

The Jewish Jesus and Anti-Supersessionist Ecclesiology

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Introduction

The question of what the Jewish identity of Jesus means for Christians is one that should be directed to the church and its members. Hence any answer to this question must contain an ecclesiological dimension. I do not intend to address what official ecclesiastical entities and their documents *say* about who the Jewish Jesus is but rather to ask what it means for the church itself to be constituted through the life and work of a Jew. Building on that, how can such an understanding be articulated in a way that does not express a hierarchical ordering of Christian over Jewish communities but rather expresses a non-competitive, non-dual form of mutuality?

Christology informs ecclesiology – belief in Christ articulates the nature of the collective Christian experience. There are a range of Christological expressions to choose from in the Christian tradition, from low to high. I write out of the Western Christian tradition as mediated through the ecclesial expression of Anglicanism. As such, my Christological orientations assume the teachings that stem out of the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.¹ Using these as a point of departure, I argue that when one speaks of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, it is necessary to specify that this is the incarnation of the *God of Israel*. There is no other God. And this incarnation of the God of Israel is expressed as a Jewish person, Jesus of Nazareth. As Michael Wyschogrod puts it, “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.”²

Some modern attempts to uncover the Jewish Jesus as significant for the life of the church have assumed a lower Christology that foregrounds his human consciousness and sidesteps assertions of incarnational and trinitarian doctrine. Yet

¹ Affirmations of this as the normative Christological framing in Anglicanism are reflected in the use of the Nicene Creed in the Eucharistic liturgy and the affirmation of Nicaea and Chalcedon in documents ranging from the Articles of Religion to the inclusion of the Chalcedonian definition in the historical documents section of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* used by the Episcopal Church.

² Michael Wyschogrod, “Incarnation and God’s Indwelling in Israel” in *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Eerdmans, 2004), 178.

Wyschogrod's framing of the incarnation as an intensification of divine presence indicates an event beyond the human manifestation of a divine consciousness. Barbara Meyer has shown that an emphasis on the Jewish identity of Jesus need not obviate an expression of a high Christology. Indeed, to identify Jesus as a Jew who is also fully human, one who is not only a charismatic prophet but also a keeper and teacher of Torah, provides a further defense against a docetic Christology.³ In the context of two-natures Christology, to assert the Jewishness of the humanity of Jesus Christ is a reminder that his full humanity is a participation in the full divinity of the God of Israel.⁴ The fully human nature of Jesus Christ is not only generically human, it also carries a specific Jewishness. The full divinity of Jesus Christ is likewise not a generic divinity, but the specific divinity of the God of Israel expressed in the Scriptures of Israel.⁵

Yet, how do contemporary Christians relate to Jesus the Jew if most of them live as gentiles in a tradition that for most of its history has maintained a firm separation from Jewish identity and practices?⁶ How are the members of the church brought into a meaningful relationship with Jesus *the Jew* when one of the great strengths of the Christian tradition is its ability to contextually express the identity of Jesus Christ in a wide range of Gentile cultural modalities? Jesus has been presented to various cultures as a Saxon warrior, an enlightened teacher, an oppressed peasant, and a cosmic lord. Yet behind all these cultural representations lies the Jewish Jesus as the foundational historical incarnation of the God of Israel. This reality is relevant for how churches express their collective constitutive identity in Christ.

This article will propose how the Christian church, constituted in the Jewish Jesus, might conceptualize relating to the covenanted Jewish people, Israel. It will do this by thinking through two images for the church, that of the Body of Christ and the people of God. I will reconceptualize these images within an anti-supersessionist framework to indicate how they can be applied when thinking of the relationship between the church and the Jewish people. Then turning to Anglican documents and theologians, I argue that the concept of noncontrastitive transcendence is useful for more fully articulating a relationship between Israel and the church that is grounded in God's absolute freedom. This divine freedom is expressed in non-dual relations in the divine life that is translated in the relationships of the communities constituted by God.

³ Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Explorations* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 63-65.

⁴ Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory*, 121-127.

⁵ The question of how the Jewish Jesus mediates between Israel and the church has also been taken up recently by Sarah Coakley and Paul Griffiths. See Sarah Coakley, *The Broken Body: Israel, Christ and Fragmentation* (Wiley Blackwell, 2024) and Paul Griffiths, *Israel: A Christian Grammar* (Fortress Press, 2023).

⁶ It is important to not lose sight of the early Jewish composition of the Jesus movement and the evidence for a blended "Jewish Christian" experience in the first centuries of the Common Era. See Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism* (Fortress Press, 2022); Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (Yale University Press, 2018).

The Jewish Jesus and Images for the Church: Anti-Supersessionist Approaches

The framework of anti-supersessionism is useful for considering the significance of the Jewishness of Jesus for the relationship between Israel and the church.⁷ Anti-supersessionism foregrounds practices of solidarity to live into a new relationship between Christians and Jews. Undoing supersessionism requires solidarity with Jewish people that both attends to Jewish self-description and reframes Christian life and thought as a consequence of this attentiveness. This activity ought not to simply mitigate the effects of supersessionism and anti-Judaism but also should shape a future expression of Christianity that is actively anti-supersessionist. Anti-supersessionism is the creation and maintenance of a deep solidarity between gentile Christians and Jews that ensures the mutual flourishing, and even communion, between these two people. This relationship is grounded within the common life of God, the awareness of which permeates Christian theology and practice.

The work of anti-supersessionism requires theological reconceptualization. As a concrete example, Gentile Christians have a strong supersessionist tendency to read the scriptural narrative of the people of Israel as a map for understanding their own identity. As a consequence, this often leads to Christian language and practices that minimize the ongoing vitality of Judaism. To redress this issue, Christians can use anti-supersessionist approaches to develop a new conceptual map by which they can affirm that the Jewish community currently and always has been in a permanent graced relationship with God. This process involves gentile Christians decentering their position of privilege in the life of God and re-centering Israel, the Jewish people, within this divine life. This requires rethinking how the church, the Jewish people, and God exist in covenant. One helpful way in beginning this process of anti-supersessionist rethinking is to consider two images for the church, the Body of Christ and the people of God.

The Church as the Body of Christ

A foundational ecclesiological image is the Body of Christ. The *locus classicus* of the image of the Body of Christ is from Paul's first letter to the community in Corinth: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12-13). This image of the gathered community of believers in Jesus indicates that via participation in ritual actions, namely baptism and the Lord's Supper, all participants regardless of ethnic or social identities are bound together by the Spirit of God in the risen Christ. Moreover, Augustine of Hippo elaborates that the members of the Body of Christ are mystically bound together in communion with Christ, those who are on earth and those

⁷ On the concept of anti-supersessionism, see Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, "Towards an Anti-Supersessionist Theology: Race, Whiteness, and Covenant," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 129.

in heaven.⁸ The Body of Christ is a potent symbol for the profound mutuality that exists between all Christians across time and space which also binds them through the risen Christ into the very life of God.

In the twentieth century, Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac recovered the patristic and scholastic understandings of the Body of Christ to articulate what he saw as a threefold expression of the Body of Christ in the Western Latin tradition.⁹ These are the historical, ecclesial, and sacramental bodies of Christ, expressed respectively as the person of Jesus, the community of the Church, and the sacrament of the altar. In de Lubac's thinking each of the expressions of the Body of Christ point to a larger eschatological reality bound up in the life of God. The threefold Body of Christ has both an expression of being *res* (the fulfillment of reality as a graced experience) and of being *sacramentum* (the signs which point towards, or prefigure, that fulfillment).¹⁰ Crucially, de Lubac argues that in the fulfillment of all things, both the historical Body of Christ (Jesus of Nazareth) and the ecclesial Body of Christ endure, although the external forms of church hierarchy will not endure. Rather, it is the faithful who will endure beyond the eschatological horizon. On this side of the fulfillment of all things, it is the sacrament of the Body of Christ and the structures of the ecclesial Body of Christ that nourish the faithful as they journey towards fullness of life in Christ.

As useful as de Lubac's understanding of the threefold Body of Christ is for articulating a rich ecclesiology that looks towards the cosmic meaning of God revealed in Jesus Christ, de Lubac's framing also has supersessionist elements. Concerning the historical Body of Christ, de Lubac posits that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament and that indeed "readings of the Old Testament which fail to take into account the Christological fulfillment are invalid, even 'contaminated' and 'defiled.'"¹¹ In this reading, the Old Testament is completely fulfilled in Christ and whatever is not directly related to Christ in this revelation must pass away. As a corollary, the death of Christ is read as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices, which is represented in the confection of the sacramental Body of Christ on Christian altars. Despite the allegorizing and implicitly supersessionist orientation of de Lubac's paradigm, I argue that his retrieval of the threefold Body of Christ is useful for considering how the Church is spiritually united

⁸ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York, Doubleday, 2002), 43.

⁹ For this treatment of de Lubac's thought, I am drawing on Eugene R. Schlesinger, "The Threefold Body in Eschatological Perspective: With and Beyond Henri de Lubac on the Church," *Ecclesiology* 10 (2014): 186-204.

¹⁰ For the purposes of this article, I am most interested in the relationship between the historical and ecclesial forms of the Body of Christ.

¹¹ Schlesinger, "Threefold Body," 189-180, quoting Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O'Neill (Crossroads, 2012), 90, 176. On the tension between de Lubac's theological anti-Judaism and his prolific work to resist Nazi antisemitism in France, see Joseph K. Gordon, "Ressourcement Anti-Semitism? Addressing an Obstacle to Henri de Lubac's Proposed Renewal of Premodern Christian Spiritual Exegesis," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 3 (2017): 614-633. Schlesinger is currently at work on a volume that addresses the question of the supersessionist aspects of de Lubac's thought and how it can be reconceptualized.

to the Incarnate Jesus Christ, who was born and remains in the historical, and exalted, Body of Christ as a Jew.¹²

The theological turn to articulating a fuller positive Christian theological relationship with Judaism presents an opportunity for seeing the usefulness of de Lubac's idea of the threefold Body of Christ while also eschewing supersessionist elements of it. One of the pressing questions of contemporary Christian theologies of Judaism is how Jews who do not affirm belief in Jesus Christ relate to this Body of Christ that is constituted of gentiles and Christ-believing Jews.¹³ This question matters in light of de Lubac's theology because he envisions the Body of Christ as an eschatological reality that endures after the earthly signifiers of hierarchy, structures, and forms recede. The ecclesial Body of Christ will exist beyond the eschatological horizon as those who dwell eternally with God. Yet, in the wake of the Shoah, the eternal covenant the Jewish people possess with God has been consistently affirmed by official ecclesiastical bodies.¹⁴ These ecclesial statements bring to the fore the question of whether there are two entities, Israel and the ecclesial Body of Christ, which will dwell with God beyond the eschatological horizon. Or must these two communities at some point be articulated as one entity, which in Christian terms often leads to subsuming the Jewish people under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

One can see the challenge of articulating the proper relationship between the Body of Christ and Israel which does not fall into patterns that dismiss or minimize the eternal covenantal relationship that Israel possesses via Abraham and Sinai. Episcopal theologian Paul Van Buren speaks of this relationship in terms of the mission of the Church to Israel. Making clear that this mission is not about conversion of non-Jesus-believing Jews, Van Buren argues that the Church's mission to Israel is to serve it, affirming Israel's covenant with God and its election. This reflects Christ's own service to Israel and serves as an authentic witness of Christ's love for Israel (cf. Romans 15:8): "As the church serves the Jewish people, it shows that it really has been brought close to the covenant by Christ. It therefore becomes itself a living testimony to the trustworthiness of the God of Israel in fulfilling in Christ his promise that Abraham would become the father of many Gentiles."¹⁵ Here Van Buren anticipates an example of an anti-supersessionist reframing. The church, constituted as the Body of Christ, does not forego a relationship with the Jewish people, of whom Jesus was a member. Likewise, the church does not place the Jewish people, Israel, in a subservient relationship to itself. Instead, the church as the Body of Christ is called to serve and recenter God's abiding covenant with

¹² Schlesinger, 189-192, 196.

¹³ At various points in history the number of Jews counted within the Body of Christ has varied widely. Given both the presence of Jews in Jesus-believing assemblies indicated in the New Testament and a resurgence of Jews identifying as Jesus believers in our contemporary context, it is not possible to make an easy dichotomy between Jew and Gentile as respective insiders and outsiders to the ecclesial Body of Christ.

¹⁴ Philip Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship Between Christians and Jews* (Eerdmans, 2015).

¹⁵ Paul M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality: Part Two, A Christian Theology of the People of Israel* (Harper & Row, 1987), 344.

the Jewish people. The existence of the church bears witness to God's faithfulness in the prior, and foundational, covenant with Abraham that contains within it a promise to gentiles.

The Church as the People of God

Here it is instructive to look at another ecclesiastical metaphor, the people of God, and to see what an anti-supersessionist reframing of this concept might produce. The World Council of Churches identified both the Body of Christ and the people of God as apt metaphors for the church that can signal differing ways of thinking about the Church's relationship with the Jewish people.¹⁶ Both *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* from the Second Vatican Council identified the church as the new people of God.¹⁷ But these documents state that this concept ought not to mean that the distinctive mission and role of the Jewish people has ceased. The metaphor of the church as the new people of God seems to indicate that the understanding of Israel as the people of God has expanded to now include alongside Israel the united entity of gentiles and Jesus-believing Jews constituted as the Body of Christ who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus the Jew. It is in this sense that the church is a new, or expanded, people of God.¹⁸

Catholic theologian Kevin Brown argues that despite the efforts to mitigate the specificity of this term, "people of God" language retains supersessionist elements.¹⁹ He stipulates that the use of the definite article to describe the church as *the* people of God centers the Christologically constituted nature of this people. As such, even when the Catholic Church might seek to clarify that Israel remains as the people of God, their abiding existence as such a people implies either a Christological grounding or a Christological future. Brown offers an anti-supersessionist reframing for the ecclesiological term "people of God" by recourse to Pauline scholarship and sacramental theology. Drawing on the work of Paula Fredriksen, Brown argues that the apostle Paul never envisioned that the people of Israel as a Torah-observant body in covenant with God would be subsumed into a new Christologically constituted people. Rather, Paul understood those non-Jewish pagans who confessed belief in the God of Israel through the agency of the risen Jesus were the "eschatological gentiles" brought into fellowship with Torah observant Israel that signaled the coming of the end of ages about which Israel's prophets spoke. These eschatological gentiles were not called to follow Torah and Torah was not abrogated for Israel.²⁰ Given this, Brown argues for an anti-supersessionist reframe in which the church should not be called "the people of God" but rather "a sacrament of the eschatological people of God." Here Brown draws upon *Lumen*

¹⁶ World Council of Churches, *The Church and the Jewish People*, IV (1964).

¹⁷ *Nostra Aetate*, 4; *Lumen Gentium*, 2. Cf. an explanation of this in *Gifts and Calling*, 23.

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 14; *Gifts and Calling*, 23, 41.

¹⁹ B. Kevin Brown, "Is an Anti-Supersessionist Ecclesiology Possible after Nicaea?" in *Dissent, Power, and Christian Identity After Nicaea*, ed. Elizabeth Podromou and Jason Welle (Palgrave MacMillan, 2027). I am grateful to have received an advance copy of this essay from the author.

²⁰ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle* (Yale University Press, 2017), 73-77, 146-47.

Gentium, which describes the church as a sacrament of Christ and a sacrament of the unity of humanity.²¹ In other words, the church is the fundamental means by which Christ is made present to the world beyond the boundaries of the people Israel. This is a sacramental presence offered to all gentiles who would be brought into saving relationship with God. This sacramental reality has a fundamentally eschatological orientation towards God's fulfillment of all things, following Paul, represented by a union of Israel and gentile believers in Jesus. The Jewish Jesus is the means by which gentiles are part of an eschatological people in relation with the God of Israel who first called Israel as a people. The church, properly understood, is one part of the gathering of this eschatological people, alongside the Jewish people.

Working with Brown's anti-supersessionist reframing for the church as a sacrament of the eschatological people of God further presses on the question of how to conceptualize the relationship between the church and Israel. Methodist theologian Kendall Soulen helps advance an anti-supersessionist perspective when he clarifies that the image of the church as the people of God means that it "participates in God's unfinished history of covenant faithfulness with the whole Jewish people, irrespective of its posture towards the gospel (cf. Rom 9-11)."²² If the church is the people of God, it has not replaced Israel, the enduring covenantal community of the Jewish people, but is included alongside Israel. Both Israel and the church are called into being by acts of God's self-disclosing revelation. For Israel this is expressed as covenant, primarily via the election of Abraham and the giving of Torah at Sinai. For the church, this is a covenanted life manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. While it is certainly the case that initially the church was primarily Jewish in composition at its beginning, the nature of this body is now primarily that of gentiles living as part of an eschatological people of God. In reference to de Lubac's threefold Body of Christ, especially concerning the historical and ecclesial Body of Christ, we need to ask how another body, Israel, exists alongside this one.

Towards an Anti-Supersessionist Ecclesiology

Using Brown and Soulen's reframing of the people of God aids in further developing an anti-supersessionist ecclesiology that incorporates de Lubac's threefold paradigm of the three-fold Body of Christ. The church as the Body of Christ describes those who are constituted as a sacrament of the eschatological people of God in the person of Jesus Christ (de Lubac's historical Body of Christ), who in his resurrected human nature continues to exist as a Jew even as he redeems and restores those in need of restoration to God's life. The work of Christ is to bring the members of the ecclesial Body of Christ into a covenantal relationship with the God of Israel. This covenantal union brings the ecclesial Body of Christ alongside

²¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

²² Kendall Soulen, *Irrevocable: The Name of God and the Unity of the Christian Bible* (Fortress Press, 2022), 120.

the Jewish people, Israel, God's first covenanted people. It is the church and Israel together who constitute this new, or expanded, eschatological people of God. However, this is not a uniform or homogenous people of God. Thus, Soulen argues that the purpose of the Incarnation was to unite all people, whether members of Israel or the Body of Christ, into "a differentiated ecosystem of praise."²³ This differentiated manifestation of the people of Israel and the Body of Christ, what Philip Cunningham describes as co-covenanting companions,²⁴ provides the means by which all creatures fulfill their fundamental purpose of offering praise to the One who makes all things.

From an anti-supersessionist perspective, one can speak of the people of God as a collection, or perhaps a confederation, that one perceives in its particularity and universality. It is particular in two modes, first by constituting the people of Israel, who are designated through a collective belonging to a historic people recognized via common ancestry (even as movement into this people through a process of conversion sometimes occurs). The people of God are also particular, secondly, insofar as the church, the Body of Christ, does not necessarily include all gentiles, even as the Body of Christ expresses a desire for the reconciliation of all people with God. And there is also a universal dimension to these two aspects of the people of God. The people of Israel are a transhistorical reality whose existence and mission serves in part to reveal the God of Israel to the nations. The Body of Christ are those among the nations, also existing across time and space, who have received this testimony via the witness of Jesus Christ the Jew, crucified and resurrected.

Soulen's intervention to envision the people of God as a differentiated unity helps to avoid a surface level reading of Paul's image of the Body of Christ as one in which difference is erased between Jew and Greek, male and female, and other markers of social and cultural identity (e.g., in Gal 3:28). The work of God, whether in creation, covenant, or incarnation, is to bring together an intentionally diverse humanity into a chorus of praise, worship, and love. This diversity is inclusive of both Jews and Gentiles who exist in relationship with God via either Israel or the Body of Christ. Furthermore, Soulen's framework opens a way to eschew de Lubac's insistence that the historical Body of Christ represents a totalizing fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures and the narratives of the people of Israel. The Christian articulation of the doctrine of the Incarnation does point towards an amplification and intensification of the message of these scriptures that God chooses to draw close to God's people, as Wyschogrod argues. But the event of the historical Body of Christ as expressed in the Incarnation is not the definitive end of Israel's story. Rather, one can see the church as a sacrament of the eschatological people of God constituted by the work of Christ Jesus the Jew to bring forth the ecclesial Body of Christ in his death and resurrection. The existence of the church is not the end of Israel as the people of God. Rather, the church exists as that community in which the faithful of all nations outside of Israel may be gathered.

²³ Soulen, *Irrevocable*, 120.

²⁴ Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom*, 204-219

The Relationship of Israel and the Church in Practice

The anti-supersessionist ecclesiological perspectives that I have presented on the Body of Christ and the eschatological people of God have implications for the lived practices of the church in remembering itself as constituted by Jesus the Jew and thus brought into relationship with the God of Israel and the people Israel. In Romans 9-11 Paul wrestled with the great mystery of how to understand the relationship of eschatological gentiles with the people of Israel who did not confess Jesus the Jew as Messiah and Lord. Paul, it seems, concluded that God has been revealed to act graciously towards both Israel and the church (Ex. 34:6; Rom. 8:38-39). This insight is fundamental for an anti-supersessionist theology. Yet actualizing this perspective requires engaging with those practices of the church which present potential pitfalls for moving back into a supersessionist perspective. When one encounters these practices, the need for further theological refinement of the relationship between the church and Israel becomes apparent.

As an example, one can turn to practices of Christian scriptural proclamation and interpretation. Here one can easily run into problems of hearing an accounting of God's revelation to either Israel or to the church in which elements of this revelation appear to undermine either Jewish or Christian understandings of their respective covenantal relationship with God. Typically this might occur with supersessionist presentations of Scripture readings to favor the church. But one can also imagine hearing readings from the Tanakh in which passages concerning the election of Israel raise questions about the nature of the church's own election.

Many Christian bodies have recognized the importance of reframing the proclamation of the Old and New Testaments so that the Jewishness of Jesus is re-centered in the worshipping life of the Church as part of an effort of reversing a long tradition of supersessionist biblical interpretation and preaching. *God's Unfailing Word*, a 2019 teaching document from the Church of England, puts it this way: "In teaching, preaching, liturgy and more informal modes of communication within their communities, Christians, clergy and lay, should provide a truthful and accurate representation of biblical and Rabbinic Judaism and of Jesus as a Jew of his time who came not to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them."²⁵ Elsewhere, this document counsels against reading the Old Testament either as only foretelling the coming of Jesus Christ or avoiding making any connection between the Old Testament and the Christian witness. "... care needs to be taken to avoid the opposite danger of distancing the Church from Israel in the Old Testament, as if they had no abiding relation to one another. God is named in the New Testament also as the God of Israel. The Church is the body of Christ, whom Christians regard as the anointed one of Israel."²⁶ The specific claims made about Jesus in this quote can be parsed in various ways but the specific claim that the people Israel and the church (the Body of Christ) find a common point of connection in

²⁵ Faith and Order Commission, *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* (London: Church House Publishing, 2019), 61.

²⁶ *God's Unfailing Word*, 68.

attending to the revelation of the God of Israel is important. Crucially, this revelation itself is pluriform and extends along different axes. Israel and the Church both receive the revelation that is variously called the Torah, the Tanakh, the Old Testament, or the Scriptures of Israel. The differing terms for it show the varied ways that the “differentiated ecosystem” (to use Soulen’s term) have received God’s revelation. That the church also receives a further revelation from God, found first in Jesus of Nazareth and then the New Testament, is not itself a stumbling block if one understands that the creation of the people of God as variously constituted entities (Israel and the Body of Christ / eschatological people of God) exist as parts within whole. An anti-supersessionist ecclesiology would see this pluriform existence is part of the divine plan that finds resolution within an eschatological horizon. With this expanded vision of the people of God, the church can also affirm the continued activity of God among the Jewish people and within their religious life and intellectual traditions. God’s graced, revelatory activity has not ceased for the Jewish people.²⁷

Looking at the Christian reception of divine revelation in both a person (Jesus of Nazareth) and a canon (the Old and New Testaments), one sees how the perception of this new iteration of revelation hinges upon the priority of the Scriptures of Israel. Returning to *God’s Unfailing Word*, this connection is made explicit:

Perhaps the earliest summary of the gospel message in the New Testament says “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15.3b-4, NIV): if the promises of God in Israel’s Scriptures find their “yes” in Christ (2 Corinthians 1.19-20), then it is also true that the work of God in Christ can only be understood in the light of those Scriptures. . . . Christian doctrine teaches the unity of God’s revelation, so that as hearers of God’s word we stand in a relationship of fellowship and solidarity with those who receive that word in every age, testifying with them that the steadfast love of the one Lord never ceases but endures for ever.²⁸

The Scriptures of Israel was the chief resource that the first Jewish disciples used to make sense of the death and resurrection of their Jewish teacher Jesus. It is not only Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 who does this interpretive work. We also see it testified to in the meeting of the resurrected Jesus with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is Jesus himself who with these followers “interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). The Scriptures of Israel inform the Christian understanding of the historical Body of Christ (that is, Jesus of Nazareth). The collection of books that become the New Testament constantly draw upon the writings of the Scriptures of Israel to express core teaching and

²⁷ As an example, see Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 249: “God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with his word.”

²⁸ Ibid.

guidance for the followers of Jesus. The ecclesial Body of Christ itself could only begin to do its work of reflective self-understanding about its nature and existence by dependence on the Scriptures that Israel, as the people of God, itself wrote and discerned through God's prior revelations.

The discernment of the church's self-understanding through the Scriptures of Israel, even the discernment of the radically cosmic significance of the Incarnation, need not give rise to a replacement theology, to which de Lubac gives voice, in which the Christological interpretation of fulfillment in the Scriptures of Israel renders other readings to a lower category or even dispensed with entirely.²⁹ When the ecclesial Body of Christ proclaims and interprets the Scriptures of Israel it of course is appropriate to actualize certain passages Christologically or otherwise meaningful ways in the life of the Church. This is to be faithful to the New Testament witness of the necessity of such hermeneutics for the church's own constitution as the people of God. At the same time, the ecclesial Body of Christ must signal that this is not the exhaustion of meaning for the Scriptures of Israel. Their meaning, as divine revelation, itself has an inexhaustible quality to it that overlaps with, but encompasses more than, the Christological meaning. As a people whose destiny is bound up with the people of Israel, the meaning of these scriptures within the life of Israel must also be acknowledged and honored in the act of proclamation and preaching on scripture.

At the same time, the differing modes of Christian interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel leave unresolved, at least in the New Testament witness, how Israel and the Body of Christ relate to one another. In addition, Christians are also aware of the competing, and seemingly contradictory, Jewish interpretations of biblical passages that have profound consequences for Christian self-understanding, such as Genesis 12 or Isaiah 52-53. The awareness of diverging understandings of divine revelation raises further questions of how these two bodies relate to one another. More consequentially, it also raises fundamental questions about the nature of God, who seems to have two covenanted people who at times possess contradictory understandings of that which they have received as revelation.

Divine Freedom and the People of God

An anti-supersessionist theological framework ultimately leads to questions about the nature of God. Starting with the affirmation of the abiding significance of the Jewishness of Jesus leads to understanding that both the Jewish people of Israel and the church, a primarily gentile eschatological people, have ongoing and gracious relations with God. From a Christian perspective, this God is the God of Israel who is confessed as the Triune God, meaning that Jesus the Jew from Nazareth in Galilee is also the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son. A Jewish view of God derived from the rabbinic heritage would not make a similar claim. Rather

²⁹ This is a point that the Pontifical Biblical Commission has made. See Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2002), par. 21.

such a Jewish view would affirm God's unique oneness as creator of all who draws Israel into a covenantal relationship for the sake of blessing the world. Both Christian and Jewish claims derive from the reception of divine revelation. An anti-supersessionist theological perspective would ask this question: Who is this God who appears to act in mutually exclusive ways, who both uniquely calls Israel to be a covenanted people as a light to the nations and who also acts for the redemption of all people, and indeed the entire created order, through the Incarnation of the Son and made known via the mission of the church?

An anti-supersessionist framework leads inevitably to claims about the nature of God. Working from two contemporary Anglican theologians, Rowan Williams and Kathryn Tanner, I argue that a deeper understanding of the nature of divine freedom helps resolve some of the tensions that arise from affirming that Jesus the Jew constitutes the church that is in a necessary, but seemingly contradictory, relationship with Israel and their God.

Divine Non-Duality and Ecclesiology

In the conclusion of his magisterial study of Christology, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, attempts to synthesize his argument by engaging with the German-Polish Jesuit theologian Erich Przywara's theological metaphysics.³⁰ Williams argues that Przywara's metaphysics is useful for a Christian answer to the question of "Who is God?" The Christian tradition states that because God revealed God's Word in Jesus Christ, God is never spoken of as merely an object. Rather the incarnation is an invitation into experiencing the divine life and an entry into the subjectivity of God. This is a profoundly paradoxical statement, of course, because in classic western metaphysics God is on the side of perfection and the infinite while humans are on the side of the finite and limited, implying humanity can only experience God as object. Williams shows that Przywara counsels not to see the incarnation as the solution to this problem by creating a sort of continuity between the infinite and the finite. For example, it is not the case that Jesus simply represents the flawless human ideal or that the Incarnation only is a moment of the shining forth of divine transcendence by which finite limitations are abandoned.³¹

To state that God is incarnated in Jesus Christ is "an affirmation of the transforming *coincidence* of finite and infinite in the detail of this finite life . . . which insists that the unprotected fleshliness of the incarnate Word is the appropriate embodiment of the selflessness of the divine."³² It is in the Incarnation, and specifically in the abasement of the crucifixion of Jesus, that one perceives not the linear movement between finite and infinite but rather the desire of God to transform human life by bringing the infinite into the finite as a type of coinherence.

³⁰ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 219-254. Williams primarily engages with Przywara's *Analogia Entis*, first published in 1932. Although Przywara does not deal with problem of supersessionism in his writings, he was active in critiquing National Socialism.

³¹ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 234-235.

³² Williams, 236. Emphasis in original.

The incarnation is “the absolute simultaneity . . . of the Word and the crucified.” As such, it answers the question of who God is.³³

Dwelling on the moment of the crucifixion of Jesus, Williams draws on an understanding of Jesus’ life as a Jew and dwelling in a Jewish society. He writes,

What God *is* is self-gift made specific and historically real in the scandal and folly of Christ’s expulsion from the covenanted human community. In the very fact that Jesus abandons all claims to holiness and perfection in the religious and political terms of his contemporary world, the divine freedom is made plain. And in that making concrete of divine freedom and love, through the shedding of blood on the cross, the Headship of Christ in creation – and most signally in the human world – is made known and made effective.³⁴

I quote this passage at length because it illustrates an intimate connection between a Christian doctrine of God and ecclesiology as it relates to the Jewishness of Jesus and the people of Israel. Williams glosses 1 Corinthians 1:20-25 to speak of the scandal of Jesus, a righteous Jew, seemingly cut off from the people of Israel. The crucifixion of Jesus is understood by Paul to be an expulsion from the people Israel (Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:23) not due to his sinfulness but as an act of radical solidarity with human suffering. This is a choice freely taken on by Jesus that accords with the divine will (Phil. 2:6-11). This act of Jesus does not obviate the covenanted community of Israel (Williams does not imply this community ceases to exist or that its covenant ceases). But the crucifixion does work to constitute a wider community in relationship with God. Williams notes that Przywara understands that those who are brought into relationship with the crucified and risen Jesus are constituted as the mystical Body of Christ and are likewise called into “the same exposure and the same saving folly of self-forgetfulness.”³⁵ Embedded in Williams’ explication of Przywara’s understanding of the Incarnation is also an understanding that it is divine self-disclosure that constitutes two communities in relationship with God, first Israel and then the Body of Christ.

The relationship between the finite and the infinite in the Incarnation is an expression of the fundamental element of what Williams describes as the “non-dual, non-identical grammar of divine relation.”³⁶ This non-duality is paradigmatically discerned because Christians ground their speech about God in the very act of the infinite being made actual to humans in the finite boundaries of the Incarnation. Moreover, this divinity is made explicitly apparent to human perception not in an act of divine glory but in the all too human abasement of the death of Jesus. In this moment where divinity looks nothing like divinity (i.e., is manifested in a non-identical way that transcends binary categories of infinite and finite), humans perceive God. Similarly, the resurrection of Jesus, bearing the scars of his death but also recognizably glorified to his disciples, shows forth not only divine presence,

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Williams, 245.

but that Jesus is both infinite divinity and finite, death-subject humanity. This Christological event, of the non-dual, non-identical coincidence of the infinite and finite, serves as a guarantee of the integrity of all creation in which its fullness is not merely an aspiration to ineffable transcendence or the experience of the rupture of the divine into the created order. Creation itself can be a site for the instantiation of the non-dual experience of divinely graced reality.³⁷

The church is the community in which the grammar of this non-dual, non-identical reality is attempted. “[T]his reshaping of language happens in the actual life of the Christian community as it reflects on its creatureliness, in prayer and sacraments, and in its negotiation of its role and responsibility in human society.”³⁸ For Williams, the perception of the relationship between the finite and the infinite within Christological speech open onto ecclesial questions, such as the theology of grace and the sacramental life. This leads the church to take on a “patient embrace of finitude, the refusal of the defensive anxiety about the Church’s privilege or influence” and the “steady building of a culture of durable mutuality and compassion.”³⁹ The church, constituted as the Body of Christ, is thus a network of interdependent people bound together in Jesus Christ as the Word. Constituted in this way, the church comprises those who “in the practice of their lives embrace their finitude and materiality without fear, lives that enact the divine self-identification with those who endure loss, pain, and contempt.”⁴⁰ The church as the Body of Christ analogically reflects the non-dual grammar of Christological doctrine, seeking to practice a life as an organic body that lives beyond its own materiality and finitude.

If the doctrine of church may be conceptualized in relation with a non-dual doctrine of God that assumes the divine freedom to act in a way that brings the finite and infinite into coincidence, this speaks also to how the church perceives its relationship with Israel. Since this same God also called forth Israel as a covenanted community, we can see that God desires for Israel and the church to live together in its own non-dual and non-identical life that reflects the divine grammar of relationships. If the church is to mirror the divine grammar of mutuality and compassion that is grounded in divine freedom that is not anxious about its privilege or influence, this can also extend to how it conceptualizes its relationship to the Jewish people, constituted as the covenanted community of Israel. In other words, the church and Israel can exist as distinct people with differing, even at times seemingly contradictory, beliefs. Because they are held together by divine freedom in a non-dual grammar, one can speak of an eschatological unity of Israel and the church that is not necessarily present on a temporal scale.

³⁷ Williams, 242.

³⁸ Williams, 245.

³⁹ Williams, 245-46.

⁴⁰ Williams, 250.

Noncontrastitive Transcendence and Ecclesiology

Episcopalian theologian Kathryn Tanner's work on noncontrastitive transcendence further helps in situating divine freedom as a pathway for considering how two communities constituted by divine revelation and election, Israel and the church, relate to one another despite traditionally contradictory ways of speaking about their relationship with God. Tanner's concept of noncontrastitive transcendence concerns how God should not be talked about as either similar to any part or whole of the world nor in terms of simple contrast with the world. We see here a similar project as that of Przywara's concern for the relationship between the finite and the infinite that Williams situates as a key for understanding a connection between Christology and ecclesiology.

The goal of Tanner's focus on not reducing discourse to God in terms of simple contrasts to the created order is twofold. Tanner emphasizes both the freedom of God to exercise transcendence and immanence in relation to creation (not entirely unlike the relation of the finite and infinite). Equally, Tanner foregrounds the capacity of humans to experience grace and relate with God in a manner that does not violate human freedom. Tanner's framing is an effort to take seriously divine transcendence while also positing a freedom of encounter between both God and creation. This requires a movement beyond either/or categories that Tanner describes as noncontrastitive.⁴¹

Noncontrastitive transcendence presents a model for the bridging of contradictions between God and the created order in which God acts and relates. This concept helps to resolve questions of how and when one can discern God's gracious, liberating, and reparative work within the created order. One can see how discerning God's grace in the created order relates to parsing the existence of the ecclesial Body of Christ in relation to the people of Israel. These are two graced communities that exist within the created order but with differing means of expressing and understanding their relationship with God. Each people is formed via an experience of divine revelation and calling as a people constituted by God that is first an act of divine freedom. For Israel, this event is rooted in the self-disclosure of God to Abraham, the creation of a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, the liberation of these people from Egypt, and the covenant ratification and revelation of Torah at Sinai. Each one of these events is grounded in a mutuality of freedom – the divine freedom to act in relationship with Israel and Israel's human freedom to respond to be in relationship with God.

For the church, the experience of divine revelation begins first with the divine disclosure in the incarnation of God in Jesus the Jew. The first followers of Jesus experience God's coming near to them in the tangible, personal, material encounter with Jesus that is crystallized in his death and the disciples' encounter of him in his resurrected life. It is through this encounter with the incarnated God the Son that

⁴¹ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny and Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). For an updating of her argument, see Tanner, "How My Mind Has Changed on God's Noncontrastitive Transcendence," *Modern Theology* 41.4 (2025): 649-657.

the church is formed. Through this experience the church also turns to the interpretation of God's prior revelation to Israel in its Scriptures. The development of the church's self-understanding happens as both an awareness of its relationship with God's first covenanted people, Israel, even as it is aware of their differentiation from them because of diverging understandings of how God has acted and whom God has called.

The difference between Jewish and Christian encounters with the divinely free act of revelation is perceived in the practice of scriptural interpretation. For example, a traditional Christian reading of the Scriptures of Israel, especially in a Christological mode, led to claiming a Christological interpretation as a necessary and even primary one. The ecclesial Body of Christ often presents this mode of interpretation as the most authentic or spiritually meaningful one. This stance has several effects. First, as seen in the work of de Lubac, this can lead to the claim that reading the historical Jesus into the Scriptures of Israel signals the end of interpretation of these texts. If the Scriptures of Israel have been definitively fulfilled in Jesus, the historical Body of Christ, then these texts have indeed become the Old Testament, and the post-biblical rabbinic tradition is rendered irrelevant. Anything not pointing towards Jesus only has a transitory or subordinated value. Here one sees the tangible effects of understanding God's role in history in a way that limits divine freedom as it relates to human experiences and communities.

A second effect concerns the nature of the Jewish people, who find in these very same scriptures a different narrative of God's work and purpose, one that speaks of their election and also of a hope for God's loving work to continue to be realized in this world. But if the Jewish people do not perceive the definitive work of Christ in their scriptures, then do their interpretations remain valid in the eyes of the ecclesial Body of Christ? Even if the Catholic Church and some forms of Protestantism say "yes" in their contemporary official documents, there remain many Christians today for whom this is a question. Indeed, for much of the church's history the answer has been "no." In this historical Christian perspective, the Jewish people, because of their incomplete understanding of their scriptures, participate in a diminished way in the divine economy. Indeed for some Christians, they are no longer Israel at all. A common traditional reading declares the Jewish people are not a community that experiences grace or a covenanted life to the same degree or intensity as the church. But this traditional stance regarding Israel's identity would seem to limit the extent of divine freedom and raise questions about how to account for the divine abrogation of the covenant with Israel revealed in scripture.

Tanner's idea of noncontrastitive transcendence helps reframe the question concerning whether God is at work more in Israel or in the church. By positing a radical freedom for God to act in creation in the categories of both the transcendent and immanent, noncontrastitive transcendence can help one affirm the full endowment of divine relationship with both Israel, constituted as the Jewish people, and with the Body of Christ, constituted primarily of gentiles as a sacrament of the eschatological people of God. A divine encounter that is covenanted, graced, and eternal is found in both manifestations of the people of God, Israel and the church,

even if the speech by which each people express the nature of this abiding encounter occurs in different, and even competing, registers.

Following the principles of noncontrastive transcendence, it is possible to reimagine a Christological proclamation of the Scriptures of Israel that sits alongside a Christian affirmation of the ongoing, efficacious reality of Israel's covenant with God. Indeed, the Christological hermeneutic for interpreting the Scriptures of Israel gives witness to the understanding that God's covenant has been instantiated in two modalities that have distinct expressions as Israel and the church, even as they exist in relationship as co-covenanting companions. These two entities are not, according to the principle of noncontrastive transcendence, in competition with each other nor possess a differing degree or quality of grace. Rather, they bear witness to a diversified ecosystem generated by the divine will that acts freely to graciously effect differing covenanted communities. For Christians, the experience of the effects of freely dispensed grace begins with incarnation of God the Son as Jesus the Jew, an act which itself is a result of divine freedom expressive of non-contrastive transcendence.

Conclusion: Practicing Anti-Supersessionist Ecclesiology

Affirming the Jewish identity of Jesus opens up the need in Christian theology to rearticulate its understanding of the place of the people of Israel in the divine economy. Asserting an understanding of the nature of God in non-dual and non-contrastive terms grounded in an affirmation of absolute divine freedom provides an important avenue for an anti-supersessionist ecclesiology. Such an ecclesiology understands that the people of God is found among the Jewish people as Israel and among Christians as (primarily) gentiles incorporated into the Body of Christ. Given that anti-supersessionist theology has a fundamental concern with practices that counter and resist anti-Judaism, this article concludes with a few observations about the practical implications of an anti-supersessionist ecclesiology.

A Christian proclamation of the relation between Israel and the ecclesial Body of Christ informed by a non-dual and noncontrastive doctrine of God could be implemented through preaching. One area of focus is those scriptural passages that seem to favor a Christological interpretation to the exclusion of others. Especially in the seasons of Advent and Christmas, these passages are a prominent element of worship services. The occasion for reading these passages is the anticipation and celebration of the birth of Jesus the Jew, proclaimed by Christians as the Messiah and Son of God. This Christian proclamation of the identity of the Jewish Jesus serves paradoxically as the site of division between Israel and the church and as the point of contact between the two. There is a trajectory moving in one direction in which Israel's "no" to the church's interpretation of Jesus the Jew moves the two bodies into contrast, division, and even conflict. For Israel, this "no" serves as an affirmation of their fidelity to the God of Israel. Yet on the other hand, the church affirms that Jesus the Jew, the historical Body of Christ, by the power of the God of Israel, has brought gentiles, the ecclesial Body of Christ, into a covenanted life

with the God of Israel. And so while dwelling apart, seemingly by a divine permission, Israel and the church are also bound together in overlapping covenantal connections. Here it would be possible to bring in non-dual and noncontrastitive understandings of divine activity to reconcile what appears contradictory and exclusionary in traditional modes of Christian biblical interpretation and proclamation.

A non-dual, noncontrastive vision of the divine economy can be integrated into the life of the Christian community in a variety of way. It can be written into biblical commentaries and preaching aids. It can be proclaimed in homilies and sermons. It can be embedded into catechetical and educational materials. It can be placed within liturgies and Eucharistic prayers. The narrative of the church, originated from the Jewish Jesus to be in covenant with the God of Israel, need not be one of contrast and rivalry with the people of Israel. Nor does a Christian need to imagine either a subsuming of Israel within the Body of Christ or of two bodies existing on parallel tracks whose convergence exists only beyond the eschatological horizon. There is a new way to tell the story of how, via Jesus the Jew, the ecclesial Body of Christ has come to journey alongside Israel thanks to the gracious work of God who is always free to act.