

Judaism and Christianity: Covenants of Redemption (by Irving Greenberg)

God's Universal and Particular Covenants

The religion and the people of Israel came into being to mediate the conflict between bringing the *ideal* world (creation redeemed and history fulfilled) into existence and meaningful living in the *real* world (creation and history as they are now). According to Jewish tradition, God, out of love, self-limits—first to create and sustain existence, then to enable its ultimate perfection. Without yielding the conviction that people should live lives of full dignity, God allows history to go on in a flawed world and in societies full of degradation. Without giving up the desire that humans always act on the side of life and value, God respects human freedom and allows people to sin without destroying them. To reconcile the poles of the ideal and the real, God enters into covenant. The primordial self-limitation is expressed in establishing natural order/law and being bound by it. The regularity and dependability of the natural order gives humans the sense of trust to work and build the world and to feel responsible for their lives. Similarly, God does not continuously interfere with history; nor will the divine enter into human lives with constant miraculous intervention. Rather, God calls humanity into active partnership. Singly and collectively, human beings are commanded to use their God-like capacities to complete the world. In turn, God promises to be with humanity and to work with them all the way, neither to reject them nor to coerce them until all is realized.

All other living forms are genetically programmed to maximize creation of life and to live in the natural order. Humans alone have the fuller consciousness that enables them to understand and, then, to reject or to willingly join in the rhythms of creation. For humans to be summoned into covenant, then, is to be singled out in love; the call to do more and to get closer to God is the content of the experience of election.

Only divine self-control and a profound commitment to full human development can motivate God's promise to neither reject nor coerce human beings; only the recognition that coerced righteousness would violate human equality can evoke God's ongoing willingness to bear the pain of an unredeemed world. The covenant is grounded on an infinite divine respect for humanity; it is driven by a loving desire that human beings emerge out of the natural and historical process as fully independent, dignified creatures.

How can God move the world forward toward perfection and still allow humans to be free? God can do this by joining with humanity as it is (with mixed values, contradictory urges, and cross-purposes), where it is (in a world of shortages, limitations, and conflicting interests), in a partnership to work together for redemption. God joins with humanity in this way by establishing the Noahide covenant—a covenant with humanity that precedes the covenant with Israel. The goal is to fill the earth with life, life in the image of God (Gen. 9:1–2, 7).

The concept of partnership implies joint and parallel efforts and mutual obligations. This is one of the revolutionary insights of Israelite religion. The covenant mechanism is intended by its Initiator to give over a sense of stability and dignity to humans and to make them feel that God is deeply and equally involved with them. At the same time, the covenant teaches that humans should not view their power as absolute. Human authority comes into being within a framework of relationship and accountability to God; it is bound by the rules of the divine-human partnership, biblically called the Noahide covenant.

The Noahide covenant is permanent, but the Torah tells us that God chose Abraham, Sarah, and their children to be the bearers of an additional, particular covenant. Particular group covenants are needed because the emergence of a universal *brit* (covenant) brings with it a great risk implicit in the exercise of human power and freedom. Unified or centralized human power can inflict evil unchecked. Ironically, this danger is exacerbated by the very vision of perfecting the world. All these God-like capacities can be enlisted in the cause of totalitarianism, which, strengthened by good intentions and dreams of perfection, will stop at nothing to realize its goal. The glittering ideal of the perfect world can blind the eye to the cruelty being done in the name of advancing the cause. The music of redemption drowns out the anguished cries of the victims of progress and soothes the conflicts in the breast of killers for kindness. To prevent the possibility of utopian totalitarianism, one must break up the centralization of human culture, power, and institutions.

The particularization of the Noahide covenant and the sharing of the covenantal task between smaller (national) groups restores the human scale of the movement to perfect creation (*tikkun olam*: repairing the world). Small group covenants also open up the possibility of experimental, varied pathways toward perfection. Local successes can be spread around or imitated by other groups; failures or dangerous tendencies can be contained within the limits of the community or locale.

Of course there is a trade-off in adopting such a strategy of redemption. The use of human groups as agents of covenant may lead to the growth of parochial loyalties. The creation of an in-group/out-group mentality often leads to double-standard morality codes and to the reduction of the humanity of the outsider. Conflicts of interest frequently emerge between the group's needs and the cause of *tikkun olam*, the very cause for which the group has come into being. This danger of chauvinism can be offset only by engendering a moral universe in which particular human bonds of affection and morality are nurtured but are balanced by being set in an overarching culture of universal love and responsibility. This constant tension (and the inevitable recurring outbursts of tribalism or runaway universalism as one tendency or the other gains strength) will be a prominent aspect of Israel's covenantal history. On the other hand, the particular covenant opens the door to a more richly textured, more human religious experience. Each group can incorporate its own language, its own specific historical experiences and family memories, its own favorite symbols into the warp and woof of its religion.

Covenanting with smaller groupings of humanity also addresses the question of the pace of perfection. How can human beings be inspired with the vision of *tikkun olam* without being overwhelmed by constant pressure from divine revelation? How can humans be moved to change the status quo as quickly as possible? The answer that is most respectful of human dignity is: by calling into being an avant-garde to serve as pacesetter for humanity, a cadre of humans to undertake the task of working toward redemption at so high a level as to inspire others to greater efforts by their example. The vanguard is willing to work in a highly disciplined way and to be held accountable for this effort so as to become lead partners in humanity's covenant with God. The Bible works with one small group; the family of Abraham is elected to be the pacesetters for humanity. This family *brit* neither repeals nor replaces the universal covenant. After all, God's covenantal love, *hesed*, is steadfast; God's calling proves to be irrevocable.

In the development of the particular covenant out of the universal, the partnership with God is intensified. The human partner is further empowered, as evidenced by Abraham's intervention to plead for Sodom (Gen. 18), in contrast with Noah's passive acceptance of the divine decree to wipe out all life on Earth (Gen. 6:13–22).

The Abrahamic Covenant

The gift of election is given to Abraham and Sarah and their family and not to an individual. The goal of the mission is to advance the triumph of life. Only the family has the biological capability of creating life and also the bonds of love to nourish and raise it successfully. The family is the womb of humanness; its love confirms and deepens the individual's image of God. Affirming the family makes clear from day one that the natural affection and emotional links that bind the family are not to be thrust aside for the sake of the greater good, namely, the assignment to repair the world.

Covenant incorporates committed love, a love that is willing to be bound to the other. Entering the covenant represents the lover's promise to be steadfast in the face of obstacles and failure; the partner is binding herself to be there even when the emotion of love flags. The singling out is a proclamation of love and divine good purpose for the Abrahamic family and all of humanity (Gen. 12). Abraham's family is singled out to establish the human scale of redemption and to hasten its pace and, thereby, its arrival for all. Thus, when Abraham responded to his call, he changed from being a local notable to becoming a blessing for the other families of the earth. Moreover, the choosing of Abraham and Sarah is designed to pluralize the ways to salvation; by living in harmony with the divine order, their descendants are to release the channels of blessing already inherent in the creation. When the other peoples walk in Israel's footsteps, they, too, draw forth the divine abundance from the wells of blessing that lie beneath the surface of life. Thus Abraham is a source of blessing for all.

With election comes the promise that Abraham will receive the gift of the land, with the condition that only his descendants will inherit it. The future gift makes clear that having been asked to uproot in order to go ahead, Abraham's family will obtain a new place to settle. The divine faithfulness to this promise led to the great liberation in the Exodus that is the cornerstone of the Mosaic covenant. And the profound connection of land and calling confirms the dignity of embodiment and the significance of economic life and labor, now and forever.

The commanded sign of the covenant—circumcision—underscores the profound transformation of Abraham's condition as a result of his joining in this pact. The organ of generation is marked with a sign of dedication that, in turn, constantly evokes God's promise, the assurance of the expansion and victory of life in the world. Moreover, God's blessing is now intimately intertwined with God's human partner. Circumcision reminds both God and Abraham of their sacred undertaking and ultimately sets the children of Abraham inescapably apart in the eyes of their neighbors. Finally, circumcision makes it clear that Israel is of the flesh as well as of the spirit; this again underscores the affirmation of embodiment. The Israelite body sends the message that God-is-in-our-midst, incarnate.

Abraham and, later, the children of Israel are teachers to humanity everywhere; to many, they are the first to bring the message of the presence of God and the call to walk the way of the Lord through life. So closely is God's name associated with the people Israel that even if some circumcised Israelites do not want to testify, their existence is an involuntary witness.

The link between circumcision and covenant was directly challenged by the Apostle Paul and by Christian hermeneutics during and after the break between the two religions. In Paul's argument, the true Jew is one who is such inwardly, and the true circumcision is of the heart (Rom. 2:29). In defending Judaism, some Jews intensified the stress on the biology, the carnality, the law that Paul and other Christian theologians disputed. A rereading of Abraham's life, especially of the

chapters on cutting the covenant (Gen. 15, 17), refutes the easy contrasts that developed out of these early, polemical disputes: Abraham as the icon of pure faith versus Abraham the one who is given specific commandments and who undergoes circumcision in response; Abraham the universalist father of many nations versus Abraham the particularist father of a family that stands alone. Such partisan readings are simplistic; the chosen's function is richly complex. Abraham's call includes acting as all of the above. The covenantal instructions extend across a continuum of meaning.

The Covenant of Sinai

At Sinai, the Abrahamic covenant was renewed, deepened, and extended to a whole people. Abraham's *brit* had all the great strengths of a family covenant; it also had all the limitations of a family covenant. Blood ties make the exercise of mutual responsibility elemental. The frame is too biological, running the risk of excluding others not born into the system.

A nation incorporates people beyond the immediate family. At Sinai, the people of Israel, including absorbed mixed multitudes, were elected to be God's people. The nation's experience of being chosen was spelled out in the later synagogal liturgy, which includes references to being singled out, being loved and desired by God, being exalted. In grateful response, the Israelites accepted the partnership offered at Sinai. The covenant that came with chosenness included making the nation holy/special through additional commandments that made the people Israel an avant-garde in God's service. The Sinaitic covenant was powerfully influenced by the Exodus. Liberation was the act that singled out the people Israel. The Exodus challenges the reigning status quo and points to a future perfection even as it affirms the meaningfulness of history. Thus the Exodus generates the dialectical tension between the real and the ideal; and the events at Sinai again make the point that a covenant is required to close the gap and to guide living along the way to redemption.

By focusing on the Exodus, the Sinaitic covenant deepens Israel's commitment to the perfection of time (history) and not just space (creation) or spirit (humans). God's mighty acts of redemption *are* in history and not in some mythic realm. Of course, Israel's religion is not simply the product of the victory of the Exodus: the people of Israel will continue to testify in exile and after defeat.

The mission to testify places an enormous weight on the shoulders of the chosen people. Every day they must witness to infinite value in a world where values are degraded. In their behaviors, they must act responsibly when others "unburdened" by covenant may take advantage. When external events bring crushing forces to bear on them, they must find the internal fortitude to persist in hope and testimony. Given the incredible faithfulness and persistence in the face of suffering that the covenantal people have shown, one is almost convinced that God knew exactly what God was getting in selecting this family. In any event, at every step, covenantal actions summon up distinctive blessing for the covenant people; simultaneously, these blessings operate in exemplary fashion and extend to all humanity.

Israel and Its Blessings

God's promise to establish Israel in dignity in its own land is an example of the blessing bestowed upon the covenant people and of the extension of this blessing to the world. The promise implies that the soul of Abraham's children is bound to this land in a special way and that the land is uniquely responsive to them. At the same time, the right to live somewhere is the anchor of self-worth. The covenant model suggests that all peoples should have a homeland where their right to exist is self-evident and unquestioned. Unfortunately, most people tend to slip into the corruptions of being landed—becoming tribal, exploiting or excluding the outsider, worshiping the gods of this space, however morally outrageous their demands may be. Moreover,

people do not necessarily feel an obligation to turn their land into the locus of a moral, humane society. In the act of election, God asks the beloved to step up and lead the way for humanity by making the promised land a microcosm of perfection, a land in which economic equality, righteousness, justice, and equal treatment before the law will be the lot and right of everyone, citizen and stranger alike.

When the people of Israel did not step up and lead the world in this way, they were degraded or exiled, God's Name was profaned, and the covenantal message was damaged. The other nations misread the sight of Israel in exile as proof that there is no profit in living covenantally.

The nations misunderstood the situation in two ways. First, they failed to discern that the expulsion occurred because Israel had not lived up to the covenantal standard that is demanded of God's people; second, they failed to grasp that since Israel is planted in God, exile cannot make it lose its soul or its way; it can move from one land to another and maintain its values and its being because it is grounded in God. It is also the case that when living in its homeland, this very groundedness in God should prevent Israel from absolutizing land possession and should remind Jews of their part in *tikkun olam*, of their role as a blessing to the nations.

To be a blessing to the world, Israel must play three roles. It must be a teacher, a model, and a coworker. As a *teacher*, each living generation must pass on its values to others, starting with its own children. Because the goal of perfection cannot be achieved in one generation, the covenant is, of necessity, a treaty among all the generations, as well as between them and God. If one generation would reject or fail to pass on the covenant to the next one, then the efforts and sacrifices of all past (and future) generations are wasted as well. The encounter with God and the experience of cosmic care gives Israel insight and girds it with strength to teach covenantal values. As teacher of humanity, Israel becomes God's witness (Is. 43:10, 12). In a flawed world, however, the faithful can only testify to their experience of the divine presence and of being saved, and this testimony may well fail: if the messenger suppresses his testimony, or if her behavior contradicts the message, or if the facts of life and the condition of other people are dissonant with the affirmation, then the witness will bear no fruit.

As a *model* for humanity, Israel must be a community within which covenantal values are maximally lived, at least to the extent realizable now in an imperfect world. By so doing, Israel can create a liberated zone—a land within which equality is respected. In serving as a model, Israel becomes "a light of nations" (Is. 42:6). The term "model" must not be idealized. This model people are only human, with all the attendant limitations. At times, Israel looks out only for itself and fails to teach; at times, its behavior contradicts its witness. At such times, Israel is a model of what not to do. When Israel does rise to heights of faithfulness, courage, and responsibility, it is worthy of emulation.

Finally Israel must be a *coworker* for redemption. One people cannot lift up the whole globe by itself; Israel must work with others. At times, some people have been tempted to dream of an apocalyptic ending that will burn away all the wicked (all the others?) and leave Israel alone, victoriously vindicated. This event would certainly be a morally unsatisfactory outcome of the divine election of Abraham. Throughout the Bible and thereafter, there are echoes of valid revelations to other peoples and traces of mighty redemptive acts bestowed on other nations (Gen. 14, 18ff; Num. 22–24; Is. 20, 21, 23; Jer. 1:4–10). Suffice it to say that at the end of days when the whole world is redeemed, other nations will have contributed their portion and will share in it fully (Is. 2:1–4; Mic. 4:1–5; Is. 57:6–7).

All the world is holy, suffused with divine presence. However, the transcendent is veiled by the evil and

failure in the world. Someday perfection (life, peace, harmony with God and creation) will be manifest. In the interim, Israel is the holy place/nation/time where God's presence is more visible, and consequently, life is (more) triumphant there than elsewhere. In accepting the covenant, Israel agrees to become just such a nation of priests (teachers, role models) who offer an intense model to challenge the nations. If Israel lives up to its full commitment, it becomes the signpost to which all eyes turn to be inspired to work for the final perfection.

The New Covenant of Christianity

Each stage of the covenant has its own time. Rabbinic tradition counts the ten generations from Noah to Abraham as a measure of divine patience in the face of disappointment, that is, sin and the power of the status quo go on after the flood as before. In the increasing divine search for partners in *tikkun olam*, God chooses Abraham to initiate another experiment and to move the world toward perfection.

One can speculate on the timing of events in the first century. It was always God's plan to bring the vision of redemption and the covenantal way to more of humanity. After thousands of years, the Jewish people, as they would evidence in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple, had sufficiently internalized the covenant to be able to take on new levels of responsibility. Challenged and enriched by Hellenism, they were capable of shifting to a more hidden holiness without losing their connection to the transcendent God.

At the same time, in the Hellenistic world, there was a high receptivity to the spiritual/ethical messages of the covenant, especially if they could be articulated in Hellenistic terms, to and for Gentiles. To reverse a classic image, then, it was God's purpose that a shoot of the stalk of Abraham be grafted onto the root of the Gentiles. Thus non-Jews could be made aware that they were rooted in God also, and they could then bear redemptive fruit on their tree of life. Bringing considerably more people into covenantal relationships with God would be an important fulfillment (albeit not a complete one) of the promise that Abraham's people would be a blessing for the families of the earth.

The group that would bring the message of redemption to the rest of the nations had to grow out of the family and covenanted community of Israel. But the community was not intended to be a replacement for Abraham's family; nor were its achievements the proof of a divine repudiation of Sarah's covenant. The new avant-garde was to be an offshoot, a group to reach out to new masses of people in their language and images. To be heard and followed, this group had to swim in the sea of the Gentile people and their culture. This religion dared not be too Jewish (culturally or literally). Therefore, although the new articulation of the faith grew in the bosom of Judaism and was profoundly marked by Jewish interpretation of its symbols and history, it could and did take on the coloration of the people that it reached. Once one grasps that the emergence of this group was the expression of divine pluralism, God seeking to expand the number of covenantal channels to humanity without closing any of them, then the next step follows logically. The new development would have to become an independent religion or it would erode Jewish distinctiveness and undermine the capacity of the Jewish people to carry on a distinctively Jewish witness.

Christianity had to start within Judaism, but it had to grow into its own autonomous existence to preserve the particularity of the original covenantal ways while enabling deeper exploration of the polarities that characterize the covenantal dialectic. The signal that triggered the new growth was to be discernible to the minimum number it would take to start a new religion. It would not be heard by the bulk of Jewry, not because of spiritual deafness or arrogant hardheartedness, but because the signal was not intended for them. The Jewish majority was shortly to be called to its renewed covenant, its rabbinic flowering.

What was that initial signal? Was it a special teacher who gave new vitality and freshness to his followers' religious lives, communicating a sense of special closeness of the presence of God? Was it a revolutionary advocate for the poor and outcasts and/or against the Romans, proclaiming the kingdom of God, preaching a political, economic, and spiritual transformation out of which the first would be last and the last would be first? Was it some miracle maker whose truest miracle was to channel God's love and, hence, the sense of election to those who followed him? Or was the signal the miraculous, blazing glory proclaimed by some fundamentalists or everyday faithful Christians who read the Gospels quite literally today? By contemporary standards of proof, likely we shall never know the answer. In any event, the period of that initial signal was overtaken by the crisis of Jesus' crucifixion.

Was this shocking, God-mocking, torturous death the end of miracles? The proof that the brutal status quo would always win? The cruel refutation of the teaching of love? The ultimate phenomenology of Godforsakenness? The faithful few, thinking like Jews, concluded that death and destruction do not get the final word. On the contrary, defeat tests faith and opens the door to new and deeper understanding. Then they received another, activating signal: an empty tomb. The fact that Jesus did not even attain the minimal dignity of a final resting place—an undisturbed grave—should have been the final nail in the crucifixion of their faith. Instead, they increased hope and trust in God. Soon they experienced the same (or greater) presence in their midst as before. Once faith supplied the key of understanding, the empty tomb yielded the message of the resurrection. Whether they received this message within three days, as the Gospel story indicates, or within three decades, as the most probable scholarly account has it, is of secondary importance. Inspired, they redoubled their telling of their redemption story. Inspired, they interpreted every inherited symbol and tradition as foreshadowing their redeemer. Among Jews who were hearing other divine messages loud and clear, their preaching made little headway; among Gentiles, as was intended, it spread and spread.

The original people of God soon encountered their own crisis—the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and the exile that soon followed. Was this catastrophe the end of the covenant? In light of Jewish religious/national fervor and their revolt against Rome out of loyalty to God, why did God not vanquish the Romans even as God had overwhelmed the Egyptians?

Instead of despairing, most Jews increased their hope and trust in God. The rabbis emerged to teach of God's self-limitation, of God's "hiddenness," which was designed to call the people of Israel to participate more fully in the covenant. In the Temple, the manifest God showed overwhelming power, speaking through prophet and breastplate, and holiness was "concentrated" in Jerusalem. Now, God was calling on Israel to discern the divine that was hidden but present everywhere. To see God everywhere is a special skill; learning and law thus became the keys to religious understanding. The Jewish people, in biblical times an ignorant peasantry awed by sacramental, revelatory experiences in the Temple (or elsewhere!) were now trained by the rabbis to study and speak through prayer to a God who no longer revealed Godself directly/visibly to Israel. The sacramental religion of the Bible was transformed into the internalized, more participatory faith of the rabbinic period. Even as Christians responded to their great religious experiences by proclaiming a New Covenant, Jews responded to their extraordinary flowering by affirming a *renewal* of the covenant.

In the aftermath of the destruction came the tragedy in the parting of the ways (note: *in* the parting of the ways, not *of* the parting of the ways). As Christianity spread among Gentiles, they heard the message in a

way that made Jesus more literally God-like. Jews looked away from the shared values, the shared sense of covenant, the shared memories and focused on the Christian teaching that Jesus was God— which made Christian teaching more unacceptable, indeed inferior, in Jewish eyes. Soon gone from Judaism, or rather muted within it, were the themes of grace, love, and the pathos of divine suffering— covenantal all, but now deemed to be too Christian.

At the same time, as Christianity spread among Gentiles, it elaborated a theology that eliminated *halachah* (starting with the practices that separated Jews from non-Jews). Furthermore, to the constant Jewish critique that the world was manifestly unredeemed (therefore, Jesus could be no true redeemer), Christianity responded by spiritualizing redemption (and dismissing Judaism as a "carnal" religion). The conjunction of anti-halachic thinking and the dismissal of biology (Christians are children of Abraham in the spirit) encouraged an otherworldly focus and reinforced a dualism that often pitted the soul against the body, the flesh against the spirit. Rootedness in the land also was spiritualized away; no land was sacred, and only the heavenly Jerusalem really mattered. Christianity preserved the covenantal dialectic between the ideal and the real. However, in its main thrust it leaned to one side of this dialectic, a skewing that was reinforced by its projection of Judaism as the devil's advocate, rather than as God's balancing voice.

Experiencing their own real sense of God's love as election, Christians assumed that the Jews must have lost theirs. Then Christians became convinced that their interpretation of the common symbols was the only one. As Christians saw it, the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile of the Jews was decisive proof of their interpretation of God's intentions. Precisely because of the Jewish origins of Jesus and shared patrimony with the Jews, the Christians were driven to insist that Judaism was superseded. The final confirmation of Christian supersessionism came with the success of Christianity in the Roman Empire. A triumph of the spirit—that is, bringing God, love, covenant, redemption, ethics to countless pagans—turned into a victory for a politically established religion and a license for triumphalism.

In their triumphalism, Christians overlooked the extent to which theirs was a one-sided and partial reading of the biblical tradition in the light of their redemptive experience; they ignored the possibility that God had supplied the Jews with a different interpretive key. Instead, Christians concluded that the Jews had to be spiritually deaf and dumb or willfully devilish to resist Christian understandings. From this conclusion it was not a big jump to medieval Christianity's demonizing and dehumanizing of the Jews and, from there, to the Holocaust. Thus a gospel of love—which often acted that way among Gentiles—turned into a privileged sanctuary for hatred of the original people of Israel, especially as election became self-centered and the experience of chosenness turned into a claim to hold a monopoly on God's love.

The narrowing of its messages that grew out of its unconditional rejection of Judaism penalized Christianity itself in no small measure. The focus on crucifixion strengthened ascetic tendencies and devalued the spiritual significance of pleasure. The model of self-abnegating sacrifice as the key relationship to God generated fideism, sometimes at the expense of reason; it also nurtured the self-image of a powerless human, dependent on a mediator, unable to help himself or play a fully dignified role in the covenant. Sometimes, such attitudes spread to other cultural disciplines.

For their part, the rabbis could only envision a covenantal pluralism inside Judaism. They understood the Christian claim that if Christianity was right, Judaism was wrong. Since Jews experienced ongoing religious vitality and the presence of Holy Spirit in their community, they concluded that Christianity was an illusion and that Jesus was a

false Messiah. Precisely because of a shared Bible and because of the Jewish origins of Christianity, Jews were driven to insist that Christianity was idolatrous, that is, it advocated the worship of a man. Just as the Christian rejection of Judaism penalized and distorted Christianity, so, too, Judaism was no less skewed by Jewry's inability to admit the vitality of Christian religion and its contribution to meaning and ethics around the world. To reduce the impact of Christianity's triumph among Gentiles, Jewry dismissed the significance of this world and of politics and military power. Law and learning were stressed in counterpoint to the grace and love of the gospel, to the extent that tendencies to legalism or underrating the spirit were stimulated. Also, a certain narrowing of Jewish concern from all of humanity to the tribe of Israel took place.

Covenant After the Shoah

The Shoah was the *reductio ad demonic absurdum* of interethnic, inter-religious hatred. The Nazi demonizing of the Jews drew upon the subculture of degradation and hostility that grew out of past Christian teachings of contempt. After the Shoah, the burden of this past teaching was insufferable to repentant Christians. The Shoah made clear the overriding need to end all circles of hatred that surrounded and isolated groups of others. The isolation not only made Jews vulnerable but also tempted bystanders into indifference and silence. Jews had to ask themselves if they would not be guilty of similar failures were the people and religions that they disrespected at risk. Responding to the Holocaust created an overwhelming moral need to restore the image of God to the other. This restoration required recovering the uniqueness of the other by throwing off the lenses of stereotype and of caricature. The Nazi absolute—a combination of centralized power and unlimited ideology—made the Holocaust possible. The commitment to "never again" demanded the breakup of all concentrated power and absolutisms—even cultural and religious ones. Pluralism—the setting of healthy limits on absolutes, valid or otherwise—emerged as a key corrective to the abusive tendencies built into all traditions of ultimate meaning. The more people of faith were committed to restore God and the image of God in a devastated post-Shoah world, the more they were driven to recognize God's intended pluralism.

Jews, too, must understand that theological contempt cannot be separated from human responsibility. As Hillel said, in summary of the whole Torah, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others." Jews must recognize the full implications of the truth that "God has many messengers." It is not enough to speak of the tradition that there is salvation for individuals outside of Judaism. This generality does not do justice to the full spiritual dignity of others who live their lives in religious communities, and not just as individuals.

In this spirit, one can make the following declaration about Christianity from a Jewish perspective. Both religions grow out of Abraham's covenant and out of the Exodus. The Exodus, as understood by the Hebrew prophets, is an event that points beyond itself to future, expanded redemptions. The messianic impulse is a fundamental expression of Judaism's ongoing vitality. In that sense, Christianity is not a mere deviation or misunderstanding; it is an organic outgrowth of Judaism itself. As I have argued above, Christianity is a divinely inspired attempt to bring the covenant of *tikkun olam* to a wider circle of Gentiles. God intended that Judaism and Christianity both work for the perfection of the world (the kingdom of God). Together, both religions do greater justice to the dialectical tensions of covenant than either religion can do alone.

Judaism's focus on family as the context for *brit* is constructive; pursued one-sidedly it can lead to tribalism and amoral familialism. The religion needs to be corrected by a faith that breaks out of the family model and explores the power of a universal, self-defined belief group. Rabbinic Judaism brings humans more powerfully into participation in the covenant; but it needs a counterpart religion to explore the element of grace and transcendence in a more central way. In this perspective, Jewish covenant peoplehood and

Christian faith community are both validated. Both models are a necessary expression of the plenitude of divine love and of the comprehensiveness and range of human roles in the covenant. By the same token, it is not too late for Christians to enrich their own revelation by learning from rabbinic response and the development of halachah how humans become (in Joseph Soloveitchik's words) cocreators of Torah, the divine word. Nor is it too late for Jews to enrich their own way by focusing again on grace and the sacramental and universal motifs played out in Christianity.

There are many dialectical tensions built into the covenantal structure. There is grace: the divine role in the partnership and the extraordinary initiative of God's love. Yet, the counterpart is the centrality of humans and the fullest participation of the human in the process.

When they focus on grace, both individuals and communities find it difficult to explore the limits and potential of human participation in covenant. Similarly, if one concentrates on continuity in the covenant, it is difficult to plumb the depths of change and transformation in history. If, on the other hand, there is a community that is particularly quick to understand the role of transformation or change, it finds it difficult to adjust to the ongoing validity of tradition. Humans cannot keep the covenantal tensions in perfect balance. The key to upholding the totality of covenant and the fullest realization of the goal is that there be multiple communities working on many roads toward perfection, and that there be mutual, loving criticism to keep standards high. Perhaps this need for criticism and high standards is why the divine strategy utilized at least two covenantal communities. Even with Christianity and Judaism both in the world, neither religion has succeeded in bringing the final redemption to its fullest flowering.

From this perspective, Jesus is no false Messiah, that is, a would-be redeemer who teaches evil values. Rather, when Christianity, in his name, claims absolute authority and denigrates the right of Judaism or of Jews to exist, then it makes him into a false Messiah. Short of such claims, however, Jews should recognize Jesus as a failed Messiah. This recognition would allow Jews to affirm that for hundreds of millions of people, Christianity has been and continues to be a religion of love and consolation.

Does the recognition of Jesus as a failed Messiah demean classic Christian affirmations of Jesus' messiahship and the incarnation? Does it betray the classic Jewish insistence that the Messiah has not yet come, or does it breach Judaism's self-respecting boundary that excludes Christian claims?

I believe that none of these fears is warranted. The term "failed Messiah" allows for a variety of Christian and Jewish self-understandings. Some Christians will translate this term into their view of Jesus as a proleptic Messiah. Others will insist on their own traditional understanding of Jesus' messiahship but will see in the term a divinely willed, much needed spur to believers to confront the fact that the world is not yet perfect and that their task is unfinished. Still other Christians, those who insist on Jesus' Trinitarian status, will hear the phrase "failed Messiah" as a reminder that God's self-presentation is deeply humble, not triumphalist. God is identified with the weak and the defeated and with the power of persuasion by model rather than victory by intimidation.

Some Jews will understand the term "false Messiah" as a description of Jesus' actual role in Jewish history; others will understand it as an affirmation of the Jewish "no" to all claims to finality in this unredeemed world. Still others will understand the term as a tribute to Jesus' extraordinary accomplishments, since under the impact of his model, a major fraction of humanity has been brought closer to God and to redemption.

I have already suggested how one might respond to Christian claims that Jesus was the incarnation of God

and that his resurrection in glory was decisive proof that Christianity is the only true religion. The resurrection signal was so ambiguous, so subject to alternate interpretations, that it was heard in diametrically opposed fashions— one way by the band elected to start the new faith, another way by the majority called to continue the classic covenantal mission. Only such a subtle signal would fully respect the free will and dignity of the disciples. Only a modest interpretation of the resurrection could prevent the hegemonic grandiosity of Christian claims and the spiritual arrogance that leads it to mistreat and abuse other religions.

From a Jewish perspective, one hopes that the growing Christian emphasis on Jesus as the path to the Father rather than on Jesus as God incarnate may yet win out as a more proper understanding. If it does not, then one may argue that Christianity is wrong on this understanding. But a single error, even on a major point, does not destroy the overall legitimacy of Christianity's covenantal way. Implicit in pluralism is the recognition that there are limits in my truth that leave room for others. Such limits may include the acknowledgment that erroneous doctrines do not necessarily delegitimize the faith that incorporates them.

If the Christian insistence that Jesus is literally God or part of God wins out, then many Jews will argue that closing the biblically portrayed gap between the human and the divine, between the real and the ideal, by incarnation is idolatrous or at least against the grain of the biblical way. But even if incarnation is contradictory to some biblical principles, the model itself is operating out of classic biblical modes—the need to achieve redemption, the desire to close the gap between the human and divine, the role of divine initiatives in redemption, and so on. Thus one can argue that incarnation is improbable and violates other given biblical principles, or that it is unnecessary in light of the continuing career of the Jewish people. But one can hardly rule out the option totally, particularly if it was intended for Gentiles and not for Jews. Far be it from me as a committed Jew to dictate to God or to other faith communities what religious signals should be given or how they should be heard in those communities—unless they have evil consequences for others.

Both Judaism and Christianity share the totality of their dreams and the flawed finiteness of their methods; nonetheless, they differ so fundamentally that the traditional record is dominated by bitter conflict. However, from a pluralistic perspective—dare one say from the perspective of a divine strategy of redemption rather than from within the communities embedded in historical experience and needs?—both religions have more in common than they have been able to admit to themselves. Both Jews and Christians have a revolutionary dream of total transformation and yet remain willing to accept the finitude and limitations of humans and to proceed one step at a time. Both groups persist in preaching their messages despite the difficulties they have encountered along the way; they press ahead in the face of their historical suffering. And despite the terrible history of their relationship, each has witnessed to God and the human covenantal mission in its own way. For what often seems an eternity, both have hoped and waited, both have transmitted the message and worked for the final redemption. Both need each other's work (and that of others) to realize their deepest hopes.

All in all, the Christian experience of election is valid; they have experienced God's love that singles out the beloved and transforms and revivifies life. They must understand, however, that God's love is capable of singling out again and again; they are not the sole beneficiaries of chosenness.

There remains one question to be asked. When Christians carry on their covenanted mission, are they members of the house of Israel? Are they in a parallel covenant or part of a single covenant alongside Jewry? Personally, I believe that world religions such as Islam and noncovenantal faiths such as Buddhism and forms of Hinduism should be recognized as movements legitimately striving to fulfill the universal divine covenant with humanity. However, only Christians (although possibly also Muslims) may be deemed to be members of the people Israel, even as they practice differing religions than Jewry does. To articulate and defend this

thesis would require another essay as long as this one. I adjure you, who love Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the field, let me not wake that love or rouse that enmity until [the time] please!

Israel, Judaism, and Christianity (by David Fox Sandmel)

"Hear, O Israel! The YHVH is our God, the YHVH alone."

Who Is Israel?

Traditionally, both Jews and Christians have considered themselves to be the heirs of biblical Israel, God's chosen people. Perhaps more than any other difference between Judaism and Christianity, this claim to be God's covenantal partner has defined the tragic history of relations between Jews and Christians. It is also the single aspect of Christian theology that has changed most radically since the Shoah, as a result of the process of Christian self-examination, of the dialogue between Jews and Christians, and of advances in critical scholarship concerning religion in the Greco-Roman world. After a brief look at the meaning of "Israel" for Jews, I will examine some classical and contemporary Christian understandings of what it means for Christians to be Israel.

Jews as Israel

For us Jews, the word "Israel" has three interrelated meanings. First, it refers to a *people* descended from the patriarchs and matriarchs. Second, this people Israel has a special *covenant* with God, first established with Abraham and subsequently renewed at Sinai. Third, according to our tradition, God has given us a specific *land*, the land of Israel. In English and in most other modern languages, we refer to ourselves as "Jews" (French, *Juifs*; German, *Juden*). The word "Jew," however, is not our original name. "Jew" occurs rarely in

the Tanach or in the *siddur*.¹ Our oldest name is *Yisrael*, Israel; we call ourselves *'am Yisrael*, "the people of Israel," and *benei Yisrael*, "the children of Israel." In non-Orthodox prayer books, one of the first benedictions to be recited in the morning is "Praised are You our Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe who has made me *Yisrael* (an Israelite)."² Similarly, in the Talmud we find, "A *Yisrael*, even though he (or she) sins is still a *Yisrael*."³ The fact that most translators render *Yisrael* in both the morning benediction and the Talmudic dictum as "Jew" underscores the point. Indeed, the *Shema* doesn't make sense to some Jews until it is rephrased as "Hear, O *Jews!* The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." We, and others, may use the word "Jew," but our *name* is Israel.

As the children of Israel we are the descendants of our ancestors: Abraham and Sara; Isaac and Rebecca; and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. Jacob was given the name Israel during his encounter with God described in Genesis 32. And Jacob had twelve sons who, in turn, became the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus Israel is a *people*, an extended family in which all Jews are related. But the family is open. Those who become "Jews by choice" are adopted into the Jewish people and become indistinguishable members of the family.⁴

"Israel" also refers to a particular event, since we are the people who entered into the *covenant* with God at Mount Sinai:

Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, and Moses went up to God. YHVH called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the *children of Israel*: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and

brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples." (Ex. 19:2—5, emphasis added)

Finally, as Israel we have a deep emotional attachment to a particular *land* that we also call Israel. The phrase "land of Israel" is much older than the modern State of Israel; it is found in the Book of Samuel and is used regularly by Ezekiel. In the light of a history marked by persecution and genocide, the existence of an independent Jewish state, also called Israel, has made the connection to both the land and the state an integral part of what it means for contemporary Jews to be Israel.

Christians as Israel

The Christian understanding that the church has become God's covenantal partner—has become Israel—can be divided into three stages. The first stage was quite short, lasting only a generation or two after Jesus' execution, and can be found in the writings of Paul. During this stage, the earliest followers of Jesus, both Jewish and Gentile, saw themselves as part of, or at least in relationship to, the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition. The second stage began as Christianity started to develop an identity independent of Judaism, as early as the composition of the Gospels, and continued into the modern period. In this stage, Christianity came to view itself as the

"new Israel." Christians are partners with God in a "new" covenant through Christ, and God's covenant with old Israel, with the Jews, is no longer in effect. As a result of their unfaithfulness to God, as recorded in the Tanach itself, and culminating in their rejection of Jesus Christ, the Jews are disqualified from continuing as God's covenantal partners. In its extreme and most dangerous forms, the church as "spiritual Israel" is diametrically opposed to the Jews as "carnal Israel"; the church is the "true Israel" and represents God and good; the Jews are the "false Israel" and represent Satan and evil. During the third stage, in the years since the Shoah, official church bodies and Christian theologians have been reconsidering what it means for both Christians and Jews to be Israel. I will now briefly examine each of these stages.

Paul's Conception of Israel

Christianity began as one of many groups within the complex religious world of Second Temple Judaism. As the movement that evolved from the followers of Jesus grew, it attracted relatively few Jews but was taken up by many Gentiles. By the middle of the second century C.E., Christianity and rabbinic Judaism were well on the way to becoming separate religions. One of the challenges for emerging Christianity was defining the relationship between an increasingly Gentile church and Christianity's Jewish roots. What did it mean to be a Gentile who believed that Jesus as the risen Christ was the Messiah promised *to Israel* by the *God of Israel*, especially when most Jews—Jesus' own people—did not accept Jesus? How could Gentiles share in God's promise to Israel and worship the God of Israel without being Israel?

Whereas the Gospels portray the tension between Judaism and emerging Christianity in the harsh rhetoric of religious polemic, it is the apostle Paul who first tries to provide a theological resolution for the question of the relationship of Christianity to the God of Israel.

This attempted resolution is found most succinctly in Romans 9—11. Paul begins by affirming God's

covenants with the people Israel.⁵ He then suggests that God's promise is not limited to the physical descendants of Abraham, that is, to the Jews. Rather, the essential aspect of God's covenant with the Jews is not the Jews per se but the fact that God made a choice and that God continues to have the power to choose

whomever God wants. Paul states, citing Exodus 33:19, that it is God's choice, or God's grace, that ultimately determines whether mercy is bestowed upon a person or not. Likewise, and here Paul cites Hosea 2:23, God can choose other covenantal partners if that is God's will.

In this section of Romans, Paul also discusses the place of Jewish law in the new covenant. Paul believed that the law by itself was insufficient to ensure redemption or salvation. Faith in the risen Christ is essential: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). Thus for Paul, although God's choice of Israel is a historical fact and remains valid, God retains the freedom to choose whomever God wills; God's salvation is not restricted to Israel simply because God has a covenant with it. "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him" (10:13).

As a Jew, Paul was greatly distressed that Israel had not heeded God's message of salvation brought through Jesus (10:14–21). Nonetheless, Paul steadfastly proclaims God's continued covenant with the people of Israel as well as his own allegiance to them. "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (11:1–2). Indeed, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is, in part, an effort to bring Israel to faith in Christ by provoking their jealousy! (11:13)

At this point Paul invokes the famous metaphor of the olive tree from which some branches have been broken and onto which other branches have been grafted (11:16–24). The tree, both roots and branches, is Israel, the people with whom God made an everlasting covenant. The broken branches are those of Israel, the nation that has rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ. The grafted branches are those of the nations who have accepted the gospel. Gentiles who believe in Jesus become part of Israel—that is, God's covenantal partners—and are able to share in the salvation brought by the Savior who comes from Israel. In Paul's view, it is Israel's rejection of Jesus that has made possible the election of the Gentiles, and the faith of the Gentiles is an essential part of God's plan for Israel. Paul has described a "new" or, more accurately, "true" Israel consisting of those who have faith in Jesus Christ. This true Israel is not made up of the descendants of Jacob/Israel (though they are not necessarily excluded from it); rather it is the community of both Jewish and Gentile believers, that is, the church.⁶

Paul understood the relationship between the old Israel (the descendants of Jacob) and the new Israel (the church) to be reciprocal; each needed the other in order to achieve final salvation. At the same time, Paul believed that God's promises to the old Israel were irrevocable and would be fulfilled, although admittedly, his understanding of that fulfillment—inasmuch as it required faith in Jesus as Christ— was not one that his contemporaries among the Jews would have accepted.

The Church as the True Israel

The first and second centuries were years of self-definition for both Judaism and Christianity. As Christianity grew and spread through the ancient world, it had to assert its own identity. As part of this process of self-definition and differentiation, each tradition drew distinct boundaries that excluded the other, and each claimed to be the exclusive heir of biblical Israel. The Christian understanding of the church as the "new" Israel came more and more to exclude the "old" Israel. This exclusion is found even in Gospel documents, which often portray the Jews rejecting Jesus and Jesus (and/or God), in turn, rejecting the Jews and turning to

the Gentiles.⁷ Whereas Paul saw a new Israel that included both "Jew and Greek," later Christianity saw (and some Christians today continue to see) the new Israel (Christianity) superseding the old Israel (Judaism).

Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165), an important early church father, uses the term "true spiritual Israel" in referring to

the church in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin argues that since the God of Israel acted in Jesus Christ, it is in the church rather than in Israel that the God of Israel is now found.

An important difference between the position of Justin and the one articulated by Paul in Romans 9—11 is that Paul affirmed the irrevocable nature of God's promise to the people of Israel. Justin, and, thereafter, most of Christianity into the modern era, viewed God's relationship with "Abraham's physical descendants" as transient, at best.⁸ The historical consequence of this theology was a growing antipathy to Jews and to Judaism in most of the Christian world.

Christianity Reconsiders Israel

We now come to the third stage in the development of Christian identity as Israel, in which the Shoah becomes a defining moment for Christianity. The long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism made the Shoah possible.⁹ Many of the people who carried out Hitler's Final Solution considered themselves Christians. In confronting this stark reality, some post-Holocaust Christians have reexamined aspects of traditional Christian teaching, especially the concept of the church as the "true Israel," and have offered new definitions that differ from those of Paul and classical Christianity. Among the fundamental questions probed by theologians such as Paul van Buren, Rosemary Radford Reuther, George Lindbeck, and Franklin Littell are:

- What are Christians to make of the persistence of the Jewish people?
- Is the church the new Israel? If so, who are these people? If not, what happens to the doctrines of promise and fulfillment, law and grace?
- Is Jesus of the people Israel? For whom is he the Messiah?
- What of Israel's land and state?¹⁰

In addition, many official church bodies have issued public statements that reflect these concerns. In the documents of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church reassessed its teachings about Jews and Judaism; it has continued this reassessment in subsequent documents. Protestant churches have made similar pronouncements. For example, in 1987 the General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted a resolution titled "The Relationship Between the United Church of Christ and the Jewish Community." It stated: "The United Church of Christ affirms its recognition that God's covenant with the Jewish people has not been rescinded or abrogated by God, but remains in full force, inasmuch as 'the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable' (Rom. 11:29)."¹¹

The moral imperative to disavow triumphalist teachings that have led to atrocities in the past is the driving force behind the Christian theological reevaluation of Jews and Judaism. Hans Küng, a Roman Catholic theologian, examines the history of Jewish—Christian relations and states: "Only one thing is of any use now: a radical metanoia [reorientation], repentance and re-thinking; we must start on a new road, no longer leading away from the

Jew, but toward them."¹² Küng concludes that the church's opposition to the Jews is tantamount to opposition to God. Furthermore, the church "must seek in every way to enter into sympathetic dialogue with

the ancient people of God." Küng also argues that the church and Israel are two distinct peoples of God:

Like Israel and following Israel the Church sees itself as the journeying people of God, constantly being delivered from bondage, constantly wandering through the wilderness of this age, constantly maintaining the tension between thankful commemoration and hopeful expectation and preparing itself for its entry into the promised land, the messianic kingdom, the goal that always lies in the future.¹³

The realities of history are also the starting point for Kendall Soulen's book *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. In his critique of traditional Christian theology, Soulen argues that it has essentially omitted the history of Israel/Jews from its telling of its own story. In his reconstruction of what he calls "the standard canonical framework," there are four stages of history. First, God creates the world and humanity. Second, humanity, through the sin of Adam and Eve, disobeys and falls. Third, "lost humanity" is redeemed in Christ. Fourth, God brings the final redemption of the world at the "end of time." The church (that is, those who believe in Jesus as Christ) is Israel inasmuch as it has become the people of God through its fidelity to Jesus Christ, not because it is descended from a single ancestor. Its status as a people is not defined solely by the promises of Sinai, nor does it necessarily entail a connection to any particular land. Noticeably missing from this rehearsal of the Christian sacred story is any mention of what we Jews would consider the core of our history. In this view, the Jews and their story are irrelevant to the story of the new true Israel, Christianity.

Soulen notes, however, that "significant parts of the Christian church today reject supersessionism and affirm God's fidelity to the Jewish people. From there we ask: *what are the implications of this new development for the rest of Christian theology?*"¹⁴ Soulen offers his own answer: "Christians should acknowledge that God's history with Israel and the nations is the permanent and enduring medium of God's work as the Consummator of human creation, and therefore it is also the

permanent and enduring context of the gospel about Jesus."¹⁵ Rather than viewing the history of Israel and the nations as preparation for the gospel, Soulen argues that this history "*surrounds* the gospel as its constant horizon, context, and goal."¹⁶ Soulen suggests that Christianity cannot understand itself unless it posits an Israel whose covenant with God coexists with and informs the new covenant. Scott Bader-Saye, another Christian theologian who has considered the meaning of election for contemporary Christianity, refers to the church as "God's chosen people *with* Israel" (emphasis added).¹⁷

The concept of the church as the people of God along with the Jews, a concept that does not depend on denying Jews our identity and covenantal legitimacy, is a radical shift in Christian thinking. This step has required painful soul-searching and theological courage on the part of those Christians who have taken it. The Jewish community should view this shift positively; it signifies a real change in Christian understandings of Jews and Judaism and creates a profound basis for cooperation and exchange.

Above and beyond this basis of exchange, however, we ought to ask another question: does this new shift among Christians have theological implications for Jews? Does the recognition on the part of some Christians that we Jews continue to be Israel in covenant with God require that, in turn, we must acknowledge the legitimacy of the church's claim to identify with the name "Israel"? As I have tried to show in this brief essay, Jewish and Christian definitions of what it means to be Israel are quite different from one another. Jewish tradition already recognizes and affirms Gentiles who acknowledge the oneness of God. Jews can recognize Christians as people who believe in the God of Israel. From a Jewish perspective, however, that belief, in and of itself, does not make Christianity part of Israel, *as we understand Israel*, that is, a *people* that has a special *covenant* with God who has given us a specific *land*. Although Christians can acknowledge that Israel's

covenant with God is eternal, fidelity to Jewish tradition precludes our recognition as Israel of those who do not meet our definitional criteria. This is but one of the enduring differences between Jews and Christians, and we both must not only accept but also affirm this difference if we are truly committed to supporting each other's integrity.

Changes in Christian theology regarding Jews and Judaism, however, do challenge us to find new ways to relate to Christians and Christianity. Now that some in the Christian world affirm God's continuing covenant with the Jews, we need to consider the theological implication of their claim to be in covenant with that same God.

1. The Hebrew word *yehudi* in its various forms appears twenty-four times outside the Book of Esther, where it is used regularly. Though most often translated into English as "Jew," in context the best translation may be "Judean."

2. In the Orthodox prayer book, the same benediction is found in a negative formulation: "who has not made me a Gentile."

3. Sanh. 22a.

4. Thus a Jew-by-choice is given a Hebrew name reflecting the family relationship — X the son/daughter of Abraham and Sara.

5. Paul uses the plural "covenants," probably a reference to successive covenants with Abraham as well as to the covenant at Sinai. It should be remembered that what we have of Paul's writings is a collection of occasional letters, not an organized, worked-out theology. All interpretations of Paul are, by necessity, constructions.

6. Cf. Gal. 3:7, 9, 14, 29; 6:19.

7. See, for but one example, Mt. 22:33–41.

8. Much of Christian anti-Semitism can be traced to the view that the Jews ("carnal Israel") had rejected Jesus, indeed had crucified him. See Chapter 2 for a further discussion of this topic.

9. The term "anti-Semitism" is problematic. It is important to differentiate between religiously based and racially based prejudice against Jews. Some consider only the latter to be "anti-Semitism." Nonetheless, although it is important to distinguish different types of "Jew-hatred," it seems to me that the term "anti-Semitism," despite its shortcomings, is now understood to encompass both "religious" and "racial" Jew-hatred. It is also important to stress that although Christian anti-Semitism made the Shoah possible, "Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon," to quote "A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," which appears at the beginning of this volume.

10. See Peter Ochs, "Jewish and Christian Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2d ed., ed. David Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 607. Ochs's article provides a good synopsis of this trend in contemporary Christian theology.

11. For more on this resolution and its implications, see Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, "God's Continuing Covenant with the Jews and the Christian Reading of the Bible," in *Prism: A Theological Forum for the UCC* 3, no. 2 (fall 1988): 60–75.

12. Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. Ray and Rosaleen Oekenden (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), 138.

13. *Ibid.*, 148.

14. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 3.

15. *Ibid.*, 110.

16. *Ibid.*, 176.

17. Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), 148.

Israel and the Church: A Christian Response to Irving Greenberg's Covenantal Pluralism (by R. Kendall Soulen)

A Brief Portrait of the Church

As a Christian, my task here is to state briefly how I understand the church and in doing so to respond to at least some of the points raised by Rabbi Greenberg.

In my view, the nature of the church can be clarified only by starting with what is generally agreed to be an odd claim (even by those who hold it to be true): the One God, the Creator and Consummator of all things, is the God of the Jews. If God is not God as he is portrayed in the Scriptures of the Jewish people—a God who makes promises to some for the benefit of all—then virtually nothing of what the church proclaims is worth bothering with. If, on the other hand, the Mystery-at-the-Heart-of-all-Things is the I AM who accosted Moses at the bush, then the gospel (the proclamation of which is the church's *raison d'être*) is at least possibly true. This is not to say that everything the church believes is already spelled out in what Christians traditionally call the Old Testament. But it is to say that only the God who made a beloved people Israel from Sarah's barren womb could have raised a beloved child Jesus from the dead.

According to Christian understanding, the church is what one might expect to come into existence once God's promise to Abraham — "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3)—has been fulfilled. The Christian notion of a fulfilled promise is frequently misunderstood (not least by Christians), so let me define the term using the words of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth: "The promise is fulfilled does not mean: the promise comes to an end and is replaced by the actual thing promised. It means: the promise itself is now whole, complete, unambiguous, and hence already mighty."¹

To put it another way, a fulfilled promise is still a promise, but one that has been "filled up" with the power of the promised future, so that the power spills over into the present. Christians believe that God's promise to Abraham—indeed, that *all* of God's promises—have been "filled up" in Jesus Christ. Oddly enough, this belief is tied directly to the fact that Jesus is, in Rabbi Greenberg's words, a failed Messiah, or, as Christians are more accustomed to saying, a crucified Messiah. A crucified Messiah is one on whom the forces of death and destruction have done their worst, so that—if he be raised—he is already their victor, and life's final victory over death has already begun to spill over into the present.

The church, then, can be compared to the commotion that happens after the ringing of a dinner bell but before everyone has settled down to dinner. Fittingly enough, life in the church begins with a good washing (baptism), and its central corporate act is a simple meal (Eucharist) that anticipates the end-time banquet of the new creation. Every act of Christian worship is accompanied by preaching, which echoes the good news of the first dinner bell. The commotion, beginning in Jerusalem, has gradually spread to the ends of the earth,

so that now a sizable portion of the world is getting ready for I AM's supper in the name of Jesus.

This brief characterization of the church will have to suffice. The church is the company of those who believe that the promise of life's victory over death has been "filled up" in Jesus Christ, who seek to live according to the Spirit of that victory in the present time, and who look forward to the final triumph of life over death in the coming reign of Israel's God.

The Jewish—Christian Conundrum

The time has come to consider a major perplexity that confronts the view of the church that I have just presented: though Jews were the first to proclaim the gospel, it has been mostly Gentiles who have responded. In terms of our analogy, Jews rang the dinner bell, but Gentiles came to dinner. As for the bulk of Jewry and what eventually became normative Judaism, the response was simple: false alarm.

From his vantage point as a Jewish thinker, Rabbi Greenberg addresses this perplexity in a generous and profound manner by suggesting that the alarm was genuine but intended only for the Gentiles. He proposes a model of Judaism's relation to Christianity that I think might be called covenantal pluralism, according to which God's covenant with the Jews spins off other covenantal communities that are relatively independent of the Jewish people but nevertheless oriented toward a very Jewish hope—God's consummation and redemption of the world. From this point of view, the resurrection was the signal that initiated one such spin-off among the Gentiles. It was not an event intended for the Jewish people as a whole, nor one that "filled up"

God's promises to Israel.²

Although I perceive elements of profound truth in Rabbi Greenberg's view, I do not believe that Christians can be completely satisfied with his answer. Christians, in my view, cannot easily yield on the idea that the resurrection of a crucified Messiah, if true at all, has significance for everyone. This claim may be puzzling and even offensive to many Jews. But it is tied up with the very notion of resurrection, which by its nature signals the dawn of new creation. It would make little sense, I think, for a Jew to say that God is Creator, but only of Jews. If God is Creator at all, God is Creator of Jews and Gentiles alike. Similarly, if Jesus inaugurates a new creation by his victory over death, then again he does so for all. True, neither Jesus' resurrection nor the dawn of new creation presents itself self-evidently to human experience. But the same thing is true of the affirmation that Israel is the chosen people of God, or, for that matter, that the universe is the good creation of God. Christians may be wrong that Jesus is raised from the dead, but, believing and trusting in this, it is all but impossible for them to relinquish the conviction that the gospel—the tidings of God's promises filled up in Christ—is good news for all.

But now we are back to our conundrum. If the gospel is for all, then why is it not also embraced by the Jews, who by all accounts know a thing or two about God and God's promises? There can be no denying that this circumstance has puzzled Christians from the earliest decades of the Christian movement. Paul, for one, grappled passionately with the issue at the climax of his most important letter (Rom. 9—11). What made the issue so difficult for Paul was his determination to maintain the truth of two seemingly irreconcilable convictions: the gospel was God's power of salvation for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, *and* God's promises to Israel were irrevocable, including that part of Israel that did not believe in the gospel. Unfortunately, subsequent generations of Christians resolved the conundrum much more simply by just

dropping the second of Paul's two great convictions. (Rabbi Greenberg for his part resolves the conundrum by dropping the first, but I have already explained why I believe Christians will have difficulty following him.) These Christians taught that God's covenant with the Jewish people was over, and that henceforth the church alone stood in its place. This teaching, often called supersessionism today, became the church's standard view on the matter, and it has prevailed among almost all branches of the Christian church until recent times.³

Jews, I need hardly say, have never found the teaching of supersessionism convincing. Many Christians (including myself) now concur with them on this point. If we find it difficult to yield on the gospel's universal implications, we find it equally impossible to continue to hold that God has annulled his covenant with the Jewish people on account of their posture toward the gospel. Christians have rediscovered the relevance of Paul's approach to the conundrum. In the climactic section of Romans, Paul warns his Gentile readers not to assume that God has withdrawn His faithfulness toward the Jewish people, even those who have not believed in Jesus. Although in a sense different from Rabbi Greenberg in his conclusion, Paul, too, is forced to conclude that the resurrection signal is not yet intended for most of Jewry. With a rare solemnity, Paul declares that Israel's "no" to the gospel is actually God's own doing, and that it serves the propagation of the gospel among the nations. Despite its "no," Israel remains God's beloved on account of the promises God gave to the patriarchs. "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29), Paul concludes.

Had the church paid more attention to Paul's warning during the first centuries of its existence, it would never have adopted the simplistic theory that God has abrogated his covenant with the Jewish people and put a Gentile church in its place. In any case, during the past generation, Paul's warning has finally begun to register with many Christians. Citing the Pauline texts in question, many Christian communions have issued public declarations repudiating the idea that God has abrogated his covenant with the Jewish people on account of its "no" to the gospel about Jesus.⁴

"Carnal" Israel, "Spiritual" Church?

The picture that emerges from these considerations suggests that the church is related to the Jewish people in a way that incorporates elements of both independence and dependence, although these elements are configured somewhat differently than in Rabbi Greenberg's account. The church is independent of the Jewish people in the sense that it must represent the truth of the gospel by word and deed before all the nations, despite (or perhaps, thanks to!) the posture that most Jews take toward it. Yet the church is dependent on the Jewish people in the sense that the people Israel are not just one nation among the others, but the people who already and uniquely stand in covenant relationship to God, and who have already received the promise of life's victory over death, God's overflowing fidelity to which is the very content of the gospel itself. The gospel does not exclude the affirmation of God's fidelity to His promises to the Jews. The gospel requires it. Since these promises include at a minimum the survival and security of the Jews as an identifiable people (cf. Lk. 1:68—79), Christians should pray for and rejoice in everything that contributes to these ends in a manner consistent with the dignity and rights of the other families of the earth.

Rabbi Greenberg alludes to the destructive power of a second and more elaborate form of supersessionism that goes one step beyond the simple view that God has rejected the Jews on account of their refusal to believe the gospel. Since I agree with Rabbi Greenberg that this second view is at least as wrongheaded as the first, I want to address it directly.

At the heart of the second version of supersessionism is a dualistic (and therefore biblically suspect) contrast between what is carnal and transitory and what is spiritual and enduring. According to this view, God's covenant with Israel was carnal, since it was transmitted by carnal means (natural descent from the

patriarchs) and since it focused on carnal goods (posterity, prosperity, and land). In contrast, the church is spiritual, since membership is conferred by faith and not by natural descent, and since it focuses on spiritual goods such as salvation from sin and eternal life. According to this second version of supersessionism, God elected Israel as a kind of "dry run" on His way to the church, like a sculptor who first molds a design in clay before committing it to marble. Once the spiritual church appears, carnal Israel becomes obsolete. Like a clay model, it can be set aside and even destroyed, since the reality that it once prefigured is now present.

In my view, this second form of supersessionism is even more pernicious than the first, since it implies that God's covenant with the Jewish people is inherently obsolete and inferior, quite apart from whether the Jewish people are faithful or not. Yet like many bad theological ideas, this one goes astray by distorting a genuine feature of biblical reality, one on which both Christians and Jews can agree. There really is an important difference between Judaism and Christianity regarding how one becomes a Jew or a Christian, respectively. Christians can free themselves from the spell of supersessionism in its second form by coming to a more sound appreciation of this difference and by interpreting it in a nondualistic way.

Traditionally, Jews have understood themselves as God's chosen people descended from the patriarchs and matriarchs. Hence the ordinary way of becoming a Jew is to be born of a Jewish mother. Even converts, who are not Jews by birth, become members of the chosen family through the appropriate ritual. This, of course, does not mean that Jews share a common ethnicity or belong to a common race, another grotesque distortion. But, to use the language of the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod, it does mean that God's election of the Jewish people is like the election of a natural family. Of course, there are segments of Judaism today that wish to downplay this aspect of the tradition by putting the emphasis on a person's freedom to choose his or her own religious identity. Still, the dominant interpretation remains. Most Jews are members of the chosen people by birth, and the privileges and obligations of the covenant fall to them accordingly.

Christians, on the other hand, understand themselves as a fellowship that can be entered only through repentance and rebirth into the messianic community (that is, by getting washed!). Hence, no one can be born a Christian. Once again, there are segments of the Christian community that blur this reality, especially by confusing Christian identity with ethnic or national history, or by the practice of indiscriminate infant baptism. Yet the dominant interpretation remains: one becomes a Christian through faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord, and through baptism in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

When Christians yoke this genuine difference between Judaism and Christianity to an unbiblical dualism of flesh and spirit, supersessionism and other distortions result. As I noted, Christians become tempted to view Judaism as spiritually inferior and destined to disappear. They overlook the importance of repentance, faith, obedience, and forgiveness in Jewish life. Moreover, Christians become alienated from Jesus and the first disciples, who all lived and died as Jews. Christians often forget that Jesus' first Jewish followers continued to observe the Torah even while they dispensed with the requirement that Jesus' Gentile followers do the same (in keeping with the belief that Jesus had inaugurated the age when the nations would at last worship the God of Israel). Finally, the dualism of flesh and spirit tempts Christians to locate the reality of the church in an invisible realm cut off from the material world.

In my view, Christians need to dismantle this second theory of supersessionism for the sake of a better understanding not only of Judaism but of the church itself. In this connection, I and many other Christian theologians have found the work of Jewish thinkers especially helpful. Jewish thinkers such as Michael

Wyschogrod have argued, for example, that Israel's "carnal" election makes it superior in certain respects to the church, whose membership is based on baptism and faith. When the costs of witnessing to God become too high, Christians find it relatively easy to disavow their baptismal identities, whereas Jews are not so easily quit of their carnal identity as God's covenant people. Therefore, Jews may remain witnesses to God in situations where Christians have melted from the scene.⁵

True, claims of superiority and inferiority are probably beside the point, even when reversed. The crucial point is that Christians can learn from Wyschogrod and others that God's election of Israel as a human family is not a temporary expedient on the way to the church. God's choice of the Jewish people, and the distinction between Jew and Gentile that it entails, are an abiding part of God's positive purpose in the world, irrespective of the posture that Jews may take toward the church's claims on behalf of Jesus of Nazareth. For its part, the church must understand itself as a messianic community of Jew and Gentile that arises through rebirth into fellowship with Jesus Christ, the one who has come and who will come again. But Christians do no honor to this confession by suggesting that fellowship in Christ replaces or brings to an end God's covenant with Abraham's chosen children after the flesh. As Paul declared in another of his letters, Christ means the confirmation rather than the invalidation of God's promises. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20).

In short, whereas Christian theology traditionally cited the church's character as a community of rebirth in order to deduce the obsolescence of carnal Israel, I believe the correct conclusion is just the opposite.