

Robert W. Bleakney
Evangelical Interpretation After Auschwitz

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The Shoah changed everything. As the scope of the tragedy became clear, both Jewish and Christian thinkers struggled to make theological sense of the unabated cruelty and bloodlust, not only of Nazis but of the many willing collaborators. While Jewish religious leaders and theologians asked serious questions about the apparent silence of Israel's God, some Christians began a painful reckoning with the abject failure of many if not most Christian leaders to support and defend the Jews at their most desperate hour of need. Many within the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic communities also asked not only how millions of Christians could participate in the slaughter but how Christian theology might have contributed to it. A group of thinkers later called "Holocaust Theologians" studied, pondered, and agonized over these questions throughout the post-war era. Jews and Christians in the United States and Europe engaged one another as never before.

This background is important, for while some Christians have continued this engagement, few Evangelicals have entered into this dialogue. Also, few have been willing to consider the potential anti-Jewish (if not antisemitic) character of their traditional theologies and their sacred texts. In recent years there have been fruitful, high-level conversations between Jewish and Evangelical leaders and academics, but little of this conversation appears to have made its way to ordinary Evangelicals. It is not that Evangelicals were unmoved by the horror of the murder of 6,000,000 Jews, but that many of them appear not to have considered how Christian theology and biblical interpretation may have contributed to hatred of Jews. Several factors have hindered this reckoning. At a very practical level, opportunities for connections with Jews are not as easy for Evangelicals in, say, Mississippi or North Dakota as they would be in New York or southeastern Florida. Some Jews are also justifiably wary of engaging Evangelicals, fearing that they will be seen as candidates for conversion. Finally, Evangelicals' native conservatism makes it difficult for them to consider that their historic understanding of their sacred texts and traditions could be wrong or harmful.

Robert W. Bleakney, an Evangelical and an Associate Professor at Hebraic Christian College, knows this history. He is especially concerned with how little

Evangelicals and Jews have engaged one another and, especially, with how little Evangelical Christians appreciate Jews' painful historical experiences with Christians. He is concerned that harmful stereotypes long critiqued and rejected within the Catholic and mainline Protestant communities endure within large segments of the Evangelical world. He demonstrates, for example, the startlingly anti-Jewish interpretations and readings within popular Evangelical study Bibles and attempts to redress such readings (193-202). It is as if these commentators have not grasped that their harsh language concerning "the Jews" refers not just to an ancient people but to a living and vulnerable community.

Bleakney discusses the relationship between Evangelical Christianity and Judaism, while also aiming to help Evangelicals understand both the nature of contemporary Judaism and Christianity's Jewish roots. Although the two traditions went their separate ways, they share a common story, a common sacred text, and the worship of the one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is not to minimize the differences but to recognize a common heritage. Bleakney thinks this is especially important for Evangelicals to understand. Bleakney throughout the book shares his own engagement with and learning from a variety of Jewish scholars and thinkers as a means to educate Evangelicals and encourage them to initiate their own conversations.

This is a diverse book, addressing many topics and issues. It is less a sustained argument and more a series of essays and reflections. Some of these essays and reflections are stronger than others. It is an earnest book. The reader senses Bleakney's concern to speak to his fellow Evangelicals, to turn them away from caricatures and stereotypes and toward sympathy and understanding. There is a sense in which the reader is observing Bleakney's own learning and his own growing consciousness and concern for his relationship with Jews and Judaism. There are few books of this nature by Evangelicals, and it represents an important starting point in the ongoing conversation. One hopes the conversation will continue to be refined and enriched by mutual understanding and even love. Robert Bleakney deserves our appreciation for making a start.