

Toward Jewish-Christian Reconciliation: Some Theological Reflections

By Richard Oxenberg

Both Christianity and Judaism have their basis in the Torah, the five central books of the Hebrew Bible that culminate in the revelation at Sinai. This very commonality, potentiality a source of mutual respect and concord, has played itself out, in the two thousand years since the advent of Christianity, in a disastrous rivalry of interpretation. Christians have interpreted their own religion in such a manner as to disallow the separate legitimacy of Judaism; understanding Hebrew Scripture in terms that are often derogatory of Jews and the Jewish religion, an attitude that has resulted in horrific persecutions and oppressions. Jews, in response, have often defended themselves by adopting an insularity of focus at odds with the universality of God as Judaism itself understands it.

My aim in the following is to explore some basic theological stances that would allow both religions to accept one another. ‘Acceptance’ here does not necessarily entail ‘affirmation.’ To ‘affirm’ a view, let us say, is to hold it as true. To ‘accept’ a view, in the sense in which I will use the term here, means to allow that it does not demand repudiation in the name of one’s own. The purpose of this essay, then, is to search out some basic theological positions that both parties can at least allow, and which might permit each to adopt an informed acceptance of the other.

I. Asymmetry

The first thing to note is that there is a basic asymmetry in the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Judaism can be entirely itself without any reference to

Christianity. Christianity, however, implicitly and integrally entails a reference to Judaism and the Jewish people. Christian theology, as such, involves an interpretation of Hebrew Scripture and Jewish ‘chosenness.’ The word ‘Christ,’ of course, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Mashiach*, Messiah. The very idea of the Christ, thus, entails an interpretation of the meaning and import of Jewish messianic prophecy, which itself involves an interpretation of the Sinai revelation and covenant.

Given this, it is not theologically possible for the two religions to disentangle themselves from one another. The relationship of Judaism to Christianity is not like that of either to any of the other world religions. The Jewish roots of Christianity are an essential of Christian self-understanding, and, however Jews might wish it otherwise, the sheer historical sway of Christianity demands that Jews adopt, not only some view of it, but some view of its view of Judaism. Each makes extensive reference to the other merely in being itself (even if only implicitly in the case of Judaism). Thus, both traditions face the question of whether it is possible for each to understand itself in a manner that does not involve an overt affront to the other. To ask it simply: must Jews be wrong for Christians to be right, or vice-versa? More positively, we might consider whether their very historical and theological entanglement make possible a yet unrealized synergy between the two. Below I shall try to sketch out some theological positions that might make this possible. .

II. Sinai and Chosenness

Essential to the Christian understanding of the Hebrew Bible is that the event at Sinai has universal significance. God’s revelation to the Jewish people is, at the same

time, God's revelation to the world at large *through* the Jewish people. From a Jewish perspective, of course, the Sinai event is for the sake of the Jews' deliverance and sanctification. The Jewish nation is not merely a means to another end. From the Christian perspective, however, the founding of the Jewish nation is *also* a means to another end: the redemption of humankind. God both redeems the Jews themselves through covenant with them, and employs them for the sake of the redemption of the world at large. Indeed, from this perspective, it is precisely their unique role in the world's redemption that may be understood as constituting their 'chosenness.' They are chosen to be the vehicle of God's universal redemptive purpose; a 'priestly' people who will mediate God's revelation to the world.

At Sinai, God says to the Jewish people, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:4).

Judaism's claim to a special covenant with God is expressed in the above passage from Exodus. Christianity's claim that the Sinai event is also of universal significance finds its expression here as well, in God's pronouncement that "the whole earth is mine." The Hebrew Bible makes it clear that, as the creator of heaven and earth (Gn. 1:1), God's concern is for the good of the creation *in toto*. Recognizing this, it should be possible for both traditions to affirm that God's call to Abraham, which begins the Jewish story, takes place within the wider context of God's concern for humankind at large. In Gen. 12:1-3 we read: "Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred

and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing . . . and *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" The declaration that 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' through Abraham and his lineage is repeated at Gn. 18:18, Gn. 22:18, Gn. 26:4, and Gn. 28:14.

How are 'all the families of the earth' blessed through the Hebrew people? From the Christian perspective this is obvious. The children of Israel are the paradigmatic people of God; they are the first to receive God's revelation to humanity as a whole, they are the first to struggle with the meaning of that revelation, it is they who record, preserve, and pass on that revelation to the rest of humanity, and through the story of their struggle with God they provide a model for humanity's spiritual struggle in general; a model continually referenced within Christian worship itself. It is in this sense that Christians (and Jews) can affirm the 'chosenness' of the Jewish people.

But how do the Jews fulfill their role as 'chosen'? They may be seen to fulfill it simply by struggling with God within the context of Judaism itself. There is no indication in Hebrew Scripture that the Jews will one day be asked to renounce their Judaism in order to enter into a broader or newer covenant. The prophets tell us that God's covenant with the Jews is eternal. The Jews' job in the scheme of things is to be faithful devotees of the God of Sinai and, as such, witnesses to their own unique history with that God.

In recognition of this both religions can utterly reject the supersessionist tendencies in Christianity while allowing Christians to preserve the important association they themselves make with 'Israel.' Jacob, the third of the patriarchs and progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel, is renamed 'Israel' after his wrestling match with the angel of

God at Gn. 32:22-29. This new name, according to Genesis, designates one who 'strives with God and with humans and prevails' (Gn. 32:28). The meaning of 'Israel,' thus, may be taken to refer to anyone who enters upon the struggle for redemption.

In this sense we might speak, perhaps, of 'Israel proper' and of 'greater Israel.' Israel proper may be taken to refer to the Jewish people as such; that people to whom the revelation at Sinai was delivered, who recorded and preserved that revelation, and whose struggles, as documented in the Hebrew Bible, are paradigmatic of the broader human struggle with God. 'Greater Israel,' then, would include all who have joined this struggle through Christ. The original terms of this struggle are expressed in the covenant established between God and the Jewish people at Sinai. The 'new covenant' of Christianity is not a negation of this original covenant, but its extension, in somewhat different terms, to the world at large.

III. Law and Faith

The conflict between Judaism and Christianity has often been expressed, in Christian circles, as a conflict between a religion of law and a religion of faith. This distinction involves a flawed understanding of Judaism, and a failure to understand the true import of the New Testament critique of legalism.

To understand this properly a sharp distinction must be made between law as such and legalism. Legalism is an attitude that elevates the letter of the law to a status above that of the human beings for whom the law is created. In Mark Jesus says, "Man was not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made for man" (Mk.2:27). In other words, the purpose of law is to serve the human good, it is not the purpose of human beings to serve

the law. When this is forgotten we get legalism. Legalism, often conditioned by fear of punishment and desire for reward, can give rise to the insecure arrogance of those whose strict observance becomes their means of propping themselves up at the expense of others. In this way law can be a temptation to the very spiritual narcissism the law itself condemns.

A principle theme of the New Testament is the repudiation of legalism. Indeed, this repudiation is implicit in the doctrine of the incarnation itself. Christ, as the ‘God-man’ (the perfect communion of God and man) is the manifestation of a mode of human being in full accord with the *being* of God, in which God’s ‘law’ is no longer experienced as an extrinsic imposition because it has been ‘written on the heart’; i.e., fully integrated with human affection and will. It is this mode of being that is the goal of religious practice, not perfunctory observance of law. To dedicate oneself to it is, in Christianity, a chief component of what is meant by ‘faith.’

But we find this repudiation of legalism expressed just as forcefully in the Hebrew Bible itself. Isaiah writes: “‘What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?’ says the Lord; ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings . . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow’” (Is. 1:11-17). Hosea writes: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hs. 6:6). Jeremiah writes: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’” (Jr. 7:3-4). Micah writes: “With what shall I come

before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? . . . Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? . . . He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mc. 6:6-8).

Here the Hebrew prophets protest against empty ritualistic formalism and look forward to the day when, in the words of God as voiced by Ezekiel, "I will put my spirit within you" (Ez. 36:27). The New Testament's critique of legalism (authored for the most part by Jews) continues this Jewish prophetic tradition.

Of course, legalistic distortions are not unique to Judaism. The Protestant religion begins as a protest against just such distortions in Catholicism. But Protestantism has since shown itself just as susceptible. The reduction of the idea of faith to a profession of doctrinal belief, together with the insistence that such a profession is demanded for salvation, turns faith itself into a legalistic requirement. What we may learn from this is that legalism is a temptation for every religion (indeed, we find passages in which Krishna rails against Hindu legalism in the *Bhagavad-Gita*). Legalism, as a means through which the devotee seeks to earn the special favor of God, is itself symptomatic of the human alienation from God. That the Jews struggle with this alienation very openly and publicly in Hebrew Scripture is just another way in which they serve as a paradigm people; a model for people everywhere who struggle to align their lives with God.

Jesus' rebuke of the legalism of the Pharisees should be understood as a protest against *all* legalistic tendencies wherever they may be found. It is not a critique of the Pharisees *per se*. The Jewish Jesus, of course, was criticizing aspects of his own religious

tradition in criticizing the ‘scribes and Pharisees.’ The Christian who wishes to follow in Jesus’ footsteps will do well, then, to scrutinize his or her own tradition as well.

Hallakah, Jewish law, is not essentially legalistic. Properly understood, it is a practice through which the devout Jew strives to remain continually in the presence of God, even while engaged in worldly pursuits. If Christ is understood as one who lives always in the ‘presence of God,’ then Hallakah, for Jews, is one means to that end. When pursued in the right spirit, Hallakah can serve as a pathway to an exceptional life of holiness; a life in which even the most mundane matters are raised into the sphere of the Eternal. The Jews as a people, as the ‘chosen’ people, have a special call to exemplify this life of holiness for the world at large. Hallakah is one means through which they do so.

IV. The Messiah and the Messianic Age

For both Jews and Christians the ‘messianic age’ refers to a hoped-for time when the culture of the earth as a whole will be fully imbued with the spirit of God. One of the most celebrated expressions of this can be found in Isaiah: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them . . . They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Is. 11:6-9).

The ‘Messiah’ is the one who will initiate this age. Isaiah has something to say about him as well: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and

understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor; and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked” (Is. 11:1-4).

One question that may be raised in regard to this is *how* the Messiah will bring about the messianic age? Given human free-will it is impossible for such an age to be brought about by force or coercion. Hence, as Isaiah says, the Messiah will not strike the earth with a rod of iron, but with the ‘rod of his mouth,’ he will not kill the wicked with lethal weapons, but with ‘the breath of his lips.’ He will bring forth the messianic age through persuasion and conversion, not through force.

The Messiah, thus, can bring about the messianic age only by revealing the nature of that age, making manifest the spirit of those who would live in such an age, and inviting human beings to willingly dedicate themselves to the cultivation of that spirit (with God’s help). Christianity understands this function to have been fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth, who is therefore called ‘the Christ,’ Greek for ‘Messiah.’ The fulfillment of Jesus’ mission to convert and redeem the world, of course, remains in the future. The messianic age foreseen by Isaiah has not yet arrived. Whether it is really to be expected in historical time, or whether it is the expression of an ideal that stands above time, is a matter of theological interpretation within both Christianity and Judaism. Nevertheless, for Christianity, Christ reveals the spirit that must imbue such an age, and invites human beings at large to devote themselves to it.

Judaism, of course, does not recognize Jesus to have fulfilled the role of the Messiah, and still looks forward to a Messiah in a future time. Nevertheless, both traditions look forward to the ‘messianic age’ forecast by Isaiah. For Christians, this age is identified with the *second* coming of Christ, sometimes also called the ‘parousia.’ *Parousia* in Greek means ‘presence’ (lit. ‘being’/ousia, ‘by’/par), and refers, in this context, to a world imbued with the presence of God. Despite their different estimations of Jesus, then, both religions can recognize themselves, and each other, as being called to further the realization of this messianic age.

At the close of the Gospel of Matthew the resurrected Christ says to his disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). This command has been interpreted as mandating the conversion of the Jews, but this is to read it out of context. Here the Jewish Jesus is asking his Jewish followers to extend the covenant beyond the Jewish people. The Jews, of course, had long since entered this covenant. Jews precede Gentile Christians into it, and it is only through the Jews that its memory has been preserved and its substance made available to the rest of the world. Given the universal significance of God as Judaism itself insists upon it (“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One”), this extension of the covenant to all humankind may be seen as consistent with, even necessitated by, Jewish self-understanding. Of course, given the Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth fulfills the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, there remains an area of significant controversy between the two traditions. Nevertheless, this controversy should be recognized as one between two groups who share the same basic ethical, spiritual, even eschatological commitments.

In the *Epistle to the Romans* Paul looks forward to a time when this controversy itself will be resolved, when Israel (proper) will come to accept the legitimacy of Christ's mission and message. He writes: "If their rejection [of Christ] is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (Rm. 11:15). It is unclear why Paul links the Jewish rejection of Christian claims to the 'reconciliation of the world,' and we may read this as a rhetorical flourish in Paul's writing. What is more significant (and that for which the rhetorical device seems to be used) is the idea that the acceptance of Christ by the Jewish people will constitute a *new moment* in God's project of reconciling the earth to himself. I do not think it inherently problematic for Christians to hope for this new moment, so long as they acknowledge that there is no way to know what it will look like. In its context, it is clear that Paul provides this teaching in order to instill *humility* in the newly converted Gentiles. He is telling them, in effect, that without the Jews Christianity itself remains incomplete. Of course, such a suggestion can be dangerous to the extent that it gives rise to a Christian desire, which becomes a Christian demand, that Jews 'convert' to Christianity.

But one may better understand this to mean that Jews and Christians, through mutual acceptance, may one day, together, convert the distortions of both religions into something more perfect not yet seen. To the extent that both groups look forward to a 'messianic age,' both look forward to a time when the spirit of God will be, in Paul's formulation, "all in all" (1Cor. 15:28); i.e., a time when the violent divisions that stand in the way of healthful human community will be overcome.

We find this hope expressed in the Hebrew prophets as well: "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to

be his servants . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is. 56:6-7). Is this last to be read as *Jewish* supersessionism? Are all nations to become Jews? It might conceivably be read this way. But it is better read as the expression of a hope for human concord and community *under* the God revealed at Sinai but transcendent of the particularities of this or that religious form.

And in this context, again, we can note the grave danger of legalism. In elevating form above substance, legalism prevents the adherents of one form from recognizing their essential commonality with adherents of another. Indeed, Christian supersessionism—the demand that Jews adopt the form of Christianity--may itself be seen as a destructive instance of just such legalism.

V. New Covenant / Original Covenant

In Paul Johnson’s *A History of Christianity* Johnson notes that Christian evangelism has had great success converting pagan, polytheistic, societies to Christianity, and little or no success converting members of the other great monotheistic or monistic religions. This suggests that paganism, with its vision of a world controlled by multiple, often contending, nature gods, is not finally satisfying to the human heart and mind. Indeed, even in paganism we see an attempt to get beyond paganism; as evidenced by the unitive metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle. Thus, the pagan world was already primed for conversion to monotheism when Christianity appeared. The situation was quite otherwise with respect to the Jews. Jews had no particular reason to convert to Christianity, as the

essence of the Christian message is already embedded in Jewish Scripture. The teachings of Christ are, on the whole, reiterations—albeit, often striking ones—of Jewish teaching.

The supersessionist theology of Christianity, it might be posited, resulted from triumphalist tendencies among *pagan* Christians; i.e., among those who entered Christianity with little understanding of the Jewish tradition at its root. These people adopted a caricatured view of Judaism as legalistic in essence, while (ironically) adopting an often legalistic understanding of Jesus' own significance. The simplistic notion that those who accept Christ will enter heaven while those who do not will be condemned to hell, as if faith were a magic charm rather than an existential commitment, allowed for the self-congratulatory idea on the part of new Christians that they were especially favored compared to the Jews--who, having rejected baptism, would be rejected by God.

Baptism marks entry into a covenant with the God of Sinai. For Christians, the entryway into this covenant is the person of Christ himself, whose very *being* is understood as, so to speak, the perfect 'covenant' between God and man. Jesus' atoning death and resurrection manifests the self-surrender each person must undergo in order to transcend the life of exclusionary self-interest (what Paul calls 'the life of the flesh') and be 'reborn' into a life of devotion to God and others. Through baptism, the Christian understands himself or herself to be joining Christ in the life of communion with God.

But the Jews as a people understand themselves to have entered upon just such a covenant and communion at Sinai. Historically, it is understandable that Jews would have been put off by the demand, made by newly converted pagans, that they renounce the terms of their long relation with God and enter upon a 'new' covenant whose terms

seemed alien to them. In all humility and respect, Christians should accept that Jews have their own avenue of relation to God.

Both religions, then, might affirm two distinct, but complementary, covenants between the God of Sinai and human beings. There is the original covenant between God and the Jewish people that gave rise to Hebrew Scripture and Jewish tradition. The story of this covenant remains central to both Judaism and Christianity. In addition, Christianity believes the same God has, through Christ, extended the offer of covenant to any human being who will enter upon it. This new offer of covenant does not abrogate the original; rather, it grows out of its soil and may, indeed, be seen as confirming its universal import. It is on the platform of God's covenant with the Jewish people that God's covenant with the rest of humanity is established. It is at least conceivable that a recognition of this could be, at once, a source of satisfaction for Jews, as they consider the special role they have played in the advancement of God's purposes, and the basis for an honoring of Judaism among Christians. Both traditions should be able to affirm that all who sincerely strive to live in accordance with the covenant into which they have entered walk the path to God.

May there one day come a time when Jews will see the new covenant in Christ as a legitimate offspring of the original covenant at Sinai, and thereby affirm Christians as true brethren in faith? It is my hope that one day they will. As a Jew who has entered into the Christian communion, I believe there is something offered through Christ that supplements, without negating, the Judaism I was exposed to. The universality implicit in the very idea of monotheism seems to me to demand the sort of universal extension we see in Christianity. Beyond this, the life and meaning of Christ, as I have come to

understand them, encapsulate the spiritual and ethical core of Judaism itself in a striking way; in a way that, for me personally, has helped provide a deepening of understanding and faith.

I believe, as well, that there is that in the Jewish talmudic and mystical traditions, and in the familial intimacy with which Jews approach ‘the God of our fathers,’ that would enrich the Christian tradition were the two religions ever to come to recognize their basic complementarity. Christianity should see itself, not as superseding Judaism, but as extending it. Jews, in turn, might see this very extension as confirmation of the special role they have played (and may still play) in God’s revelation to humankind. In this way we might hope for the day when relations between the two will be relations of creative synergy rather than destructive rivalry. Given the troubled and troubling state of religion in our world today, such a creative, dynamic, affirmative relationship might well prove to be, in Paul’s words, ‘life from the dead’ for both.