

# Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

---

---

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

## *Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View\**

Eugene Korn

Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel

Volume 6 (2011)

<http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr>

## Polemics and Beyond

Polemics were salient in Christian and Jewish conceptualizations of each other during the Middle Ages and the most prominent characteristic of medieval disputations that Christian authorities forced upon Jewish leaders. In the words of one scholar, these debates were designed to prove that “the truth of Christianity would be rendered manifest to destroy the errors of the Jews, that Jesus was the messiah, and that Jewish legal and ceremonial rules were discontinued and that they (were) never to be resumed after Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> Polemics thus exhibit a binary logic that dictates that if Christianity is true, then Judaism must be false. Conventional wisdom has it that in facing Christianity’s polemical posture toward Judaism, Jews responded with their own polemical understanding of Christianity.

Thus polemics were a theological duel to the death—a duel which for a variety of historical and political reasons medieval Jews could not afford to win or to lose. Whether overtly hostile *a la* the Middle Ages or more polite as in some modern Jewish-Christian discussion, a tell-tale indicator of polemics is the use of the biblical *personae* of Jacob and Esau as metaphors for the relationship between Christians and Jews. Both Judaism and Christianity understood this fraternal relationship as a

permanent, even ontological, rivalry for God’s blessing and covenantal promise.<sup>2</sup>

The title of this paper assumes, of course, that we now live in a post-polemical world; yet this assumption is hardly self-evident. Polemics are a function of discourse and discourse varies widely among particular speaking and listening communities; while some Jews and Christians today may inhabit a post-polemical world, others remain committed to extending the logic and vocabulary of traditional polemical theologies and arguments. So if some Jews and Christians no longer assume an antagonistic cosmic rivalry between the faiths, many still do, even if in softer tones.

One Catholic example is Cardinal Avery Dulles, who not long ago responded vehemently against those Catholic theologians and USCCB bishops who proclaimed that Judaism was “salvific” for Jews because God’s grace in Christ is available to all and that “campaigns that target Jews for conversion to the Catholic Church are no longer theologically acceptable”.<sup>3</sup> Dulles

---

\*This paper was delivered at the 2011 Corcoran Chair conference, *Are Jews and Christians Living in a Post-Polemical World? Toward a Comparison of Medieval and Modern Christian-Jewish Encounters* on March 28-29, 2011 at Boston College. I thank Prof. Daniel Lasker and Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College for organizing this conference and for their invitation for me to speak there. The majority of the research for this paper was done under the aegis of the Institute for Theological Inquiry, which is a division of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Israel.

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Dahan, *The Christian Polemic Against the Jews in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1991), 36-37.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Gerson D. Cohen’s pivotal study, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19-48. Cohen showed how both faiths made heavy use of this biblical metaphor in the Middle Ages, each laying claim to identification with the blessed son Jacob, and understanding the other faith as the evil Esau, who was a mortal threat to the younger purer brother. For more recent treatments of this topic see Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2006), 1-26 and 92-129, and Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 60-68 and 200-232. On pp. 225-226, Levenson raises the ultimate reconciliation between Jacob and Esau indicated in Genesis 33:11-17, a subject rarely found in the medieval treatments of the fraternal rivalry, but one which holds rich potential for contemporary Christian-Jewish relations.

<sup>3</sup> In a document titled “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” available at <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/interreligious/bceia-ncs/1056-ncs-bceia02aug12> (accessed January 8, 2012.) For Avery Dulles’ published responses, see his “Covenant and

relied on Heb 8:13 and 7:12 to advocate that the Sinai covenant (and Mosaic law) have lost their validity and he encapsulated his view that Christianity has eclipsed Judaism by quoting Heb 10:9: “(Christ)...abolishes the first [covenant] in order to establish the second.” This is the doctrine of “hard supersessionism,”<sup>4</sup> i.e., that with the appearance of Christianity, the New Covenant completely replaced the “Old Covenant” of Moses and Israel, thus terminating the theological efficacy of Judaism. More anecdotally, I can personally attest that polemical motifs (both explicit and subtle) are common today in attitudes of some traditional Jews toward Christianity. Largely oblivious to the fundamental changes that have taken place in contemporary Christian theology about Judaism and in Jewish-Christian relations, these views draw from traditional texts like the rabbinic adage, “It is a well known law that Esau hates Jacob”<sup>5</sup> and the medieval theological critiques by authorities like Sa’adia Ga’on and Maimonides. Indeed, there is truth to the quip that “not all medievalists lived in the Middle Ages.”

Unlike Dulles, many Christian thinkers today reject hard supersessionism regarding Jews and Judaism. Their theologies come in a number of varieties, including soft supersessionism and non-supersessionism, which I will discuss in more detail below. They acknowledge the permanent or at least the continuing temporary theological legitimacy of Judaism, which lessen the impulses today to refute Judaism or defeat Jews logically, theologically and physically.

---

Mission,” *America* 187:12 (21 October 2002), 8–16. See also Dulles’ “The Covenant with Israel,” *First Things* (November 2005), 16–21.

<sup>4</sup> David Novak makes the useful distinction between “hard supersessionism” and “soft supersessionism” in “The Covenant in Rabbinic Thought,” in *Two Faiths, One Covenant?*, ed. Eugene Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 65-80. More on the distinction and soft supersessionism later.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis Rabbah on Gn 33:4, quoted by the popular medieval rabbinic commentator Shlomo Yitshaki (Rashi) *ad loc.*

One might think that it is naturally easier for traditional Jewish theology to adopt a non-polemical posture toward Christianity because of the Jewish belief in the universal Noahide covenant, a doctrine that implies a limited theological pluralism.<sup>6</sup> At one time I did believe that this doctrine could provide the basis for a satisfactory Jewish account of Christianity and its theological relationship to Judaism; however I have now come to realize that the Noahide covenant falls short of this task. Even if we maintain, as do most—but not all—rabbinic authorities, that faithful Christians qualify as *benei Noah*<sup>7</sup> who fulfill the seven divine obligations of that covenant, subsuming Christians in the generic category of Noahides with all other gentiles ignores both the unique historical relationship between Jews and Christians and Christianity’s unique relationship to Judaism’s covenantal religious mission. If we wish to live in a coherent

---

<sup>6</sup> Traditional Jewish theology maintains that Jews are bound to God by the Sinaitic covenant and its 613 divine commandments. Gentiles outside the Sinai covenant are also bound to God by virtue of the universal Noahide covenant, which contains seven commandments: the injunction to establish courts ensuring a law ordered society, and the six prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, sexual immorality and eating the limb of a living animal, considered a paradigm of cruelty. For a fuller analysis of the Noahide covenant and its commandments, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* (henceforth, *MT*), Laws of Kings and their Wars, ch. 9, and David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*, second edition (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization: Portland OR, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> The term “*benei Noah*” or “Noahide” is used in rabbinic literature in two different senses. Technically, all gentiles are Noahides and stand under the seven Noahide commandments, whether they observe or violate them. However, the term is frequently applied to only those who observe the Noahide commandments and who are contrasted with those who violate those commandments, e.g., an idolator or an “*oved avodah zarah*.” The towering medieval rabbinic authority Maimonides believed that the trinity and incarnation violated the prohibition against idolatry, and hence maintained that Christians did not observe the Noahide covenant. Many follow this position of Maimonides. As will be cited later, most later rabbinic authorities living in Christian Europe disagreed with Maimonides and believed that Christians do not violate the Noahide prohibition against idolatry and do in fact observe the Noahide commandments.

post-polemical world today, one challenge is to find a more adequate Jewish theology of Christianity.

### Jewish Theology and Christianity

What tools are available within rabbinic and halakhic tradition to carve out a non-polemical understanding of Christianity? Further still, we should ask if there are authentic and traditional grounds for a new *theological* relationship in which Jews see Christians as participating in a cooperative, not competitive or polemical, religious mission with them? And if so, what are the boundaries of this commonality?

Because of the painful historical experience that Jews endured with Christians almost since Christianity's inception, most rabbinic authorities have lacked incentive to view Christianity as a positive phenomenon. Nevertheless there was a perceptible shift in the rabbinic understanding of Christianity over time. One can plot four stages in the evolution of rabbinic thinking about Christianity in different historical eras:<sup>8</sup>

- (1) In the first and second centuries, Jewish Christians were first a tolerated sect in the Jewish community and later came to be regarded as heretics or apostates from Judaism. Belief in Jesus as the messiah and in the "new covenant" were considered illegitimate and prohibited doctrines for Jews, i.e., *avodah zarah* or "foreign worship" often connoting idolatry. (There is little rabbinic discussion about the status of gentile Christians between the third century and the early Middle Ages.)
- (2) During the Middle Ages when Jews lived in small communities in Christian Europe and were dependent

<sup>8</sup> For extensive details of this evolution and the logical map of rabbinic opinions regarding Christianity, see my "Rethinking Christianity: Rabbinic Positions and Possibilities," in *Jewish Theology and World Religions* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, forthcoming in 2012), Ch. 9.

on economic interaction with Christians, most medieval rabbis in Germany, France and Italy (*Rishonim*) ruled that gentile Christians were not considered the same as the idolaters found in the Bible or the Talmud.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, because of the doctrines of the trinity and the incarnation, most rabbinic authorities considered Christianity to be illicit worship (*avodah zarah*). Under this legal position, Christians were considered observing Noahides who—for technical reasons—did not violate the prohibition against idolatry.<sup>10</sup>

- (3) In the late Middle Ages and early modernity, the majority of rabbis living in Christian Europe (*Aḥaronim*) did not consider Christianity to constitute *avodah zarah* for gentiles. They ruled that while Jews were obligated to believe in absolute monotheism, gentiles were not so obligated by the terms of the Noahide covenant. Hence Christianity was seen as a valid belief system for gentiles.
- (4) From the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Christian toleration of Jews grew,<sup>11</sup> a number of rabbinic

<sup>9</sup> That is, the biblical and talmudic legal restrictions on commercial and social interactions with idolaters did not apply to Christians.

<sup>10</sup> The legal possibility that Christianity is *avodah zarah* yet Christians would not be considered worshippers of *avodah zarah* is based on the opinion of R. Yohanan: "Gentiles outside the land of Israel are not worshippers of *avodah zarah*, but only follow the traditions of their ancestors" (Babylonian Talmud, *Hulin* 13b). Although the precise meaning of this statement is unclear, its legal import is not: Gentiles in the talmudic and post-talmudic eras are not subject to the halakhic restrictions applicable to the worshippers of *avodah zarah*.

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Katz advanced the causal thesis that it was the budding Christian tolerance during this period that significantly influenced the development of a positive halakhic attitude toward Christians held by traditionalist Orthodox rabbis of the time: "The first signs of tolerance toward Jews...gave rise to corresponding attitudes on the part of Jews to Christians." *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York: Schocken, 1962), 166. It is evident from the statements of Rivkis, Emden and Ya'ir Bacharach (to which Katz is referring) that this positive attitude referred not only to Christians, but also to Christianity *qua* religious belief system.

authorities began to appreciate Christianity as a positive historical phenomenon and an unobjectionable theological system for gentiles because it spread many fundamental principles of Judaism (e.g., existence of God, *creatio ex nihilo*, Noahide moral norms and the belief in Sinaitic revelation) and thus advanced the Jewish religious mission.

I wish to explore this fourth category for two reasons: It is the closest to our contemporary era and it holds the most potential for fashioning a non-polemical understanding of Christianity in light of contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. Here are some examples of this category of opinions that express a new theological appreciation of Christianity:

R. Moses Rivkis (17<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania):

The gentiles in whose shadow Jews live and among whom Jews are disbursed are not idolaters. Rather they believe in *creatio ex nihilo* and the Exodus from Egypt and the main principles of faith. Their intention is to the Creator of Heaven and Earth and we are obligated to pray for their welfare.<sup>12</sup>

Rabbi Jacob Emden (18<sup>th</sup> century Germany):

The Nazarene brought a double kindness to the world... On the one hand he supported and observed the Torah of Moses with full strength...in a way that is impossible to deny....On the other hand, for Gentiles he brought much good....He eradicated *avodah zarah*, removed idols [from the nations] and obligated them in the seven commandments of Noah so that they would not behave

like animals of the field, and instilled them firmly with moral traits.....<sup>13</sup>

Christians and Moslems are congregations that [work] for the sake of heaven; [they are people] who are destined to endure, whose intent is for the sake of Heaven and whose reward will not be denied.<sup>14</sup>

The goal of [Christians and Moslems] is to promote Godliness among the nations...to make known that there is a Ruler in Heaven and earth, Who governs and monitors and rewards and punishes....We should consider Christians and Moslems as instruments for the fulfillment of the prophecy that the knowledge of God will one day spread throughout the earth. Whereas the nations before them worshipped idols, denied God's existence, and thus did not recognize God's power or retribution, the rise of Christianity and Islam served to spread among the nations, to the furthest ends of the earth, the knowledge that there is One God who rules

<sup>12</sup> Gloss on *Shulhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat*, Section 425:5

<sup>13</sup> Emden published two versions of this statement. The first in *Seder Olam Rabbah VeZuta* (Hamburg, 1757) and then as *Resen Mat'eh* of *Sefer Shimmush*. This quote is taken from a scholarly version of both editions published by Lior Gottlieb, "Resen Mat'eh le-Rabbi Ya'akov Emden—Mahdurah Kamma' U'Vatra," in *Be-Darkhey Shalom: 'Iyyunim be'hagut Yehudit mugashim le-Shalom Rosenberg*, ed. Benyamin Ish Shalom (Jerusalem, 2007), 307-308. The most comprehensive analysis of Emden's position is by Jacob J. Schacter, "Rabbi Jacob Emden, Sabbatianism, and Frankism: Attitudes toward Christianity in the Eighteenth Century," in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations—In Honor of David Berger*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter, (Boston: Brill, 2012), 359-396. See also: Harvey Falk, "Rabbi Jacob Emden's Views on Christianity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 19:1 (Winter 1982):105-111; and Moshe Miller, "Rabbi Jacob Emden's Attitude Toward Christianity," *TURIM, Studies in Jewish History and Literature*, Volume Two, ed. M. Shmidman, (New York, 2008), 105-136.

<sup>14</sup> *Lehem Shamayim* (commentary on Mishnah) vol. 2, (Altona, 1768), 49b.

the world, who rewards and punishes and reveals Himself to man.<sup>15</sup>

And Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19<sup>th</sup> century Germany):

Although disparaged because of its alleged particularism, Judaism...has been at pains to stress that, while in other respects their views and ways of life may differ from those of Judaism, the peoples in whose midst the Jews are now living [i.e. Christians] have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of Divine revelation. They profess their belief in the God of heaven and earth as proclaimed in the Bible and they acknowledge the sovereignty of Divine Providence in both this life and the next.<sup>16</sup>

Israel produced an offshoot [i.e., Christianity] that had to become estranged from it in great measure, in order to bring to the world—sunk in idol worship, violence, immorality and the degradation of man—at least the tidings of the One Alone, of the brotherhood of all men, and of man's superiority over the beast. It was to teach the renunciation of the worship of wealth and pleasures, albeit it not their use in the service of the One Alone. Together with a later offshoot [Islam] it represented a major step in bringing the world closer to the goal of all history.<sup>17</sup>

Note that these later rabbinic authorities judge Christians positively because of their beliefs. That is, unlike the early medieval rabbis who had to downplay Christian theological

<sup>15</sup> *‘Etz ‘Avot* (Commentary on Ethics of the Fathers) (Amsterdam, 1751), 4:11.

<sup>16</sup> *The Collected Writings, Vol. VII, Jewish Education* "Talmudic Judaism and Society," (New York: Feldheim, 1984), 225-227.

<sup>17</sup> *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, edited and annotated by Joseph Elias (Jerusalem, 1995), 271.

beliefs in order to develop the legal ground for productive Jewish-Christian interaction, these early moderns appreciated Christians *because* of the influence of Christianity on Christian behavior and belief. Implicitly then, these authorities made theological statements regarding Christianity, not merely about Christians. However, their statements do not yet constitute a theology of Christianity that takes seriously Christian self-perception and the positive relationship of Christian belief to Jewish covenantal self-understanding.

Christian theologies have always insisted that Christians are the heirs to the Jewish covenant. The Church has traditionally construed itself as part of the unfolding history of Israel. Indeed, it is "*the* New Israel," which for Christians often meant the replacement of the "old" Israel. Christians have seen themselves as the contemporary recipients of the divine blessing given to Abraham and as members of the covenantal chain from Abraham to Moses that culminated in the new covenant established with the blood of Jesus.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Christians see themselves as the new chosen people, not merely as *b'nai Noah*, or people connected to God through the Noahide covenant, undifferentiated from other peoples.

This has been an unacceptable thesis for Jewish theology, as traditional Jewish thinkers have consistently maintained that Jews and Christians do not share any post-Noahide

<sup>18</sup> This is the formulation of Irenaeus of Lyon, in Heresies III.11.8, found in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, translated by Robert M. Grant (New York: Routledge, 2007), 132. More recently, Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos put it this way: "Abraham is the father of faith, but in a chain of salvation in which the Messiah is expected. And the Messiah has arrived." See Mary C. Boys, "Does the Catholic Church Have a Mission 'with' Jews or 'to' Jews?" in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 3 (2008): 9, found at <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1482> (accessed January 8, 2012).

covenant.<sup>19</sup> (Of course, Jews are obligated by the Noahide covenant, but Jews do not identify themselves as Noahides.) Rabbinic thinkers have resisted acknowledging the Christian claim to the Abrahamic covenantal legacy for historical and theological reasons to be discussed later. Yet the matter cannot remain settled with this denial, for it is clear that Christianity is closer to Judaism in history, mission and content than, for example, any Asian religion that may teach the Noahide commandments. For whatever reasons, God has closely intertwined Jews and Christians throughout history, and as we have seen from the previous rabbinic acknowledgements, Judaism and Christianity are also interrelated theologically. For Judaism, then, Christians cannot be mere Noahides. Christianity must stand theologically somewhere between the Noahide religion and the Judaism of the Sinai covenant.

If we combine the above cited modern rabbinic appreciation of Christianity with the recent sympathetic Christian theologies toward Judaism, we open up fresh possibilities for rethinking a Jewish covenantal relationship with Christianity and fashioning new Jewish-Christian cooperation in pursuit of common values.

<sup>19</sup> Three modern Jewish thinkers have advocated a sharing of the covenant. This is a central thesis of the non-traditionalist academic Michael Kogan in his book, *Opening the Covenant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). His book never drew any attention from traditional rabbis or Orthodox thinkers, undoubtedly because of the bold untraditional nature of his project. The thesis was also offered (with qualification) by the Orthodox rabbi and thinker, Irving Greenberg in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004). This book, however, further marginalized Greenberg in traditional circles, indicating the radical nature of his claim of the theological affinity between Judaism and Christianity. Most recently, the Orthodox rabbi Shlomo Riskin has moved in this direction in his oral presentations and has written of this in "Covenant and Conversion: The United Mission to Redeem the World," in the forthcoming volume, *Covenant and Hope: Christian and Jewish Reflections, Essays in Constructive Theology from the Institute for Theological Inquiry* (Eerdmans, 2012). It is too early to determine if Riskin's theological claims will gain any resonance in traditional or rabbinic circles.

Classical and modern Jewish thinkers believed that Abraham's covenantal mission consisted in spreading the knowledge of God as well as bearing witness and teaching divine moral values to the world.<sup>20</sup> Rabbinic authorities and Jewish philosophers understood these values as fundamental requirements for human welfare.<sup>21</sup> In the philosophic eyes of Maimonides, spreading the knowledge of the One God of Heaven and Earth throughout the world was the primary vocation of Abraham.<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that this traditional rabbinic understanding of Abraham's mission is

<sup>20</sup> See commentaries of Isaac Abravanel and Menachem Recanati on Gen 12:2, Maimonides, *MT*, Laws of Idolatry 1:3 and *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:29, and Yehudah Leib Alter, *Sefat Emet*, *Sukkot* 5664. This interpretation is supported by the numerous passages in Genesis where Abraham "calls the name of the Lord." (Gn 12:8; 13:4; 21:33). Isaac does the same in 26:25. Gerald Blidstein claims that Maimonides "points to Israel's universalistic mission of the Jewish people as instructors of humankind in the worship of God" when he codifies in *MT*, Acts of Sacrifices, 19:16, that Jews may teach gentiles how to offer sacrifices to God. See Blidstein's "Maimonides and Me'iri on Non-Judaic Religion," in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction Between Judaism and other Cultures*, ed. Leo Landman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990) 31, n. 12.

<sup>21</sup> This also has biblical support in Gn 18:19. See also Maimonides, *MT*, Laws of Kings 10:11, who states that the Noahide laws with their requirement of a legal order were given to humanity help ensure that "the human society is not destroyed."

<sup>22</sup> *MT*, Laws of Idolatry 1:3; *Book of Commandments*, positive commandment no. 3; *Guide for the Perplexed*, III: 51. While some famous rabbinic figures (the talmudic sages R. Nehorai [BT *Qiddushin* 82a] and Rav [BT *Yoma* 28b] and the medieval commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzḥaḳi [Rashī]) saw Abraham as living the same life as a post-Sinaitic Jew and observing all the uniquely Jewish 613 commandments, most rabbinic authorities and biblical exegetes rejected this ahistorical notion and insisted that Abraham functioned as a witness for the reality of God and observed only the Noahide laws plus circumcision and perhaps prayer. See commentaries on Genesis 26:5 by Rabbis David Qimḥi (Radaq), Ovadiah Seforno, Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides), Abraham Ibn Ezra, Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), Hizqiyā bar Manaḥ (Hizquni). See also Maimonides, *MT*, Laws of Kings, 9:1. For a contemporary expression of this position by a traditionalist rabbinic authority, see Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, ed. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (Jersey City: KTAV, 2008), 58.

nearly *verbatim* the mission and historical impact of Christianity according to Rivkis, (“[Christians] believe in *creatio ex nihilo* and the Exodus from Egypt and the main principles of faith. Their intention is to the Creator of Heaven and Earth”), Emden (“The Christian removed idols [from the nations] and obligated them in the seven *mitzvot* of Noah so that they would not behave like animals of the field, and instilled them firmly with moral traits...The goal of [Christians and Moslems] is to promote Godliness among the nations...to make known that there is a Ruler in Heaven and Earth”) and Hirsch (“The peoples in whose midst the Jews are now living [i.e., Christians] have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of Divine revelation. They profess their belief in the God of heaven and earth as proclaimed in the Bible and they acknowledge the sovereignty of Divine Providence...Their acceptance of the practical duties incumbent upon all men by the will of God distinguishes these nations from the heathen and idolatrous nations of the talmudic era...Judaism produced an offshoot [Christianity]...in order to bring to the world—sunk in idol worship, violence, immorality and the degradation of man—the tidings of the One Alone.”)<sup>23</sup>

In effect, Rivkis, Emden and Hirsch viewed Christianity as playing a role in the fulfillment of the covenant of Abraham. Their statements can thus provide the basis for contemporary Jews to view Christians as partners in that covenant.<sup>24</sup> It means that

<sup>23</sup> It is because Hirsch believed that the fulfillment of God’s covenant as spreading the reality of God throughout the world constituted the *telos* of sacred history that he could claim that Christianity [and Islam] “represented a major step in bringing the world closer to the goal of all history.” See his commentary on Ex 19:6.

<sup>24</sup> For a fuller explication of this claim, see Eugene Korn, “The People Israel, Christianity and the Covenantal Responsibility to History,” in *Covenant and Hope: Christian and Jewish Reflections: Essays in Constructive Theology from the Institute for Theological Inquiry* (Eerdmans) forthcoming in 2012. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish theologian, Steven Schwarzchild, and his student the noted contemporary Maimonides scholar, Menachem Kellner, have argued that Maimonides believed that some theologically advanced gentiles were

Christianity qualifies as a religion that emerges somehow out of the Abrahamic covenant, and Jews and Christians can see each other as sharing Abraham’s covenant.<sup>25</sup> They can legitimately understand themselves to be working toward the same spiritual goals of sacred history, but under different systems of divine commandments and charged with differentiated functions in God’s plan for humanity. This may be a common assumption in Christian theology, but it is a new claim for Jewish theology.<sup>26</sup>

Correctly understanding that Christians are closer to Judaism than are Noahides, Mary Boys once suggested to me that Christians should be seen as somehow having stood with Jews at Sinai. I find it difficult to go that far, and fail to see how Jews (or even contemporary non-supersessionist Christians) believing in the enduring validity of the Sinai covenant can logically understand Christians as partners in the Sinaitic covenant. That Christians are not obligated to observe all the Sinaitic *mitzvot* implies that at least part of Sinai covenant has been

---

included in the designation “Israel” as “Israel of the Mind.” See Kellner’s *Maimonides Confrontation With Mysticism* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), ch. 7. This idea strengthens the idea that non-Jews could also be members of the same covenant God made with the Jewish people. Of course, however, Maimonides would not have included Christians in that category because of their belief in the trinity, a belief tantamount to idolatry for Maimonides.

<sup>25</sup> Old-new problems remain with this claim, foremost among them that circumcision was an obligatory sign for members of Abraham’s covenant. How uncircumcised Christians could be members of the covenant needs to be addressed. Title to the land of Canaan, which was promised to Abraham’s covenantal descendants, is less problematic, as that can be understood as limited to the biological descendants of Isaac (see Gn 21:10-12). Shlomo Riskin’s distinction between “*zera Avraham*” (“the seed of Abraham”) and “*benei Avraham*” (“the children of Abraham”) may alleviate these problems. See note 18.

<sup>26</sup> Jewish thinkers have always assumed that gentile nations could be genealogically descended from Abraham (e.g., Arab Muslims), but that no gentile could be within the particular covenant that God made with Abraham. That was reserved for the Jewish people alone.



superseded.<sup>27</sup> For example, the Sinaitic Decalogue prohibits making images of God and requires the observance of the Sabbath on the seventh—not the first—day of the week, two commandments that Christianity does not acknowledge as binding and that Christians do not observe.

### The Problematics of Sharing the Covenant

There are two principal reasons why Jews have always rejected the Christian claim to be included in the covenant of Israel. The first problem was the exclusive and supersessionist character of traditional Christian theology. Christianity's claim to the same covenantal promises God made to the Jewish people was the very source of intense theological rivalry, the delegitimization of Judaism, and often the Christian persecution of Jews over the course of Jewish-Christian history.

Only a few early Christian thinkers entertained the notion of what has come to be called soft supersessionism, the idea that the Church has been grafted onto the living tree of the Jewish people. This theology still insists that the New Covenant is the ultimate fulfillment of the still living Jewish covenant, but in the interim, both the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant are simultaneously valid. This doctrine carries the implication of *de jure* theological coexistence between both covenants and faiths. But this idea was ultimately rejected by early normative Christian theology, which was so heavily shaped by Augustine's hard supersessionist understanding of covenantal history.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Josef Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) asserted the supersession of the Sinai covenant in the very same passage in which he insists on Christian participation in that covenant. *Many Religions*, op. cit., 70-71.

<sup>28</sup> See Steven McMichael, "The Covenant in Patristic and Medieval Christian Theology," in *Two Faiths, One Covenant?*, ed. Eugene Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 49-51.

Hard supersessionism became the long-standing Christian teaching regarding Judaism and Jews. This taught that the New Covenant and New Israel replaced the Jewish covenant and the old Israel and that, after Jesus, God rejected the Jews in favor of the Church. The New Covenant of the Spirit rendered the Mosaic Covenant limited in its validity to human history before Jesus' death and resurrection. With the advent of the New Covenant of the Spirit, the Mosaic Covenant became meaningless, even an obstacle to future salvation history, because if Christianity is true, post-Temple Judaism must be false—or at least dead. No room was left for the continued theological integrity of the Jewish people or its distinct and independent covenantal mission. Bringing the Jews into the universal Church assumed an immediate urgency. This rival claim to the same covenant was a life and death struggle, and since Jews were never inclined toward physical or spiritual suicide, they consistently rejected the Christian claim.

The second obstacle to Jews seeing Christians sharing their covenantal identity is rooted in the doctrines of the trinity and the incarnation, both of which posed formal problems for Jewish legal authorities and theologians. Jews understand the second of the Ten Commandments "There shall be no other gods for you besides Me," (Ex 20:2)<sup>29</sup> as demanding absolute monotheism that excludes any trinitarian dimension. The denial of God's absolute unity would violate the divine essence.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, it was the literal reading of this verse in Hebrew that opened up the logical possibility for many early modern rabbinical authorities to consider Christianity non-idolatrous for gentiles, while remaining idolatrous for Jews. They understood that the prohibition "There shall be no other god for you..." was addressed exclusively to the Jewish people at Sinai ("for you"), and thus the Christian concept of a trinitarian deity that included the one Creator of the universe along with other associations with the Creator could be permitted to gentiles. This became known in Jewish legal and theological parlance as "*shitu*" (partnership or associationism) and is based on the commentary of the Tosafists on the Babylonian talmudic tractate *Sanhedrin* 63b, s.v. "assur."

Moreover, Jews understood the incarnation to violate the second half of that same commandment: “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth” (Ex 20:3). The Creator of the material world could never become a human (or any being) with a physical form. Philosophically inclined Jewish theologians saw these two restrictions as logically identical, for to predicate any division of God is to imply that God is physical, limited and imperfect, i.e., not God at all.<sup>30</sup> Thus, prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century many rabbinic and Jewish philosophical thinkers understood Judaism and Christianity as referring to different gods, and if so, Jews and Christians could hardly share membership in the same divine covenant.

Today, however, we have the means to overcome both these problems. The post-Holocaust change in Christian thinking about Jews and Judaism has significant implications for the Jewish understanding of Christianity and its relationship to the covenant. This is so because Jewish theology is neither dogmatic nor derived exclusively from theoretical “first principles;” rather it is vitally influenced by the experiences of the Jewish people through history. As God’s living witnesses, Jews understand God and divine providence mediated through their experiential reality as a people.

After the moral and physical devastation of the Holocaust in the heart of Christendom, a number of Christian thinkers understood where the traditional hard supersessionist teachings led: directly to Christian acceptance of the Final Solution and indirectly to Auschwitz.<sup>31</sup> As a result, Christians

<sup>30</sup> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, I: 50.

<sup>31</sup> See Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?*, chap. 4; James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); Malcolm Hay, *Europe and the Jews* (Chicago: Academy, 1992); Jules Isaac, *Jesus & Israel* (Austin, TX:

began to develop more tolerant soft supersessionist teachings about Jews and Judaism that maintain that God’s covenant with the Jewish people was never revoked, that Judaism continues to occupy a role in salvation history and that Jews are not a rejected people.<sup>32</sup> This is the dominant position of the Catholic Church today as a result of *Nostra Aetate* and the theological approach to Judaism that has grown out of the Second Vatican Council. Major Protestant churches have followed suit and a number of evangelical theologians make a similar argument.<sup>33</sup> In most of these views, however, Christianity and the New Covenant remain the highest fulfillment of the Old Covenant, and Jewish conversion to Christianity is still a theological desideratum—for God, the Church and for Jews themselves. Yet the soft supersessionism that now appears in most official Christian theological circles decreases the urgency and imperative to convert Jews.

One important version of soft supersessionism is “eschatological supersessionism”—evidently the position of Pope Benedict XVI. In 1999 as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger he wrote: “Sinai is indeed superseded...but theological unification (i.e., the conversion of Jews to Christianity) is hardly possible within our historical time, and perhaps not even desirable.”<sup>34</sup> And in his 2011 book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, he wrote that that the conversion of Jews should be left “in God’s hands and in God’s time”<sup>35</sup> and that it should come after the full conversion of the

Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1971); idem, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1964); Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984); Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (Portland, OR.: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> *Nostra Aetate* (1965) is the most famous articulation of this soft supersessionist teaching.

<sup>33</sup> Documented in Boys, *Has God only One Blessing?*, 249-266.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions, One Covenant*, 109.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part II (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2010), 46.

Gentiles. In this theology, Christianity remains the highest fulfillment of God's word to all on earth, but the full unification of Jews with the Church occurs at the end of time, or at least in the far distant future.

Finally, some Christian theologians deny any form of supersessionism. They assert that Judaism is salvific for Jews, equal in validity for Jews as Christianity is for Christians, and therefore converting Jews to the Church is theologically unacceptable.<sup>36</sup>

Churches long ago lost their temporal power and the capacity for physically threatening the Jewish people. Moreover, the recent emergence of soft supersessionist, eschatological supersessionist and non-supersessionist theologies render Christian theology less threatening to Judaism and Jewish covenantal integrity. These recent theologies remove, or at least significantly lessen, the Christian theological attack on the continuing vitality of the Jewish covenantal mission in history. Understanding this, Jews need not be hesitant about adopting a positive theological approach to Christianity. Jewish and

Christian theologies are no longer engaged in the medieval duel to the death, and Jews need not fear a sympathetic covenantal understanding of Christianity consistent with the Jewish understandings of the Bible, Jewish law and theology.

It is crucial to note that this new covenantal understanding does not demand either Christians or Jews to give up their eschatological convictions. Both soft supersessionism and eschatological supersessionism continue to insist that Christianity is the highest fulfillment for everyone, including Jews, and that all will join the Church when truth is revealed in the distant future or at the end of time. Traditional Jews, too, are free to continue "believing with great passion in the ultimate truthfulness of their views, praying fervently for and expecting confidently the fulfillment of their eschatological vision when their faith will rise from particularity to universality will impress their peers of the other faith community,"<sup>37</sup> should they wish.

However, the new covenantal relation *does* require that Christians and Jews give up intense rivalry in their pre-eschaton activities, that they allow their discourse to rise above simple binary logic and that they begin to view each other as partners in carrying out God's covenant rather than striving in the here and now to triumphantly vanquish the other and his religious convictions.<sup>38</sup> Surely, before the eschaton God has more than enough blessings to bestow upon both of His children.

<sup>36</sup> See "Reflections on Covenant and Mission," in Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, August 12, 2002, available at <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/interreligious/bceia-ncs/1056-ncs-bceia02aug12> (accessed January 8, 2012.) This claim elicited strong dissenting reactions from a number of traditionalist Catholic and Protestant theologians, who interpreted this as a two covenant theology that is inherently invalid for Catholic theology. For a prime example, see Avery Dulles, op cit, and response by Mary C. Boys, Philip A. Cunningham and John T. Pawlikowski, *America* 187:12 (21 October 2002), 8–16, and Dulles' "The Covenant with Israel" *First Things* (November 2005), 16–21. Cunningham denies that this statement entails a two covenant theology. See also the essays in the volume *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, ed., Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary Boys, Hans Hermann Hendrix (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), especially those of Cunningham and Didier Pollefeyt (183-201), Adam Gregerman (221-228), Christian Rutishauer (229-250) and Ruth Langer (287-295).

<sup>37</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6, no.2 (Spring 1964): 25.

<sup>38</sup> It seems that the Roman Catholic church is still working out how this dialectic can be achieved in practice, and is caught in what some scholars have called a "contradictory pluralism" and a "bipolarity of tendencies" entailed by its soft supersessionism, and its struggle to work out a coherent theology about Jews and the need for their conversion to the Church after *Nostra Aetate* and the Second Vatican Council. See Mary C. Boys, "Does the Catholic Church Have a Mission 'with' Jews or 'to' Jews?," 7-19. Boys documents the "bipolarity" of official Catholic documents and statements regarding the need for converting Jews. The issue has become even more controversial since 2008, with the 2009 statements of

The second more formal theological problem of the unacceptable status of the trinity and incarnation according to *halakhah* (Jewish law) is also resolvable using the late rabbinic distinction between what Jews are required to believe about God (absolute monotheism) and what gentiles are permitted to believe (the One Creator of the universe with additional associated elements). I have argued elsewhere that this difference in legal requirements leads to a philosophic problem and points to the avoidance of theology by formal *halakhah*,<sup>39</sup> but the significant covenantal points here are that this distinction allows the acceptance of legitimate, differing Jewish and Christian beliefs about God, and that it is consistent with Jews and Christians retaining their differences in worship, their fidelity to their respective faith communities and to viewing each other as mutual partners in God's covenantal mission. Lastly, it is crucial to note that this distinction imposes limits to theological pluralism: conversion to Christianity and Christological beliefs remain strictly prohibited for Jews.

### Conclusion

Reconsidering an extended membership in Abraham's covenant offers a rich theological agenda and new practical challenges for Jews and Christians. Jews will need to learn how to successfully navigate between their commitment to their exclusive Sinaitic covenant and the more open covenant with Abraham. And if they share covenantal membership with

---

the USCCB on this issue regarding evangelization toward Jews and its place in Catholic-Jewish dialogue and relations. See USCCB's "Note on Ambiguities of RCM" and USCCB's subsequent revision of "Note," found at <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/us-conference-of-catholic-bishops/578-usccb-09june18>, accessed on January 4, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> See my "Rethinking Christianity: Rabbinic Positions and Possibilities" in *Jewish Theology of World Religions* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, forthcoming in 2012), Ch. 9.

Christians, what will be the theological and practical borders of this partnership that ensure the enduring particularity of the Jewish people and their mission?

I suspect that Christians will still have to grapple with the issue of supersessionism, but in a new form: has Christianity superseded Abraham's covenant? If not, how does Abraham's more open covenant relate to traditional Christology and ecclesiology, both past and contemporary? And of course, the conundrum of the universality of the church coexisting with the continuing validity of the particular Jewish covenant still cries out for resolution. Is it a virtuous divine mystery that is cause for humble reflection and celebration,<sup>40</sup> or a vicious logical inconsistency to be eliminated?

If we are faithful to the biblical account of Abraham and his covenant, we must admit that the Bible does not portray Abraham as a theologian, but as a man of faith, action and morality.<sup>41</sup> His covenant, then, should above all entail a commitment to practical action in sacred history. It is precisely today that the practical teachings of Abraham's covenant assume particular urgency, when both Christianity and Judaism

---

<sup>40</sup> See Richard Sklba, "New Beginnings: Catholic-Jewish Relations After 40 Years," *Origins* 35, no. 31 (January 19, 2006): 509-514, who argues that the tension between the universal theological claim of Christianity and the enduring particular validity of the Jewish covenant is a mystery to be appreciated.

<sup>41</sup> In a dramatic departure from the biblical text, Maimonides portrayed Abraham as a Socrates-like philosopher whose primary religious mission was to rediscover and teach the fundamental metaphysical truths about the nature of God that was lost in the generations between Adam and Abraham. (*MT*, Laws of Idolatry 1:1-4.) This philosophic portrayal of Abraham is the exception in Jewish tradition and came under severe critique in rabbinic circles. See the stinging gloss of R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres (Ra'avad) on this section of *MT*.

are threatened similarly by forces emanating from radical secularist and religious fundamentalist worldviews. Neither the pious Jew nor the faithful Christian can thrive in a world that sees the human person in exclusively materialistic or functional terms and where moral values are considered mere human conventions and relative *in esse*. Nor can they thrive in a world of religious violence and intolerance that is rooted in exclusivity and impervious to reason. Like the rabbis of old, I would argue that it is hard to find optimistic prospects for *any* human flourishing should these ideologies determine our future together as human beings.

The transformation of the Christian-Jewish relationship from polemic to covenantal cooperation is neither a parochial, nor a bilateral affair. It is a profound need for the future of all of God's children. Jews and Christians have a critical role to play in this sacred story. Together they can fulfill the divine biblical mandate bestowed on Abraham: "Through you, may all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gn 12:3).