

REVIEW

Alan L. Berger and David Patterson,
with David P. Gushee, John T. Pawlikowski, and John K. Roth

*Jewish-Christian Dialogue:
Drawing Honey from the Rock*

(St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008), paper, vii + 317 pp.

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This book consists of six chapters by Jewish scholars Alan L. Berger and David Patterson, followed by a transcript of responses to the manuscript of three Christian conversation partners (an Evangelical, a Catholic, and a mainline Protestant) from a three-hour discussion with the authors. Despite the honey in its subtitle, the book guides its readers along a very stony path of dialogue, focusing principally on the tragedies of the historical encounter of Judaism with Christianity, the seemingly inextricable link between Christian identity and supersessionism, problematical aspects of Christian theology, and the status of the relation between the two traditions after Auschwitz.

The authors view early Christianity not as a branch of Judaism but as a “breach of Judaism” (p. 30). They question whether Christianity can define itself in other than supersessionist terms, that is, without setting itself in opposition to Judaism: “Whether by conversion or by extermination, the Christian aim—in keeping with Christian tradition—has been the elimination of the Jews” (p. 54, italics in original).

Much of this book might be read as a sort of lament, a *cri de coeur*, against the sins of Christians against Jews. The authors acknowledge the importance of the Jewishness of Jesus and see Paul as the “first to de-Judaize Jesus and his teachings” (p. 77). They argue that the mythic elements of the Gospels were transformed as they were recast in terms of later Christian doctrine. Because Christianity is a religion grounded in belief, it “must also insist that others affirm the belief” (p. 92). The combination of creeds and doctrine—which are “unintelligible to Jews” (p. 92)—with political power starting in the fourth century resulted in the systematic oppression of Jews: “Because Judaism is precisely what Christianity replaces, anti-Judaism had to become a defining feature of Christianity” (p. 95). (In the concluding dialogue, David Gushee refers to his reading of the manuscript as taking a “guilt bath” [p. 196].)

The fourth chapter, on theological issues, offers a number of points that the authors see as differentiating Judaism from Christianity. What Christians see as necessary for salvation, the human sacrifice of the one who is also divine, is “alien and abhorrent” to Jews” (p. 105). Further, they claim, Christian behavior follows from belief, whereas Jewish belief derives from behavior. Christians, moreover, hold that those who do not believe in Jesus Christ are condemned to eternal damnation, in contrast to a far more inclusive Jewish perspective. Since Christians believe that persons are justified by faith alone, they are not obligated to study their sacred texts or to learn the languages of those texts. Unlike Jews, who emphasize *tikkun olam* (improving this

world), Christians look to the next life: “Christians labor to get into God’s kingdom, whereas Jews labor to get God into *this* kingdom” (p. 109, italics in original). Later, they criticize both the Vatican’s *We Remember* (a statement on the Holocaust from 1998) and *Dabru Emet* (“A Jewish Statement on Christians And Christianity” from 2000) as “fraught with peril” (p. 156) and misleading or simplistic.

The conversation with the Christian interlocutors ranges over a series of topics, including forgiveness, the State of Israel, conversion, and relations with Muslims. They discuss Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*, and the controversy unleashed by the film figures prominently in the book as a whole. (In their conclusion they argue that it is the “most recent example of how seamlessly antisemitism emerges when Christianity first ignores then denies its Jewish origins” [p. 251].) Gushee, Pawlikowski, and Roth offer some diplomatically phrased challenges to the authors’ understandings of Christianity. Had the authors taken these up as a basis to rework aspects of their manuscript, they would have significantly enhanced the book.

There is indeed much to lament about Christian denigration of Judaism and the vilification and, too often, persecution of Jews. The Shoah looms as the great question about lived Christianity. Dialogue has yet to make a major impact in the churches in any depth. But will this book advance relations between Jews and Christians? Will it help Christians to confront our history? I think not, and it grieves me to say so.

The book’s major flaw is its caricature of Christian theology. Given the tremendous diversity of theological perspectives, their repeated assertions that “Christians believe” in a particular idea (about messianism, resurrection, etc.) distort the breadth and depth of Christian thought. The margins of my book are filled with comments in which I noted frequent over-simplifications and distortions of Christianity. Some generalizations show a lack of familiarity with contemporary scholarship. For example, they ought to have reviewed the abundant literature on the lengthy and complex process by which Christianity became distinct from Judaism. Similarly, they ought to have explored recent scholarship on Paul that situates him in the broader context of the Roman Empire. Finally, the claim that Christian doctrine is simply “unintelligible” to Jews is belied by the writings of some contemporary Jewish scholars (p. 92).

Like many of my Christian colleagues, I believe that critical re-evaluation of our history with the Jewish people is an ethical obligation. This must then lead to a serious and sustained re-evaluation of Christian theology. In this way, we can build better relationships with Jews. I am therefore sympathetic with the heartfelt cry of the authors. When they refine their arguments, their passion will have far greater impact.