ORTHODOXY IN JUDAISM OF THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CENTURY
REPLIES TO DAVID E. AUNE AND LESTER L. GRABBE

BY

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1. David E. Aune

D. E. AUNE has taken issue in this journal with an article of mine which appeared here earlier 2). In that article, I argued that in the moment when Christianity began there existed in Judaism an orthodoxy which required belief in, and acceptance of (1) Yahweh, the God of Israel, (2) the special status of the Chosen People, and (3) the Mosaic Law. Eisegetically, AUNE writes, “In pressing his thesis of the dominance and centrality of a theological orthodoxy supposedly characteristic of first century Judaism, Rev. McELENEY has asked us to believe too many impossible things before breakfast” 3). I had also said, when speaking of the first Christian century, “Unfortunately, no one voice spoke for the religion of Judaism in this period” 4). AUNE responds to this by saying, “Unfortunate for whom? Unfortunate only for McELENEY and others who would attempt to project their own highly structured, centralized and theologically defined religious beliefs and categories into historical and religious contexts where they simply do not fit” 5). In short, AUNE regards my “central thesis together with each of the supportive arguments adduced as both fallacious and a serious distortion of the religious integrity and structure of first century Judaism” 6).

Leaving aside whether AUNE’s comments have the dispassionate tone one might prefer to see in scholarly writing, I should like to point out that he has not really understood my article but rather misrepresents it. Since AUNE writes in his article, “we must stress the fact that the intention of the present article is not to deny that the Judaism contemporaneous with the rise of Christianity had a belief system” 7), and since my own article specified three major elements of Jewish belief at that time, one

1) David E. AUNE, “Orthodoxy in First Century Judaism? A Response to N. J. McEleney”, JJS 7 (1976), 1-10. This will be cited hereafter as “AUNE”.
3) AUNE, p. 10.
4) Orthodoxy, p. 23.
5) AUNE, p. 6.
6) AUNE, pp. 1-2.
7) AUNE, p. 10.
might think AUNE had no particular reason to disagree so strongly with me. Apparently, he does, however, for he twists me into divorcing belief from action and then opting for belief as though action were unimportant. Such an over-intellectualization of Jewish orthodoxy in the century of which we speak is AUNE's not mine. Of course, once one creates a straw man, it is easy enough to burn that creation. Here, I should like to recall for the interested reader my earlier words, "All branches of Judaism in the first century believed that God had revealed himself to a particular people at a specific moment in its history and that this divine revelation was significant for the salvation of both the community and its individual members. It was to this revelation of God that all groups ultimately referred in the doctrinal debate. Through this revelation, Israel had established its relationship with God, and consequently, a correct apprehension of the divine self-communication was the indispensable point of departure for the religious practices which acceptance of this revelatory gift imposed upon Israel. Misapprehension of God's revelation brought with it a wrong relationship to God and resulted inevitably in false practice. Thus right belief was held to be supremely important for the community and individual salvation and deviation from it was punishable by eventual exclusion from the community". (Italics added).

AUNE also claims, "that the belief system was definitely subordinate in both a functional and structural way to Jewish traditions of ritual practice and ethical behaviour". Thus, his central charge against me is that I subscribe to the notion that one's actions spring from one's beliefs, beliefs which must then logically precede these actions. To this charge, I plead guilty. I think most people would.

I might also note that in choosing the specific points of my minimal but generic orthodoxy, I am far from alone. Louis Jacobs writes, "Jewish thinkers who hold that an essence of Judaism can be perceived tend to speak of a 'normative Judaism', with the implication that at the heart of the Jewish faith there is a hard, imperishable core, to be externally preserved, together with numerous peripheral ideas, expressed to be sure by great Jewish thinkers in different ages but not really essential to the faith, which could be dismissed if necessary as deviations."

"Unfortunately for this line of thinking no criteria are available for distinguishing the essential from the ephemeral, so that a strong element of subjectivity is present in this whole approach".

Thus far, Jacobs seems to be closer to AUNE's views. But Jacobs continues, "However, if due caution is exercised and no exaggerated claims made, the idea of a normative Judaism is not without value in that it calls attention to the undeniable fact that for all the variety of moods in Judaism's history there does emerge among the faithful a kind of consensus on the main issues... Historically considered it is true that Judaism is an amalgam of three ideas—belief in God, God's revelation of the Torah to Israel, and Israel as the people which lives by the Torah in obedience to God.

8) Orthodoxy, pp. 22-23.
9) AUNE, p. 10.