

**REVIEW**

Robert W. Jenson and Eugene B. Korn, Eds.

*Covenant and Hope:*

*Christian and Jewish Reflections*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012)

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This formidable book is really two volumes in one, growing out of two scholarly projects led by the editors in their capacity as co-directors of the Institute for Theological Inquiry, an undertaking of the Israel-based Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation. The first project, on “Covenant, Mission, and Relation to the Other,” provided the essays in the first half of the book, and the second, on “Hope and Responsibility for the Human Future,” those in the second half. The contributors are leading Christian and Jewish scholars from the United States and Israel.

Co-editor Robert Jenson provides the opening chapter in the “Covenant” section, posing the question, “What Kind of God Can Make a Covenant?” In a closely reasoned essay, he reviews and emphatically rejects the traditional notion of the impassibility of God, à la Aristotle’s “unmoved mover.” A God who makes covenants must be a God who can communicate with humans, and who can act within time. Such a God, paradoxically, can be “both the author of the history he makes with creatures and one or more of the *dramatis personae* of that history” (p. 8). Thus far, Jenson, as a Christian theologian, feels that his Jewish co-participants in the project could agree (though Maimonides would not; his God retains Aristotle’s impassibility). But Jenson goes further, arguing that even the “trinity” of God can be Jewishly understood. What divides Christianity and Judaism is not the theological question of the inner life of God, but rather the historical question of Jesus’

resurrection. It was the experience of Jesus as risen that led the first Christians to identify him as the Incarnate Logos.

One wonders what the responses of the Jewish participants were to Jenson's essay, but there are no references to it in the Jewish essays in the book. David Novak, a veteran of Christian-Jewish dialogue, discusses the question of whether a Christian mission to the Jews is legitimate or even requisite from a Christian standpoint, and correspondingly, the question of whether Jews, as part of their covenant duties, are called to seek converts from among the Gentiles. In both cases, he recommends a stance of welcoming converts, but not actively proselytizing for them. Naftali Rothenberg of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute urges, in the manner of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, that Jewish-Gentile collaboration be seen as grounded not in a theological convergence but in a cooperative endeavor to fulfill the ethical requirements of the Noachic covenant. Shlomo Riskin, head of the Israeli study center that supported the project, offers a survey of biblical and rabbinic understandings of the Other, i.e., the non-Jew. He seeks for "gates and drawbridges," as he puts it, in what has often been viewed as a fortified wall between the two (p. 97). The venerable Jewish philosopher and theologian Michael Wyschogrod, in a highly idiosyncratic essay, proposes that since covenant implies kingship, the State of Israel should declare itself a Davidic monarchy, meanwhile appointing a "regent" to symbolize the absence of an actual king (p. 142).

The Roman Catholic biblical scholar Bishop Richard Sklba, in his chapter in this section, considers the question of whether there is just one, unitive covenant including both Jews and Christians, or two covenants, one for each community. He opts for Joseph Ratzinger's / Pope Benedict XVI's view of "unity in tension," i.e., "one Covenant...realized in the plurality of covenants" (p. 70). The Protestant scholar Gerald McDermott likewise sees the covenant as "a differentiated plan of blessing in which God relates in different ways to gentiles and Jews" (p. 19).

Eugene Korn, in his introductory essay to the second half of the book, notes that the Abrahamic covenant, with its charge to “be a blessing,” implies that the Jewish people are challenged to play a role in universal history, not just in their own history. The same, he asserts, is true for Christianity, which can be seen as another instrument for the fulfillment of this charge. Neither is well served by what Korn calls a “withdrawal theology” (p. 149).

Alan Mittleman, in a masterly essay on “Messianic Hope,” employs Gershom Scholem’s distinction between apocalyptic / utopian messianism and a more realistic form. The former anticipates a catastrophe that breaks the frame of human history, whereas the latter envisions goals that are in principle attainable and thus motivates human action toward those goals. Among the exponents of a realistic messianism whose thought Mittleman reviews, that of the Jewish Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen is of special interest. Cohen viewed the idea of the messianic age as denoting a historical consummation that can only be approached asymptotically: it is always getting nearer, but never fully arrives. We can move towards an axis of perfection, but will never intersect it—a notion that should induce a healthy dose of self-criticism and self-restraint in both revolutionaries and reformers.

Deborah Weissman, a leader of interfaith endeavors in Jerusalem, offers a case study of Zionism as an instance of realistic hope: its mission was that of “translating the traditional Jewish longing for redemption into human agency” (p. 266). Its intense devotion to re-gathering the people and renewing the land had, and has, a messianic fervor. As a counterbalancing note of realism, she quotes the familiar saying from the early rabbinic text *Pirke Aboth* (Sayings of the Fathers): “It is not incumbent on you to finish the task; but neither are you free to desist from it.”

The other essays in this section include those of R. R. Reno on “The Antinomian Threat to Human Flourishing,” Miroslav Volf on “God, Hope, and Human Flourishing,” Douglas

Knight on “Hope and Responsibility,” and Darlene Fozard Weaver on “Moral Agency, Sin, and Grace.” Both parts of the book make weighty contributions to the issues with which they deal.