Refuting Christian Polemics

One of the problems facing the emerging Church in the first centuries of this era was how to deal with the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, the preeminence of the Law as a way of life was antithetical to fundamental Christian teaching as formulated by Paul who maintained that salvation comes not through the observance of the Law but through faith. He likewise held that with the coming of Jesus the Law was fulfilled. What then was the role of the Law to be in Christian teaching? The claim that the Hebrew Scriptures was theirs was an absolute necessity for the new movement since it provided it with legitimacy by affirming its antiquity. Proof of one’s antiquity in the ancient world was indispensable in advancing one’s credibility. The interpretation of Matt. 5.17 points up the dilemma the early Christians faced: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” The implication of this verse is that the Law will be in force “until all is accomplished.” Clement of Alexandria, among others, stated that the coming of Jesus marked the end of the Law as the central aspect of life.

1 E.g. Gal. 3.23ff. 2 Ibid. 3.25; Rom. 8.2 et al. 3 Clement, Stromata VI: “Dominus autem ‘Non venit ad solvendam legem, sed ad impendam’ ad implendam autem, non ut cui aliquid deesset, sed quod legis prophetiae per ejus adventum completae fuerint.”

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Faith in the saving power of a divine messiah, superseding the Law, was only one problem involved in assigning a place for Hebrew Scriptures in Christian theology. Another was how to treat its non-legal elements. These passages served several purposes for the Church. One was that they were useful as predictions announcing the advent of the messiah in the person of Jesus. Another was to understand the prophetic chapters as directed to mankind as a whole, but particularly to Israel. For those of Israel who accept Jesus as the divine incarnate and as their personal redeemer, they were to receive the reward of eternal life in the Kingdom. Conversely, those who reject him and his mission would be relegated to eternal damnation. In short, the prophetic passages predicting a collective life of blessing and well-being all refer to Christians, “New Israel,” whereas the prophetic indictments of the people and the accompanying condemnation and punishments refer to the obstinate Jews. Of these prophetic predictions those dealing with the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in 586 B.C.E. were of particular interest to Christian exegetes. They saw in them proof of God’s rejection of “Old Israel” and they applied these passages to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. which followed the crucifixion only by some forty years. This selective and homiletic use of Scripture with clear polemic intent directed against Jews and Judaism, was summed up with bitter sarcasm by the Church Father Irenaeus,4 “The Jews, had they been cognizant of our future existence, and that we should use these proofs from the Scriptures which declare that all of her nation will inherit eternal life, but that they who boast themselves as being the House of Jacob are disinherited from the Grace of God, would never have hesitated themselves to burn their own Scripture.”

It is against this background of polemical and partisan treatment of Scriptural passages by Christian writers that rather strange interpretations of several Biblical verses cited in the Talmud can be understood:

Jerusalem has become among them a thing unclean (Heb. גַּלְגָּל) [Lam. 1.17]. R. Judah said in the name of Rab: This is to be understood as a blessing. As an unclean [menstruous] woman becomes permissible [to her husband], so, too, will Jerusalem be reinstated.5

She [Jerusalem] has become like a widow (ibid. 1.1). R. Judah said: This is to be understood as a blessing. “As a widow,” but not an actual widow,

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4 Irenaeus, Contra Haereses III xxi (PG VII p. 946).
5 Ta'an 20a. See also Sanh. 104b; Lam.R. 1.3; Yal. Lam. 1004.