

## *The Question of Uniqueness in the Teaching of Jesus*

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**The Ethel M. Wood Lecture 15 February 1990**

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### **Introduction**

One of the favourite things which New Testament scholars and, probably, Christians in general say about Jesus is that he was 'unique'. If we think historically, we know two things about the topic from the outset: no two people are alike; there is nothing new under the sun. Like all clichés, these two are true, and the hard thing is to know how to apply them. In this respect these two statements are like general moral maxims and folk wisdom: one or the other will meet every situation, but you do not know in advance which formula to apply when. I live by two maxims: nothing ventured nothing gained, and better safe than sorry. My trouble has been venturing when I should have played safe and the reverse. But one of these two maxims is always true. So it is with regard to similarity and dissimilarity among human beings. Either 'nothing new' will apply, or 'no two people are alike'. They might even both apply at the same time, as clichés often do. My wife once said to me, on the same topic, 'that's just like a man', and 'only you could do something like that'.

Uniqueness is frequently attributed to all the major aspects of Jesus' career, or, more precisely, to aspects of all the major aspects. Jesus taught, he healed and he drew followers, and in all these cases someone will say that some points are unique. Some brief examples:

To a Jewish mind, it would have been irreverent and therefore unthinkable to call God by this familiar word [*abba*, 'daddy']. It was something new, something unique and unheard of that Jesus dared to take this step and to speak with God as a child speaks with his father, simply, intimately, securely.<sup>1</sup>

Second example: After correctly pointing out that Jesus was not precisely like Theudas, the Egyptian and other Jewish prophets, Hengel concludes that Jesus' 'charisma' breaks through the possibilities of categorization in terms of the phenomenology of

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religion. The very uniqueness of the way in which Jesus called individuals to 'follow after' him is an expression of this underivable 'messianic' authority.<sup>2</sup> I agree entirely that Jesus was different from John the Baptist, Theudas, the Egyptian, and the others—all of whom were

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (London, SCM, 1965), p. 21; *ABBA. Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (ET Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1981), p.87; *Nachfolge and Charisma* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1968), pp. 77f.

different from one another.<sup>3</sup> I do not know, however, that only Jesus felt full of authority to call others.

One of the most interesting things about saying that this or that is unique is that the claim implies what one might at first think to be uniqueness on the part of the claimant: that he or she is omniscient. Omniscience, it will turn out, is by no means unique to any individual New Testament scholar: most have it, or claim to have it. We should all, however, grant that our knowledge is limited. We have very few personal prayers from other Jews of the first century, and so are not able to prove a negative, that no 'Jew' (that is, no Jew other than Jesus) could have said *abba*. We possess no stories at all about how Theudas and others called their followers, and so we cannot say that only Jesus called people with an authority 'grounded in God himself'.<sup>4</sup>

It is useful to know what about Jesus was different, and I enjoy pursuing questions of similarities and dissimilarities. We learn principally by comparison and contrast. I do not wish to criticize the perfectly valid pursuit of distinctive traits.

The question of uniqueness in the teaching of Jesus, however, is seldom the disinterested study of similarities and dissimilarities. There are two major problems, one historical and one theological, and they are so severe that they render most discussions of the topic by New Testament scholars worthless or worse—misleading with regard to Jesus and denigrating with regard to Judaism. I shall spend most of this essay on the first problem, the historical claim that this or that is unique, and relatively little on the second, the theological problem which the claim to uniqueness partly reveals, partly creates. Finally, I shall propose a way of viewing the issue which is constructive, both historically and theologically.

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For the discussion of the historical uniqueness of Jesus' teaching, I shall consider three passages from the synoptic gospels: the 'antitheses' of the Sermon on the Mount in general (Matt. 5.21-48); one line from this section in particular (5.44: 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'), and the double love commandment, love God and love the neighbour (Mark 12.28-34).

### Sample cases

1. The 'antitheses'. While many scholars have recognized that the so-called 'antitheses' are not antithetical, numerous others have regarded them as giving the very essence of Jesus' supposed demolition of Judaism. I shall offer only a few examples. Käsemann focused attention on the opening words, 'but I say', and emphasized both the 'but' and the 'I'—*but on the contrary I*—as being a unique claim to authority.

the words *egō de legō* embody a claim to an authority which rivals and challenges that of Moses. But anyone who claims an authority rivalling and challenging Moses has *ipso facto* set himself above Moses.... Rabbis may oppose each other in debate by the use of the formula 'But I say'; but this is only a formal parallel, because, in the case we are discussing, it is not another rabbi but the Scriptures and Moses himself who constitute the

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<sup>3</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1965), pp. 239f.

<sup>4</sup> Hengel, *Nachfolge*, p. 77.

other party. To this there are no Jewish parallels, nor indeed can there be. For the Jew who does what is done here has cut himself off from the community of Judaism—or else he brings the Messianic Torah and is therefore the Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

This packs an awful lot of misinformation into a few lines. ‘Brings the Messianic Torah’ implies that it was generally thought that the Messiah would bring a new law which would replace that of Moses, but there is no evidence in favour of such a view. More importantly, Käsemann supposes that the so-called antitheses are against the law of Moses, but they are not.

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Schrage, though noting that Matthew did not understand the ‘antitheses’ as antithetical, agreed with Käsemann in holding that in these verses the historical Jesus opposed Moses and Scripture itself. This was unique. ‘In Judaism we never find a doctrine proposed that is counter to the Torah.’<sup>6</sup>

These dogmatic views (‘In Judaism we never find...’, ‘there are no Jewish parallels, nor indeed can there be’) are in error. Let me start with the simplest point, whether or not the sayings attributed to Jesus can be read as being contrary to the law. They cannot. They supplement it and heighten it. The person who follows Jesus’ commands in these passages will never transgress the law itself. If Jesus’ followers never desire to commit adultery, they will not commit it; if they never become angry, they will not murder; if they do not divorce (the third antithesis), they will never transgress the law which prohibits a man from remarrying his first spouse after divorce and marriage to a different person. It is not against the law to be stricter than the law requires. If it were, then one would have to say of the entire Qumran community that either they brought the messianic torah and were the collective messiah, or they broke with Judaism. Neither is true, though many of the special rules of the Dead Sea scrolls or the Covenant of Damascus heighten the law, as do the ‘antitheses’, and one of them is substantively the same: the prohibition of remarriage. Throughout the legal literature from Qumran, the law is made stricter and is modified in other ways. In one document, the Temple Scroll (we now know, though Käsemann did not), the sect attributed their laws about the temple to God himself, since the Scroll is written in the first person, as if spoken by God.

Here is a claim to authority which at least matches Jesus’.

Others also went beyond the law,<sup>7</sup> just as they sometimes made it easier. The Pharisees in particular relaxed some important points of biblical law, such as the prohibition of carrying dishes out of the house on the sabbath (made less stringent by the rules

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<sup>5</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (ET London: SCM, 1964), p. 37; ‘Das Problem des historischen Jesus’, repr. in *Exegetische Versuche und Bessinnungen I* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht,<sup>3</sup> 1964), pp. 187-214, here p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (ET Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), pp. 66, 147f. Unfortunately I was unable to find a copy of the original.

<sup>7</sup> Most Jews went beyond the law, for example, in avoiding corpse-impurity: *AJ* 3.262; 18.38.

of *'enûvîn*). This is much bolder than heightening the law, since it permits transgression of the law as written.

Thus the contents of the 'antitheses' do not show an 'unheard of' authority.

With regard to the form: 'You have heard that it was said to the men of old' is not the same as 'Moses wrote' (see Mark 10.3-5) or 'Moses commanded' (Matt. 8.4), which we should expect if Jesus were discussing the authority of Moses and the Scripture, as distinct from offering modifications on specific points. 'Heard that it was said' points towards interpretation.<sup>8</sup> The Matthaean Jesus does not discuss other interpretations, but what he presents as his own view is interpretation, not a new law. 'Do not kill' means also 'do not be angry'; 'do not commit adultery' means also 'do not look with lust'.

It will be noted, however, that in all but one of the 'antitheses' what 'was said to the men of old' is in fact in the Bible. If an average Jewish exegete wished to *modify* the Mosaic law, he would have done it just as the Matthaean Jesus did, by attributing to others the law that he wished to change, so as not to confront Moses himself: 'they have said', rather than 'Moses said'. The Qumran sectarians were bolder. They claimed to have 'secrets' which on the one hand were in the Mosaic law and on the other hand had been revealed only to the Zadokite founders of the sect. That is, they altered Moses' law by attributing new material to it. As far as we know, anyone else who wanted to change the law would *claim* to be modifying *interpretation* and would not say that he was correcting Moses.<sup>9</sup>

The point of not naming Moses in Matt. 5 is to avoid direct criticism of him for not being strict enough. Others besides Matthew used this device when they revised the law. I give one example of many available. The 'Elders' (Pharisees?) rendered impure the priest who was going to burn the red heifer 'because of the Sadducees: that they should not be able to say, "it must be

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performed only by them on whom the sun has set"' (Parah 3.7) That is, the Elders wanted to force the priest to carry out this most sacred act in a state of semi-purity, one recognized by the Pharisees but not by others: he could immerse again, but if he was going to burn the red heifer that day, he could not wait for the sun to set. The wording of the mishnaic passage is 'so that the Sadducees could not say...'; but in fact it is the Bible itself that says that the sun must have set: 'He who burns the heifer shall wash his clothes in water and bathe his body in water, and shall be impure until evening,' (Num. 19.8).<sup>10</sup> When the Pharisees/Rabbis/Elders

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<sup>8</sup> David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956), pp. 55-62; W.D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), pp. 101-103. It appears that Davies has now changed his view; see below.

<sup>9</sup> On the supposed Pharisaic doctrine of 'oral law' which went back to Moses, see Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (London: SCM, 1990), pp. 97-130. For the purposes of this paper, I am leaving out of account unconscious changes of the law, which were quite numerous. For example, Philo, Pseudo-Philo and Josephus all thought that Moses required assembly on the sabbath (*JLJM* p. 78). This kind of unconscious or semi-conscious change in the law was not presented as interpretation.

<sup>10</sup> It appears that both parties to the dispute accepted that Num. 19.8 refers to the priest before he burns the heifer, Num. 19.7 to his purification afterwards; in either case, both sides thought that the priest should be pure when he burned the heifer, and the Elders tried to insist on a non-biblical half-purity.

wanted to change the law they simply attributed it to others, not to Moses. That is precisely the technique used in Matt. 5.

Further, we note that in the rabbinic passage the Elders wanted to oppose, not heighten the law. The priest who followed them would transgress Num. 19.8. This again is a more extreme claim to authority than that of Jesus.

The rest of the terminology in this section of Matthew also points towards interpretation. ‘But I say to you’ is similar to ‘and concerning [this] we say’ (*v<sup>e</sup>al[zeh] ‘anahnû ‘ômerîm*) in 4QMMT,<sup>11</sup> or like ‘R. X says’ in rabbinic literature. The verb ‘to say’ in legal debate means ‘to interpret’. The use of the first person singular depends on the literary genre; in and of itself it does not imply any special claim, except that the speaker is a worthy interpreter. The Greek conjunction *de* in ‘but I say’ may mean either ‘and’ or ‘but’. If a translation, it probably does not represent a strongly adversative ‘but’ (such as ‘*ella*’), but the simple Hebrew *vav* (‘and’ or ‘but’). (This sort of legal discussion might well have been held in Hebrew.) If one imagines that ‘but I say to you’ was translated from Aramaic, there would have been no conjunction at all.

In sum: The law is modified by being heightened, and no one who followed Matt. 5.21-48 would break the law. In content, the ‘antitheses’ are not antithetical. The vocabulary is that of debate over interpretation, and the wording avoids direct criticism of

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Moses for being too lenient. Other Jewish interpreters were bolder *vis à vis* Moses, and the passage does not constitute an unparalleled assertion of authority.

I said that there were two problems with claiming uniqueness, and I wish briefly to illustrate them now. One is historical: Käsemann and Schrage did not assess all the Jewish material available to them on the topic of a claim to authority, nor on the question of modifying the law by heightening it. They failed to do their homework. In Käsemann’s case, the Scroll which makes the boldest claim to authority (11QT) had not been published when he wrote. The historian must never forget his or her limits and should moderate his or her claims accordingly. As a theologian, Käsemann wished to tie a substantive question of Christianity—whether Jesus was ‘Messiah’—directly to what he (Käsemann) regarded as unique. This is an extremely strange way of doing Christology, though a large number, perhaps a majority of New Testament scholars engage in it.

I also said that there would be a constructive proposal at the end. I do not wish to give it away, but let me point out an aspect of Käsemann’s remark which is pertinent: his view of the large issue of Jesus’ uniqueness in claiming authority depends in part on the interpretation of three very small words in Greek, *egō de legō*. A great deal hinges on the *de*, which (we noted above) can equally mean ‘and’ or ‘but’, and which need not be adversative. In Käsemann’s interpretation it must be. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, a language which often gets by without conjunctions. Even if we have no doubts at all about the accuracy of the gospels, we would still have to admit that we cannot know, by looking at the Greek, whether or not Jesus used an

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<sup>11</sup> Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, ‘An Unpublished Halakhic Letter from Qumran’, *Biblical Archaeology Today*, ed. Joseph Aviram and others, 1985, pp. 400-407, here pp. 403f.

adversative conjunction in Aramaic. This does not yet, I realize, sound like a constructive proposal, but is on the way to one.

Other scholars, though more knowledgeable about Jewish literature, nevertheless want to find things in the antitheses that are 'unique'. Davies and Allison now propose that 'but I say to

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you' is set in contrast not to Jewish interpretation but to the Bible itself.<sup>12</sup> Yet the antitheses (in their view) are not antithetical; they do not contradict the law, but rather transcend it.<sup>13</sup> Are they unique? No individual point is entirely unique, though Jesus' statements 'may well have struck his contemporaries as novel'.<sup>14</sup> This is much more modest than saying that 'no Jew could have said such things'. Jesus does distinguish himself from others, however, in claiming that God demands a radical obedience that cannot be casuistically formulated'.<sup>15</sup> This view presupposes an overall context in each case. Jesus, unlike other Jews, was not a casuist (so Davies and Allison). Context, as we shall see later, is very important in the discussion of uniqueness.

2. As our second example, we shall consider the last of the so-called antitheses:

You have heard that it was said, 'You should love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.... (Matt. 5.43 f.).

This passage quotes Lev. 19.18, 'love your neighbour as yourself', and then it attributes to others the reverse, 'hate your enemy'. The second half is not a quotation from the Bible, though it may be considered a reasonable summary of some passages, such as those in which God required the Israelites to kill their enemies (e.g. Joshua 10.8).

Jesus' admonition to love one's enemies is, as most people recognize, the positive form of the sentence 'repay no one evil for evil'. This commandment is in the Bible: 'Do not say, "I will repay evil"', Proverbs 20.22, where it is an application of the rule that God will avenge evil. In Proverbs, it means, You as an individual should not repay evil for evil; leave punishment to God. Paul quotes it in Rom. 12.17, and he retains the original meaning, 'never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God' (12.19).

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The sentence, however, was taken up in Jewish literature and generalized. Thus, for example, *Joseph and Aseneth*, a first-century Jewish romance, written in Egypt: in the novel, some Gentiles are out to get the Jews, and the Jews fight back. One Jew has just wounded Pharaoh's son, and intends to polish him off, when his colleague says.

By no means, brother, will you do this deed, because we are men who worship God, and it does not befit a man who worships God to repay evil for evil nor to trample underfoot a

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<sup>12</sup> W.D. Davies and Dale C Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, vol. 1, 1988), p.506.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 506f.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 521.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.521.

fallen (man) nor to oppress his enemy till death. And now, put your sword back into its place, and come, help me, and we will heal him of his wound... (29.3f.)

It is quite natural to follow the negative command, do not do evil, with a positive admonition. Paul proceeds by quoting Prov. 25.21-22, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head' (Rom. 12.20). And in *Joseph and Aseneth*, as we just saw, there is a subsequent positive command, 'help me, and we will heal him'.

That one should do good, or at least refrain from doing evil, even to enemies, was well known in Judaism. As Josephus put it,

We must... show consideration even to declared enemies. He [Moses] does not allow us to bum up their country or to cut down their fruit trees, and forbids even the spoiling of fallen combatants; he has taken measures to prevent outrage to prisoners of war, especially women. (*Apion* 2.212).

The prohibition of burning the enemies' country is not actually in the Mosaic law. We see here that, since the time of Joshua, there had been some development of rules for treating enemies when at war. Josephus is much kinder.

I do not know of any Jewish source which has the explicit words

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'love your enemies'. Equally unparalleled, as far as my knowledge goes, is 'pray for those who persecute you',<sup>16</sup> which seems to be a specific application of the general principle. If we range outside of Judaism, we find that Epictetus urges that one should love (*philein*) the man who flogs him (*Discourses* III.22.54).<sup>17</sup>

There are three ways of saving the teaching of Jesus on enemies for the category 'unique'. One is to focus on the fact that his commandments are positive, not negative. One scholar wrote that 'in Joseph and Asenath the commands relating to neighbor... and enemy... are all prohibitions'.<sup>18</sup> That is not true, as we just saw. "Let us heal him" is not a prohibition. The scholar in question knew that passage, but stopped reading it one word too soon.

But while on the topic, let me say a few more words about positive and negative commandments. As probably everyone knows, several Jewish sources contain the 'negative golden rule': do not do to anyone what you would not wish to be done to you (so Tobit, Philo and the Babylonian Talmud, in the name of Hillel).<sup>19</sup> Jesus put it the other way around: 'Whatever you wish that people would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets' (Matt. 7.12). There are two observations. When others used the negative version,

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<sup>16</sup> For proposed parallels, see J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 2 vols., 1981, 1985), on Luke 6.28; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, p. 553. I do not find any of these quite convincing, though there are some similarities.

<sup>17</sup> John Piper, 'Love your enemies'. *Jesus' love command in the synoptic gospels and in the early Christian paraenesis*. A history of the tradition and interpretation of its uses (SNTSMS 38; Cambridge: University Press, 1979), p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Piper, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Tobit 4.15; Philo, *Hypothetica* 7.6; Shabbat 31a.

they did not intend to exclude positive good deeds. Thus Philo followed the negative rule by positive admonitions, such as 'If the poor or the cripple beg food of him he must give it as an offering of religion to God' (*Hypothetica* 7.6). Similarly when Paul showed knowledge of the negative rule, 'love does no wrong to a neighbour' (Rom. 13.10), he did not limit proper behaviour to the avoidance of evil. The distinction between positive and negative is often overstated.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, there is the question of the appropriate wording of commandments. A negative law is stronger than a positive one. 'Do not kill' is weighed quite differently in law from the implied positive, 'help people live'. The negative is also more explicit. We know what it means not to cut down someone's fruit trees, we do not always know how to 'love'. Thus if one wanted to give a specific and more-or-less observable rule, one would use the negative. I think that we should not think ill of the author

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of Tobit, Philo, Hillel or Paul for saying, in effect, 'do no wrong'.

Having said all that, I hasten to add that the positive statements, 'do to others', 'love your enemies', which are attributed to Jesus, are rhetorically forceful and penetrating. 'Unique' is not quite the word which does them justice. As Davies and Allison put it,

Despite all the parallels just listed, the succinct, arresting imperative, 'Love your enemies', is undoubtedly the invention of Jesus' own mind, and it stands out as fresh and unforgettable.<sup>21</sup>

I think that this is the better way of putting the matter: succinct, arresting, fresh and unforgettable.

The second way of finding uniqueness in 'love your enemies' is to point out that the overall meaning of Jesus' message is distinctive, and that consequently the individual points take on a distinctive significance. Jesus preached the kingdom of God, a new age in which human relations would be or should be transformed. That is quite different from the Stoic desire to be indifferent to both pain and pleasure, and the related view that one can control only one's attitude, not external events, which means that virtue consists in treating all events in the same way. This is what stands behind Epictetus' advice that a slave should love the master who flogs him. Jesus' message is also different from the Wisdom tradition of the Mediterranean, which is reflected in Proverbs. There the advice not to harm an enemy is based on prudence: perhaps the enemy will be won over. A soft answer turns away wrath. Doing good to one and all is the best way to get through life with the least amount of difficulty.<sup>22</sup>

We shall keep in mind this difference of overall thrust and context.

A third way of claiming the uniqueness of 'love your enemies' is offered by Wolfgang Schrage. He takes a large body of literature which contains different views, points out that they are not all

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<sup>20</sup> So also Schrage, p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> Davies and Allison, p.552.

<sup>22</sup> On context, see, for example, Schrage, pp. 76, 86.

equally noble, and contrasts the single saying of Jesus with the average of the other literature. Schrage points out that there are lots of parallels to 'treat your enemy with kindness' in Jewish literature. He then notes that some Jewish writings have a different attitude towards enemies, such as that they should be killed (2 Macc. 15.16, reflecting the revolt against the Seleucid empire). Now comes Schrage's remarkable contribution: these two motifs—kindness towards enemies and physical defence against them—cancel each other out. 'These later passages neutralize the good beginnings'.<sup>23</sup>

This contrast, between good beginnings and later passages which are worse, rests on a widespread but completely inaccurate view of Judaism: early—in the days of Isaiah, Jeremiah and even the author of Proverbs—Judaism was a good religion. It went downhill, and by Jesus' day it was awful. He harked back to the great prophets, and he stands against, and completely superior to, his contemporaries in Judaism, and what came thereafter. Schrage probably wrote this as a kind of scholarly reflex. His 'good' passages, which favour treating enemies well, are not actually earlier than the ones which favour killing them. Both sorts of passage exist at all periods, and what one reads depends on the temperament of the author and the particular circumstances of the work. To favour killing one's enemies at a time of war, especially a war which aimed at securing Israel's right to worship the Lord, as did the author of 2 Maccabees, is not surprising.

At any rate, Schrage has before him two kinds of statement on enemies. He concludes that the two neutralize each other. This leaves Judaism as standing dead level: neither for nor against doing good to enemies. When Jesus urged love of enemies, he stood out as unique *vis à vis* Judaism.

Judaism, as you will see, has become a non-historical abstraction, presented as an average. One may wonder how Christianity would fare if treated in this way. Schrage had at his disposal the Bible, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, plus handbooks which contain snippets of another thousand years of Jewish

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literature—say 2,000 years in all. What if we took a thousand or so years of Christian history? We add together the unresisting deaths of martyrs in the third century and the violence towards one and all shown in the crusades. We divide by two and get 0, thus proving that an abstraction called 'Christianity' is neutral on resisting evil and killing other people. If there were a church of Josepholatry, an apologist could note that Josephus opposed burning the enemy's country, and conclude that he was uniquely superior to Christianity—that is, to Christianity as defined by an average of one thousand years of Christian behaviour.

Here we see that, in the discussion of Jesus as unique, 'unique' means 'superior', not just different. Schrage claims that he does not wish to prove Jesus' superiority,<sup>24</sup> but that appears to be the guiding force in his discussion of uniqueness. The whole point of averaging Judaism is to make sure that Jesus comes out as better.

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<sup>23</sup> Schrage, pp. 76f.

<sup>24</sup> Schrage, p. 85.

3. The two love commandments. According to Mark 12.28-34, a scribe asked Jesus 'Which commandment is the first of all', and Jesus answered by quoting what is called in Hebrew the *Shema* ' , after the first word, *shema* ' , 'Hear'. The passage runs,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. (Deut. 6.4-5 as quoted in Mark 12)

Jesus then offered the second greatest commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself (Lev. 19.18). According to Mark, the scribe agreed with him. According to Luke, it was the lawyer who quoted the passages, Jesus who agreed (10.25-29).

Mark and Luke, in their different ways, reflect the fact that no thoughtful Jew would have disagreed, and many would have made precisely the same answer. The *shema* ' , 'love the Lord

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your God', is presented in Deuteronomy itself as a culmination of and reflection on the preceding ten commandments (Deut. 5), and the passage continues by requiring that the commandments be recalled 'when you lie down, when you rise up, and when you walk in the way'. They are to be put on the doorposts, strapped to the forehead and arms, and taught to children. Following the clear intent of the passage, first-century Jews did all these things. They recited or recalled the *shema* ' every morning and evening, they put selections of the Bible in containers and attached them to doorposts, and they strapped similar containers on their heads and arms. If asked about the 'core' of the law, or what was most important in it, many would have answered with the passage which they recited twice a day, as did Jesus.

How do I know that they really did these things? In part, because archaeologists have found at Qumran physical evidence for the use of mezuzot and tefillin (as the containers of texts are called: mezuzot on doorposts, tefillin on arms and head). More important, in my view, is a general consideration. Numerous ancient Jewish authors (e.g. Pseudo-Aristeas, Josephus) say that they followed the requirements of the *shema* ' . Jews in general thought that they should follow them. They thought that there really was a God, and that God cared whether or not people obeyed him. Therefore on the whole we may assume obedience. Finally, I note that Jesus criticized the Pharisees for making their tefillin too large, which indicates that others, presumably including himself, wore more modest ones.

There are few things which Jesus could have said which would have been less unique than calling the *shema* ' the greatest commandment.

What about the second, love your neighbour? This too is presented in the Bible itself as a summary. Lev. 19 contains the priestly author's version of the ten commandments, plus a few more, and 'love your neighbour' summarizes the ethical commandments, such as 'you shall not reap your field to its

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border.... You shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner' (19.9f). The chapter

goes on to give commandments about the treatment of non-Israelites, and these are also summarized: ‘you shall love [the stranger] as yourself (19.34).

Jews in general thought of the law as being divided into two tables: commandments which govern relations between humans and God, and those which govern relations among humans.<sup>25</sup> The two commandments quoted by Jesus are the most obvious summaries of these two tables: love God, love other humans. Philo relied on the two biblical passages chosen by Jesus to summarize the laws in each category. ‘God asks nothing from thee that is heavy or complicated or difficult, but only something quite simple and easy. And this is just to love Him..., to serve Him ... with thy whole soul ...and to cling to His commandments...’ (*Spec. Laws* 1.299-300). Here he uses the *shema*. Subsequently comes another summary: ‘the law stands pre-eminent in enjoining fellowship and humanity (*koinōnia* and *philanthrōpia*)’ (*Spec. Laws* 1.324), a statement which paraphrases Lev. 19.18,34. The discussion of the two tables, including worship of God of love of humanity (*philanthrōpia*), is extremely common. Frequently the word *eusebeia* stands in place of ‘love of God’; but to suppose that Jews excluded love of God from *eusebeia* is perverse, especially granted the number of times they said the *shema*. The combination of Deut. 6.5 and Lev. 19.18, 34 constitutes a commonplace of Jewish teaching.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For rabbinic passages, See Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 114, 168, 179. For Greek-writing Jewish authors see below.

<sup>26</sup> Both Philo and Josephus give longer virtue lists. Our present concern is only with the division between duty to God and duty to other humans. Thus, for example, Philo commented that ‘sins are sometimes committed against humans, sometimes against things sacred and holy’ (*Spec. Laws* 1.234). The fullest discussion is in *Who is the Heir of Divine Things*, where Philo describes the two sets of laws, one set consisting of right behaviour towards God, the second set of responsibilities towards other humans (*Heir* 168). These ten general commandments, he wrote, covered almost all possible cases (173). He and others who wrote in Greek often combined ‘piety’ (*eusebeia*) and ‘justice’ or ‘righteousness’ (*dikaïosynē*) as words that encapsulated the two parts of the law. Thus Philo wrote that the first set of commandments governed ‘piety’, while the second set prohibited ‘injustice’ (*Heir* 172) and that on the sabbath Jews throughout the world gathered in synagogues, where they learned their ancestral philosophy, which fell under two headings, “One of duty to God as shown by piety and holiness, one of duty to men as shown by love of humanity and justice’ (*Special Laws* 2.63). The two-fold division of the law into ‘justice’ and ‘piety’ also appears in *Virtues* 175 and *Rewards and Punishments* 162. ‘Justice’ and ‘piety’ served as the two key words governing Jewish behaviour before Philo (*Arist.* 24, 131) and also in other Diaspora literature (*Sib. Or.* 5.142). Josephus also used this terminology, as, for example, in explaining the preaching of John the Baptist, who exhorted the Jews ‘to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God’ (*Antiq.* 18.117; cf. also 6.265; 8.121, 134; 9.16; 10.50; 12.56; 14.283; 15.375; *War* 2.139, on the Essenes).

While *eusebeia* and *dikaïosynē* are the most frequent two terms in this context, there are others, some of which appear in the passages just cited. We may especially note that both Philo and Josephus sometimes used two words to describe the treatment of other humans, *philanthrōpia*, love of humanity, and *koinōnia*, fellowship. In *Apion* 2.146 Josephus distinguishes them: ‘fellowship’ (or ‘commonality’) governs relations with other Jews, ‘love of humanity’ relations with non Jews. Both were to be treated decently, even if they were enemies and even in warfare.

With regard to other variations: *Hosiotēs* (‘holiness’) often accompanies *eusebeia* and sometimes replaces it. *Theosebeia*, ‘fear of God’ is a third possibility. *Philanthrōpia* similarly accompanies or replaces *dikaïosynē*. ‘Self-control’ (*egkrateia*) is frequent in Philo; in one instance it is paired with *eusebeia* (*Spec. Laws* 1.193) and in one with *theosebeia* (*Moses* 1.303) There is an interesting three-fold categorization in *Spec. Laws* 4.97: self-restraint, love of other humans, piety towards God. In view of Philo’s strong attack on passion and desire (e.g. *Spec. Laws* 4.79-99), it is surprising that he does not give the threefold formula more often; for him, virtue began with self-control. This view, which could be called either ‘Stoic’ or ‘Platonic’, is seen also in *Arist.* 277f. (people lack self-control, yearn for pleasure, and therefore fall into injustice; a person who has self-control will treat others with justice). Aristobulus also summarized the law with the three-fold *eusebeia*, *dikaïosynē* and *egkrateia* (Aristobulus Fragment 4 (13.12.8); OTP II, p. 841, where 13.13 is a typographical error). The relative frequency of the two-fold formula, with one term indicating behaviour towards other humans and the other behaviour towards God, shows how firmly fixed the division of the law into two tables was.

Many Jews who summarized or epitomized the law, however, wanted a one-line statement, and they uniformly chose a single sentence which in fact summarizes only the second table of the commandments. Thus Paul: ‘the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Gal. 5.14). Most often, however people used an epigram based on Lev. 19.18, 34, instead of simply quoting Lev. 19.18. We noted these epigrams above in discussing the golden rule. Philo’s version is

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this: ‘What a man would hate to suffer he must not do to others’ (Philo, *Hypothetica* 7.6). Jesus’ ‘golden rule’ is also an epigram which he says epitomizes the entire Bible, though logically it covers only the ‘second table’: ‘Whatever you wish that people would do to you, so do to them; for this is the law and the prophets’ (Matt. 7.12). The reason for saying that these epigrams are based on both Lev. 19.18 and 19.34 is that 19.18 requires ‘love of neighbour’—that is, other Jews—while 19.34 requires love of ‘strangers’—non Jews. The epigram includes both: ‘do not do to any one’ or ‘whatever you wish that people would do’.

You may wonder why I am discussing Mark 12.28-34 in a paper on uniqueness in the teaching of Jesus, since love of God and love of other humans are fundamental to all of Judaism, and they were recognized as such in the first century. You must not underestimate New Testament scholars. They can rise to any challenge, and they find uniqueness here as well.

Piper, following Nissen, proposed that the combination of the two commandments in one passage is unique.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Schrage wrote that ‘the combination of quotations from Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18 to summarize God’s will is unique; it is not found in Jewish texts’.<sup>28</sup> This is true only if one engages in casuistry in the worst sense and argues (1) the two passages are not explicitly and fully quoted in the same paragraph; (2) *eusebeia* is not ‘love’. A realistic analysis, as I said above, will show the combination to be a commonplace.

Schrage has a second proposal for establishing Jesus’ uniqueness: the double commandment of love is ‘in contrast to the casuistry and trivialization of God’s will in Jewish ethics’.<sup>29</sup> This is the second time that we have run into the term ‘casuistry’, and I shall continue to reserve comment on it.

Still worse, some scholars say that Jesus surpasses Jewish ethics because Lev. 19.18 confines ‘love’ to the ‘neighbour’, that is,

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<sup>27</sup> Piper, pp. 93f., citing Andreas Nissen, *Gott and der Nächste im antiken Judentum. Untersuchungen zum Doppelgebot der Liebe* (WUNT 15; Tübingen: Mohr, 1974), p.241. In the six months allowed for this essay, I have been unable to obtain a copy of Nissen’s book, and I have had to work partly from memory, but mostly on the basis of Piper’s discussion.

<sup>28</sup> Schrage, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Schrage, p. 87.

fellow Jews, while Jesus would go beyond that.<sup>30</sup> This results from not reading Lev. 19 far enough, down to v. 34, which commands love of foreigners, from ignoring the epigram ('do not do to other people'), which explicitly includes both, from not noting the meaning of *philanthrōpia* in Greek-writing Jewish authors, from ignoring the commandment of both *koinōnia* (treatment of other Jews) and *philanthrōpia* (treatment of one and all, including especially Gentiles) in Philo and Josephus and from relying on Billerbeck for knowledge of rabbinic literature.<sup>31</sup>

### Claims for uniqueness and originality

Let us pause for a moment to gain perspective. It is not only Christian scholars of the New Testament who make the kind of claims that I have been summarizing and criticizing. According to Gautier, Cleopatra was

the most complete woman ever to have existed, the most womanly woman and the most queenly queen, a person to be wondered at, to whom the poets have been able to add nothing, and whom dreamers find always at the end of their dreams.<sup>32</sup>

Or, changing to religious claims, we may note this statement about the experience of pilgrimage to Mecca:

To the pilgrim, the Mosque in Medina is alive with faith and everything in which a Muslim believes, for here was where the virtues of goodness, brotherhood, unselfishness and love first blossomed.<sup>33</sup>

Since Jesus lived some centuries before Mohammed, Christians will doubt that goodness and love *first* blossomed at the Mosque in Medina. And since Deuteronomy and Leviticus preceded Jesus by some centuries, Jews will doubt that Jesus brought love into the world.

Most claims for uniqueness or originality are confessions of faith. As Amin wrote, '*to the pilgrim*' love etc. originate at Medina.

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Similarly, to Christians, it is Jesus who teaches love of neighbour. They learn it from him. In her Christmas message in 1989, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II urged her hearers to live by the rule 'which Jesus Christ taught us, "Love thy neighbour as thyself". I do not doubt that the head of the Church of England learned this from Jesus, nor do I fault her for saying so. Few of the ordinary people in an average church pew will know that Jesus quoted Leviticus. Whether they know it or not, it remains true that they learn it from him. They may not live up to it, any

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<sup>30</sup> Davies and Allison, p. 250; Schrage, p. 73 (there are 'traces of an extension that takes into account strangers dwelling in the land.... Later Judaism understood an explicit limitation of the law of love, making it apply only to Israelites and full proselytes'). This leaves the great Jewish ethicists, such as Philo, and more pedestrian ones, such as Josephus, out of account. On the Rabbis, see the next note.

<sup>31</sup> For Billerbeck as = the Rabbis on this point, see e.g. Schrage, pp. 73f. I surveyed rabbinic views of Gentiles in Paul and Palestinian Judaism, but I here leave them aside.

<sup>32</sup> I saw this in an advertisement for L. Hughes-Hallett's book on Cleopatra, and I have not yet confirmed the quotation.

<sup>33</sup> Mohammed Amin, *Pilgrimage to Mecca* (London: Alan Hutchinson, 1978), p. 28.

more than Muslims manage to show love in all cases, but at least they have it as an ideal, and it comes to them from Jesus, no matter who may actually have said it first.

Scholars, one would think, will be different. When they say 'unique', they should really mean that no one else has thought or said whatever it is. But they too are human, and very frequently Christian New Testament scholars slip confessions of faith into what purports to be historical description. Thus Käsemann wrote that no Jew besides Jesus *could* have said 'but I say', or could have claimed authority to rival Moses, and Jeremias wrote that 'to Jewish sensibility' (für jüdisches Empfinden) it would have been unthinkable to call God *abba*. This is dogmatic and confessional. Käsemann meant that, for him, Jesus really did overthrow Moses. No one else could have done that. Similarly Jeremias made a dogmatic and confessional statement. He did not have exhaustive knowledge of Jewish sensibilities.

Christian scholars, like others, also make mistakes and are occasionally ignorant of things they should know. Amin, in the book on Islamic pilgrimage, wrote that the crowds which gather in Mecca are the largest which have ever gathered for religious purposes. This shows only that he did not study Hindu pilgrimage. In the case of Jesus and other Jews, I have frequently cited Philo in this paper simply because the scholars whom I have discussed mostly ignored him, and when they cited him, they did not refer to the most appropriate passages. *Selective reading combines with confessional interest to produce claims of uniqueness.*

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People who read more widely than others, such as Davies, make fewer claims of uniqueness and put them more appropriately: this would have struck the hearers as fresh. Occasionally, however, he too claims uniqueness (for example, by ignoring Lev. 19.34), and it will always turn out that he should have read one more passage.

If we removed confessional interest entirely, we would find people making no stronger claims than 'unparalleled as far as I know'. After all, what percentage of the total wisdom of the world is available to even the most diligent reader? The pronouncement that something is 'unique', as I said at the outset, is among other things a claim to omniscience: I know everything, and there are no parallels. This is an extremely unscholarly attitude. The more one studies, the less one should hold it.

There is, however, in my opinion, a worse aspect to the claim of uniqueness than partial learning and confessional interest. People who make it have been bitten by the bug of historicism, and they wish to find some historical kemal which will support faith. Being scholars, they know that they must delve into details, and the more they delve the more minute becomes the historical datum which will (they imagine) support their belief that Jesus was the only begotten son of God. Käsemann, we noted, found vast significance in three small and very common Greek words, 'but I say'. They prove Jesus' unrivalled claim to authority. But these words, which we cannot know to convey the precise nuance of Jesus' Hebrew or Aramaic, simply cannot bear this much weight. Or there is Piper's claim, following Nissen, that only Jesus put 'love God' and 'love neighbour' back to back, instead of separating them by a page, and illustrating first one and then the other (as did Philo). This is pretty thin ice. How far can one skate on it? As long as we are dealing with this level of detail, we should apply the rule that there is nothing new under the sun. 'This little bit here', we may say, 'is as

far as we know without precise parallel in anything which Jesus' hearers might have heard, but the difference is marginal'. This would be a fair

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statement to make about the double love commandments and numerous other parts of the teaching of Jesus. To go much beyond that is historically unjustified. When people do it they are not only bad historians, they also exemplify a bad way of doing theology. The claim to uniqueness, as I have pointed out, is confessional; and it is very bad theology to hang a confession of faith on a verbal detail. Doing it creates bad Christology. This little detail and that are unique. They prove that Jesus was the Son of God. The basis is inadequate for the Christological confession.

We saw that sometimes people find an element to be unique by appealing to the fact that it resides in the overall context of Jesus' message, which was neither Stoicism nor Wisdom. This is quite a different issue. *With regard to the totality of his message*, we should apply the rule that 'no two people are alike'. There has been only one Jesus, just as there has been only one Socrates. This sort of claim of uniqueness would be unobjectionable, were it not for the fact that, in discussing Jesus overall, and attempting to make him stand out as superior, people all too often caricature and misrepresent Judaism. This is usually done by catchwords which serve as a code expressing disapproval. Jesus said 'love God and love your neighbour', and when he said that he was different from the abstraction 'Judaism', with its casuistry and trivialization. 'Casuistry' is a catchword which any Protestant will recognize as indicating what is wrong with Roman Catholicism. That is, it is a bit of religious polemic, which Protestants apply to their historical enemies, the Catholics and the Jews.

A casuist is a person who studies and resolves moral problems in specific situations, and then by extension someone who does this in an overly subtle way, so that finally the resolution is dishonest. A casuist in this negative sense might reason thus:

I want to harm Joe Smith. Lev. 19.18 says 'love your neighbour as yourself. He is not my neighbour. Therefore I can do him dirty and not transgress.

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A slightly more honest casuist would add:

Lev. 19.34 says love the stranger as yourself. But in context, this is the 'stranger who dwells among you'. Joe Smith is staying in a hotel while here on business, and so he does not 'dwell' among us. Therefore I can do him dirty and not transgress.

According to Schrage, Davies and Allison, Jesus' teaching of love was different from Jewish casuistry. Were all Jews casuists, and was Jesus the only one who was not? Was he unique simply because he was not debased and dishonest? No one who has read the great Jewish ethicists, such as Philo, will think this, nor those who have read even a summarizer of standard teaching, such as Josephus. It is instructive to recall that Eusebius thought that Philo had been a Christian. It is very difficult to make him out to be a trivializing casuist, as hard as it is to prove this of Hillel, Akiba or Judah b. Ilai.

I do not think that Jesus needs to be exalted by such tactics. In fact, they do not exalt him, they demean him. He stands out, historically, as does any great person—by the positive impact which he made, and by the impact which he made as a whole. I think it historically beyond doubt that many people who heard him, and all who followed him, were gripped by his message, his deeds, and his behaviour, so that they really heard, as if they had not heard before, the proclamation of a coming kingdom and the promise that all, no matter how lowly or even sinful, could be included. Was he the only person ever to utter such words? I doubt it very much. That in some cases he penetrated the fog which surrounds most of us most of the time, and made some people actually believe in love, grace and renewal, I fully believe.

Even this, though, does not explain the impact which he made. To account for that, one must consider his final suffering, his death, and his followers' experiences after his crucifixion, which

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they described as seeing the risen Lord. The claim of Christianity historically has not been that Jesus said six things which no one else said. When scholars put themselves into the awkward position of proving his greatness by finding unique sayings, they unwittingly reduce him to the level of a phrase-maker. Classical Christianity claimed that in Jesus' life, death and resurrection God acted for the good of the world. Sayings, no matter how original, will not prove that, and trying to prop up faith by specious arguments for uniqueness not only denigrates Judaism, it demeans Christianity.

What about the teaching of Jesus was unique? The historian who studies detail will answer, This is roughly paralleled here and there, this fairly distinctive, this otherwise unattested: very little is unique, actually. I believe that experts can do this sort of thing with Newton, Darwin, Marx and Freud. Does it mean that they were not unique, or that Jesus was not unique? Not in the least. Was his message not his own? Was his mission not his own? Was not the result greater than one would think who simply added up the discrete bits? What about him was unique? Everything. He was himself.

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Prepared for the Web in December 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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