The Ways of God with His People:
The Development of a Theology of Israel in the Thought of Robert Jenson

An Essay Draft

by

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respectfully submitted

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Encapsulation:

In the context of contemporary religious pluralism, and in the particularly unique situation of current Jewish-Christian encounter, this paper explores the attempt of Christian theologian Robert Jenson to develop a renewed theology of Israel and the implications this might have for Jewish-Christian learning. This paper first explores how 1) an understanding of the role of Israel’s Scriptures in Christian theology and 2) an understanding of the identification of the God of Israel in Christian theology both demonstrate the potential vibrancy of a theology of Israel as itself an integrative thematic for Christian systematic theology. The paper then considers the crucial proposal advanced by Jenson about how the Church could re-envision its self-identity as theo-communal locus of God’s people in a renewed theology of Israel. This renewed understanding challenges the simple displacement of Israel by the Church in traditional Christian theology, and instead argues that by viewing the Church as an event within Israel space is opened up to consider Rabbinic Judaism as an authentic, parallel path, alongside the Church, in the eschatological fulfillment of God’s Promises to his People. This paper argues that the achievement of Jenson here is to have balanced the Church’s faithfulness to the integrity of its claim about Israel’s Messiah with an enduring, positive and ordained role for Rabbinic Judaism from the perspective of the Church.
I: Orientation—The Need for a Renewed Theology of Israel

One of the truly monumental and pressing questions for the Church today is how it should understand itself and its constituting message in the situation of global pluralism and cultural-religious interaction. Not that interreligious or pluralistic scenarios have not previously been historical experiences of the Church, in which she has attempted to live and speak her Gospel. But the degree and immediacy with which competing religious sensibilities, worldviews and practices intermingle with, collide and challenge Christianity and its Gospel speaking have endowed this question with more poignant relevancy and urgency than ever before. In this situation, the following essay labors toward developing, in some small way, the understanding of religious pluralism by a renewed theology of Jewish-Christian relations in particular.

The particular selection of the Jewish-Christian axis for discussion intends to say something also about the nature of Christian theology of religions itself. Instead of treating the question of other faiths as one of an undifferentiated mass, the comparison of particular ideas and practices represents the most beneficial and plausible way forward. Certain constellations will emerge in the interreligious engagement that correspond to the relative proximity or distance of a given religious tradition from the Christian understanding and the potential overlap of its claims and symbol-world. More concretely, the relation to Judaism embodies a unique case for Christian Faith. For it is not only a question of an exterior encounter with a foreign religio-cultural mentality, but the Jewish Faith includes shared elements that are internal to the Christian Story itself. In this way, the Jewish Community relates more intimately to Christian theology as a locus of its own self-reflective discourse, and so, consequently, any eliding of the difference between the question of a theology of Israel¹ and the more generic question of a theology of religions will already have embarked from an insufficient platform.

¹ In this case, “Israel” here refers to the biblical, socio-historical, and primarily theo-communal, category of peoplehood and not to questions of the Land and the Modern Nation-State, which are themselves crucial and related questions but here distinguished and prescinded from for the purpose of scope and focus. Given the interior theological developments of Christianity in response to its own Claim & Scriptures, the question of Land and Nation-State are relatively de-centered; though this varies, of course, with the hermeneutic employed especially in relation...
This paper, then, attempts to augment Jewish-Christian exchange through a renewal of the Christian Community's own theology of Israel. It does so by advancing an exegesis and interpretation of the thought of the contemporary theologian Robert Jenson. Jenson has been so chosen both because he has made the theology of Israel question one of the animating concerns of his recent theology and because, as I will contend, he actually and uniquely offers a rigorous and plausible proposal for the constructive development of this systematic locus, one which may be viable for an ecumenically-minded but still doctrinally serious theology that still faithful adheres to the traditional-particularistic claims of the Christian Gospel.

In a recent article, Jenson describes the urgency of this particular question for the Church thusly: “I have realized how urgently the church needs a Christian theology of Judaism. It is all very well to renounce supersessionism, but how then should the church understand Judaism's continuing existence?” Not only is this a question of history, of the attempt to overcome the harms that replacement theology has done when it has been

2 For the purposes of this paper, I assume that “replacement theology”, what has often been called now “supersessionism”, has been the predominant, default theology of Israel in Christianity through most of its history and in most of its forms. I will not here undertake a historical exploration of this assessment, but suffice it to say that it could be well documented as, in general outline, the operative theology in many cases when Christians have attempted to make theological sense out of continuing Judaism—though the emergence of dispensationalist and premillennial eschatology complicates this standard narrative somewhat. For the general approach to the history of Christian theology in relation to world religions more generally, I have relied on: Jacques Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, updated ed. (Marynol: Orbis Books, 2001). In the particular case of “replacement theology”, this particular theological model remained largely uncontested because, after the fourth century, the Church rarely gave substantial systematic reflection to its theology of Israel other than to say, most often, that Jews who did not explicitly join the Church stood condemned. Early Church theologians often spoke of this replacement theology in terms of the Church as the “True Israel”. To explore the history of replacement theology further, a fascinating study would be to look at the history of exegesis of Romans 9–11. I myself have refrained from using the term "supersessionism", however, as this term has become so theologically imprecise—not to mention so politically and ideologically freighted as to degenerate into a nebulous condemnation of almost any distinctive Christian claim. Replacement theology can be more precisely crystallized as follows: the theologoumenon—it never really attained the status of doctrine—that the relationship of the Church to Israel is one of simple, categorical replacement. The advent of the Church upon the Revelation of Jesus displaces Israel as the theo-communal locus for God's People to gather in this world so also to exclude those Jews who do not enter the Church and to subsume the canonical category “Israel” under the New Testament category “Church”. Although replacement theology does find potential scriptural warrant in the New Testament, and this must be seriously considered as I hope to do in the concluding
enacted in the persecution of Jews by Christians, this is further a question of importance for the continued future and vitality of both communities together. “In the next decades,” as Jenson assesses the situation, “powerful historical forces will drive Judaism and the church ever more closely together,” and they will stand or fall together, so he thinks.3

Notwithstanding how one reacts to this assessment, and however someone now conceives this entity, “Israel” remains an ineradicable locus for systematic reflection due to its role in God’s dealings with the world for those who take the biblical experience as normative. I will explore the development of this systematic locus in Jenson’s theology under three rubrics suggested by his understanding: 1) the status of the Old Testament as Scripture in Christian theology, 2) the identification of the God of Israel in Christian theology and then, centrally, 3) the ecclesiological location of continuing Judaism in relation to the Church within Israel. In this explication of Jenson’s position, I argue that it demonstrates the potential vibrancy of this particular topic to augment our understand across various doctrinal loci and that it presents another viable option for a biblically informed re-construal of the role of Rabbinic Judaism in God’s dealings with the world in relation to other prevalent positions in the history of Christian theology.

II: The Scriptures of Israel in Christian Theology

If we are to determine how Christian theology is to construe its relation both to biblical Israel and, correlatively, to the permutation of Israel in continuing, contemporary Rabbinic Judaism, one of the basic questions is of Scripture, as the witness to what God is doing with his people. What Christians call the “Old Testament,”4 as one unit of its 


4 The nomenclature is itself problematic here. What we call the body of literature that functions as normative scripture fully for Judaism and partially for Christians usually encodes a certain theology over against others, and there is probably no way to circumvent the problematic nature of terminology in every context. The traditional usage “Old Testament” has come under censure for its alleged “supersessionism”. It is presumed that “Old” must be pejorative, even though for the vast majority of Christian and indeed Western history, antiquity was in fact viewed quite oppositely as an esteemed characteristic. Furthermore, “Old Testament” does pose a legitimate problem in
Scriptures, endures, of course, as sole unit, that is, as Scripture as such, as bible, for the Jewish Community. Some of the relatively early followers of Jesus encountered the possibility of envisioning such a radical discontinuity between the Risen Christ and antecedent Israel that the Scriptures of Israel could be thereby rejected in totality in favor of the Apostolic Writings alone, or the some of those. Because of Jesus, these believers thought, all that was needed was some writings of the Apostles as witness to the God thereby disclosed. Ciphered under the label of Marcionism, the Early Church as a whole decisively rejected this position, as it, in fact, undermines the very logic and intelligibility of Jesus’ ministry and mission. In this way, it was decided that the “New Testament” does not function in absoluta per se, but only as part of the larger book.

Jewish-Christian mutual learning, since, for the Synagogue, there is no such thing as a “New Testament” to make the other scriptures “Old”. To adopt the traditional Rabbinc usage of “Tanakh”—in reference to the collection of Torah, Prophets and other Writings—even though descriptive, would be, at this point, somewhat artificial for the Church and also seems to prohibit in advance the Christological reading of those texts. Biblical scholars have largely defaulted to the term “Hebrew Bible” as a descriptor, emphasizing the predominant language of the text. For the Synagogue, of course, this term is just redundant. Nor, in the strict sense, is this term correct, given the Aramaic portions of that literature; but this is taken to be a marginal point. Another problem with this term is that it is largely a scholarly construct, abstracted for the concerns of that enterprise, with little or no resonance in the originating, concrete, lived faith of either the Synagogue or the Church. Even so it could possibly be adopted, but the term is in fact also theologically pernicious: it preferences the scholarly reconstructed “historical context” over what Christianity has seen as the intrinsic translatability of its scriptures. Even if now, in our time, the study of the original Hebrew must remain a fixed pole of the Church’s engagement of its Scriptures, for the Church these Scriptures do not strictly subsist in Hebrew. Those scriptures only become “Hebrew” for Christians during the Protestant Reformation and even after that into the period of modern biblical criticism, for those who had the privilege and ability to read the language and engage in translation for the regular believer. The actual bible of most of the Early Church was the Greek Septuagint, and the Scriptures in the West were, for the majority of Christianity for the majority of its history, the Latin of the Vulgate—not to mention the translation now in Christian Mission of the scriptures into the multifarious vernacular languages of the world: English KJV inter alia. This is in contrast to the strict Arabic criterion of Qur’an, such that the Scriptures as such for the Ummah subsist only in the original recitations—the language of heaven—and not properly in translation: see further Lamin Sanneh, Translating the Message. Then there is also the plural or singular tension: “scripture” or “scriptures”. Indeed, if the book is scripture at all its functions, in some way, as a singular, coherent whole, but scholarship has tended towards the compositeness, even the fragmentation, of the text into ever more discrete and disparate units. That emphasis is appropriate in certain respects, but in other respects also cannibalistic on that text being “bible” at all. In attempted partial resolution, I have adopted here the term “Scriptures of Israel” for that body of literature and the term “Apostolic Witness” or “Apostolic Scriptures” for the Church’s distinctive body of literature that interprets the Scriptures of Israel by the Event of Jesus. Given the theological concerns I here present, the term “Scriptures of Israel” does not exclude those writings either from being a distinctive set for the Synagogue or from being a partial, but constituting, set for the Church. Even though the predominant sensibilities suggest that we should once again remind ourselves of the coherent wholeness of “Scripture” I have opted for “Scriptures” in order to acknowledge its multivocality, and as patterned after and on the warrant of the biblical practice itself of referring to the “Scriptures” or “Writings” (γραφαι), paradigmatically Luke 24:32. “Apostolic” for the second body in that its authority, in terms of historical experience, derives precisely from its apostolicity, which is the foundation of the Church (Ephesians 2:20), and its concretization of the Apostolic message about God’s deeds in Jesus, that is the Gospel. The novelty of this proposal may not find resonance in the actual life of the Church, though it is hoped that its scriptural moorings might perhaps recommend it. But, in the final analysis, I also find no sufficient prohibition to simply abiding with the tradition of the Church: “Old Testament”. As long as it is remembered that “Old” in this case is not pejorative but just means “historically prior”, “antecedent” or even “senior”, “foundational”, as well as the consideration that the Old “Testament” is not really a single covenant but the coherence of multiple “Testaments”, in relation to the culminating “Covenant” in Jesus.
That the Scriptures of Israel were thus retained did not foreclose the temptation to forget or neglect the intertestamental reciprocity. In many ways, it was easy to take the Apostolic Scriptures as basic and then to adapt Israel’s original Scriptures to them, to take the New Testament as the interpretative criterion of the Old, but without the other direction, without incorporating the world of the Old as the criterion of plausibility and faithfulness of the New. In one way, this is certainly correct, if indeed Jesus is in fact the culminating self-disclosure of God, the center of the whole scriptural communication. In another way, however, this fails to appreciate the integrity of the actual historical development and its dramatic-experiential coherence. And it is here, Jenson suggests, as one facet of our theology of Israel, that we need to recapture thinking the other way, that is, thinking from Israel’s Scriptures to the Apostolic Witness. Here contemporary Judaism has the potential to augment the Church’s reading of its own scriptures by recalling their original integrity in this mode.

For Jenson, this insight functions doctrinally in the recognition that as the *norma non normata* of our theological judgment, “parts of Scripture are ‘Scripture’ in different ways.” He argues that we need to recapture the *mode* by which the Scriptures of Israel functions architectonically for the Church in a way that is unique to them. “The New Testament throughout,” Jenson claims, “demonstrates apostolic dependence on the holy book of Judaism, precisely as book…” As such that book constitutes the Church in a way that is different from the Apostolic Witness, the recognition of which emerges from the life and mission of the Church as inspired confirmation of the Event which inaugurates its, namely Jesus’ life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. “Thus the canon of Israel’s Scripture is for the church a sheer given.” And so, “Israel’s book is an underivable condition for the existence of [the Church].” This is more forceful than a “reception” of Israel’s book by the Church. And, indeed, the Church did not “appropriate” or “adopt” that book at all. For that book itself is inextricably woven into the disciples own encounter and relation with Jesus. So Jenson argues: “It is perhaps not strictly correct even to say that the church ‘received’ Israel’s Scripture, since this scripture was antecedently constitutive for the apostles’
relation to their Lord and so for the existence of the church.”\textsuperscript{5} As Jenson will put it in his pithy way, “The Old Testament was Scripture for the apostles and disciples before they were apostles and disciples.” These Scriptures are “just there, as a fact antecedent to its [the Church’s] existence and foundational for its self-understanding.”\textsuperscript{6}

The theological corollary to this insight, as Jenson will advocate it in his adventurous and provocative way, is that one direction for the Church’s thought must be whether the claims about Jesus are themselves authentic and plausible possibilities to have emerged out of Israel’s Scripture: “Indeed, the question is not whether the church has this canon [OT] but whether this canon acknowledges the church: May Israel’s holy book be so read, without violence to its coherence and historical actuality, as to accept Jesus’ Resurrection and the appearance of the church as its own denouement?”\textsuperscript{7} This is Jenson’s doctrinal proposal for how scriptural interpretation is to function in the Church. In his conceptualization, theology is the Church’s attempt to speak the gospel faithfully in a new situation.\textsuperscript{8} To undertake this enterprise, “the primary documentary control of our effort is that our attempt to speak the gospel be the same interpretive act [the Apostles] performed: that we interpret what happened with Jesus by Israel’s Bible and Israel’s Bible by what happened with Jesus.”\textsuperscript{9}

The inference that I draw from this, which Jenson does not thematize, even though his explicit account already implies a certain relation to Israel, is that the Church has the opportunity to develop its relation to contemporary Judaism by a re-engaged study of Israel’s book together. In one sense, to anticipate the historico-theological hermeneutic of parallelism to be explored subsequently, the relation between Christianity and Judaism


\textsuperscript{6} Robert W. Jenson, Canon and Creed, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 14, 20.

\textsuperscript{7} Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 30.

\textsuperscript{8} Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 11-22, for his more elaborated understanding of what theology is.

\textsuperscript{9} Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 30.
along one axis is a dispute between those who claim to be God’s People about whether the Apostolic Witness or Mishna-Talmud are more faithful and plausible interpretations of Israel’s Bible in the situation after the claim about Jesus and after the destruction of the Temple. If the Church cannot engage in study of Israel’s Scriptures with the Rabbis and show how what happened with Jesus is at least a possible, faithful interpretation of that Scripture, then it has forfeited one component of its mission. The practice of such, it is here suggested, should become one constant feature of the Church’s Life, where and if it has not been. And this itself is the most fruitful proposal for what has been called “Jewish-Christian dialogue” or “learning”.

This proposal could be easily misunderstood. So the caution should be immediately mentioned that this proposal does not simply capitulate to contemporary Judaism’s claim nor does it imply a recognition that the Church is somehow an alien imposition on Israel’s Scriptures. To such, Jenson makes the following point:

At the same time, there is also no reason for the church to think that contemporary Judaism has a prior right to the use or interpretation of the Old Testament. Some of our difficulty arises from the supposition that the church once ‘appropriated’ or ‘adopted’ Israel’s Scriptures; since the origin of the church depended on these Scriptures, such an event can never have happened. Moreover, since what is now called Judaism and the church appeared simultaneously within Israel, neither can have a prior claim; even from a strictly historical point of view, the one is as immediate and direct a continuation of canonical Israel as the other.  

Again there is the interpretive model of parallelism, which re-orient much of the discussion. “Rabbinic Judaism and the church have equal and parallel claims to obey the Tanakh/Old Testament as scripture. Neither is a direct continuation of old Israel. In the long run, each could obey old Israel’s scripture only by adding a second volume: the rabbis added the Mishna, and the Christians the New Testament.” If this is acknowledged, then mutual Jewish-Christian learning has an animating task to orient and direct its proceedings, instead of merely upholding “dialogue” as some kind of nebulous end in itself.

10 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 30, note 23.

Nor does this consideration foreclose the Christological exegesis of the so-called plain sense of Israel’s Scripture, as a latent feature of that text. Indeed in his own two commentaries on books of Israel’s Scripture, Jenson has proceeded with the intention that, “exegesis of the Old Testament might call up points of Christian doctrine” and that “Christian doctrine should shape interpretation of Old Testament passages” even though he is aware that this procedure, “offends the modern exegetical academy’s chief dogma” and that latter “offends it every more deeply.”\(^\text{12}\) The Church must live out the integrity of its claim to have been oriented to the understanding of Israel’s Scriptures by Jesus himself and by the inspired Witness to Jesus’ life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection in its own Scriptures. This way of approaching the Scriptures, nevertheless, facilitates an arena for mutual learning and augmentation between the Church and contemporary Judaism.

**III: Israel and the Identification of the Christian God**

Another way to consider Israel in Christian theology is by the identification of its God: the Abba to whom Jesus calls out is precisely the God of Israel. The identification of God has been one of the constant concerns of Jenson’s theology throughout its diachronic development. From his perspective, the great religious question of humanity remains not whether God is—perhaps not even an actually intelligible one if one understands what the semantic signifier God attempts to convey—but rather: “which is God?” What is the true and authentic way to understanding what the word attempts to convey? Following Luther and resonate with Tillich, Jenson claims the ultimate question is what functions as ultimate reality or endows coherent meaning, or chaos, for one’s life, regardless of how that reality is then construed or implemented: as spirit or as matter, incoherently or coherently, personally or non-personally.\(^\text{13}\) What functions as the culminating focus of one’s worldview


or, at least, one’s way of being in the world? What really captures one’s heart as finally meaningful? Whatever that is, that is one’s God. And the real religious question then includes an inescapably element of normativity: what should capture people as finally meaningful in this way? The answer of some in the late-modern situation, for example, may be that only matter and energy are the Real, and that we should live as such, and cease asking the questions of meaning and value. Therein, they would have precisely identified their God, and their theology would then consist either in that single proposition and nothing more or in the entire scope of natural scientific and economic knowledge and whatever animation that gives to their lives, depending on the particular direction of thought.

One of the basic questions of any theology, consequently, is whether the posited God is able to be identified, or beyond any such identification in creaturely categories, and how this is so. Does “God” relate or not relate to what else exists? For Christian theology, as it explicates faith in the Gospel, God is the type of reality which can be intended, to which we can direct our attention, with whom we can commune—personal reality.14 This is primarily so because God is identified as the Agent or Meaning of Events in the world’s experience and its history. Jenson crystallizes its primal identification of God as follows: “Christian talk of God intends a specific reality, that is identified by the apostles as the agent of Jesus’ Resurrection...”15 God is primally whatever that transcendence was towards which Jesus the Nazarene called out in the Spirit, “Abba, Father”; God is that reality into which he invites us into conversation, fellowship and obedience, and that reality whose vindication of this invitation is given by raising Jesus from the dead.

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14 My thanks to Prof. John Jefferson Davis for the insight phrased this way: for the Christian, God may be more that personal, in the scholastic understanding analogically personal, but is certainly not less than personal, that is fundamentally non-relatable.

15 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 42.
Immediately it must be added for Jenson, however, that the identification of God by Jesus’ Mission and as the agent of Jesus’ Resurrection does not represent a discrete event. Its coherency is understood as occurring in the world and experience of Israel. God is not a generic x at the time of Jesus, but rather the same one who discloses his identity as the “I am [will be]”, as YHWH, the God of Israel, her Exodus, her subsequent national-cultic life and, chiefly, as constituted by the Covenants and Promises of God with the Community whom he gathers. Jesus is the self-communication and self-identification in creaturely reality of this God and not another. So a return is made, insofar as we are able to authentically identify God, to the fundamental connection with the Scriptures of Israel, which document the Events of this identification. “It is the God of Israel whom Jesus called Father and to whom the disciples wanted to pray”, clarifies Jenson.16

This confession appears elementary enough. And, for Jenson, the place to start with the identification of God is not determinative. If the Church, for the most part, inaugurates its confession and witness to the Gospel with the identification of God with Jesus and the disciples’ claim about him, so far so good; that is the culminating moment of God’s congress with the creation. A critical problem does arise, however, when the Church fails to continue speaking its Gospel by taking it back through the experience of Israel, and so either by neglect or superficiality untethers the climactic identification of God in Jesus from God’s authentic identification in the experience of Israel. “So far as mere logic goes, our discussion could pick up the chain by any link [of the identification of God],” claims Jenson, “so long as we then went round the full circle.”17

Jenson, though, begins his own systematic account of the Triune God, “with confession of the God of Israel,” precisely because, in his judgment, the Church so often continues to neglect to go round the full circle: “in view of the predominantly gentile church’s perennial temptation to evade” anchoring its identification of God in Israel. In the historical experience of the Church, “The temptation was early overcome dogmatically,

16 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 42.

17 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 42.
with the rejection of Marcion”. But the neglect of Israel in her identification of God, in Jenson’s reading of the history, “remains the church’s most regular occasion of apostasy.”\textsuperscript{18} This is an assessment with which it is difficult to dispute, given its manifestation in the Church’s often tortuous and oppressive legacy of relations to the Synagogue over its history.

For Jenson, moreover, this is not only a matter of the unholy persecution of the Jews by the Church, but also a matter of the forfeit of the Church’s own integrity and authenticity to the God of the Gospel: “When the church has fallen to it, even partially or ambiguously, the result has been the mere replacement of her God by some noumen of the momentarily surrounding religious culture; even Marcion who wanted to proclaim a God altogether unknown until he appeared in Jesus, in fact produced only a usual piece of late-antique mythology.”\textsuperscript{19} At work here is Jenson’s own narrative about the formation of Early Christian theology in the crucible of the Greco-Roman world and the issue of the relation of Hellenistic metaphysical categories to the explication of the Church's theology.

While Jenson does not succumb to the naïveté of positing a narrative of an uncomplicated, linear process of the corruption of biblical categories by Greek, allegedly “static”, metaphysical terms and categories, as someone like Adolf von Harnack might have done, for example. In that, he does recognize ambivalently the appropriateness of reason and the benefit of the tools that Greek thought brought to the Church’s discourse, while he also acknowledges that it is inevitable that the Church’s theology occurs in reciprocal “conversation with some surrounding religious culture”, one that is not just active or critical but also receptive and appreciative, that unearths, as it were, the \textit{logou spermatikoi} and the \textit{preparatio evangelicae} in truth wherever theology encounters it.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, Jenson envisions his own systematic theology, in one respect, as a “revisionary

\textsuperscript{18} Jenson, \textit{Systematic Theology}, I: 42.

\textsuperscript{19} Jenson, \textit{Systematic Theology}, I: 43.

\textsuperscript{20} Jenson, \textit{Systematic Theology}, I: ix.
metaphysics, aimed at allowing one to say things about God that scriptures seems to require [according to his reading] but that inherited metaphysics [that is, classical metaphysics] inhibits.”

Jenson, either way, thinks that the construal of Eternity as sheer non-temporality is unfaithful to the way the God of Israel self-discloses. Rather, “The True God is not eternal because he lacks time, but because he takes time...The biblical God’s eternity is his temporal infinity” in that temporally “he overcomes all boundaries.” Or, again, more radically, he argues, “The eternity of Israel’s God is his faithfulness. He is not eternal in that he secures himself from time, but in that he is faithful to his commitments within time. At the great turning, Israel’s God is eternal in that he is faithful to the death, and then yet again faithful.”
The methodological point that Jenson wants to make in these claims is that when the identification of God in Israel is neglected, our ways of relating to God are easily and readily shifted into the idiomatic-metaphysical assumptions of the surrounding culture, as he thinks happened in this case. It is arguable whether Jenson has not been hindered here by the ossification of his narrative about the infiltration of Greek metaphysical categories into the thinking of the Church. But the point remains that if God is truly and authentically self-identified by the Scriptures of Israel, and just so by the saving


22 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 222: Another provocative example of what Jenson sees as the tension between the biblical account and inherited metaphysics is the radical personality of God which usually gets blunted by metaphysical caveats: ”...the one God is a person...The life of any person is both one event and many events. Therefore, to grasp myself as a whole, I must grasp the mutual dramatic coherence of the events of my life...I must grasp the faithfulness of each of my acts and sufferings to all the rest. But as a creature, I do not have this faithfulness in myself; I have it only in the coherence of God’s intention for me. Moreover, as a fallen creature I actively fight against dependence on God and so against my own coherence with myself. Thus in daily experience I am threatened by absurdity, by disintegration of my life into a mere pointless sequence of happenings...That we take God’s personality seriously is vital to the religious life demanded by the gospel. The Bible’s language about God is drastically personal: he changes his mind and reacts to external events, he makes threats and repents of them, he makes promises and tricks us by how he fulfills them. If we understand this language as fundamentally inappropriate, as ‘anthropomorphic,’ we do not know the biblical God. Persons do all these things, precisely to be personal, and in that the true God is personal they are ontological perfections, not deficiencies...Therefore, that God listens to us and responds to us, far from being a condescension, is the very way he is faithful to himself. God is not God in spite of changing his mind, in spite of answering prayer or failing to do so; he is God because he does and can do such things wholeheartedly. Operatively: unabashed petitionary prayer is the one decisively appropriate creaturely act over against the true God.” See also note 13 above.

23 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 217, 216, emphasis original.
Events of God in Israel’s experience as a *dramatis persona*, as a partner in Covenant and Promise, then to neglect these realities will fundamentally impoverish and hinder the relation of the Church to her God. As a result, what the Church attempts to call “God” will often be some kind of substitute on offer from some predominant culture.

In explicating the identification of God by the Scriptures of Israel and in Israel’s experience of constitution, exodus, redemption, exile, messianic hope, Jenson re-emphasizes some particularly salient features of this experience. Fundamental to the identification of God in Israel, Jenson argues drawing especially from Von Rad, is the event of Exodus, as the occurrence of God as the One who works in history: "In her own self-understanding, Israel had been created by the deliverance of bond workers from Egypt and by events of their consequent migration through Sinai into Canaan." 24 For this reason, God’s self-identification for Christians is bound to the events of history, their meaning and their significance: “Israel’s and the church’s God is thus identified by specific temporal actions and is known within certain temporal communities by personal names and identifying descriptions thereby provided.” This is not to say that God could not have potentially self-disclosed in another way, as if God were subject to the events of history by some metaphysical necessity. But it is to say that for the Christian understanding, God *has* so self-disclosed *truly and authentically*, insofar as the historical world as creation is potentially transparent to God’s presence as Creator. In Jenson’s assessment, at critical points where the identification of God by Israel has been neglected, the consequence has been an abstraction from these specific, temporal actions: “Nor does Scripture contain permission to transcend these relations at any height of spiritual experience, even though craving to rise above such temporal and ‘limiting’ nodes of experience is endemic in religion.” 25

This authentic identifiability by particular events in history is characteristic of Israel’s, and so the Church’s, God. And Jenson thinks is one of the relatively distinguishing


features of Jewish-Christian faith over against most other religious mentalities. "It is itself a particularity of Israel's and the church's God that he so insists upon his particularity, a component of his identity that he can be definitely identified", says Jenson. Whereas, by contrast, “The standard religious attitude is that the principle of individuation, whatever it may be, cannot finally apply to deity. In the case of normal religions, such theology is merely faithful to its *lex orandi*. The gods have in general no final stake in their individual identities and will arrange them to suit our religious needs."26

In the height or depth of most other spiritual experience, all such names, concepts, predicates, particular events are seen as dispensable, and even perhaps attacked as a penultimately idolatrous residue of what is truly beyond any such differentiation or undifferentiation. Such an approach reproaches all aesthetic and narratival singularities as ultimately misleading, and attempts to abolish all contour down to the same level of symbolism, which in the end, drives toward the homogenous ocean of eschatological uniformity that is the Real. Of course, as has been noted now for some time, *particularity* seems to be what is especially scandalous to the current, dominant, pluralistic mentality. God cannot *actually, really* be about Exodus or Israel or Prophet or this enigmatic Jesus from Nazareth, can it? Certainly these all gesture towards a larger reality that transcends them, do they not? In this sensibility, “Declining modernity is in full accord with antiquity on this principle.”27

Jenson seeks to undermine what he sees as the current, standard religious mentality in his intentionally provocative account of God's attributes: “In the Scriptures, on an exact other hand, it is first among the Lord's attributes that he is 'a *jealous* God.' He neither shares his name nor is addressed by an accumulation of other deities' names. For Jesus as for the Deuteronomist, 'the first and greatest commandment' is love specifically to 'JHVW, your God.'” This is not a jealously of fear or insecurity or capriciousness, of course, as

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mostly in the human case jealously evidences such. But it is a jealousy of authentic identity. “The Lord is jealous”, Jenson explains further, “because he is truly identified by the temporal events of Exodus and Resurrection.”28 To attempt to identify him in another way, therefore, represents the attempt to overthrow God’s own free and loving presentation of himself to the world, to say that, from the human perspective, it must be false or insufficient; it is the attempt by the creature to re-forg[e the God’s identity and so to claim the last and final authority over God.

This rebellion is really a misunderstanding of what it is to be creature, a revolt against the reality of historical and worldly being as such insofar as it presents itself as flux, as dissolution, as the coming and going of all things. If the world and its history is the real theater for God’s Glory, that God created to communicate his Glory, identification must be so: “In time, each thing must indeed be ‘itself and not another’ or not be at all; temporal entities must be jealous of their identities or cease.”29 Under the conditions of this world, if I am everything I am nothing. Identity is possessed precisely in relation to the whole complex and entirety of that which also exists, … a, b, c …, so that one entity is the reality that it is precisely because it is not any other reality. In the world and in time, it is thus only in relation to the whole complex of reality that any particular entity presents itself with an interior objectivity that makes it a this. So if God is going to be the God who identifies himself in (Exodus) and by (Jesus) creaturely realities, this must entail jealously; for God will be identified as a this in relation to that. There will be particularity. (We do not have to think of this identity, as did the height of modernity, as the discrete, punctilliar, mutually exclusive kind of logical variables: x and not-x. Identity certainly can be more appropriately conceived in terms of a field, so that there is a potential intrinsic relation between the “I” and the “Thou” every within the sphere of the self. But there is definiteness, and not a sheer amorphousness, nonetheless).

28 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 47.

29 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 47.
Either that or God really has no investment in creaturely reality. “Usual gods,” of generic religion, Jenson continues, “care little for their identities just because they are not personally invested in time; indeed, their deity consists in their immunity to time, from which devotees hope they may rescue us also. If their worship is initially enabled by apparently identifying names and descriptions, these are transcended at higher levels of spiritual process in which the bonds of time loosen—as therewith, of course, is transcended also their partnership in personal discourse.” To this, Jenson contrasts fundamentally, “Not so the God of Scripture”, that is, not so the God truly identified by and in Israel.\(^30\) It is only when the Church untethers itself from its connection to Israel that it begins to meander down the same path of transcending names, concepts and descriptions.

One benefit of a renewed theology of Israel, therefore, is to stimulate the Church’s recollection, to catalyze faithfulness to its identification of God, to its contour, its narratival and aesthetic singularities as these embody true self-disclosures of God. To truly understand this self-disclosure of God, however, we must consider its character more fully. For God’s true and authentic self-identification is not just a matter of the past, says Jenson. That would be a quest for mythic origins or immunity to time that standard religion seeks. This identification is a matter also, more fundamentally, perhaps, of the future, of the End to which God draws the history in which he has anticipated his own identity. So Jenson takes the basic eschatological turn of some other recent theology.

If Exodus truly identifies the God of Israel, the correlative temptation is simple deference to the past as it is. As Jenson elaborates in his early critique of “religion” as a result of his work on Barth: “Israel’s life had been built upon trust in what God \(had\) done. He had brought them ‘out of the land of Egypt’; of a group of wandering tribes he had made a nation with its homeland. As a result of what \(had\) happened there was \(now\) a stable situation within which life had meaning. However great the difference may be between life thus based on a past event in time, and one based on an event in the once-upon-a-time of eternity, and so between the faith of old Israel and the mythic nature-religion of other

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\(^30\) Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, I: 47.
ancient peoples, this fundamental pattern was the same for both: the great saving change is past, salvation now lies in the continuance of the order then created.”

In this case, the great threat to that understanding in Israel’s own experience was the Exile. The Exile represented the potential falsification of the Lord’s Promises. Perhaps that God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of the Exodus from Egypt and Torah, was not really God after all? It seems some in Israel took that path, says Jenson: “When that order collapsed in the Exile, some despaired of their God, some turned to desperate restorations, and most no doubt tried to go on as before.” But, also, there were those who interpreted the events of Exile precisely in continuity with the events of Exodus. These were the prophets: “the prophets took the collapse of the past as the act of the very God whose revelation that past had been. In his name they preached that there was no more salvation in the old acts of God, no hope in clinging to what already was. Over against the past, and the present order of meanings it had created, Israel was lost and not saved. The old acts of God were but prophecies of his true reality in the future.” In the crucible of Exile: “The faith of Israel was to become a different thing: no longer trust in what had been, but hope in what would be.”

This insight can be interpreted in radical disjunction, almost such that the advent demolishes what had preceded it (for Jenson: Bultmann is an example), and Jenson early on almost succumbs to this temptation. In this case, there is lost the actual anticipation, the possibility to live by foretasted content of what is to come.

So how, then, can we properly identify God in a faith that looks to the future but that also remembers the authentic disclosure in events of the past? As part of a development of his theology of Israel, Jenson will say that to take the identity of the God of the Church as disclosed in the history of Israel seriously, we should construe God’s identity as dramatic coherence. God is the God who he is in relation to the creation by being faithful to himself in the varying circumstances and vicissitudes of history. So Jenson summarizes: “The


32 Jenson, God After God, 17.
proposition that God’s self-identity lies in dramatic coherence is in any case mandatory for those who wish to worship the biblical God. For if we cannot construe the biblical God’s self-identity in this way, then we cannot construe it at all; then we do not know any one such reality as the biblical God. Otherwise than dramatically, the Bible’s theological descriptions, accounts of divine action, and worshipful invocations are too mutually conflicted to suggest referral to a same someone.”

That the Lord’s identity is one of dramatic coherence or not at all is evident, Jenson argues, from the very vicissitudes of the historical experience of Israel. If we are to say that the God who makes specific Promise to Abraham, who also Covenanted with the whole creation in Adam and Noah, who brings his people out of Egypt in Exodus under Moses, who gives them Instruction-Torah, to establish them in the Land, to build the Temple, only then to lead them out from the Land into Exile, and so on...down to Jesus, if we are to say that this is the selfsame God, that selfsameness must be in the coherence that belongs to historical experience, which has its resolution in an End. So Jenson says of Israel’s faith, which in his theology of Israel, is then determinative for the legitimacy and plausibility of the faith of the Church: “Even Israel’s ability to conceive a continuity of her own history through the discontinuities of her fate, and, for centuries, to interpret and re-interpret that history theologically to produce the Scripture the church received, did not result from continuous ability to synthesize the religious and conceptual deposit to date, but depended on her antecedent and repeatedly rewon conviction that...[the Lord] in his personal identity had been and would be the protagonist of her doings and sufferings, however apparently discontinuous.” In this way, “the scriptural narrative is thus itself Israel’s sole construal of the Lord’s self-identity” and in that narrative, “God is identified with Israel in that he is identified as a participant Israel's story with him.” Only in this way, as an insight continually re-achieved in a return to Israel’s Experience, can the Christian identification of

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33 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 64.

34 Jenson, Systematic Theology, I: 64, 77.
God by faithful to its inheritance of Ancient Israel and her Scriptures, as it must be for it to be authentically plausible at all.

**IV: The Roles of Jews and Christians as God’s People**

At long last, having already over-extended the reader’s due patience—after exploring Israel’s Scriptures and Israel’s identification of God in Christian theology, according to Jenson’s rendition—I come to the crucial question of a contemporary theology of Israel: how does the Church relate to its fellow, but in some ways divergent, interpreter of the heritage of Ancient Israel in continuing Rabbinic Judaism. How does the Church relate to those Jews who do not explicitly join the Church of Jews and Gentiles? The previous sections have explored more traditional loci of Christian theology, only from a new perspective, as I have attempted to show the potential scope and vibrancy of a renewed theology of Israel. But here we must engage the pressing contemporary question of the relation of the Church and the Rabbinic Jewish community and their status as People of God, their respective roles in God’s drama in history. It is on this question that Jenson’s renewed theology of Israel probably most radically challenges the Christian Community to re-understand its own theo-communal identity in relation to continuing Judaism.

As a first matter, it will be helpful to explore what Jenson means by the *Church*, and how this discussion finds its place in his more general account of ecclesiology. Strictly speaking, in Jenson’s understanding, the Resurrection of Jesus in the Spirit founds the Church as its constituting event. Of course, if this was to have been the case, then it is also the case that Jesus’ Mission in the gathering, formation and sending of disciples anticipates the emergence of the Church in some way—contrary to the current, fashionable, scholarly trend to dichotomize between the “Kingdom” that Jesus preached and the “Church” that came. Nevertheless, as Jenson understands it theo-historically: “Bluntly stated, God institutes the church by not letting Jesus’ Resurrection be itself the End, by appointing the ‘delay of the Parousia.’”

The “time” of the Church, therefore, is what is opened up between the Resurrection as the anticipation of the Kingdom and the final consummation of the

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Kingdom itself, during which time the Church carries on its mandate of speaking and living the Gospel, of baptizing and communing and worshipping, of loving and serving.

Now, the *ecclesia* entity, the “Church”, of which the Apostolic Witness speaks, but which also is the context for its speech, emerges as the self-understanding of this new community that lives by confessing Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, by studying the Scriptures to so confess, and by living out the discipleship of its teacher in the meantime. Immediately the question arises, however, what relation this new entity “Church” has in the biblical story of God with his People to the entity “Israel”, who is the antecedent partner of God in instruction and worship and covenant and promise—either in the form of the prophetic “remnant” or as a whole. This question should be one with which the Church should have continually grappled in its theology. The fact that it has not done so for the large part—dispensationalist theology and covenantal theology are exceptions—but that much of Christian theology has overlooked its locus on Israel is itself indicative of an abiding problem. The simple, naïve and uncritical displacement of Israel from its biblical status as God’s people has led to monumentally disastrous historical consequences for Israel, the Church and the World—some recent authors have attempted to connect it even to the formation of the entire modern racial imagination and colonial world system with all its calamities.36 It is in navigating the current relation between Israel and the Church that Jenson seeks to propose some decisive developments in the theology of Israel for the consideration of the Church.

First of all, the time of the Church should manifest Israel’s Promises. Now, in the development of messianic expectation during the Second Temple period, neither the crucifixion nor the resurrection of an individual, in the midst of history, were anticipated in association with the Messianic Events. This is why the cross, but also the individual inaugurative resurrection of Jesus, was a “stumbling block” to Jews then and, from the

perspective of most contemporary Rabbinic Judaism, remains a clear falsification of the messianic claims about Jesus.\textsuperscript{37} But, says Jenson, the Resurrection of Jesus first, such that a time is opened up in between the inauguration and the completion, actually “resolves an antimony at the heart of Israel’s hope.” This is because one dimension of the Promise concerns the historical mission of Israel to be the conduit of \textit{blessing to all nations}, such that Israel’s purity of identity is always also \textit{for} the others and \textit{not without} the others. “Israel’s calling was to be a blessing to all nations,” says Jenson exegeting the Abraham story, “and the prophets interpreted the fulfillment of that calling as the gathering of the nations to fellowship with her in worship of the true God.” But with the rise of messianic expectation and the orientation of the promise to the future that was forged in the crucible of Exile, such that Israel’s destiny is located in a new creation beyond this age, Jenson notes that “no space seem[ed] to remain for such a gathering [of the nations] in this age.”\textsuperscript{38}

So, on the one hand, there seemed no space \textit{in history} available for the gentiles to come in, and yet, on the other, the blessing of the gentiles and their gathering to worship the one, true God itself an event which \textit{prepares} Israel for the End: “when God’s people is wholly taken into God and Israel’s hopes are thereby fulfilled, that people must already be the Israel to which the gentiles have come.” In Second Temple Judaism, this tension seems to have remained simply unresolved. Jenson understands the time and mission of the Church, along with the anticipatory Resurrection of Jesus, as the historical enactment of the full scope of Israel’s Promises: “Had Jesus’ Resurrection been immediately the End, Israel’s mission would have been aborted” \textsuperscript{[1]}, since the Israel that would come to worship at the throne of the Lord would not be the already historically embodied Israel to which the gentiles had come, Israel would not have fulfilled its mission to be blessing to all nations.\textsuperscript{39}

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\textsuperscript{37} Wayne D. Dosick, \textit{Living Judaism} (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995), 47-49.
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\textsuperscript{39} Jenson, \textit{Systematic Theology}, II: 171.
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The Church, therefore, is the space and time God opens up for the gentiles to come into Israel, as the branch grafted in, on the way to the Lord's consummation of his promises with all creatures. This is what Jenson will call the "eschatological detour of Christ's coming," a detour in the sense that the trajectory of Israel after the flesh is modified, thought not discontinuous and still recognizable as the same path, precisely in order that the gentiles may be incorporated in history into the worship of the one, true God.\(^{40}\) "The church," Jenson explains further, "is...an appropriate if beforehand unpredictable sidestep in the fulfillment of the Lord's promises to Israel." For those bamboozled by such a delay or detour, as some of those were in the Early Church, to whom the letters of Thessalonians or Peter were addressed for example, Jenson notes, "but, as the author of II Peter wrote, to those worried about the Lord's delay, 'The Lord is not slow about his promise...but is patient' precisely for the sake of Israel's mission. Nor indeed are detours uncharacteristic of the whole plot of JHWH's story with his people..."\(^{41}\)

The language of "detour" may be misleading here, or may disgruntle some. But what Jenson attempts to convey is the unique reality of the Church: "Thus the church is neither a realization of the new age nor an item of the old age. She is precisely an event within the event of the new age's advent." Ever the dogged ecumenist, Jenson also wants to navigate what he sees as the opposite extremes that schism has brought to conceptions of the Church in the past, and thus qualifies both the traditional Protestant and the traditional Catholic view of the Church: "We must be very careful about out language here; loose rhetoric can have disastrous spiritual consequences. Protestants have sometimes proclaimed with satisfaction or even glee, 'In the Kingdom there will be no church,' thereby in fact blaspheming. Catholics and Protestant social activists have sometimes oppositely talked of the church as a sort of overlap of the Kingdom onto the old age, thereby in fact depicting her as a space available for idolatry...."\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) I must admit I find the language of detour problematic, but the insight underlying Jenson's usage of the term so enticing as not to be distracted by semantic quibbles.

\(^{41}\) Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II: 171.

\(^{42}\) Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II: 171.
The Life of the Church is the concrete and available, not just ethereal, anticipation of the Kingdom when it comes together to follow its mandate, the inexchangeable Bride of Christ for the Last Day. So there is largely an inaugurated eschatology here that resonates fundamentally with certain realist sensibilities about the Church. But it is also an inaugurated eschatology in that the Church lives by anticipation and not by full actualization, where we do not manufacture the Church here as the Kingdom according to sociological categories, as certain other sensibilities maintain. That remains for the Last Day. And this recognition also acknowledges the Jewish sensibilities that, yes in fact, the new age is not here yet entirely when we look even cursorily at the world and its tragedies, and still awaits its consummation, where the swords will be beaten into plowshares.

Now that we have a sense of what the Church is for Jenson, and how it emerges out of Israel as an eschatological, but authentic and necessary, detour, the question remains of the reciprocal relationship. What of Israel now? And, more specifically, how does the Church view those, of the heritage of Ancient Israel like itself, but that do not enter her, but instead remain in the historical community of Rabbinic Judaism? This is where, in Jenson’s assessment, much traditional Christian theology encounters problems. Indeed, since the Church is taken by Christians to be an authentic detour in God’s fulfillment of his relationship to the world, the Church has most often been taken in Christian thinking as the overarching category of God’s People, or to be the only such category possible. So the Church subsumes Israel under its own wider scope. Jenson, however, argues that this understanding is not really the biblical understanding, from all the considerations he has so far entertained. Rather, fundamentally, what we must say is that primarily, “... the church is an event within Israel.”\(^43\) Jenson notes, commenting especially on the Second Vatican Council recovery of the term “People of God” as elemental to the Church, that “A search of the New Testament, however, quickly discovers something rather surprising: when the New Testament refers to the people of God it rarely has the church in mind. The nation of Israel continues to appear as ‘the people’ of God, often in quotation from the Old

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\(^43\) Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, II: 183, emphasis added.
Testament; and when the New Testament does refer to the church as God's people, this is in every case but one done at least in part to indentify her with Israel.”44 [See Appendix I & II]

If we can say, as Jenson thinks is the Apostolic Scriptures predominant mentality, that the Church is an event within Israel, and so is not, properly speaking, the overarching category of God's encounter with his people, then even if the Church must see itself as authentically the People of God coalesced by the true and culminating event of Jesus' Resurrection, this provides a context in which to view continuing Judaism as those still within the purview of Israel but not necessarily the Church. The possibility here is to see Rabbinic Judaism as another, not intrinsically exhaustive, but legitimate nonetheless “detour” in God’s fulfillment of Israel's Promises. Jenson argues thusly: “If the church can understand its own time in this way, as detour encompassed within the one extended event of Messiah’s advent [between Jesus’ Resurrection and the Consummation of the Kingdom], then the church’s question about the other community, gathered by descent from Abraham and Sarah and by Torah, acquires a precise context.” The possibility thus opens for the Church to consider Judaism also as authentic development during this time and in this space: “For Judaism thus appears to the church as a paired phenomenon in the time opened within the Messiah’s advent, and then the church may see Judaism as another detour taken by God on his way to final fulfillment.”45

Why does this relationship need to be re-envisioned or, rather, its objective appropriateness discovered anew? The question about the People of God and the relation of the entity Church to Israel and then to the enduring Synagogue, and God’s design for his people, has been reawakened once again in our era with poignant force as a result of the Shoah Event, and the complicity of certain Christian discourse in this incomprehensible and massive destruction of the Jewish People during the Second World War. This is the


question of what has been called “post-Holocaust theology”: how it is possible to continue to speak of God given this scenario, and how to reckon with the reality that Christian theological discourse itself played at least some role in the facilitation of this Event? Now I encounter this question heretofore latent, the question of Shoah. Thus far, I have left this question relatively unthematic, even though it is the one which eclipses all others in our era, since my contention is that the theology of Israel needs to be, and should have been, a standard locus for reflection of Christian theology irregardless of this Event, simply by the overflowing logic of the biblical experience.

For Jenson, as for much other recent theology, the unparalleled experience of Shoah in the twentieth century necessitates self-reflection and self-criticism on the part of the Christian Community. So Jenson describes the importance of the current moment for the Church’s theology: “What the Holocaust has forced on our attention—besides the evil of which humans are capable—was the urgent need for the church to appreciate in practice and theology the in itself manifest fact that ‘the Jewish way of life’ did not in fact end [with the destruction of the Temple and the coming of the Church].” Jenson’s assessment is that the materials were always there for a more robust theology of Israel, but the Church largely ignored the question: “The observations and considerations just adduced have been available through the history of the church, nor was the eleventh chapter of Romans recently added to the New Testament.” The current moment, however, heralds a return to this question, “What is new in Christian theology is sustained attention to them and the need to use them with a certain bent, provoked of course by Europe’s holocaust of Jews. Insight here has been demanded by guilt.” Jenson does not advocate a renewed theology solely on the basis of guilt, however, as he surmises, “The content of new gentile-Christian awareness should nevertheless not principally be guilt but rather sober recognition of the history and its present mandate."46

The present mandate of which Jenson speaks calls for a new understanding of the role of Israel as the People of God in the actualization of God’s providence. The previous

46 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 193.
understanding of what has been called “supersessionism” is what “must be and is being overcome,” Jenson argues. He describes “supersessionism” as the teaching or theological understanding “that the church succeeds Israel in such fashion as to displace from the status of God’s people those Jews who do not enter the church.” What Jenson endeavors to do here is to break a standard inference of the Church’s thinking. It is essential for the Church to acknowledge that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, and also that its own identity is one of the legitimate theo-communal locus to make this confession and to live in between the time of the Resurrection and the Second Coming—what Jenson’s calls God’s eschatological “detour”. But what the Church cannot infer from this, says Jenson, is the exclusion of continuing Judaism from God’s designs as a result: “she dare not conclude that the continuing separate synagogue is against God’s will.” That the Church thereby subsumes or displaces Israel as such is an erroneous inference that Jenson thinks must be corrected. And he thinks that there is space opened up for this perspective from the view of the biblical category of Israel, within which the Church is an event, but which also is not necessarily exhausted by the Church.

What does this make of the Church’s mission in Israel? In some circles, such considerations have led largely to an abandonment of the traditional realities of the Church. Jenson thinks this must be viewed soberly. He chastises much recent theology that has endeavored “to overcome ‘supersessionism’”, for this theology has “supposed that their effort is incompatible with belief that the advent of Jesus Christ definitely fulfills the promises to Israel.” In order to atone for the sins of the past, and to develop relations with the contemporary Jewish Community, much theology has assumed that overcoming replacement theology means attenuating the constitutive Christian claim that Jesus accomplishes Israel’s Promises. Jenson sees such reticence as basically an evisceration of the Church’s claim, its diachronic identity and its faithfulness to the Gospel. This supposition entails further, Jenson claims, “that supersessionism can only be avoided by repristinating a Christology in which Jesus is not quite identical with the Son, that is, by

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repristinating Arianism or Nestorianism. But after the decisions of the councils, such a withdrawal amounts to retreat from the faith.”  

The Church cannot thus relinquish its claim and still be the Church. It must continue everywhere and always to speak and live and illuminate the Gospel, including in relation to Rabbinic Judaism. But the God of the Bible is a God of surprise, who cannot be so circumscribed in advance. What the Church, and Paul, may perhaps think should have happened, that all Jews would come to Christ, did not happen even though it was bamboozling for the Church. So the Church rapidly became an almost exclusively gentile entity and Rabbinic Judaism emerged as another permutation of Israel in a separate community. Where Jenson will begin to challenge some traditional thinking is in reminding us that we cannot assume “that events at this point escaped God's providence” either.  

How then should the now predominantly gentile Church view the continuing Israel after the flesh as it has emerged in Rabbinic Judaism? Here is the substance of Jenson’s truly innovative proposed theologoumenon for the Church: that without vitiating its own claim, the Church can view Rabbinic Judaism as another authentic “detour” like itself in God’s design, one which maintains the theo-cultural particularity of Jesus’ humanity, in contrast to the universality of the Church, and just so is also fulfills some ordained role in God’s encounter with his people, that is, in Israel. Jenson explains: “The church, it is here suggested, should regard the continuing synagogue as a detour like herself, within the Fulfillment of Israel's hope. Between the end of canonical Israel and the absolute End the church waits by faith in Jesus’ Resurrection, and the synagogue waits by study of torah, read in a way devised by the old rabbis for just this situation of waiting. Finally, whatever the synagogue may judge about the church's faith, the church must think that the study of torah is indeed worship of the one, that is Triune, God.”  

48 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 335-336.  
50 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 194.
From a historical perspective, we can say that the Christian Community and Rabbinic Judaism both emerge as co-claimants to the heritage of Canonical Israel, each with its own particular continuities and discontinuities. So “their claims to continue to the worship of Israel’s God and their claims rightly to read Israel's Bible are precisely equivalent.”\(^{51}\) What this means, theologically, is that while the Church sees itself to have encountered the anticipation of Israel’s Promises in Jesus, on the way to their fulfillment, it can also recognize that a divinely ordained role does exist also for the other path through to the consummation of Canonical Israel, Rabbinic Judaism.\(^{52}\)

Jenson himself provides the obvious question to this account: “Why would God ordain two parallel detours?” in the fulfillment of his Promises. In Jenson’s understanding, this is precisely because of the dialectic between particularity and universality that is at the heart of the Church’s, and Israel’s, account of the world and God’s relation to it. While the Church universalizes Israel’s mission, that is, provides a space within history for the gentiles to come into Israel as they are, the loss of distinguishable Israel after Torah in the Church is precisely the loss of what the gentiles come to, the loss of Israel’s particularity, and so would be the loss of the one pole of the dynamic. Just as “Christ could not know himself in a polity alien to Israel without ceasing to be Christ”\(^{53}\) in the integrity of his humanity, so also Jenson infers, Christ would not be Christ in a body alien to the flesh of Israel, constituted as it is by its particular rites of socio-cultic demarcation and Torah observance.


\(^{52}\) We should remember, though, that even if we invoke parallelism as an appropriate theological principle, this is not entirely historically genuine. Historically, we must admit some asymmetry, given the antecedents of Rabbinic Judaism in Second Temple Phariseism, which even if we read Jesus within this tradition, there is relatively more continuity in the former than in the latter case; for the context, especially: David Novak, “From Supersessionism to Parallelism in Jewish-Christian Dialogue” in Braaten and Jenson, eds., *Jews and Christians*, 95-113.

So Jenson argues: “My central thesis is this: given what the church in fact quickly became and is, had the church been the only Israel in the time of its detour, the promises would have been not merely ‘fulfilled and not yet fulfilled,’ would not have displayed the famous ‘already but not yet’; they would have been simply in abeyance.” They would have been in abeyance lacking the particular content of what is promised. “I propose to my fellow Christians,” Jenson will then conclude, “that God wills the Judaism of Torah-obedience as that which alone can and does hold the lineage of Abraham and Sarah together during the time of detour.”54 The community of Rabbinic Judaism is the God ordained continuance, alongside the Church, of historico-cultural particularity in relation to Israel’s universal mission.

That both the Church and Judaism are paths in God’s fulfillment of the Kingdom, lastly, is the work of the Spirit. And that they are indeed the work of the same Spirit makes the coherence between Israel, Judaism and the Church. Jenson describes this as the work of the Spirit in the following way: “The Spirit did not first begin to liberate a human community when he intervened at Pentecost; indeed, the description of the Spirit’s being and work here presupposed was derived...mostly from the Old Testament. It is the Spirit who made prophets who makes the prophetic community; the Spirit who raised up ‘judges’ to free the tribes from historical impasse who frees the church from history’s intrinsic impasse; the Spirit promised a new life for Israel’s dry bones who is eschatological life’s ‘down payment’ in the church.”55 The Spirit is the freedom of human community to be what it cannot be simply on its own initiative: the Covenant People of God, the Divine Presence in Creaturely Reality.

This is the fundamental and necessary “spiritual” nature of these communities’ lives, according to Jenson, such that those who worship God do so in Spirit and in Truth, and those who will live ultimately live by the Spirit. So he says, “…no structure of historical


55 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 183.
continuity simply as such—and we must here include torah, circumcision, and the other national guarantees of Israel—can maintain the continuity of a people who have a mission other than their own perpetuation. Israel would not have remained Israel, nor would the church or synagogue remain themselves, unless God the Spirit used these structures to draw his people to their final goal.”

It is not the continuities of Torah and cultural demarcation as such, as by human effort or sociological continuance, that makes continuing Judaism a divinely ordained detour, as also such a detour in God’s plans does not occur without such continuities. Otherwise, we would be saying that God’s call is revocable and that God is not really the God of dramatic coherence with his previous acts. In the end, it is the Spirit himself who is the animating coherence of these two detours in God’s historical work: “Perhaps we may formulate so: the Spirit makes the common dynamism of Israel and the church, impelling Israel to become the church and liberating the church for the fulfilling of Israel.”

V: Coda—Together the People of God

In the context of contemporary religious pluralism, and in the shadow of the Shoah Event during the twentieth century, I have embarked upon a renewed discussion of the theology of Israel and what implications that might have for Jewish-Christian encounter. What we have seen, however, as I anticipated at the outset, is that Judaism represents a unique case for the Christian Community. Indeed, given the content of Jenson’s proposal, if correct in any sense, as well as the more general historical hermeneutic of parallelism, the Christian question of Rabbinic Judaism is not an “interreligious” question at all, but rather an “ecumenical” one, internal as it is to Christianity’s own story and discourse, even though burdened as it is with much historical difficulty and ambiguity. As Jenson describes his own development, he was converted to this understanding by the shift to parallelism as the model for interpreting the historical emergence of the two communities: both the Church and Rabbinic Judaism emerged as parallel, co-claimants to the heritage of Ancient Israel following the destruction of the Temple and in the wake of the ministry of Jesus the

56 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 194.

57 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 183.
Nazarene: “It is an abiding conviction: theological discourse among Jews and Christians is not inter-religious dialogue.”\textsuperscript{58} Such that, “For Christianity, Judaism cannot be an ‘other religion,’ and this is true whether or not Judaism can say anything reciprocal about Christianity.”\textsuperscript{59} Even though the context of religious pluralism endows the question of the theology of Israel with more force, the reflections which Jenson here offers cannot be simply extrapolated to a general case of theology of religions, precisely because of the unique and particular place of Israel in the very life of the Christian Community and its experience. Jenson advances theologoumena about the relation between the Church and Rabbinic Judaism as an interpretation especially of Romans 9-11, but also as a more global understanding of Scriptural coherence, an interpretation of how the entire Scriptural World interrelates as God’s encounter with the world, without simply seeing the progression of that narrative as a series of displacements of old things by new things.

As I have explored here, furthermore, a theology of Israel provides one potential integrative thematic for a systematic theology. The particular character of the Scriptures of Israel as Christian Scripture, the identification of the Christian God as the God of Israel, and the potential role of Rabbinic Judaism as one eschatological detour in Israel in relation to the Church, therefore, are offered as three dimensions of a coherent and interrelated theological understanding. What Jenson has further done, moreover, is to construe such a theology, sensitive to various loci, as one which potentially enables the Church, in the integrity of its own claim and identity, to also view Rabbinic Judaism as fulfilling a true and authentic role in God’s dealings with the world on the way to the consummation of the Kingdom, when the people of every nation will gather with Israel to worship at the throne of the Lamb and the entrance to the New Jerusalem is through the twelve gates of Israel itself.\textsuperscript{60}


\textsuperscript{60} Revelation 7; Revelation 21:12-14
Of course, the Church lives by anticipation of this consummation, for “God’s one ‘people’ cannot gather in this world before the last day, therefore the church can now be the people of God only in anticipation of that gathering as the community that lives by what God will eschatologically make of it.” Now during this time of anticipation, the existence of another “eschatological detour” in God’s Community may seem odd for the Church. But as with all the antimonies of its hope that are yet to have received full fulfillment in this world, this one also will be reconciled: “But that is to say, [Jesus’] return will terminate the separation between the church and Israel according to the flesh...As judgment in the present respect, what the Lord’s coming will dismiss is the generic ungodliness of the church’s dominating gentiles and continuing Judaism’s disbelief.” The role of Israel as such was never for itself but for the glory of God, and for the participatory enjoyment of such glory by the creatures. So at the consummation, the roles of the separate detours will end: “When Christ’s advent has been accomplished in such fashion as to make further coming superfluous, there will indeed be no more role for Judaism as a community separate from the church, or for the church as a community separate from Israel; both will be superseded in these roles.”

Thus Jenson has proposed it to the Church at least. Here is one genuinely creative re-appropriation of Paul’s seeming hope in Romans 9-11 that all Israel will be saved. In the final analysis, we still must ask whether this account is a viable contribution to the current state of Jewish-Christian encounter and whether it is diachronically coherent with the experience of the Church, a question I hope to pursue in further research. This would require a rigorous comparison of Jenson’s account with some other important, historical theologies of Israel, especially initially in the context of the original Jewish-Christian schism following the destruction of the Temple and then contemporarily with developments in Catholic theology from Nostra Aetate to the most recent conversations in Jewish-Christian dialogue as represented by the work of this center here at Boston College. There is also the

61 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 171-172.

62 Jenson, Systematic Theology, II: 335, 336.
crucial question of how such a proposal could be potentially received by Jewish theologians. I have developed this paper as one of Christian systematic thinking precisely so as not to preempt the Jewish answer to the same question. What I would venture to say, nevertheless, is that Jenson does provide the Church with an opportunity to reconsider and think rigorously through its relation to continuing Rabbinic Judaism as a part of a more general renewal of its theology of Israel. He uniquely proposes the beginnings of such a theology of Israel to the Church that *both* affirms an enduring and ordained role for Rabbinic Judaism in the worship of God and remains faithful to the integrity of the Church's constituting claim in Israel's Messiah. And few Christian theological commentators on this question have managed to keep both dimensions in balance.
Appendix I:
A Schematic of traditional replacement theology whereby the Church simply displaces Israel as the locus of God’s People
Appendix II:

A tentatively proposed schematic of a renewed theology of Israel in which Israel remains the overarching theo-communal category. The reciprocity of the arrows is not meant to signify a cyclic view of history, the predominant view is still the narratival-direction, represented by the final arrow, but only to signify the anticipatory-eschatological role of Jesus.