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Frederic Seager. *The Jewish Challenge: Or the Vicissitudes of Judaism in the West.* Montreal: Picard, 1996. xvii + 270 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9681136-0-8.

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Conversion Conviction

This rather slim volume by Frederic Seager has the outward manifestation of being just another dash through thousands of years of Jewish history. As such, it must, of necessity, offer only tantalizing glimpses at high points and inglorious moments in that history. If a recitation of facts was all that this book provided, then other more complete texts on the subject could be recommended. But Seager is an author with a mission–he has tired of the traumatizing effect of the Holocaust on the Jewish religion and people, and on the writing of its history. He believes that Jews are reluctant to face the problem of the Christian world's woeful misinformation about what Judaism stands for. Now that antisemitism has generally subsided, Seager reasons that Jews should proselytize, just as they did in ancient times. Seager's book is less a scholarly attempt to provide documented corroboration for his argument than an emotional appeal for the thesis. The reader may be occasionally tempted to agree with Seager's conclusions, but even the converted being preached to may still think, "Yes, perhaps, but..."

Unlike numerous recent books, usually by Christian historians and theologians, Seager does not attempt a dialectic between Jews and Christians or strive for consensus building. Instead, he asserts the mutual exclusivity of the two religions, and points to that tension as the driving force behind antisemitism. A constant theme of the book is that Christianity, following the advice of the apostle Paul, has always respected and allied itself with the ruling power, resulting in a loss of its moral values. Seager gives many examples, the most recent being the election of Eugenio Pacelli as Pope Pius XII. When this was done, in order to maintain good relations with Hitler, the church abandoned all pretense of moral authority. Even historian Arnold Toynbee concluded that Christianity had lost its way and that Judaism would have to reverse the decline of the West. Jews would merely be continuing in their original role of teaching the world about a unique God who is the author of history and whose bidding must be done. Only then will oppression and injustice disappear from earth. At least, these are the author's arguments, woven from carefully selected excerpts.

In the first few chapters where Seager finds early Christianity wanting, Seager owes much to recent scholarship of the life of Christ by John Dominic Crossan, Geza Vermes, John P. Meier, and the Jesus Seminar, among others. Not all these authors would agree with Seager's trenchant criticisms. But they have closely reexamined the accuracy of the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament and found that many myths propounded by the early Church led to lasting mistreatment of Jews. Time after time Seager demonstrates how Jewish survival was dependent on the perception of Jewish usefulness to society. If one country found them expendable, another land welcomed them and exploited their talents. The collapse of monarchy after World War I eliminated the basic protection which had been afforded the Jews. Throughout the book, Seager weighs the counter evidence and adeptly explains why his theses remain intact.

Seager cites the example of French historian Jules Isaac, saved by a priest during the war, who was given the opportunity to read many works by Protestant and Catholic theologians, almost all containing the accusation of deicide. Isaac's book *Jesus et Israel* caused a sensation by pointing out a causal connection between Christian teaching and antisemitism. Seager asserts that Hitler's speeches and Nazi ideology were inspired by Christian theology. Thus, Christians need to reexamine the roots of their religion. Seager contends that if they were aware of the true nature of the Pharisees and their interaction with Jesus, the Gospels wold be robbed of their power.

Seager argues that Christianity's message of salvation has little current appeal, since with longer life spans, people are more interested in life on earth. Hell was made obsolete by Auschwitz, a literal hell on earth. The nuclear

age and monstrous genocides of the twentieth century discredited secular humanism's thesis that man has the capacity for self-improvement. The salvation of mankind therefore depends on something other than man–and Christianity has been found wanting.

Seager suggests that Jews recognize the fundamental opposition of the Church to Judaism and accept the challenge of re-opening Judaism to the nations by active proselytism. Not to do so would be an abdication of the role of enlightening others assigned to the children of Israel in the Covenant. Proselytism, Seager believes, would entail a rejuvenation of Jewish life and culture, focused for too long on the survival of the State of Israel and wallowing in pity over the Holocaust. Jews, by virtue of having to explain Judaism to others, would have to better comprehend it themselves.

Seager convincingly argues that Jews must surmount their age-long tendency to worry about giving offense and seize the moment. An optimistic view about humanity and history would permit them to realize that other nations are capable of moral progress and the Jews must be a light unto those nations. This book may give offense to some Christians, but it nevertheless has value for them. Most of all it is a call to action for Jews who have grown weary of the history of their religion being constructed around the Holocaust.

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