Johann Tobias Beck: Organic Continuity Between Judaism and Christianity

Judaism and Christianity had a strong organic relationship in the theology of Johann Tobias Beck (1804–1878). Having spent part of his theological life countering tendencies like those of de Wette, by the time of his death, he was regarded as the leading ‘Biblicist’.1 It was F. C. Baur who invited Beck to work in Tübingen,2 where he became a pioneer of biblical theology and ‘captivated’ Adolf Schlatter among others, at least for a time.3 The reason for Beck’s connection with Baur was a common appreciation for dialectical theology, but he did not share Baur’s fundamental ideas and was instead one of the leading figures within Swabian Pietism. A systematic theologian, Beck wrote several exegetical works, the most important of which is his commentary on Romans.4 He is thus another example of theological ‘general practitioners’, such as de Wette and F. C. Baur.5 As Beck is regarded as one of the architects of ‘biblical theology’, it is important to look at the place of Jews in his conception. His contribution is all the more interesting because he interacts critically with both de Wette and Baur—even if not always explicitly. Despite differences of opinion, Beck was also friendly with de Wette in Basel.6

2 For a brief biography, see Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz, “Beck, Johann Tobias”, Verlag Traugott Bautz, Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon, Bd IV. Much separated Baur and Beck, and at first sight, the fact that Baur favoured Beck seems peculiar. However, to a certain degree, both shared an idealistic view of history in the vein of Schelling and Hegel, see above for Baur; for Beck, see Karl Gerhard Steck, Die Idee des Heilsgeschichte. Hofmann-Schlatter-Cullmann, ed. Karl Barth and Max Geiger, vol. 56, Theologische Studien (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag A. G. Zollikon, 1959), 16–17, and below in this book.
Lutheran theology, that of justification as a non-forensic act and that of a coming Millennium, Beck was not fully accepted by confessional Lutheran theology either.\footnote{Hirsch, \textit{Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie}, V, 139–140.}

\textit{An Organic View}

Presenting the faithfulness of God, Beck uses a vivid seed-tree imagery, making Abraham the point where God enters in to show his faithfulness; this “decisive point” was chosen from among humanity as the place where the “seed of salvation” would attach itself.\footnote{Johann Tobias Beck, \textit{Die Christliche Lehr-Wissenschaft nach den biblischen Urkunden. Ein Versuch von J. T. Beck}, vol. 1. Die Logik der christlichen Lehre (Stuttgart: Verlag der Chr. Belser’schen Buchhandlung, 1841), 335–336.} After a process of division into tribes and peoples, God began to prepare an “instrument and ground” (\textit{Organ und Boden}) for the seed of blessing, the beginning seed of a kingdom of God among the nations of the world. Like a mustard seed, it reaches down into a specific individual and the family that grows around him. To start with, this takes shape in a popular (\textit{Volkstümlich}) constitution, later in a vast tree that extends its branches all over the world, spreading until it finally joins into One Crown. The core tribes of the Semites maintained their faith in the name of Yahweh. They did not enter “the ethnic process of transformation”, since they continued their life as shepherds. Only by maintaining patriarchalism (\textit{Vater-Regiment}) and sticking together as families could they survive.\footnote{Ibid., 337.}

God has elected this people, Beck writes, a people wandering among other peoples and developing “greatness of soul and humility of spirit”. Abraham is the rock, out of which a house would be built, and God made a covenant with the patriarchs, starting a development where they, walking the “way of Jehovah”, would go from the mere order of nature into a life of increasing blessing.\footnote{Ibid., 339–340.} Using the tree imagery, Beck demonstrates that the history from Abraham to Christ is an organic unity. The individual’s relation to faith is emphasised, analogous to the work that took place through that special individual, Abraham. As a “pedagogical middle stage”, between the period of minority and the