

Kinzer Rejoinder to Lévy

I am grateful to Antoine Lévy for his willingness to participate in this theological exchange. His contribution enables readers to hear him in his own voice, apart from the mediating perspective of a friendly critic.

In my rejoinder I will follow the order and headings of Lévy's response.

Issues of Method and Acts 21

Antoine states that my exegetical method “consists of reading a passage of the NT in the light of the theological coherence that can be derived from the totality of an author's writings.” This is true, but inattentive to the particular kind of “theological coherence” I discern in Acts 21 (and in other passages of Luke and Acts). The author of Luke and Acts is a theologian, but he conveys his theological convictions through dramatic narrative rather than abstract discourse. In my exegesis I attempt to understand the *narrative* logic of these books, and to position Acts 21 within the flow of that narrative.

I agree with Lévy that we should focus upon “reality” and “facts” rather than “ideological constructs.” But “facts” are not self-interpreting. As an example, let us assume that Jesus and his disciples observed all the practices of the Torah which were part of the “common Judaism” of their era. That “fact” does not tell us *why* they did so, or what impact their conduct should have upon our lives today. Augustine and Aquinas acknowledged that Jesus and the apostles maintained such a manner of life, but viewed such first-century praxis as respect for a divinely-given but now transcended covenantal order, appropriate only during a transitional era of history. Similarly, some Christian missionaries to the Jews have seen the Torah-observance of Jesus and the apostles as illustrative of the principle of evangelistic accommodation—that is, becoming a “Jew to the Jews” for the purpose of winning Jews to Christ. In a Jewish environment where most Jews no longer observe the Torah, such missionaries look for new ways to adapt to the customs of their target audience. In reality, many Christians over the centuries have noted the Torah observance of Jesus and the apostles, but few have seen such praxis as rooted in a covenantal responsibility to which all Jews are summoned.

To understand the significance of such “facts,” we need to ask of the New Testament not only “what” but also “why” and “so what.” When “facts” are presented to us in the context of a narrative, attending to the logic of the narrative enables us to interpret their significance. That is what I have attempted to do in my reading of Acts 21 in *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen*. My conclusion from the narrative logic of Luke and Acts is that the author considered the particular practices of the Torah intended for Israel as a nation (what he calls *ethē* or “customs”) to be divine commandments whose authoritative character had not been altered by the redemptive work of Jesus. In the context of this narrative, it becomes evident that Jesus and his apostles live this way *because they believe that all Jews are commanded by God to do so*. The fact that there is no diminution in the force of their example as the narrative progresses suggests that the obligatory character of these “customs” is not a transitional historical phase but an enduring feature of God's relationship with Israel. The author of the narrative tells the story the way he does in order to assure Jewish disciples of Jesus that these commandments remain in

effect for them, and to persuade both Jewish and gentile disciples of Jesus that they are misreading Paul if they interpret his letters as teaching otherwise. This is the narrative logic that I discern in Luke and Acts regarding Jewish Torah observance, a logic that reveals the “theological coherence” of these books, and that provides a theological and narrative context for Acts 21.

As regards Acts 21:20-26, the “coherence of the passage itself” points in the same direction. The narrative involves four distinct parties. First, we have Paul, who has hastened to Jerusalem in order to arrive in time for the pilgrim festival of Pentecost (Acts 20:16), in accordance with the Torah (Exodus 23:16-17; Deuteronomy 16:9-11).¹ Second, we have James, who concluded his official ruling at the Jerusalem Council by referring to the public reading of Moses “every sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:21), indicating that the ruling is consistent with the Torah. Third, we have the “thousands of believers...among the Jews” who are “all zealous for the Torah” (Acts 21:20). The fourth and final party is not present but is implicitly invoked when James states that “they [the Torah-zealous Jewish believers in Jesus] have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses” (Acts 21:21). As I already argued, the identity of this fourth party becomes evident a few verses later—they are the “Jews from Asia” who “stir up the whole crowd” (Acts 21:27). Lévy ignores or marginalizes the role of this fourth party; makes the Torah-zealous Jesus-followers the source rather than the audience for the accusation against Paul; distances James from those Torah-zealous members of his own community; and treats Paul and James as united in offering a merely expedient response to external pressure.

Contrary to what Lévy asserts above, I do not suggest that “Luke viewed Paul as one among the zealously Torah-observant Jews who are depicted as questioning Paul’s Torah-fidelity in Acts 21:20.” Luke portrays Paul as Torah-observant, but also recognizes the tensions that exist within the Jesus-movement regarding what precisely the Torah requires. In Luke’s account, all three parties of the Jesus-movement mentioned in Acts 21 agree on the authority of the Torah. It is the “Jews from Asia” who falsely accuse Paul of Torah-infidelity, and it is the Torah-zealous members of the Jesus-movement—unfamiliar with Paul personally—who are most sensitive to these charges, not knowing whether they are true or false. Luke distinguishes James from his Torah-zealous community members only by the fact that James is personally acquainted with Paul, and therefore knows that the charges against Paul are false. Luke portrays a significant vocational distinction between James and Paul, with James called to serve at the center of Jewish life, and Paul sent to the periphery. This results in differing patterns of life but not in disagreement over the authority of the Torah, as Paul’s response to the direction given by James demonstrates.

¹ Lévy incorrectly asserts that “In the whole book of Acts, there are only two times when Paul is described as performing traditional *mitzvot*, and in both cases these actions are explicitly connected with pressure coming from Jewish communities.” In addition to the two examples cited by Lévy, we also have this pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 20:16), and his voluntary vow in Acts 18:18. The latter anticipates his participation in the Nazirite ritual of Acts 21:26, and demonstrates that his Torah-honoring conduct in Acts 21 is not merely a response to “pressure coming from Jewish communities.”

Thus, in Acts 21:20-26 the “coherence of the passage itself” confirms the overall narrative logic of Luke and Acts as regards Torah-observance for Jewish disciples of Jesus.²

Continuity Model vs Messianic-Torah Model

For some reason Lévy associates my approach with the phrase “the yoke of the Torah.” He attempts to distinguish his “Messianic-Torah model” from my alleged “continuity model” by stating that “the relation of Jewish believers to these teachings [of the Torah which apply to Israel corporately] can no longer be formulated in the terminology of rabbinic Judaism, as an ‘obligation to take upon oneself the yoke of the Torah.’” He even suggests that I view the teaching of Matthew and Luke-Acts on Torah observance through the prism of this rabbinic term: “this ‘obligation of Torah-fidelity’ in Matthew and Luke-Acts is pure imagination as long as one identifies it with the ‘yoke of Torah’ in its rabbinic interpretation.” This preoccupation with a particular rabbinic idiom puzzles me, for nowhere in my article do I employ the phrase “the yoke of the Torah,” and it has never been prominent in my writings. When I speak of the “obligation of Torah-fidelity” I am not invoking a rabbinic framework but instead affirming the consensus approach to circumcision, the Sabbath, the calendar, the dietary laws, etc., which became the common heritage of the Jewish people long before rabbinic Judaism became the dominant expression of Jewish life throughout the world.

As in *Jewish Church*, Lévy here contends that my perspective on the Torah is best characterized as a “continuity-model.” He asserts that “harmonizing the two sources of authority [i.e., Jesus and Jewish tradition] lies at the core of this model.” In my article I referred to the “excruciatingly difficult task” which faces Messianic Jews when “the requirements inherent in the faith of Yeshua conflict with the norms of rabbinic tradition and the institutions of the wider Jewish community.” Lévy thinks that what I mean by this “difficult task” is the attempt to “harmonize” these “two radically distinct sources of authority.” He illustrates the difficulty in such harmonization by referring to the Antioch incident described in Galatians 2. “Eat or refrain from eating, obey the halakhah or the teachings of Christ in their apostolic interpretation—no way to do both at the same time. Either the halakhic authority of Christ is truly ultimate, so that it will in some cases overrule rabbinic halakhah, or it is not.” In other words, “harmonizing the two sources of authority” means bringing into harmony two sets of incompatible obligations.

Despite the anachronistic reference to “rabbinic halakhah,” Lévy helpfully highlights the halakhic dimension of the Antioch episode. With Lévy, I understand Paul’s behavior not as flagrant violation of the biblical dietary laws, but as setting aside stringent interpretations of those laws which prohibited eating with gentiles (as in Acts 10:28). Paul insisted that the shared life of Jews and gentiles in the Messiah required Jewish disciples of Jesus to sit at table with their gentile brothers and sisters—but not to eat food explicitly forbidden by the Torah. In this case “messianic Torah,” reflecting the new communal situation created by the sanctification of gentile followers of Jesus by the Holy Spirit, trumped prevailing Jewish norms.

² My treatment of Acts 21 only concerns the view of Luke/Acts regarding Torah observance for Jewish disciples of Jesus. In his critique of my exegesis Lévy implies that I “claim that the Gospel of Luke has only good things to say about Jews.” That is far from the case. If it had been true, there would be no basis for Luke’s preoccupation with the destruction of Jerusalem as divine judgment for Israel’s sins.

The “excruciatingly difficult task” of which I speak is not that of “harmonizing” practical imperatives which are inherently incompatible. Instead, it is the relational tension of honoring an authoritative tradition while at times departing from it. It is the sort of painful process experienced by an adult child who seeks to honor a parent while diverging from their demands because of the requirements of a higher obligation. Like Lévy, I see the authority of Jesus as higher than any other in the Jewish tradition. Unlike Lévy, I understand Jesus himself as asking us to follow the consensus tradition of the wider Jewish world as much as possible, just as Jesus asks us to honor our parents (but not to obey them when their demands conflict with his).

Contrary to Lévy’s contention, this is possible. I see it as such because my view of rabbinic tradition, and even “Orthodox Judaism,” is more pluriform than Lévy’s. In his view, “Orthodox Judaism has one great superiority over Conservative Judaism: what it means by the ‘yoke of the Torah’ is, at least ideally, clearly defined. It is the halakhah in its entirety—period.” This picture of Orthodox Judaism is sustainable only because of that little phrase, “at least ideally.” It is indeed the image that some forms of Orthodox Judaism project about themselves. Once one moves from the ideal to the real, one confronts the astounding variety of Orthodox Jewish ways of living a halakhic life—both in the past, and in the present. That variety calls into question whether the expression “*the halakhah*” has any single determinate meaning.

In holding such a position, I show myself to be what I am: a Jew who has been connected to the Conservative movement of Judaism throughout my life. My view of Jewish history, halakhic development, and halakhic variety has much in common with the intellectual world of Conservative Judaism. Here Lévy objects, arguing that “the flexibility of Conservative Judaism” (and presumably other modern streams of Jewish thought) does not go so far as to “intersect with a normative frame of reference that is external to that of rabbinic halakhah” such as the Jesus-tradition. Admittedly, modern forms of Judaism often present themselves as developing exclusively from internal normative resources. That is an understandable apologetic trope, but I find little historical warrant for such claims. Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, and even Modern Orthodox streams have been profoundly impacted by the ethical and cultural standards of modernity, which certainly represent a “normative frame of reference that is external to that of rabbinic halakhah.” Moreover, important aspects of those modern ethical and cultural standards were shaped by Christianity, and thus modern Judaism has already intersected in substantive ways with the Jesus-tradition.

For Lévy, rabbinic Judaism and Catholic Christianity are two self-contained, mutually exclusive, and tightly coherent systems. He proposes that a modern Jewish expression of the latter would perfect rather than undermine its systemic integrity. On the other hand, he argues that a Jesus-adherent version of the former would clash so profoundly with its essential character that rabbinic Judaism would be destroyed. I reject this asymmetry, and its idealized portrait of each tradition. Rabbinic Judaism and Catholic Christianity are indeed roughly coherent traditions, but each is also dynamic, creative, internally diverse, a landscape marked by historical, theological, and halakhic cliffs and chasms. As a result, each is surprisingly capable of assimilating new wisdom without losing its distinctive identity. A Jewish-form of Catholic Christianity is just as surprising and unsettling as a Jesus-form of rabbinic Judaism. But both are possible, and both are necessary.

The *Ur Problem* of Yeshua's death and the founding principle of a Jewish *ecclesia*

As regards the “Ur-Problem of Yeshua’s death,” let me again state unequivocally that Lévy’s position has no substantive resemblance to the antisemitic charge of deicide. Lévy’s purpose here is entirely constructive. In realizing that purpose he wrestles with some of the most challenging texts in the New Testament and subverts pernicious readings of the past. My concerns arise because of the complexity and subtlety of Lévy interpretation, and the potential for others to misunderstand and misuse his conclusions. In that regard, I find his comments above helpful. They strike me as clearer and more responsive to the concerns I expressed than what is found in *Jewish Church*, and they have deepened my understanding of his thesis.

But what of Lévy’s critique of my approach to this subject? Lévy contends that “the most essential question raised by the hypothesis of a bilateral Church remains hanging in the air throughout Kinzer’s works. Why should there *überhaupt* be a place for Israel *qua* Israel in the Church of Christ?” He then offers his own answer: “In *Jewish Church*, I argue that the answer to this question lies in the will of God to save Israel *qua* Israel—not individual Jews, but the whole nation of Israel—in Christ.” Lévy here roots his version of bilateral ecclesiology in a bilateral soteriology, according to which the saving power of Jesus’s death and resurrection impacts the national life of the Jewish people in a way that distinguishes Jews from gentiles. I follow a similar path in *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen*. What distinguishes my approach from Lévy’s is (1) my contention that in his death Jesus proleptically takes upon himself, and renders redemptive, the suffering Israel will endure when Jerusalem is destroyed in 70 CE; and (2) my unwillingness to view the gospel’s call to Jewish repentance as a summons for Jews to acknowledge Israel’s unqualified “collective transgression” in putting Jesus to death.

On the first point, Lévy states that for Kinzer “what bears the thrust of theological meaningfulness is not...the death of Yeshua, but the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.” Why do I stress so forcefully the linkage between these two events? First, the saving work of Jesus is oriented principally to the people of Israel, and only subsequently and consequently to gentiles. Jesus is given the name “Yeshua” in order to show that he has been born to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). As Caiaphas prophetically announces, Jesus has come to “die for the people” (John 11:50-51; 18:14). Of course, Jesus also dies for all human beings (John 11:52), but the universal scope of his salvific work is enacted through the corporate mediation of Israel, a holy nation with a priestly vocation on behalf of all nations (Exodus 19:6). As Karl Barth astutely observed, Jesus “died for the sins of the Jews and then and *thereby* also died for our sins.”³ This means that the death of Jesus is inexplicable apart from its connection to the Jewish people and the Jewish historical experience. And, since suffering for the sins of others means bearing the consequences of their disobedience on their behalf, and in fellowship with them, Jesus’s death for Israel associates him with the judgment that Israel endured a generation later.

Second, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE has unique significance because it ended one phase of the Jewish historical experience and began another. That date inaugurated a second exilic period in which the Jewish people live without a temple, a functioning priesthood, or (until

³ Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict* (trans. Victoria J. Barnett: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 285. Emphasis original.

the last century) a capital city, and in which a new form of Judaism arises capable of flourishing in such circumstances. That is precisely the way Luke viewed the “trampling” of the holy city by the gentiles in 70 CE, as shown by the phrase “the times of the gentiles” which he associates with that “trampling” (Luke 21:24). Consequently, my questions concerning the theological significance of 70 CE relate to the “theological meaningfulness” of Jewish history as a whole after the coming of Jesus. If the death of Jesus is inexplicable apart from its redemptive (and not merely punitive) connection to the Jewish historical experience over the past two thousand years, then it is inexplicable apart from what happened in 70 CE.

Finally, the gospels of Mark and Matthew add a further dimension to the meaning of 70 CE. In his version of the eschatological discourse, Luke distinguishes clearly between the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-24) and the sufferings immediately preceding the return of the Messiah (Luke 21:25-28). In contrast, Mark and Matthew superimpose one event upon the other, in a way that makes the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE a prophetic foretaste of the birth pangs of the Messiah. It is as if the Jewish people, the corporate priesthood for all humanity, are proleptically enduring in 70 CE the sufferings of the end of the age. So, when Jesus proleptically endures Israel’s sufferings of 70 CE, he is also bearing the sufferings of the final tribulation, in which the spiritual conflict operative in all human history comes to a head.⁴

My aim is not to subordinate the death and resurrection of Jesus to the destruction of Jerusalem, or to the historical experience of the Jewish people after the destruction of Jerusalem. Instead, my aim is to link these two realities in a way that each becomes inexplicable apart from the other. The divine-human person of Jesus the Messiah and his saving work are always pre-eminent, but never in a way that abstracts him and his work from the people to whom he is eternally and redemptively bound.

Enough said about 70 CE. Now for the second distinguishing characteristic of my bilateral soteriology, namely, my approach to Israel’s repentance. Lévy rightly emphasizes the role of repentance in the response demanded by the gospel. He also recognizes that the nature of this repentance differs for Jews and gentiles, and that this difference corresponds to the bilateral constitution of the *ecclesia*. Furthermore, one cannot reasonably dispute Lévy’s claim that Jewish corporate involvement in the death of Jesus is an integral component of the New Testament’s perspective on Israel’s sins. But Lévy and I disagree on the precise role it plays within that perspective. As already noted, the Gospels and Acts present the death of Jesus as the climax of an extended period characterized by the collective sins of Israel. In one sense it is the greatest of these sins, since it consists of the rejection of the holy Messiah. But in another sense, it is the least of these sins, since it is committed in ignorance (Luke 23:45; Acts 3:17), in fulfilment of the scriptures, and as the central salvific event in Israel’s redemptive drama (Acts 2:23; 3:18). In any case, collective Jewish repentance in response to the gospel should focus on Israel’s failings throughout its long history of relationship with God.

Moreover, what distinguishes Jewish from gentile sins, and thus Jewish and gentile repentance, are the particular covenantal requirements established for Israel in the Torah as an expression of Israel’s uniquely intimate bond with God. The book of Acts even associates the

⁴ See Brant Pitre, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

apostolic proclamation of the gospel with Deuteronomy 18:15-19 and its demand that Israel must obey the future “prophet like Moses” (Acts 3:22-23; 7:37-39, 53). Luke here implies that obedience to the Torah for Jews is incomplete without obedience to Jesus, just as the narrative logic of his two volumes suggests that obedience to Jesus for Jews is incomplete if it is not offered in the context of Israel’s particular covenantal responsibilities. As Abraham says to the rich man in one of Jesus’s parables, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). In this sense I agree with Lévy that the distinctive character of Jewish repentance in response to the gospel provides the basis for a distinctive Jewish corporate presence in the *ecclesia*. Bilateral soteriology and bilateral ecclesiology are indeed intertwined.

As noted above, Jesus dies for the sins of Israel. This statement connects the crucifixion with Israel’s covenantal failures that *preceded* the crucifixion. Those are the sins that led John to proclaim a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4), and which led Jesus—the one without sin—to be baptized by John. Jesus entered into solidarity with Israel in its sinful condition, offering vicarious repentance on Israel’s behalf. The baptism of Jesus points forward to the meaning of his atoning death. In his death Jesus atones by offering vicarious repentance for all of Israel’s sins.⁵ While the redemptive power of Jesus’s death extends even to Israel’s sin in unjustly precipitating that death, it would be nonsensical to see that as its primary goal. Would one go to great lengths to pay a debt for another when that debt will be incurred only as a result of the payment process? The sins of Israel for which Jesus dies span the entire history of Israel’s covenantal relationship with God. Such should also constitute the content of Jewish collective repentance in response to the gospel. In this way Jewish repentance differs from gentile repentance in response to the gospel, and establishes a bilateral soteriological paradigm that fits a bilateral ecclesiology.

Surprisingly, these comments qualifying Lévy’s thesis could, in the final analysis, strengthen it: *Jews should indeed repent collectively for the death of Jesus*. I am not now speaking about Jewish involvement in the quasi-judicial process that eventuated in the crucifixion. Instead, I am referring to the multi-generational sins of Israel which culminated in that event. Moreover, I am pointing to a repentance that is required from all human beings, whose collective sin has been assumed by Israel in its priestly role as the nation representing humanity before God. As Khaled Anatolios states, “[a]fter the death of Christ...salvific human repentance must take the form of a repentance precisely for the suffering of Christ as the ultimate victim of all human sin.”⁶ As the holy people of God, Israel’s sins differ from the sins of the nations, and wound the Messiah—and the God of Israel—in a different way than the sins of the nations. As such, a distinct Jewish form of repentance is also appropriate. Perhaps this is all that Lévy intended from the beginning. In any case, my qualified agreement signifies some progress in our conversation.

⁵ On the atoning work of Jesus in his suffering and death as vicarious repentance, and on the baptism of Jesus as a symbolic act that manifests this aspect of Jesus’s mission, see Khaled Anatolios, *Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 151-59; Mark S. Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 89-99.

⁶ Anatolios, 381.

Justifying supersessionism or understanding it?

As regards responsibility for the emergence of supersessionism, Lévy states: “I never wrote that Jews were responsible for the ‘supersessionist turn’ of the Church.” He asserts this despite the apparently contrary proposition in his book: “[S]upersessionism is not a Gentile ideological invention that starts to take shape in the second century. *It is caused by the dismissal of the Good News by the vast majority of Jews*” (85; emphasis added). In his response Lévy indicates the particular sense in which Jews cannot be held responsible for supersessionism: “It would be completely absurd since supersessionism...implies an ecclesial context.” In other words, Jews are not *directly* responsible for ecclesial supersessionism, since they were not the primary actors in the context of second century ecclesial life. In that rather limited sense, Lévy does not hold Jews responsible for supersessionism. Nevertheless, he does view Jews as *indirectly* responsible for this tragic development in Church history, since, in his mind, supersessionism is “caused by the dismissal of the Good News by the vast majority of Jews.” The rejection of the Good News by first-century Jews led eventually and inevitably to the emergence of supersessionist theology among second-century gentiles.

As regards responsibility for the “primeval schism,” Lévy rightly associates our disagreement with our different assessments of when, and between whom, it takes place. For him, the pre-70 conflict between the apostles and the leadership of the Jewish community already constituted a schism within Israel: “By primeval schism, I have always intended the scission within Israel itself between Jewish believers in Yeshua and those who would not acknowledge Yeshua as Messiah of Israel.” I, on the other hand, do not view this early conflict as a schism. The Jewish *ecclesia* of the pre-70 era continued to worship at the Jerusalem temple, continued to acknowledge the legitimate authority of the temple rulers, continued to participate fully in Jewish society. In all these ways the Jewish *ecclesia* was more fully integrated into the corporate life of the Jewish people than were the Qumran covenanters. Conflict with authorities, and even intermittent persecution, only amounts to schism (as the term is normally defined and used) if the authorities exclude the dissidents from the community, or if the dissidents exclude themselves. Neither occurred in the pre-70 period.

In my view, the schism does not take place until a later period, and the main parties to the dispute are Jewish and gentile members of the *ecclesia*. On this point I agree with Anders Runesson: “It seems clear that the real parting of the ways, the process that created what is now the Christian church, took place between Jewish believers in Jesus and non-Jewish believers in Jesus, *not* more generally between ‘Jews’ on the one hand and ‘Christians’ on the other.”⁷ The suppression of Jewish identity and observance in the Church, rooted in supersessionist theology, enforced this “parting.” It was this internal ecclesial conflict which symbolized and effected the wider schism between the Church and the Jewish people.

For Lévy, on the other hand, the die was cast once the vast majority of Jews failed to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. That was the original schism, and the gentilization

⁷ Anders Runesson, “Who Parted From Whom? The Myth of the So-Called Parting of the Ways between Judaism and Christianity,” in *Chosen to Follow: Jewish Believers Through History and Today* (eds. K.H. Hoyland & J.W. Nielsen: Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2012), 70.

of the Church and its ideological justification via supersessionist theology were but the inevitable historical consequences of that initial rupture.⁸

Asymmetry – which one?

Finally, we come to Lévy's view of the asymmetry between the Jewish and Christian traditions as authoritative guides for Jewish disciples of Jesus. Here he asserts two propositions that deserve comment. First, he contends that "the Catholic Church appears to consider her decisions as more directly connected to God ('directly inspired by the Holy Spirit') than rabbinic Judaism considers its own halakhic legislation." In support of this thesis, he cites the Talmudic controversy between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua, which enunciates the principle that "the Torah is not in heaven." Authority rests with the corporate judgment of the sages, even when they contradict a voice from heaven. As this colorful story illustrates, rabbinic tradition sometimes characterizes its authority in terms that accentuate its quasi-independent character. Such anecdotes contrast strikingly with Catholic definitions of ecclesial authority, which establish its legitimacy by relating ecclesial authority to the promise of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit—in other words, by subordinating the Church to God. But this stark contrast fails to account for the difference in rabbinic and Catholic modes of thought and expression. The latter prizes balance, clarity, and abstract precision when addressing such questions. The former, however, revels in paradox, dialectical tension, and provocative concrete imagery. So, complementing the story of Rabbi Eliezer, we have the equally stunning assertion that "not only did all the prophets receive their prophecy from Sinai, but also each of the Sages that arose in every generation received his [wisdom] from Sinai" (Ex Rab 28:6). Moreover, "even the question a pupil asks his teacher God told Moses [at Sinai]" (Ex Rab 47:1). While the story of Rabbi Eliezer implies the independent authority of the sages, even *over against God*, these sayings root even the apparently independent interpretations of the sages, along with the questions of their students, in the divine revelation at Sinai. *God thus inspires the ostensibly independent rulings which appear to contradict his preferences!* In the final analysis, these two traditions diverge in the level of appropriate initiative they ascribe to the human authorities who serve as their historical representatives, but their respective claims to speak the "words of the living God" are remarkably similar.

Lévy's second proposition concerning the asymmetry of traditions asserts that "a believer in Yeshua cannot grant the same level of authority to a tradition that affirms Yeshua's Messiahship and a tradition that dismisses it... He cannot at the same time be and not be the God-sent Messiah of Israel. One has to decide within which of the two intrinsically coherent religious worlds one finds oneself." I have contested this ostensibly self-evident claim ever since the publication of *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* in 2005. I have argued that a tradition has not

⁸ If for Lévy this "original schism" is the ultimate source of ecclesial gentilization and supersessionism, the penultimate source is the "renunciation to promote a distinct Jewish biosphere" which "goes back to the primeval Jewish leadership of the Church." As I have already argued, I see no evidence that such a "renunciation" ever occurred. In the pre-70 period, the "Jewish leadership of the Church" saw no threat to its Jewish identity, since it still retained its unrivalled position as the "leadership of the Church," and since it expected Jesus to return imminently. In the post-70 period, when Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins, when the Church was no longer under Jewish leadership, and when the return of Jesus was not on the horizon, the threat first became undeniable. Only at that point do texts such as the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles first appear, all of which press forcefully for the preservation of a Torah-observant, Jewish expression of the *ecclesia*.

fully “affirmed Yeshua’s Messiahship” if at the same time it has denied or ignored God’s irrevocable covenant with Israel, the Torah as Israel’s constitution, the connection of the people of Israel to the land of Israel, and the distinct vocation of Jewish disciples of Jesus. In other words, I see the Christian tradition’s affirmation of Jesus and the gospel as partial and deficient. At the same time, I have argued that Jesus continues to dwell in the midst of the Jewish people as its hidden ruler, shaping its tradition in a way that preserves the essential elements of the gospel which Christian tradition has denied or ignored. As the Russian Orthodox priest Lev Gillet wrote in 1942, only the Christian who “becomes aware of the Jewish contents of his own faith and inwardly responds to this new awareness enters into communion with Jesus *as Jewish Messiah* and invisibly with the Messianic community of Israel, insofar as the Messiah displays an immanent activity inside it.”⁹ In other words, apart from the Jewish people and Judaism the Catholic tradition is not “an intrinsically coherent religious world,” and, from a Messianic Jewish perspective, the same can be said of the Jewish tradition apart from the resurrected Messiah. Each tradition lacks full coherence apart from the other.

Finally, Lévy portrays my symmetrical assessment of the Jewish and Christian traditions as an attempt to occupy “some sort of ‘equidistant point’ from both Judaism and Christianity.” He suggests that I view the “Jewish corporate presence in the Church” as constituting “some sort of middle-way between the Yes-No of the Church and the No-Yes of Judaism.” Here Lévy misses a critical nuance of my ecclesiological proposal, and the way it mirrors his own. In *Jewish Church* Lévy argues that the Jewish corporate expression of the body of the Messiah should be viewed as a Jewish form of Catholicism. It must value rabbinic tradition and draw upon it, but it must also recognize that it is discontinuous with that tradition. The Jewish *ecclesia* thus takes its place as part of Catholic tradition, and engages in a constructive conversation with Jewish tradition. The approach I have proposed in the past for Messianic Judaism is the mirror image of Lévy’s approach for Jewish Catholicism: Messianic Jews should take their place as part of Jewish tradition, and engage in a constructive conversation with Christian tradition. Note that neither Lévy nor Kinzer suggests that a Jewish expression of faith in Jesus can occupy an “equidistant point” or “middle-way” between Judaism and Christianity. I present Messianic Judaism as taking its place squarely in the Jewish sphere, and Lévy presents Jewish Catholicism as taking its place squarely in the Christian sphere. Lévy thus mischaracterizes the nature of the symmetry I propose, even as he replicates in reverse the pattern of my thesis.

But there is another difference between my thesis and that of Lévy, and it provides a fitting way of closing this phase of our dialogue. While Lévy acknowledges the spiritual and theological significance of the Messianic Jewish movement, he denies our claims to be a legitimate form of “Judaism.” Here he reproduces the arguments of our detractors in the wider Jewish world. For Lévy, the only theologically coherent option for Jewish disciples of Jesus in the long-term is to carve out a distinct Jewish space within the expansive world of Catholic Christianity. A reasonable interpretation of *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* could view it as mirroring Lévy’s exclusivism, arguing that the only theologically coherent option for Jewish disciples of Jesus is to carve out a distinct Yeshua-following space within the expansive world of modern Judaism. After collaborating with Lévy and other Jewish Catholics for more than a decade, and studying *Jewish Church*, I have modified my position. I now see the theological and

⁹ Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999 [original edition 1942]), 196.

practical necessity of both paths, and view them as complementary rather than competing vocations. As one might expect, I view the path within Judaism as primary for Jewish disciples of Jesus, and the path within Christianity as secondary. But they are both necessary. In this way, once again, I argue for a symmetry of the two great traditions.

Lévy is correct: there is no “equidistant point” or “middle-way” between the Jewish and Christian traditions. A Jewish disciple of Jesus must take his or her stand within one of them, while seeking to learn from the other. But if Jewish disciples of Jesus from each side find a way to partner with one another, as Lévy and I have done these many years, and are doing once again in this exchange, we could become an eschatological sign for the divided people of God. In our common identity as members of the Jewish people and the Body of Christ we could point beyond ourselves to the day when the fragmentary and competing truths of the Jewish and Christian traditions are reconciled and fulfilled in the One who in his crucified and resurrected Jewish flesh is both the King of the Jews and the Lord of all creation.