed in both parable and public preaching both clear and obscure messages. Some of his work is newly expressed but perfectly in accord with Jewish teaching, some is uncannily parallel, but, if one appreciates the breadth of styles that were available to the first century Jew (including, according to some scholars a school of independent preachers from the Galilee), it is even possible that some of Jesus' words might have been included in collections of Jewish material had not the interpretations of his death taken a different course.

Could Jesus be considered a prophet? The simple answer would be 'No' since according to Jewish tradition classical prophecy ceased after the closure of the canon. What was a prophet in the Hebrew tradition? The prophet was certainly human and spoke God's words concerning the moral state of the society and the future of the Jewish people. It is true that Jesus often seemingly spoke with the authority of a prophet, speaking in God's name as though what he was to say had been revealed to him. He had many of the prophetic attributes: charisma that could attract attention, a way with words, an ability to heal in the manner of Elijah and Elisha, and unpopularity with the political authorities of the day.

I remain open minded on that but not on my final and perhaps most controversial attribute of Jesus: his messiahship. The Jewish concept of the Messiah is largely, in my view, post Biblical but finds its origin in the idea that at

a given time Israel – the people and kingdom – will be restored in numerical strength and political independence, and, after the Jews have become a diaspora people, in a geographical sense too. The brutal occupation of the former independent Jewish Hasmonean kingdom by Rome, the existence of Jewish populations outside the traditional homeland, and the Hellenist idea of resurrection began to come together in the time of Jesus's life, and, as was to happen many times in Jewish history, it is likely that messianic expectation was high. Its hopes would have included: the overthrow of Rome, the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, the ingathering of Jews from outside of Israel, and some form of Day of Judgment including resurrection of the dead. The proof of any claim was to be in its fulfilment. The person who successfully ushered this in was the Messiah; a failure to do so condemned the Messiah as' false'. Was Jesus the Messiah is answered from a Jewish viewpoint by the facts on the ground!

Is it likely that Jesus would have been seen as, or claimed to be, the Messiah? It certainly seems from the evidence of the Gospels that he was not only considered to be so but that Jesus left enough ambiguity in both his words and deeds for him to be so appreciated. A direct declaration would have, of course, led to his arrest by the Roman authorities who frequently arrested and crucified Jewish leaders and potential troublemakers. The arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus indicates that, from the point of view of Rome and its Jewish collaborators, the popularity and actions of Jesus threatened them enough that they considered him a figure with Messianic potential, and, in the context of ambiguity in the Gospels and the prevailing conditions of the time, I take the view that Jesus did believe he was to have an instrumental role in restoring the physical and spiritual well being of the Jewish people.

I want to conclude by asking just one question. Does it matter that Jews have an informed, even positive view of Jesus? I think it does because it enables us to redefine the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It was previously characterised thus. Judaism was the parent religion and its value lay in its antiquity. It spawned a rebellious daughter, Christianity, which made up a pretty story about the life – or rather the death of a Jewish boy. Christianity, in its turn, had value in being new, modern in contrast to the now redundant, old fashioned ways of Judaism.

In truth both Judaism and Christianity have their origins in the Hebrew Bible but –rather than be seen as parent and child – they ought be considered siblings since both emerged as a response to Roman occupation and particularly the fall

of the Temple in 70CE. Neither has merit of age and each has equity of value. Siblings often experience rivalry especially when they are young but in maturity they are able to appreciate their common heritage valuing their similarities and at the same time their uniqueness. As Christianity has begun to recognise the Jewishness of Jesus which has gone a long way to enabling it to change its approach to Judaism so might a Jewish appreciation of Jesus lead to a new understanding of Christianity. If so, Jews and Christian might well transform the tragedy of the history of our relationship into a joint endeavour: to bring, in the words attributed to Jesus, the Jew, '…the kingdom of God' (Luke 18:21) into our needful world.

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