

Matthew Levering
Engaging the Doctrine of Israel:
A Christian Israelology
in Dialogue with Ongoing Judaism

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Introduction

In this impressive book, dogmatic theologian Matthew Levering, the James N. and Mary D. Perry, Jr. Chair of Theology at Mundelein Seminary, undertakes “within Catholic dogmatics a full-fledged treatment of the central realities of God’s biblical people Israel” (3). It is the fifth installment in an ambitious “dogmatic series” entitled “Engaging the Doctrine.” Earlier volumes explored Revelation (2014), the Holy Spirit (2016), Creation (2017), and Marriage (2020).

As in the earlier books, the present work engages by means of voluminous discursive footnotes with a wide range of scholarship across many disciplines and traditions, including some of this reviewer’s own work. One marvels at the breadth and depth of Levering’s labor. It is a challenge to succinctly review *Engaging the Doctrine of Israel*—both because it is very substantial (over one thousand pages in the digitized Kindle edition) and also because certain theological choices were likely more fully developed in one of the other entries in the series.

He introduces a major principle in his overall approach in *Engaging the Doctrine of Marriage*: “In my view, Catholic dogmatics now also needs to include the following elements: a fairly extensive engagement with historical-critical biblical exegesis; ecumenical exchange for the purpose of mutual enrichment and critique; and engagements with the natural sciences and the social sciences where they touch upon doctrinal realities ... [and appreciation] for the insights of the great mystical theologians.”¹ This expansive vision is praiseworthy here as well, and even vital, because the subject about Catholic teaching on Jews and Judaism “touch[es] on the heart of our faith,” as French bishops perceived in 1973.²

¹ Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Marriage* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), x.

² “Statement by the French Bishops’ Committee for Relations with Jews” (1973), §III.

Scholarly interaction with multiple theological sub-disciplines (such as biblical theology, historical theology, liberationist theologies, feminist theology, pastoral/practical theology, etc.) is challenging, although Levering understandably engages with only some of them. Different ways of theologizing in the Catholic world have their own—not always congruent—priorities and methodologies, as Levering seems to acknowledge when he clarifies that *Doctrine of Israel* “is not a biblical theology” or “a dogmatic theologian’s version of” biblical theologies (2).

Levering is truly appalled that over time “Christians persecuted Jews terribly, and ... made things even worse by attempting to justify why Jews (supposedly) had to be treated without full human dignity in Christian countries” (71). Therefore, he believes that Christian theology today has “the task of seeking to repair grave and humanly irreparable wrongs from centuries past” (73). This commendable commitment to history is a driving force in the book and connects with Levering’s broad vision for dogmatic theology.

Crucially, the book sincerely and substantively aims to be “in dialogue with ongoing Judaism,” as its subtitle states. Levering “actively seek[s] to learn from Jewish scholars” (3). Among Jewish interlocutors, he seems most indebted to David Novak, to whom he dedicates the volume. Novak acts “as a representative of ongoing Judaism” on more than one topic due to Levering’s “admiration for his work” (340n54). Levering had earlier co-authored with him and Anver M. Emon *Natural Law: A Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Trialogue* (Oxford U.P., 2014) and co-edited a collection of essays, *The Achievement of David Novak* (Cascade, 2021), in which he praised the rabbi as “the greatest master of Jewish-Christian dialogue who has ever lived” (1).

Outline of Engaging the Doctrine of Israel

In the preface to 2020’s *Engaging the Doctrine of Marriage*, Levering helpfully describes the approach he takes in all the book chapters in his dogmatic series:

I choose a few particular authors [from a wide range of theological and other disciplines] to engage and spend a large amount of space summarizing their work. ... In classical dialogues, the opposing viewpoints were presented through the voices of advocates of the distinct positions; [as also] in the work of my teacher Thomas Aquinas. ... I strive to develop both the positions I oppose and the positions I support in a manner that avoids the danger of “virtuoso theology”—in which the contribution of a dogmatics is measured by the creativity and rhetorical power of the author.³

He uses this format in *Engaging the Doctrine of Israel*. Besides the introductory and concluding chapters, the other seven chapters treat Jewish-Christian

<https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/other-conferences-of-catholic-bishops/cefr1973>

³ Levering, *Doctrine of Marriage*, xi.

dialogue, creation and scripture, Exodus, Torah, Temple, Land, and King. Levering astutely observes that while “[m]any of these topics do not normally have a distinct place in classical Christian dogmatics” (2), they need to be considered because of the “deep and inextricable relationship of Israel to the Christ and, indeed to all the loci of Christian dogmatics” (3). The Introduction sets forth a detailed schema of the entire book (4-15) that could be summarized as follows.

In chapter 1, “Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” Levering begins with a basic premise: “true dialogue cannot be rooted in a rejection of Christianity by the Christian dialogue partner” (52). He denies that there are “aspects of dogmatic theology that must be changed or revisited” and posits that “a better path begins with both sides respectfully acknowledging differences and affirming core beliefs, while taking care from the Christian side not to countenance the old slanders against the ongoing Jewish people” (55-56). He asserts that “Christian theologians who worship Jesus as the Son of God and confess that Jesus is the Lord and Messiah of Israel cannot suppose that Judaism is doctrinally equal to Christianity” (60). Rather, it “is the Christian task to learn to proclaim the inevitably divisive gospel of Jesus Christ in a manner least obscured by our sin and most reflective of the charity of Christ” (76). Turning to the figure of Abraham, Levering thinks he “was a real historical person” (80) whom the Apostle Paul considered “to be an exemplar of the righteousness that comes through faith rather than through Torah observance” (81). Levering’s goal “consists in distinguishing truths that Christians must affirm—for example that Jesus was and is the Messiah of Israel and that the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders and by the people to whom Paul and the apostles preached was a serious mistake—from timebound elements that pertain to the intra-Jewish polemics of the period in which the texts of the New Testament were written.” He feels that the “task of evaluating and sifting controversial passages constitutes a necessary prolegomenon to Christian Israelology” (4-5).

In chapter 2, “Creation and Scripture,” Levering asks why in the Bible “God has revealed important truths in a sometimes ambiguous way, with the result that even such a crucial doctrine as creation *ex nihilo* is not made crystal clear in Genesis 1” (5). He stresses that creation *ex nihilo* is crucial for Christian faith in order to acknowledge “the cosmos’s ontological dependence upon God” (141) and so reads Genesis 1 through that theological axiom. He disfavors reading the Priestly writers’ narrative as God imposing order on primeval chaos.

In chapter 3, “Exodus,” Israel’s departure from Egypt and the subsequent desert wanderings is read through the lens of “the new exodus in Christ.” He asks “why God, having heard the cries of the suffering people, redeemed them from Egyptian slavery only to immerse them in the terrible sufferings of the exodus journey.” Drawing upon Jonathan Sacks but from a Christian perspective, he seeks “to help Christians better understand the new exodus in Christ” (6). Levering concludes that the dynamic Jews and Christians share “of struggle and of yearning for a transcendent fulfillment is what allows a Christian theology of the exodus and the new exodus to learn from and appreciate Jewish theology of the exodus ... without exacerbating pain and rivalry between” them (191). Moreover, they can recognize in each other “a shared commitment to journeying toward the eschaton” (192).

In chapter 4, "Torah," he engages with Joseph Soloveitchik to "argue that Christ is Torah in person" (7). Levering proposes that in the New Testament, "the place that Soloveitchik accords to Torah (Written and Oral) is given to Jesus as the incarnate Son and the perfect embodiment of Torah" (256). Countering a caricature of Christianity as antinomian, he observes that "union with Christ (Torah in Person) is not so nearly as lawless as might be supposed, although Christians obey Torah as fulfilled and reconfigured around the Messiah" (258).

In chapter 5, "Temple," there is an exploration of "the temple and its animal sacrifices in light of the cessation of temple sacrifices [after 70 CE] and concerns about Christian supersessionism" (8). Interacting with the thought of Jonathan Klavans, Levering holds that "the temple's sacrifices are indeed superseded in Christian worship." However, he stresses that "this supersessionism is preeminently a fulfillment, because worship in Christ—who is the eschatological Temple—is temple-shaped and sacrificial, in a mode opened up by Christ's self-offering in love on the cross and his gift of the Eucharist" (8). At the end of the chapter, Levering asks if the destruction of the Temple means that "Torah observance as the Jewish people practice it is obsolete?" (319). He answers, "On the one hand, their observance *is* obsolete in the strict sense that the Messiah has come and reconfigured everything around himself. But, on the other hand, because the Jewish people legitimately do not recognize this fulfillment, their observance remains fully necessary, not obsolete at all" (320, italics in the original).

In chapter 6, "Land," Levering asks what Jewish Zionism might mean for Christian theology. He judges that "David Novak and his co-authors of *Dabru Emet* are correct that Christians should 'appreciate that Israel was promised—and given—to Jews as the physical center of their covenant with God' and that this means that the State of Israel is not solely a political matter" (9). Surprisingly, the chapter devotes over a dozen pages to an overview of Christian hostility toward Jews over history, ending with a detailed description of Catholic antisemitism immediately prior to the Shoah that relies heavily on the work of David Kertzer. Levering explains this inclusion by arguing that "Christian engagement with Israel's doctrine of the promised land must today also reckon with how Christians treated the Jewish people during the centuries in which the Jewish people dwelt far from the land" (355). He concludes the chapter by calling on Christians to seek "the theocentric humility promoted by Novak" as they proclaim that "the land promise is now understood by Christians to be the 'body of Christ' rather than simply the land of Canaan. [However, since] Christians believe that the eschaton has been inaugurated but not yet consummated, there is space for a deeper Christian appreciation of the perspective of the Jewish people" (391). He maintains that "Catholics should fully support Jews in their effort to obey God's covenantal commandments in their original mode, including the commandment to dwell in and govern the land," [but] "Catholics must also support a Palestinian state in the land alongside the Jewish state" (342).

In chapter 7, "King," Levering probes "the Davidic kingship, in light of Catholic ecclesiology and, specifically, papal abuse of temporal power" (11). "Indebted again to David Novak," and reacting strongly against Romanus Cessario's 2018

defense of Pope Pius IX's taking custody in 1858 of the Jewish boy Edgardo Mortaro, Levering advises that "the Davidic kings' failures in the exercise of divinely granted power can assist in understanding the failures of divinely authorized Catholic leaders" (11). "Catholics," he says, "must repent and work to ensure that no such [triumphal] attitude reemerges in the Catholic Church" (433).

The "Conclusion" summarizes many of the book's tense themes. Levering feels "that the rejection of Jesus by most of the Jewish people, even if mysteriously in accord with God's will (for positive purposes), was a tragic event" (466). Yet, "the notion that God has thereby rejected the ongoing Jewish people, abandoning them and cursing them for the past two millennia, is woefully mistaken!" (446). So, "Jews' own perceptions (and ongoing covenantal life) are important for contemporary Christian development of the doctrine of Israel" (448). Christians will not "understand the truth of the New Testament [if they] consciously or unconsciously [carry] forward its first-century polemic against 'the Jews,'" but "to be Christian [they] must believe in the truth of the revelation contained in the New Testament as handed on in the Church" (449).

Levering urges that "Christians need to relearn that [Christ] is the embodiment of the Torah, divine wisdom whose truth is supreme love ... [and] that Jesus Christ is the eschatological Temple" (452-53). Moreover, he contends that "Christians cannot be Christian without understanding themselves to be the messianic 'Israel of God,' bearing 'the marks of Jesus'" (454). They also "should support the Jewish people in obeying their original covenantal obligations, which have been fulfilled and transformed by Christ but have not been revoked" (456).

The Conclusion discloses that *Doctrine of Israel* was initially meant to include a chapter on God's providence "with a focus on the Psalms." Due to the length of the book, that plan had to be dropped. So Levering ends with a moving Christian doxology:

Configuring us to the cross, the Spirit calls us into resurrection life, a life of joy and gratitude for the mercies of God. All at once, the cross no longer becomes a path of fear. It becomes a path of love, a path of mercy, a path of service. It becomes a path, God willing, of learning from others in humility—including from Jewish brethren who gift us with their friendship and wisdom. For Christians, the cross is the place of our new exodus, our participation in incarnate Torah and in the eschatological temple. It is a path of reconciliation, of marital intimacy with the Creator, of divine praise. We can say with Paul: "far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). (466)

Engaging *Engaging the Doctrine of Israel*

Levering's book is nuanced, sophisticated, and at times eloquent. Its dogmatic approach should be studied by everyone concerned with Christian theologies of the Church's relationship to Jews and Judaism. The limits of a review mean that only

a few of the book's many topics can be considered here. I do so from the perspective of a biblical theologian whose own work, in service to a post-*Nostra Aetate* Church, seeks to actualize biblical texts for the growth of theologies and curricula that affirm Jewish covenantal life. Thus, the comments that follow often reflect the different premises, methodologies, and objects of study of our respective theological sub-disciplines, each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses. In particular, some dogmatic theology tends toward a classicist approach which stresses that Truth is timeless and immutable, while changes in how it is expressed are incidental. Biblical theology focuses more on the historical and cultural conditioning both of scriptural texts and of how they are actualized over time.

I applaud Levering's engagement with Jewish thinkers as a fellow Catholic who also feels deeply blessed by sustained study with Jewish colleagues and friends. I value his remarks that such interactions are crucial for Catholic theology. As he observes, reference to Jewish insights is atypical for classical Catholic dogmatics but is a necessity today. I also appreciate that Levering finds misleading the notion that at the eschaton "Jews will become Christians" since it "suggests that Christians will be unchanged, while Jews will simply convert" (20). Rather, the "[p]roper Christian understanding of the eschatological consummation involves a reality so glorious that it is presently unfathomable, even if known in part. ... [B]oth Christians and Jews will be radically changed at the consummation of all things, so that neither 'Christianity' nor 'Judaism' will remain as we know them" (20; see also 339, 383n177, and 411n38). Relatedly, he insists "that God intends there to be both ongoing Judaism and Christianity until the eschatological consummation" (21), despite the present-day Jewish and Christian disagreement about Jesus' messianic status from which both sides can learn (75).

Given our limited capacity to grasp God's plans, Levering calls for "theocentric humility," a virtue that "both Christianity and Judaism require" (37). This echoes a steady stream of similar statements in post-conciliar Vatican texts, beginning with the 1974 guidelines to implement *Nostra Aetate* which noted that when "the Church 'ponder[s] her own mystery' [*Nostra Aetate*, §4] ... she encounters the mystery of Israel."⁴ Levering also invokes the theological category of "mystery"—something beyond full mortal comprehension—as when he writes, "I hold that Christian antipathy toward ongoing Judaism should be viewed within the 'mystery' of 'hardening' to which Paul refers in Romans 11. ... Christians too have been 'hardened.' Comprised largely of Gentiles, the Church has 'boast[ed] over the branches' (Rom 11:18, 25) with disastrous results" (68).

Levering humbly recognizes that "believers can deploy truth-claims as a weapon, and [that] this is what has happened in Christian persecution of the Jewish people over the centuries" (37-38). "Christians must not become 'puffed up,'" he writes, "because pride is the opposite of Christ's humility and indeed pride destroys

⁴ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4)" (1974), Conclusion. <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crrr/documenti-della-commissione/en3.html>

one's union with Christ" (247). His historical awareness of the Christian *adversus Ioudaios* tradition likely undergirds Levering's reluctance to "sit in judgment on the way of life of the Jewish people in our own day" (4, quoting Kurt Hurby).

Yet Levering regularly does make judgments about Jews and Judaism, sometimes in ways that have demonstrably fostered Christian pridefulness in the past. In reference to the eschaton, for example, while he properly stresses that "it is presently unfathomable, even if known in part" (20), he also does "not hold to an eschatological deferral of truth or certitude" (75). In a manner that transcends historical time, for him "it is clear from the New Testament that if indeed Jesus *will* be the Savior of all people at the eschaton, he *is* the Savior of all people now" (378n68, italics in the original). Therefore, "it is not positive that Jews do not recognize Jesus as their Messiah, given that Jesus is indeed such" (391n197).

However, it is important to recall that Christian faith originated in the conviction that God revealed that the crucified Jesus was raised to transcendent or transhistorical life (cf. Gal 1:16). As with any divine revelation, the humans who affirm it "can make no claim upon this truth, which comes to them as a gift," as Pope John Paul II wrote, echoing an ancient Christian awareness. This truth, "set within the context of interpersonal communication, urges reason to be open to it and embrace its profound meaning."⁵ More recently, Pope Francis put the same idea this way: "The Gospel is like seed: you scatter it, you scatter it with your words and with your witness. And then it is not you who calculate the statistics of the results; it is God who does. ... And we do not gather in the harvest."⁶ It therefore seems a bit inappropriate to maintain, as Levering does a number of times, that "the rejection of Jesus by most of the Jewish people, *even if mysteriously in accord with God's will* (for positive purposes), was a tragic event" (445-46, italics added). It would be more consistent with theocentric humility to suspend such judgments and "to admit the limitations of our knowledge, and [respect] the hidden ways of divine Providence."⁷

Relatedly, drawing on the work of Thomas Aquinas and Gavin D'Costa, Levering convincingly argues that the perennially hateful behavior of Christians toward Jews, which he calls "a uniquely enduring and vicious reality" (23n52), in tandem with the "Jewish commitment to the true God over the centuries despite such horrific suffering" (27), has created the situation in which the Church's "proclamation of 'Christ' has almost from the outset been heard [by the "ongoing Jewish people"] as one of hatred and pride—culminating ... in the horrific libels leading up to the Holocaust" (375). In the face of such Christian evil, Jews concluded that

⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), §49. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html

⁶ Pope Francis, "Address to Participants in the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome" (June 17, 2023).

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130617_convegno-diocesano-roma.html

⁷ So advised Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington, D.C. during the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council on September 28, 1964, over a draft of what would become *Nostra Aetate*. <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-debate/v21964sept29b#o Boyle>

their acceptance of the “good news” of Christ would betray their covenantal loyalty to God. Their willful “ignorance” of Christ thus became “invincible” or immovable, but Levering insists that Jews are not in the wrong: “there is no sense in holding the Jewish people as a whole culpable for rejecting Christian preaching about Jesus’ [divine] identity” (25). It is the sins of Christians that are actually to blame.

While I fully agree with this conclusion, to me the traditional language of “invincible ignorance” smacks of condescension, a vestige of triumphalism. While it understandably arises from the theological challenge of relating Christ’s universal saving significance to the post-*Nostra Aetate* Church’s recognition that Jews continue to covenant with a saving God, it is nonetheless grace-less in several senses, allowing pridefulness to insinuate itself, which as Levering says, “is the very opposite of the theocentric humility that both Christian and Judaism require” (37). I suspect the need of this line-of-thought has roots in an assumption that everyone who hears the Gospel is obligated to accept it as Truth or be judged. For myself, I do not believe that my Christ-shaped covenanting with God must be asserted or defended by abandoning theological humility when dialoguing with those Jews with whom I regularly experience God’s holiness.

Similarly, in a chapter that considers the nature of the *dialogue* between Catholics and Jews, Levering appears to insist on the superiority of the Church’s Christ-shaped covenanting with God over Israel’s Torah-centered way of covenanting by prohibiting Christians from imagining that “Judaism is doctrinally equal to Christianity” (60). Setting aside the fact that both the concept of covenant(ing) and the status of doctrine itself have different cadences in Judaism and Catholicism, Levering’s prohibition raises a discomfiting pastoral concern. It would seem that to the degree that Christians think they are doctrinally superior to Jews, they would be disinclined to want to learn about God from their Jewish doctrinal inferiors. (One also wonders what the impact of this feeling of superiority would be on how Christians imagine the interactions of Jesus with his Jewish contemporaries.) While it might be argued that it is right for Jews and Christians each to assert the superiority of their respective covenantal lives with God, possibly to buttress the boundaries between them, Catholic theologians might ask if cultivating a sense of Christian superiority is fitting in the light of the awful history that Levering constantly recalls for his readers.⁸ As Levering indeed observes, “when the claim to possess truth is detached from self-sacrificial love and humility, it becomes very dangerous indeed” (411). Insisting upon superiority, confident that Christian love will channel it constructively is historically problematic and risks perpetuating longstanding anti-Jewish habits of thought that perhaps are only dormant or just below the surface among some Christians.

The priority of seeking theocentric humility connects with Levering’s admirable wish not to denigrate ongoing Judaism or to promote a syncretistic loss of religious identity and integrity. He is vigilant against anything that suggests “fatally weakening Christian truth-claims” (445). At one point he seems to set aside his

⁸ See the recent book by historian Magda Teter, *Christian Supremacy: Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023).

usual nuance to reject apodictically the possibility that there might be “aspects of dogmatic theology that must be changed *or revisited*” (55-56, italics added). Of course, Levering does not disagree that the Church is always in need of reform, as stated in *Unitatis Redintegratio*: “if ... there have been deficiencies ... even in the way that Church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment,”⁹ so it might be asked what drives his thinking here. Without getting into the intricate question of exactly how the historically and culturally conditioned ways a Church teaching has been formulated are to be distinguished from the deposit of faith itself, Levering seems guided by the perspective enunciated in his earlier *Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation*:

Without placing the Church over revelation, the Spirit can guarantee the Church’s preservation from error in its definitive interpretations of revelation—which differs from guaranteeing the truthfulness of everything the Church says and does. ... In short, we can accept the existence of errors within the Church’s works and teachings over the centuries, so long as we do not suppose that these (reformable) errors produced a rupture, that is to say a false definitive doctrine about faith or morals in the heart of the transmission of revelation.¹⁰

Yet for about eighteen centuries it seems that no Christian leader critiqued the pervasive opinion that God divinely cursed or curses Jews for rejecting and still rejecting Christ. Indeed, Christian “preaching of every age accused the Jews of decide.”¹¹ Since anti-Judaism cannot be a core doctrine for reasons Levering well describes, it must be surmised that over the centuries the Holy Spirit steadily beckoned Christians toward positive relations with Jews. Yet, presumably for various social, political, and economic reasons, Christians at large did not perceive or choose to heed the Spirit’s inspiration. Levering rightly attributes this Christian “blindness” to human sin. But the fact “that the Catholic Church has not definitively taught doctrine about the Jewish people that is now being contradicted by the Church” (69) does not obviate the concern that the *adversus Ioudaios* system that emerged in the patristic era could have tainted the work of the series of contemporaneous christological councils that composed core doctrinal formulations. It is thus proper and vital to assess even conciliar expressions in a post-Shoah, post-*Nostra*

⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*: The Decree on Ecumenism (1964), §6 https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html

¹⁰ Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation*, 27.

¹¹ Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Reflections Regarding the Vatican’s Statement on the Shoah” (May 28, 1998). <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/educational-and-liturgical-materials/classic-articles/cassidy1998may28>

Aetate Church. It should not, however, be presumed that “revisiting” doctrinal formulations will inevitably result in the discarding of core elements of Christian self-understanding, as Levering at times seems to dread.

His meritorious sensitivity to theological ideas that might “fatally weaken Christian truth-claims” (445) can, it seems to me, on occasion lead Levering to judge the work of other Christian theologians unjustly. In accord with a 1973 declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,¹² constructive theological work could, for instance, simply be re-expressing core teaching in a different philosophical system than those underlying standard formulations. (Note Pope John Paul II’s statement that the Church does not “canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others.”¹³) Nor can a post-*Nostra Aetate* formulation be rejected because it has elements that are in discontinuity with earlier articulations because, as Pope Benedict XVI observed, true reform always involves a “combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels.”¹⁴

All theologians, including Levering, prefer his or her own way of framing complex theological ideas. Fair enough. But each formulation has its own merits and flaws. Each also cannot distill the vast richness of Christian thought over time and space into a few words. Formulations that Levering uses to see if a post-Shoah, post-*Nostra Aetate* theological statement coheres with Christian truth-claims are that “Jesus is the Messiah of Israel who has fulfilled and reconfigured Israel’s covenants around himself” (e.g., 66), along with, “Christians cannot be Christian without understanding themselves to be the messianic ‘Israel of God’” (454). Beyond noting that each of the terms in these phrases requires careful delineation, space allows only brief remarks on these “litmus tests.” “Messiah of Israel” and “messianic ‘Israel of God’” are problematic for two reasons.

First, this language demeans Jews by appropriating their principle biblical self-designation as the covenanted peoplehood “Israel” and applying it to the Church. Is it proper for a post-*Nostra Aetate* theology to effectively coopt “essential traits Jews [by which] define themselves in the light of their own religious experience”?¹⁵ The New Testament never speaks of a “new Israel,” but it does provide many terms and metaphors that could better serve the present context.

Second, Jesus as “the Messiah of Israel” obscures the newness of what God has done in Christ. Historically, it took a “decision of faith” for some of Jesus’

¹² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Mysterium Ecclesiae*: Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church against Certain Errors of the Present Day” (1973), §5. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html

¹³ *Fides et Ratio*, §49.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings” (December 22, 2005). https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html

¹⁵ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4)” (1974), Preamble. <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crrr/documenti-della-commissione/en3.html>

Jewish contemporaries to discern that God had raised Jesus and then to reread Israel's scriptures accordingly. In the process, they retrospectively redefined "messiah."¹⁶ Therefore, in the words of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Jesus is not confined to playing an already fixed role—that of Messiah—but he confers, on the notions of Messiah and salvation, a fullness which could not have been imagined in advance; he fills them with a new reality; one can even speak in this connection of a 'new creation.'... The messiahship of Jesus has a meaning that is new and original."¹⁷ To say that Jews do not recognize the "Messiah of Israel" is actually to downgrade the deeper significance of who Jesus is as the Christ.

For these reasons, I have proposed that the Hebrew word "Messiah" be applied to Jewish expectations of an eschatological Coming One (expectations that have evolved in various ways since late Second Temple times), and that the Greek word "Christ" denote the Church's experience of God's Word incarnated in the human life, death, resurrection, and continuing glorified life of the first-century Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. This usage gives greater precision since "Messiah" respects the integrity of Jewish self-understanding, while "Christ" better expresses the Church's resurrection-faith. Certainly, in the context of dialogue with Jews, but also in the internal work of constructive Christian theology, it is fitting that Catholic theologians respect Jewish concepts by always making it clear when our respective definitions of key common terms differ. Distinguishing the related terms "Messiah" and "Christ" also conveys that the words function differently in the Jewish *Tanakh* and the Christian Bible.

On a related scriptural matter, Levering mentions the debate ...

... currently ongoing between exegetes who read Paul as requiring Torah observance of Jewish Christians (including Paul himself) as a matter of salvation, and exegetes who argue that Paul did not strictly observe Torah himself and did not require it of Jewish Christians as a matter of salvation. My view is that the exegetical debate is, like many such debates, insoluble, due to the pliability and relative paucity of the evidence (81).

An appeal to "insolubility" conveniently sidesteps major developments in Pauline studies. In particular, the growing "Paul within Judaism" paradigm, of which Levering is aware, ought not to be facilely dismissed. In this perspective Paul did not abandon "Judaism" and become a "Christian" (tellingly, he never uses the word). Rather for those Jews like Paul who became Christ-followers, the inclusion of non-Jews in their gatherings as "full members having equal status with Jews ... without having [to] become Jews" rested on their claim "that God has in Christ [through the resurrection] initiated the age to come kingdom already, and thus members from the rest of the nations are (and should be) participating alongside of

¹⁶ See the Pontifical Biblical Commission: "Instruction on Scripture and Christology" (1984), §§1.2.6.2 and 2.2.2.1 <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/ptbc-1984> ; and "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" (2002), §§21-22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, §21.

Israel in the worship of the One God in the ways to be expected when that day arrived.”¹⁸ This compelling shift in interpretive presuppositions raises major questions regarding how Levering actualizes Paul within his dogmatic system.

Conclusion: A Work of “Soft Supersessionism”

Although *Doctrine of Israel* mentions in only three scattered footnotes the term coined by David Novak, it can be fairly characterized as a work of “soft supersessionism.” Levering approvingly quotes Novak’s view that “it seems to me that Christianity must be generically supersessionist. In fact, I question the Christian orthodoxy of any Christian who claims he or she is not a supersessionist at all” (375n163). However, in the same essay, Novak explained that he devised the phrase due to his dismay at the pervasive presence of religious relativism in secular society: “As a Jew with long experience in Jewish-Christian dialogue, I have greater trust in Christians struggling with their orthodoxy, but who are orthodox nonetheless, than with Christians who are no longer responsible for (that is, answerable to) Christian revelation and tradition.”¹⁹

Many of the decisions Levering makes in his “Israelology” arguably reflect soft supersessionist premises. When he, following Novak, appears to offer hard or soft supersessionism as the only choices for *real* Christians—since no supersessionism at all is tantamount to religious relativism—he regrettably provides Christians with a powerful reason not to fully confront the Church’s *adversus Ioudaios* legacy. Moreover, if used as a kind of paradigmatic characterization, it fails to convey God’s abiding election of Israel as a covenantal and covenanting people. In fact, it could suggest the opposite.

In the years after the Shoah, many people asked a question that in its coarsest form could be phrased: is Christianity inevitably antisemitic? After reading *Doctrine of Israel*, one might question the book’s operating premise that Christianity is inevitably softly supersessionist. Care must be taken that such a presupposition does not become a self-fulfilling prophecy in theological work. History demands, I think, that all branches of theology first examine the prospects for not only a “non-supersessionist” theology but for a positive theology of “shalom,” of wholeness and right-relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

¹⁸ Mark D. Nanos, “Paul and Judaism: Why Not *Paul’s Judaism*?” in Mark D. Given, ed., *Paul Unbound* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022), 176-7. From many possibilities, I cite the Jewish scholar Nanos because Levering singles him out as representing views he opposes (81n88) and because he incorrectly identifies him as a messianic Jew (283n64, cf. 202n29).

¹⁹ David Novak, “The Covenant in Rabbinic Thought” in Eugene B. Korn and John T. Pawlikowski, eds., *Two Faiths, One Covenant? Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 71.