ORTHODOXY IN FIRST CENTURY JUDAISM?
A RESPONSE TO N. J. McELENEY

BY

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In an article which appeared in this journal entitled "Orthodoxy in Judaism of the First Christian Century," Rev. NEIL J. McELENEY sought to demonstrate that "there existed a firmly accepted Jewish orthodoxy in the first century and that this was even then a definable belief (actually expressed in part in the šema') which was accepted by all who called themselves Israelites" ¹). While the term "orthodoxy" is never defined with any precision in the article, McELENEY has provided a succinct definition in a related earlier article: "consensus on a doctrinal minimum beyond which one could not go without danger of exclusion from Israel" ²). The minimum content of this "universal Jewish orthodoxy" centered, according to McELENEY, in three doctrines: (1) the God of Israel, (2) the People of Israel, and (3) the practise of the Mosaic Law ³). Further, the author supposes that in the period following the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the "one more generic orthodoxy which had existed in Judaism at the beginning of the century" was replaced by two more specific and detailed orthodoxies, that of Pharisaic Judaism and early Christianity ⁴). The article concludes with a rather astonishing statement: "Are not Pharisaic Judaism and Christianity... both fully worthy of the name Judaism today as parallel developments of a wider Jewish orthodoxy of the first century" ⁵)?

The present author regards Rev. McELENEY's central thesis, together with each of the supportive arguments adduced as both

⁴) Ibid., p. 42.
⁵) Ibid.
fallacious and a serious distortion of the religious integrity and structure of first century Judaism. Each of the following sections constitutes an attempt to refute the constituent arguments which McELENEY uses to support his central thesis.

In order to introduce his primary thesis, McELENEY refers to two Christian scholars, Marcel SIMON and D. S. RUSSELL, who articulate the not uncommon view among contemporary New Testament scholars that first century Judaism was much more concerned with orthopraxy (accepted practice) than with orthodoxy (right belief) 6). The remainder of the article is then devoted to the thesis that what I shall call theological orthodoxy, rather than orthopraxy, was of primary significance in first century Judaism.

Both Jewish and Christian scholars are generally cognizant of the fundamentally different structural significance which the belief/myth system has for each faith. In contrast to Christianity (in its dominant forms from the late second century on) and Islam, Judaism has rarely, if ever, regarded an articulated belief system as the primary focus of its religious life and thought 7). Jewish scholars are virtually unanimous in the opinion that uniformity of observance (orthopraxy) is a more fundamental constituent of historical Judaism than is theological orthodoxy 8). This judgment is not based on the contention that theology was or is non-existent in Judaism, for one popular

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6) The author also mentions several scholars who hold that no doctrinal orthodoxy existed in earliest Christianity (W. BAUER, H. KOESTER, H. D. BETZ). It would appear that McELENEY's primary interest in positing a universal Jewish doctrinal orthodoxy for the first century C.E. is that it provides support for a similar position (mutatis mutandis) in regard to New Testament Christianity.

7) The Karaites and Maimonides, both under the influence of Islamic philosophy and theology, developed creedal statements for Judaism. However, even the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides were disputed by his contemporaries, Hasdai Crescas and Joseph Albo. These exceptions to the general tendency of Judaism seem to support, through the fact that they are isolated exceptions, the generalization that theological orthodoxy is indeed tangential to historical Judaism.