

REVIEW

Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Christian-Jewish Relations*

Edited and introduced by R. Kendall Soulen.
(Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), paper, xiii + 253 pp.

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This volume is a collection of eighteen essays by the eminent Orthodox Jewish philosopher and theologian, Michael Wyschogrod. Some, spanning the 1960s through 1999, are published here in English for the first time. Besides assembling this valuable compilation, editor R. Kendall Soulen provides a fine introduction to Wyschogrod's thought as well as helpful prefatory comments to each article. The book has two sections: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations.

Both Jewish and Christian readers will learn a great deal about Judaism from Wyschogrod's essays. Topics considered in the book's first section include: the Oneness of God, sin and atonement, the Land, and faith and the Holocaust. Wyschogrod's understanding of Judaism is predicated on his conviction that the five books of the Torah were given by God to Moses as God's gift to the people of Israel, whom God loves "as no other" (p.28). Thus, he holds that Jews must be "believing" or "good" Jews by obeying God's will for Israel as expressed in the commandments and repenting when they inevitably fall short.

A characteristic feature of Wyschogrod's perspective is his emphasis on the physical, corporeal nature of God's choice or election of Israel:

Israel, whatever else it may also be, and it is many other things, is first and foremost a community of family, of kinship, of descent from Abraham, of blood communion. ... There is therefore no idea that encompasses Israel because Israel is, at it were, an idea incarnated in the flesh of a people. ... [Circumcision] is a cutting into the flesh, the organ of generation, leaving a permanent mark in the flesh of a people that thereby embraces the covenant with its flesh (p. 129).

This "carnal election of Israel" means that "God did not choose a community of faith but a people of the flesh, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," thereby confirming that the human person is both soul and body (p. 99) and even suggesting that, "if the human body can resemble God, then there must also be a physical aspect to God's being" (p. 171).

It is this physicality of Israel's life with God that, for Wyschogrod, explains why being Jewish is "not just a religious but also a national identity" (p. 45), and why the land of Israel is so important to Jews, even though their "nationality" is not dependent on being physically present on its soil (p. 100). It is also why Israel knows "a God who enters the human world and into relationship with humanity by means of speech and command" (p. 42) and who is quite different from the non-corporeal and immutable deity of Greek philosophy and its heirs (pp. 32-35).

Several times, Wyschogrod stresses "the contrast between the secular and religious attitudes" (p. 54, see pp. 113-115), sometimes seeming to dichotomize them. One might suspect that his frequent distinctions between "believing" and "secular" Jews means that only Orthodox Jews are "believers" and Reform or Conservative Jews, even if people of faith, are "secular." Such a

construal would not be consistent with the impression given in his essay, "A Theology of Jewish Unity," but in this particular volume he doesn't consider if the differing halakhic practices of "liberal" Judaism might nonetheless be expressions of belief.

This apparent dichotomization may steer Wyschogrod away from directly engaging the post-Enlightenment historical consciousness in relation to his understanding of Jewish "faith." Does Jewish "belief" demand the ahistorical conviction that the Torah mitzvot (commands) are direct expressions of God's will, with any thought of human influences on the text's composition being relegated to the realm of the "secular"? This seems odd given Wyschogrod's claim that "Israel does not abandon the domain of history" (p. 98) and his affirmations of "the indwelling of God in the people Israel" in history (p. 170).

This concern no doubt stems from the experience of my own Roman Catholic community, which has been grappling for some time with the implications of a historical consciousness for its understanding of the scriptures. For example, at the turn of the twentieth-century Catholic teaching insisted on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch under God's dictation. But by the turn of the twenty-first century it could state that "Holy Scripture, inasmuch as it is the 'word of God in human language,' has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" [1993] I,A). In short, how does Jewish "Orthodoxy that does not reject modernity but tries to combine faithful ["believing"?] Torah observance with secular education" (p. 155) really respond to the challenge of a historical consciousness?

In the book's second part, Christians will especially be struck by Wyschogrod's application of his ideas about God's presence in the flesh of the people Israel to Christian faith in the Incarnation of Jesus: "the Christian teaching of the incarnation of God in Jesus is the intensification of the teaching of the indwelling of God in Israel by concentrating that indwelling in one Jew rather than leaving it diffused in the people of Jesus as a whole" (p. 178). Readers will also find his reading of the Apostle Paul to be insightful. Christians will particularly appreciate Wyschogrod's willingness to take Christianity's truth-claims seriously, as when he writes:

The nations, as represented by the Church, seek the God of Abraham. This is a fact that has never sufficiently impressed itself into the Jewish consciousness. ... Access to this God is only through a covenant by means of which a people becomes the people of God; once this is perceived, the Church arises as the people of a new covenant. Christianity, therefore, expresses the longing of those not included in the Covenant with Israel for election by the God of Israel (p. 185).

Among his most thought-provoking essays is "A Letter to Cardinal Lustiger," the son of Polish Jews. Wyschogrod argues that the cardinal's statements that he still considers himself to be Jewish after his baptism means that he should therefore be Torah observant, even if "such a decision would cause problems both for the Church and for Jews" (p. 210). A brief review does not permit a full discussion of the issues that Wyschogrod raises, but at a minimum one must ask if it is really possible to take the demographic context of first-century mixed churches of Jews and Gentiles and simply transpose it into the twentieth or twentieth-first centuries as if the intervening two millennia were irrelevant to a community's self-understanding.

The fact that such questions arise demonstrate that this is an important and stimulating book. It is "must reading" for everyone studying the field of Christian-Jewish relations and is highly recommended for Jewish and Christian readers alike.