

**Karma Ben-Johanan**  
***Jacob's Younger Brother:***  
***Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II***

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), hardcover, 352 pp.

**“Sit, Guest of Faith”<sup>1</sup>:**  
**Can Orthodox Zionist Thought Craft a Positive**  
**Yet Subversive Dialogue with Christianity?**

**DAVID MEYER**

meyer@unigre.it

Pontifical Gregorian University, 00187 Roma, Italy

Karma Ben-Johanan's seventh chapter is undoubtedly one of the most current, topical, and polemical of the book *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations After Vatican II*. It is also a painful reading for those who, like me, are devoted to the teaching of rabbinic traditions within an academic Catholic setting and are daily experiencing the friendship and profound mutual respect between our two traditions. Unearthing so many of the dark shadows and demons of contemporary Orthodox Zionist thought in its perception of Christianity and Christians remains a difficult exercise even for those seasoned to the necessity of open, transparent, and honest dialogue, including confrontations with painful verses found in classical rabbinic traditions.<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning, the author makes it clear that her intention is to uncover the “closed conversations in which one community discusses the other without diplomatic consideration” in order to bring to the “surface, precisely the points of resistance of Christian-Jewish dialogue” (4). Indeed, the reading of chapter seven is successfully undiplomatic!

---

<sup>1</sup> Liturgical prayer for *ushpizin* (distinguished guests invited into one's Sukkah).

<sup>2</sup> See David Meyer, Soheib Bencheikh, and Yves Simoens, *Painful Verses: Bible, Gospel and Quran Between Conflict and Dialogue* (Roma: Aracne, 2014).

## 1. Giving sight to the blind”<sup>3</sup>

Ben-Johanan demonstrates with detailed quotations the way a certain perception of Christianity emerges from the religious writings of Abraham Kook and his descendants (both familial and metaphorical). These writings mostly center around the value and function of the land of Israel and its holiness, as well as the effect of the end of the *galut* (exile) on the essence and nature of Jewish identity. Many scholars have emphasized the political theological nature of Kook's thought, pointing not only to the redemptive dimension of the return of the Jewish people to the land but to the never-ceasing tensions between both universalism and particularism and the sacred and the profane.<sup>4</sup> Others have attempted to sharpen and delineate the unlikely similarities and resonances of Kookist thought with that of Nietzsche on issues such as the nature of religion and morality.<sup>5</sup> Ben-Johanan's scholarly achievement is of a different nature and takes a more dramatic turn. She brings to the fore, through the unfolding of Kook's own thoughts and their developments in the writings of his son (Zvi Yehudah) and of some of his disciples from the *École de la pensée juive de Paris*<sup>6</sup> active either in France or in Israel, a radical vision of Christianity that plays a pivotal role in the Kookist theology of the land and the State. She finds there a certain “disdain for the Christian religion [turned] into a cultural war against the influence of Christianity on Judaism” (197). In turn, the State of Israel and its achievements (such as military victories, enduring Jewish presence, economic successes, and display of Jewish power) became the tools through which Judaism could affirm its final victory over Christianity and thus reverse the course of history (216-28).

## 2. “Distinguishing between the day and the night”<sup>7</sup>

This review and response to Ben-Johanan's chapter is not the place to articulate anew the theological arguments advocated by the Orthodox thinkers. Suffice to say that it mostly amounts to what the author claims is “the establishment of an

---

<sup>3</sup> From the morning daily liturgy: “Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, who gives sight to the blind.”

<sup>4</sup> See Moshe Hellinger, “Political Theology in the Thought of ‘Merkaz HaRav’ Yeshiva and Its Profound Influence on Israeli Politics and Society Since 1967,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9 (2008): 534-39.

<sup>5</sup> For a partial review of the literature, see Jason Rappoport, “Rav Kook and Nietzsche: A Preliminary Comparison of Their Ideas on Religions, Christianity, Buddhism and Atheism,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 12 (2004): 100-2.

<sup>6</sup> The expression defines the emergence of the renewal of Jewish studies and thought in France after WWII under the influence of thinkers such as Gordin (1896-1947), Askénazi (1922-1996), Neher (1914-1988), Levinas (1906-1995), and the enigmatic Chouchani (1895-1968). See David Banon, *L'école de la pensée juive de Paris: Le Judaïsme revisité sur les bords de la Seine* (Strasbourg: Presse Universitaire de Strasbourg, 2019). See also Sandrine Szwarc, *Fascinant Chouchani* (Paris: Herman Éditeur, 2022), 93-126.

<sup>7</sup> From the daily liturgy: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given the rooster intelligence to distinguish between the day and the night.”

alternative subversive kind of dialogue between Jews and Christians” (216) in which Christianity is seen as a “disruption in the natural course of this divine historical program” that Judaism can help restore (198-99). Given this frame of thought, some important and more global implications should be considered. These will help us to clarify the topic and maybe to find some light in the shadows of the theological night that Ben-Johanan’s chapter uncovered. I will offer three reflections and then propose, in the last part of this paper, what could be a different and possibly truly subversive understanding of the contemporary relationship between Orthodox Judaism and Christianity.

First, Ben-Johanan shows that the terminology used by the Kookist thinkers in their radically anti-Christian discourses, far from being an innovation, is nearly identical to the one used for centuries by the Church to denounce Jews and Judaism. Indeed, had the history been different the dynamic might have been inverted, for these Jews’ use of terms such as “proof,” “victory,” “truth,” “superiority” or even “supremacy” only translates a theological desire for the kind of “hard [Jewish] supersessionism” that David Novak describes.<sup>8</sup> This Jewish theology, in its overall ideological framework, is built around the same words, concepts, and ideals. This is none other than what Ben-Johanan labels a “triumphalist counter-theology” (226). One must ask: In which way can such a traditional semantic be the expression of a truly subversive counter-theology? Of course, one could argue that it all depends on what is meant by “subversive.” I recall my former teacher and Dean of the Leo Baeck College Rabbinic seminary, Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, author of *The Subversive Bible* (the title refers to the Hebrew Bible), defining subversive as implying risk and danger: “In a way, the title says it all. The Hebrew Bible is subversive, even dangerous, and we take a risk when we read it.”<sup>9</sup> But as long as Orthodox thinkers remain anchored in an ideology that only aims at reversing and reusing an old and derogatory theology, the hope for a subversive reshaping of Jewish-Christian dialogue and rabbinic understanding of Christianity remains unattainable.

Secondly, Ben-Johanan leads us to question her exposing the contemporary Jewish “teaching of contempt”<sup>10</sup> to a wider readership not necessarily acquainted with the violence language of many elements within the Kookist political and theological agenda.<sup>11</sup> Should we or should we not unveil our flaws and blemishes so

---

<sup>8</sup> David Novak, “Supersessionism Hard and Soft,” *First Things*, February (2019): 27-31. Outside of the Kookist tradition, similar convictions have already been expressed by Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992) who foresees the advent of a “Post-Christian Era” in the post-Shoah Zionist context. See Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973), 37-41.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Magonet, *The Subversive Bible* (London: SMC Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>10</sup> The famous plea formulated by the Jewish French historian Jules Isaac to Pope John the XXIII, asking to bring to an end the “*enseignement du mépris*” of the Church towards the Jews is now a reversed reality that contemporary Jews must face. See Jules Isaac, *L’enseignement du mépris: Vérités historiques et mythes théologiques* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1962). See also the “Note conclusive” written by Isaac following his audience with the Pope in 1960.

<sup>11</sup> I am alluding here to the decision to translate Ben-Johanan’s book, originally published in Hebrew and addressed to an Israeli public, into English, thus making it accessible to a wider audience. The issue was debated at length during the conference in Rome, March 1 and 2, 2023.

openly? And for those of us who experience trust, respect, and friendship with Christians, should we or should we not theologically and hermeneutically engage with such writings? The author invites each of her readers to take a stand and answer, at least for themselves, the question. Undoubtedly, the temptation is great to ignore such attacks on Christianity and take refuge behind the comfortable affirmation that “this is not my Judaism.” This is a psychological posture akin to the inner Jewish drama brought to life in Philip Roth’s 1959 short story *Eli, the Fanatic*,<sup>12</sup> when two radically different groups of Jews are repulsed by each other’s attitudes. But do we have the luxury to disengage from the contemporary Zionist radicalization of rabbinic discourses in our time? I do not think so. And, since Ben-Johanan makes us face the painful reality of such religious postures, it is for us to recover the desire to enter the hermeneutical war with those who promulgate contempt so as not to abandon Judaism to their radical theology. A voice from the past could certainly guide our steps at present:

It happened that the Roman kingdom sent two officials to learn Torah from Rabban Gamliel.<sup>13</sup> [...] In the end, they said, “Your entire Torah is fine and praiseworthy, except for these two matters which you say – a Jewish woman should not be a midwife for a Gentile woman, but a Gentile woman can be a midwife for a Jewish woman [...]; [and] robbery of a Jew is forbidden, but robbery of a Gentile is permitted.” At that moment, Rabban Gamliel issued an edict that what is stolen from a Gentile is forbidden because of the desecration of God’s name.<sup>14</sup>

When the sages of the past faced teachings of contempt emanating from within the tradition, they did not hesitate to intervene and, invoking the “desecration of God’s name” that such theology entailed, to correct the wrongs and to contribute to the crafting of a more respectful religion. Ben-Johanan’s chapter, disclosing the demons emanating from some dark corners of contemporary rabbinic teachings, must be seen as an invitation to renew the audacity of a Rabban Gamliel and to make it ours today.

Thirdly, I am a French rabbi brought up within the intellectual aura of the *École de la pensée juive de Paris*, and the detailed discussions of the Kookist turn adopted by some of its key figures demands attention. Ben-Johanan focuses on Rabbi Yehuda Leon Askénazi. He was well acquainted with the school of the Christian “New Theologians” and, in 1963, did not hesitate to acknowledge the profound positive

---

<sup>12</sup> Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (New York: Vintage International Edition, 1993), 249-98.

<sup>13</sup> Head of the assembly of sages in Yavneh, successor of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, who lived at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> and beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries.

<sup>14</sup> yBK 4:3.

changes that the Roman Catholic Church was undergoing during the Second Vatican Council (206).<sup>15</sup> He also declared that “the Christian understands what the Bible says, if not with his intellect, at least with his soul,” thus testifying to a respectful perception of Christian identity and the Christian message.<sup>16</sup> And yet in the wake of the Six-Day War (which brought about the conquest of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and other religious, historical, and mythical sites), he underwent a sudden and dramatic radicalization of his discourse about Christianity. The tonality changes. He suddenly alludes not only to “the end of the Constantinian era [of the Church] and the urgency of [its] resourcing in the pattern of the Bible of the Hebrews”<sup>17</sup> but also to the “dismay of the man of Christian faith who fears to detect the sudden irruption of the eschatological word of the prophets of Israel in the earthly history of the society of Israel.”<sup>18</sup> This places Judaism and Christianity on a collision course. It appears that, with the passing of time, Askénazi adopted “the traditional Jewish view that Christianity is idolatry.”<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, “starting as a non-Zionist, he became an ultra-Zionist at the end,” as Schattner correctly posits.<sup>20</sup> While Ben-Johanan brilliantly articulates the theological shift undergone by Askénazi, who always lamented the Church’s inability to go far enough in its theological grasping of the Shoah and the return of the Jewish people to its land, another reading of Askénazi’s radical post-1967 theology is possible (207). What he systematically fails to consider is the effect of the Six-Day war and the Kookist theology on Judaism itself. The unfolding idolatry of the land and of military victory and might, and an emphasis on Redemption so poignantly denounced by thinkers such as Yeshayahu Leibowitz, have “caused greater harm to Israel than the loss of faith in redemption.”<sup>21</sup> In that respect, hostile theological views of Christianity in the thought of some of the francophone disciples of Kook is collateral damage of an Orthodox Zionist fall into idolatry and not so much the consequence of a profound reflection on Christianity and Jewish-Christian dialogue.

---

<sup>15</sup> Léon Askénazi, “Espoir œcuménique et réconciliation judéo-chrétienne,” *L’Arche* 77 (June 1963): 24-25. Quoted in Léon Askénazi, *La parole et l’écrit*, vol. 1, ed. Marcel Goldman (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 442-43.

<sup>16</sup> Léon Askénazi, *La parole et l’écrit*, 445.

<sup>17</sup> Léon Askénazi, “Lettre à quelques amis chrétiens,” *L’Arche* 126/127 (August / Septembre 1967): 13.

<sup>18</sup> Léon Askénazi, “Lettre,” 12-13.

<sup>19</sup> Yossef Charvit, “From Monologues to Possible Dialogue: Judaism’s Attitude towards Christianity According to the Philosophy of R. Yéhouda Léon Askénazi (Manitou),” in *Interaction Between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art, and Literature*, Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series, vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 322.

<sup>20</sup> Marius Schattner, “Israël, ‘Lumière pour les nations’? Trois penseurs du judaïsme français à l’épreuve de la guerre des Six Jours,” *Esprit* 11 (2010): 99.

<sup>21</sup> Yeshayahu Leibowitz, “Redemption and the Dawn of Redemption (1971),” in *Yeshayahu Leibowitz: Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State*, ed. Eliezer Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 126.

### 3. "Sit, lofty guests ... guests of faith"<sup>22</sup>

Can a truly subversive Orthodox assessment of Christianity be formulated? It would have to do justice to the risk inherent to any subversive attitude and simultaneously affirm a Zionist religious relation to the land of Israel. Simultaneously, it would have to offer a valuable positive perspective of Christianity and of Catholicism in particular. Paraphrasing here the invitation to guests to the Sukkah, can one invite "guests of faith," that is Christian theological friends, into the arcane world of our religious thoughts and current concerns?

To help to consider this problematic and to try to fathom an alternative path, I would like to turn to the writings of the late professor Ernst Akiva Simon (1900-1988). Together with Martin Buber, Simon was in 1925 one of the founders of Brit Shalom, an intellectual and political movement dedicated to the establishment of a bi-national state in mandatory Palestine as way of ensuring peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in the land. It has been described as "optimistic" and "meant to forestall the conflict before it ripened."<sup>23</sup> Simon was particularly active in the field of Jewish education<sup>24</sup> and taught at the Hebrew University beginning in 1938. He was a Zionist in his own right, albeit not with the same fervor as the Kook family and their disciples.<sup>25</sup> He was also an Orthodox Jew; in the words of Avi Sagi, he was a "Torah-committed Jew."<sup>26</sup> In 1952, Simon published in a yearly supplement of *Haaretz* newspaper (*Luah Ha'aretz*) an article titled "Ha-'im 'od yehudim 'anahnu?" ["Are We Still Jews?"]<sup>27</sup> In thirty-two dense and tightly written pages, Simon proposes using a Christian typology to elucidate and debate the status of Judaism in light of the Zionist reality of his days. In a key polemical passage, he wrote "The contemporary crisis of the Jewish religion [Simon has in mind the question of the national state] is reflected in three crucial phenomena: the collapse of the ancient 'Catholic' Judaism; the weakening of the new 'Protestant' Judaism; and the futile attempt to achieve a new spiritual reality by attributing a Messianic purpose to the creation of the State of Israel in our own day."<sup>28</sup>

This short passage requires explanation. By "Catholic Judaism," Simon aims at describing an understanding of Judaism as all-encompassing religious practice and faith, dominating all spheres of life, both personal and national. Relying on the teachings of the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga's characterization of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Liturgical prayer for *ushpizin*.

<sup>23</sup> Tamar Hermann, "The Bi-National Idea in Israel/Palestine: Past and Present," *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2005): 385.

<sup>24</sup> He received the Israel Prize for education in 1967.

<sup>25</sup> Sagi sums up the Zionist views of Simon, writing he was "a realist unmoved by messianic vision," in Avi Sagi, *Tradition vs. Traditionalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 46.

<sup>26</sup> Avi Sagi, *Tradition*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> The original article by Simon was partially translated by Arthur Cohen. See Arthur Cohen (ed.), "Arguments and Doctrines: A Reader of Jewish Thinking in the Aftermath of the Holocaust," (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 388-401. Interestingly, Cohen slightly changed the title to "Are We Israelis Still Jews?"

<sup>28</sup> Ernst Simon, "Ha-'im 'od yehudim 'anahnu?" ["Are We Still Jews?"] (Tel Aviv: Haaretz, 1952), 3.

essence of the “Catholic religion,”<sup>29</sup> Simon wrote, “This kind of religious situation may be called ‘Catholic,’ where religion seeks to sanctify and control the life of the individual and the community on every level, [including] eating, drinking, work, rest, the principles of the community and state, [and] love and war.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast, by “Protestant Judaism” Simon intended to point to a reactionary posture: “The ‘Protestant’ religion seeks to compensate for the loss of the ‘Catholic’ religion by special emphasis on the individual, his direct relation to God.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, in reaction to both growing secularization and the weakening of “Catholic religion” in the modern times, a “Protestant type” of religious sensitivity emerged within Judaism. It was a vision in which some aspects of life, and of national life in particular, while still influenced by religious teachings and thoughts, escaped what Ignaz Maybaum called “the dictate of the Din,”<sup>32</sup> meaning the comprehensive laws and regulations of Rabbinic Judaism.

Having established the conceptual ground, what was Simon trying to express? Essentially, Simon was attempting to establish, using a Christian typology, the proper nature of the relationship between Judaism and the Zionist state. Toward the end of his article, Simon, having scrutinized the essence of the Jewish religious crisis in Israel, resolutely and paradoxically turned towards the individual, and yet, in search of a national model, he also turned to Christian typology to finalize his thought:

This paradoxical situation calls for a paradoxical understanding: Judaism is indeed a “Catholic religion” when viewed objectively; but in the present crisis we can approach it only subjectively, from a “Protestant” point of view. The difference between the latter approach and that “Protestant” Judaism whose deterioration I have analyzed above consists in the clear realization that this individualistic approach is not an end in itself, not a legitimate construction of Judaism as such, but merely a not dishonorable means whose use is forced upon us by necessity.<sup>33</sup>

Simon, as these quotations demonstrate, engages Christianity in a daring and yet respectful and positive manner in service of analyzing a contemporary Jewish-Zionist problematic. Such an attitude is remarkable. The references I made to Simon are not intended to validate or invalidate his analysis. Rather, Simon’s words provide an interesting and daring example of an Orthodox thinker unafraid to formulate a truly engaging yet subversive dialogue between Judaism and Christianity.

Can such an approach and method be used as a template for other creative exchanges between Orthodox thought and Christianity, and maybe more specifically Catholicism? And if so, how would one articulate such a positive dialogue?

---

<sup>29</sup> Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 1922), 153.

<sup>30</sup> Ernst Simon, “Ha-‘im,” 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Simon, “Ha-‘im,” 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ignaz Maybaum, *The Face of God After Auschwitz* (Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep, 1965), 68.

<sup>33</sup> Ernst Simon, “Ha-‘im,” 31.

In 1997, Nicholas De Lange, translator and professor of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Oxford, published an article on the religious thought of his late mentor, Ignaz Maybaum, entitled "Jesus Christ at Auschwitz."<sup>34</sup> In one particularly poignant section of the article titled "The Gospel as post-Holocaust literature," De Lange convincingly argues that the Gospels should be read "in light of the first *Churban* and probably the Second *Churban* too" and in light of the fact that "the narrative of the death of Jesus in the Gospels is, in a strange way, an allegory of the story of the destruction of the Temple."<sup>35</sup> Thus they could also be understood by contemporary Jewish readers as meaningful religious reflections that could help present-day Jewish theologians shape their own Post-Shoah theologies. De Lange concludes: "This post-Holocaust reading of the Gospel strengthens me in my belief that Jews and Christians must labour together to make certain that such *churban* cannot happen again."<sup>36</sup> What is truly remarkable in De Lange's concluding remark is his emphasis not just on "working together" in the social and secular sense that we are accustomed to but on a common "labour" with the Gospel text. It is a joint hermeneutical and theological exercise. It is the Post-Holocaust reading of the Gospel that can help and provide support and direction to Jewish theology. This can define the quality of a relationship between Judaism and Christianity that never existed before.

One is tempted to return to Orthodox thought to uphold the vision of De Lange but to shift the focus away from the Shoah and apply it to the current problematic raised by Ben-Johanan's chapter. It is no secret that many in religious Zionist movements today are prisoners of a messianic reading of the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and the creation of the State. Just as the Gospel could help Judaism face some of the theological aspects of its Post-Holocaust crisis, we could suggest that Orthodox thinkers adopt a really subversive approach to their relationship to Christianity. They might want to consider that some of the teachings and wisdom of the New Testament could help them find a way out of this unbridled messianic idolatry of the land and the State. This is not just a wild, fictional formulation. I take it from the Talmud itself which, in a particularly daring move, affirmed that "all idolatry done by Israel, Israel cannot undo it by itself."<sup>37</sup> Thus I affirm calling for external help to overcome the idolatry in which Orthodox thought is currently buried.

The New Testament and later Church teachings are rich in wisdom about tempering excessive messianic expectations, and Matthew 24 is a good place to start. It talks of the deceiving signs of the messianic time more explicitly than the Talmud and the Midrash have ever done.<sup>38</sup> The verses present a fascinating tension between

---

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas De Lange, "Jesus Christ at Auschwitz," *New Blackfriars* 78 (1997): 316.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas De Lange, "Jesus Christ," 313-14.

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas De Lange, "Jesus Christ," 315.

<sup>37</sup> bAZ 42a.

<sup>38</sup> Some important yet sporadic teachings of the Talmud and Midrash warn its readers against messianic expectations: Johanan Ben Torta harshly rebuked Rabbi Akiva's messianic understanding of the Bar-Kokhba rebellion (yTaan 4:8); Rabbah's warned, "Let him [the Messiah] come, but let me not see him" (bSanh 98b); and Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai said, "If you have a sapling in your hand and are told that



what Simon called the “subjective contemporary reality of ‘Protestant Judaism,’” with its emphasis on the self and on a personal awareness of a potential relation to God, and the more “Catholic” perspective on religion, with its placing the individual in the wider horizon of the reality of history and messianism. For these multiple reasons, Orthodox thinkers today would do well to turn to Christian friends and study partners they likely do not have and perhaps do not wish to have to fathom a positive and yet subversive way of understanding Christianity in the context of their own theology.

---

the Messiah has arrived, plant the sapling and then go to greet him” (Avot of Rabbi Natan B, chapter 31).