IN WHOM THERE IS NO DECEIT: LEARNING TO BE THE CHURCH WITH JEWS


Introduction: My presentation is focused on whether Jews and Protestants in North America can overcome current forces of alienation to mutually enhance one another’s faith and communal life.¹

In 2004 a public debate occurred over possible divestment by mainline Protestant denominations in the United States from corporations that do business with the State of Israel. This debate has focused our attention on Jewish-Christian differences in a major new way.

In Chicago, one fruit of the debate over divestment is greater awareness of each other in the Jewish and Protestant communities.² For example, my spouse and I traveled to Israel for the first time in December 2006 with a group of Protestant leaders hosted by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. We were invited to hear Israeli responses to the second war in Lebanon of summer 2006. We met with a variety of Israeli citizens and organizations to hear the spectrum of opinion. We also met with two Palestinian experts on the economic and political consequences of the ongoing conflict.

In addition to the insights I gained regarding the regional conflict, that trip deepened my awareness of how Protestants and Jews have much to offer each other in terms of faith and social witness.

In the story of the call of Philip and Nathanael in the Gospel of John, Jesus addresses Nathanael: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”³ Jesus’
movement began in the diverse world of first century Israelites before there was a normative Judaism. It evolved into a predominantly Gentile movement in conflict with early Judaism within decades. How can that original Israelite identity become a greater resource for renewing Christian identity today? What can Christians learn from Jews about faithful survival? Jewish and Protestant understandings of covenant, election, mission, and “Israel” have been sources of alienation. What if these symbols are now crucial to reconciliation between us?  

I. New Situation in Jewish – Christian Relations

Since the 1960s a new situation in Jewish – Christian relations has opened possibilities for interfaith dialogue. Vatican Council II pioneered the official repudiation and revision of church practices that aided and abetted anti-Semitism, including doctrines once considered orthodox. Historic Reformation churches, including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) made public statements that called upon its membership to adopt new ideas and attitudes toward Jewish neighbors. Although the pronouncements of the 1987 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church did not have confessional status, they were the fruit of years of dialogue. They include the following assertions:

We acknowledge in repentance the church’s long and deep complicity in the proliferation of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions through its “teaching of contempt” for the Jews. Such teaching we now repudiate, together with the acts and attitudes which it generates.
We affirm that the church, elected in Jesus Christ, has been engrafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore, Christians have not replaced Jews.

…that both the church and the Jewish people are elected by God for witness to the world and that the relationship of the church to contemporary Jews is based on that gracious and irrevocable election of both.

…when speaking with Jews about matters of faith, we must always acknowledge that Jews are already in a covenantal relationship with God.

We affirm the continuity of God’s promise of land along with the obligations of that promise to the people Israel.⁵

Christian theologies of Judaism and Jewish theologies of Christianity have appeared as the fruit of four decades of dialogue and the official Christian turn away from its anti-Judaism tradition.⁶ Of particular interest are Jewish scholars responding to the new theological situation in ecumenical Christianity in ‘Dabru Emet’ <>‘Speaking Truth’: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity.’⁷ Likewise, a group of Christian scholars responded to this Jewish document with ‘A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People.’⁸

Building on the ongoing work of these and other dialogues, what could Protestant leaders learn from a deeper engagement with Jewish thought and practice that might renew our own self-understanding as the people of God called ‘church’?
II. Jewish Survival Skills

Twentieth century Judaism survived the destruction of one third of its people in the Holocaust that occurred in the heart of Christian Europe. Out of the ashes of the Holocaust the Jewish people were resurrected in the new nation-state of Israel. Jewish institutions and ways of life have been revitalized around the world. This renewal of the Jewish people was made possible in part by the learning of survival skills in the Diasporas that followed the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem. The disaster of the Holocaust and the resurrection of the Jewish people occurred in a century when Christian minorities have faced martyrdom (for example, in Korea), and Christian majorities faced assimilation to secular societies (for example in Europe and North America). Can Christians learn from recent Jewish history and the renewal of Jewish identity how to survive and flourish in our different Diasporas in a time of globalization? Is “mutual enhancement” between our communities possible?

The phrase “mutual enhancement” refers to shared learnings in dialogue between Jews and Christians about beliefs and practices that help to renew one or both communities. For example, how could the Jewish mission tikkun olam, “to repair the world,” move some Christian missions beyond concern for individual souls to include healing their societies?

III. Overlapping Resources

There are many overlapping texts, concepts and practices between Jews and Christians that make not only dialogue but mutual enhancement possible: the shared Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, reading of scripture in liturgical settings, Bible study in congregation,
schools and homes, symbols and concepts of covenant, election, mission, identity (‘people of God’), divine unity, messianic expectation, the necessity of both divine Law and grace, etc.

IV. Evidence for the claim that “Renewed dialogue and mutual enhancement of Jewish and Protestant communities offer resources to help negotiate the public debate and help to overcome mainline spiritual malaise.”

A. Reinhold Niebuhr’s ministry and theology was significantly influenced by Jewish colleagues. His story provides a case study in the enhancement of Protestant leadership via encounter with Jewish activists and thinkers.9

During his ministry at Bethel Church in Detroit from 1915-1928, the mayor asked Reinhold Niebuhr to chair an interracial committee to study racial conditions in the city. This role introduced him to an attorney and philanthropist named Fred Butzel, the first Jew he knew personally. The pastor found the attorney to be “unsentimental, unpretentious, benevolently tough-minded, gifted with practical wisdom.”10 Through this acquaintance Niebuhr began what he called his “long love affair with the Jewish people.”11 At the time Niebuhr recorded in his journal that Butzel introduced him to “the superior sensitiveness of the Jewish conscience in social problems.” Niebuhr wrote:

The Jews are after all a messianic people, and they have never escaped the influence of their messianic, of if you will, their utopian dreams. The glory of their religion is that they are really not thinking so much of “salvation” as of a saved society.12
In his teaching career, Niebuhr was influenced by the writings of Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, Franz Rosenzweig and others. Beginning in 1938 and coming to fuller expression in the 1940s, he supported the creation of a nation-state for the Jewish people. His support for Zionism was based on the recognition that collective groups, like individuals, have a right to life, to survive with their own identity, rather than be assimilated by liberal democracies or exterminated by totalitarian regimes. Although he wrote of the problems of Arabs and Jews in Palestine in the 1930s, and later of the wars and crises of the Middle East, he was “consistent and uncompromising in his support and defense of the State of Israel.”

Niebuhr analyzed the problem of anti-Semitism in terms of both Christian history and human nature. On the one hand, the Church was guilty of “silence, indifference, and overt complicity” in anti-Semitic behavior. On the other, anti-Semitism was an expression of conflict between the will-to-power of a Gentile majority population over a minority that refused to abandon its distinctive identity in the face of persecution and assimilation. In 1944 Niebuhr wrote that “if I were a Jew I would not trust the historical processes too much and would not be too sure about the elimination of these evils” due to the sin of prideful majorities.

Writing in 1977, Dan Rice argued that Niebuhr’s analysis of anti-Semitism helps to explain the “new anti-Semitism” focused on the distinctive existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish nation: can a minority state exist amid a majority of nations that are suspicious or hostile to what makes it different from others?
In the case of the Church, complicity in anti-Semitism ignored basic beliefs shared by Jews and Christians that included:

1) “the personality of God”
2) “the definition of relationship between the self and God as a dialogue”
3) “the determination of the form of that dialogue in terms of a previous historic ‘revelation’ which is an event in past history, discerned by faith to give a key to the character and purpose of God and His relationship to man.”

B. Niebuhr on Jewish and Christian Differences

Although at times Niebuhr wrote as if there were one shared Judeo-Christian tradition, he also recognized certain theological issues divide Jews and Christians. And that continued Christian missions to Jews aimed at conversion prevented the creation of a true pluralism in religion and society. The dividing issues include:

1) Messianism
2) The “nature and extent of evil in history”
3) The “relationship between law and grace.”

In each case Niebuhr recognized real differences. Later in the paper I will take up the division over Messianism and the relationship of law and grace.

Concerning the evil in history, Rice finds irony in the fact that the objection to Christian Messianism by some Jewish thinkers is that the world is not yet redeemed. In fact we experience it as desperately unredeemed, so how can the Messiah have come in Jesus? Here Niebuhr’s account of human evil and sin appears to fit the Jewish
account. But one of the objections to Niebuhr’s theology by some Jewish thinkers is that his account of human nature is too pessimistic, his world looks too unredeemed.

Rice summarizes Niebuhr’s account of human evil:

1) “…man ever exceeds the bounds of his finiteness and creatureliness, and is universally involved in pride and rebellion against God”;

2) The human creature “can know himself and be completed only from beyond himself in God”;

3) “…history is penultimately tragic to its end and does not stand as the source of its own redemption.”

On his account Niebuhr found a different “emphasis” in Jewish accounts of evil but not a “radical contrast.” One point of difference was in the Christian sense of redemption. Rice summarizes: in Christ “the self-emptying and self-sacrificial love of God…takes upon itself the consequences of man’s sin. In that sense the world is redeemed in principle, but not yet in fact….redemption is actual in God’s grace-ful promise.”

A point of difference between Niebuhr and Jewish thinkers like Abraham Heschel was over the Christian notion of original sin, but not the universality of sin. Rice wonders whether Niebuhr’s Jewish critics are closer to a Pelagian, more optimistic understanding of human nature with Niebuhr representing their Augustine. This takes us to the concepts of redemption in the two traditions: “…within Christianity itself there is a correlation between the gravity with which the problem of sin is taken, and the quality of emphasis upon a specific understanding of the matter of atonement.”
In 1958, Niebuhr looked for some overlap between Judaism and Christianity when he wrote: “there is not very much difference between the doctrine of the yetzer hara and that of original sin.”\(^\text{22}\) (Yetzer hara is the Hebrew term for evil “inclination or impulse”).\(^\text{23}\) He stated that Jesus taught the doctrine of the yetzer hara while Paul taught a doctrine of original sin derived from Jewish apocalyptic sources.

Later in this presentation I will return to Niebuhr’s theology when I take up some objections to my thesis of mutual enhancement.

C. George Lindbeck’s “reappropriation without expropriation” of the ‘Church as Israel’ can become a powerful symbol for a new sense of corporate identity among Christians.

The Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck has proposed that Christians recover “in some sense” an understanding of the “Church as Israel.” He avoids the claim that the church is the “New Israel;” the New Testament does not use that phase. His goal is “to retrieve Israelhood for Christians without denying it to Jews.”\(^\text{24}\) Thus he intends to reappropriate the biblical symbol without expropriating it from Judaism. Among the sources of Christian supersessionism has been the denial that the Church is like Israel, along with the claim that the Church has replaced Israel in God’s economy. The challenge of his proposal is how to “reappropriate” the symbol for Christians without “expropriating” Israel’s very identity at the same time.

Here Lindbeck claims to find help from the “consensus” of historical-critical reading of Scripture: “taken as a whole, the Bible does not teach supersessionism in either its premodern or modern form.”\(^\text{25}\) In light of this “consensus” Christians should
affirm divine election of the Jewish people and reject supersessionism. By affirming God’s enduring covenant with Israel, the Church can learn to “identify itself with Israel.”

But why should the Church do this?

First, we could recover the Old Testament as essential to understanding ourselves. Lindbeck affirms the identity of the church as “a people that God has gathered out of many nations to bear corporate witness along with Israel to the promise made to Abraham and Sarah that their seed will bless all humankind.”

Second, we need the witness of the Old Testament to overcome the dichotomies we erect between:

…the individual believer versus the church;

…this material world versus a spiritual heaven;

…service to the world versus service to the church.

Third, the church needs this witness to overcome our tendency to replace “Israel’s election” with something else when we read the Old Testament. For the church often neglects the Old Testament in its common life with negative consequences like the following:

1) If Israel’s election was only conditional and if the church does not understand itself in relation to Israel in the Old Testament, then dangerous substitutions are made. Israel becomes replaced with “Christendom,” one nation identified as “Christian,” or one racial group. Dispensationalists identify Israel with “all Jews and only Jews.” But this identity is only provisional in their timeline of end-time events. In all these
substitutions the continuity between Israel and the ecumenical Church understood as Israel is lost.\textsuperscript{28}

2) In the midst of debates that divide churches, Christians need an “Israel-like sense of common peoplehood.” When Christians who strongly disagree can no longer see each other as Christian, churches suffer from a “holier-than-thou-lovelessness.” Argument and debate must be sustained over time if the church is to discern God’s will. But something more must bind Christians together.

3) If the Church can learn to overcome its replacement theology, and come to see itself in Israel, then more than the Old Testament can witness to God’s word. “The Jews remain God’s chosen people and are thus a primary source for Christian understanding of God’s intentions.”\textsuperscript{29} What can the Church learn from Judaism past and present?

…How to survive in North America and Europe after the death of “Christendom”; we can learn from Jewish examples how communities are built up.

…Without trying to emulate “rabbinic Judaism,” the church can learn from Jewish interpretive practices. For example:

…In the Talmud more than one interpretation of a text is held together in creative tension;

…In Judaism there is a rich history of commentary that involves both written and oral Torah and commentaries by rabbis. What can the church learn from its own past commentary on scripture?
Fourth, both Judaism and Christianity face a common challenge today: assimilation into secular consumer societies where traditions and communities are hard to maintain. By finding roots in the identity of Israel, its scriptures, and its endurance over time, the church can find ways to resist assimilation. It must overcome its history of expropriating Israel’s election; it must recover, retrieve, and re-appropriate its continuity with Israel.  

D. Irving Greenberg and Michael Kogan’s uses of the symbol of covenant suggest that wider understanding and use of this symbol among Christians could renew Protestant self-understanding and practice. This symbol was central to historic Reformed theology and continues to figure in historic confessions of faith and modern biblical studies.

The Symbol of Covenant for Irving Greenberg

For the Orthodox Rabbi Irving Greenberg, the symbol of covenant need not exclude Christians (and perhaps others) from “partnership” with God in redeeming the world. He understands covenant as initiated by God with Israel “to reconcile” the ideal with the real. By the ideal he means ‘creation redeemed and history fulfilled.’ By the real he means ‘creation and history’ as we experience them. The chosen people of Israel also recognized the covenant with Noah and his Gentile descendents (Gen. 9:1-2, 7).

When God and humans become covenant partners, they enter into “joint and parallel efforts and mutual obligations.” The covenant brings “dignity” to the human by engagement with God. Those called into covenant through Abraham, Sarah and Moses become God’s “avant-garde” in the work of redemption. Their example inspires other
persons, families, and nations to become involved in this work. Abraham and Sarah’s election was intended to “pluralize the ways to salvation” for others may follow Israel’s example.  

As a “nation of priests” chosen to bless the world, God calls Israel to be a “teacher,” a “model,” and a “co-worker” in redemption alongside others. In the Bible God’s acts of redemption and revelation are not limited to the house of Israel. In the time between the world as real and the world as redeemed, Israel is the “holy place / nation / time” where God’s life in the world is “more visible.”

Having dealt with the covenant with Abraham and at Sinai, Greenberg offers his interpretation of “The New Covenant of Christianity.” He plays with Paul’s metaphor of Gentiles as a “wild olive shoot” grafted into the “cultivated olive tree” of God’s people (Rom. 11:17-24). He writes, “it was God’s purpose that a shoot of the stalk of Abraham be grafted onto the root of the Gentiles.” Christianity does not take the place of the covenant with Abraham: “the emergence of this group was the expression of divine pluralism, God seeking to expand the number of covenantal channels to humanity without closing any of them….”

Christianity begins within Judaism but becomes autonomous. This was intended to preserve the uniqueness of the first covenant while allowing Christianity to explore different dynamics of covenant life. The Christian message was not heard by most Jews, not because they failed the covenant, but because that message was for the Gentile world.
With the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, Christians preached a “New Covenant” while Jews sought to renew the original covenant. As the ways parted between the two communities, there were negative consequences. Jews lost sight of “shared values, shared sense of covenant, shared memories” with Christians due to the Christian message that “Jesus was God.” Because covenant “themes of grace, love, and the pathos of divine suffering” were deeply associated with Christianity, they diminished in early Judaism. Spirituality was undervalued while “legalism” was accentuated.

Likewise there were losses as Christian teaching removed Halachah (“proper or normative behavior,” in this case involving the laws distinguishing Jews from non-Jews). Christians transferred redemption to a spiritual world, and fell into the dualisms of… soul versus body;

flesh versus spirit;

heavenly Jerusalem versus the earthly. (Cf. Lindbeck above.)

The Christian understanding of covenant accentuated the ideal over the real. Election became limited to Christianity. Greenberg finds other negative consequences in the Christian emphasis on…

- crucifixion and asceticism versus pleasure;
- fideism versus reason;
- “self abnegating sacrifice”; and…
- the image of humanity as powerless rather than as God’s covenant partner.
Today we must understand covenant after the Holocaust. Greenberg affirms pluralism as God’s intention for our situation. Pluralism is “the setting of healthy limits on absolutes, valid or otherwise.” It is needed as a “key corrective to the abusive tendencies built into all traditions of ultimate meaning.”

Pluralism for Jews means that “God has many messengers.” Greenberg affirms Christianity as “an organic outgrowth of Judaism itself.” It is a “divinely inspired attempt to bring the covenant of tikkun olam <repair of the world> to a wider circle of Gentiles. God intended that Judaism and Christianity both work for the perfection of the world (the kingdom of God). Together both religions do greater justice to the dialectical tensions of covenant than either religion can do alone.”

For Greenberg the exchange is mutually beneficial—Jews will profit from recognizing a shared covenant tradition. What might Christians learn from Jews? How “to enrich their own revelation by learning from the rabbinic response and development of halachah how humans become…cocreators of Torah, the divine word.”

Thus the covenant requires multiple communities and mutual criticism. Greenberg understands Jesus as a “failed Messiah” rather than a “false Messiah.” He prefers to see “Jesus as the path to the Father” rather than “Jesus as God incarnate.” But he acknowledges that Christians understand Jesus differently: “Jesus as a proleptic Messiah;” Jesus as Messiah in a world not yet redeemed; Jesus as God’s self-communication that is “deeply humble, not triumphalist.” These differences return him to the value of pluralism: “Implicit in pluralism is the recognition that there are limits in my truth that leave room for others….erroneous doctrines do not necessarily
delegitimize the faith that incorporates them.” In fact, within the dynamics of the covenant, Greenberg cannot totally rule out “Jesus as God incarnate” if this belief was meant for Gentiles and not for Jews.50

Greenberg affirms that God’s plan of redemption includes a covenantal pluralism. Jews and Christians share important beliefs and practices:

1) Hope for the transformation of all things while affirming human finitude;
2) Proclamation of their revelations in the heart of historical suffering;
3) “each has witnessed to God and the human covenantal mission in its own way.”
4) “Both need each other’s work (and that of others) to realize their deepest hopes.” Those others include other religious traditions.

He concludes by affirming that “…only Christians (although possibly also Muslims) may be deemed to be members of the people Israel…” despite differences in practice.52

The Symbol of Covenant for Michael Kogan

The Jewish scholar Michael Kogan also turns to the symbol of covenant to propose a new “Jewish theology of Christianity.” His definition is rooted in the revelation at Sinai where the LORD addresses the liberated Israelites: “Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5-6). Israel is God’s agent to teach the whole world of “God’s moral law,” divine unity, the rule of God over humanity and all things.54
Kogan’s “theology of Christianity” is that through the figure of Jesus (a Jew) as interpreted by Paul and early Christianity, the covenant has been opened up to gentiles (Rom. 11:17-25). God was addressing the world through Christianity, expanding the covenant.\(^55\)

The historic Jewish objection to Kogan’s theology is that Christian claims about Jesus turned him into a “God-man.” He replies, “…if Christians view Jesus as more than human, we <Jews> need not view him as less than Jewish. We can see Jesus…not as the Messiah conceived of by our rabbinic Judaism but as one sent by Israel’s God to open the covenant to Gentiles.”\(^56\)

Kogan’s theology responds to dialogue with Christians who “recognize the truth of our <Jewish> faith for us….”\(^57\) He seeks to return the recognition of “the truth of their <Christian> faith for them.” But how can there be “two religious truths”?

By holding that they were revealed at different times to different groups of people. We come to God via Torah and membership in the Jewish people (Israel, Jewish root); gentiles (who choose not to become Jews) come to God via Jesus and the church (Israel, Christian branch). One God, two revelations, two true religions.\(^58\)

In the context of dialogue among “enlightened Christians” and Jews, there need not be winners and losers. Rather there can be “two valid conclusions arising out of two valid premises. Torah as *etz hayim*, tree of life, or Cross as tree of life: two responses…” to the symbolic tree in the Garden of Eden. He finds no valid reason why there must be
“only one reading of a story…only one understanding of a problem, or only one solution” that emerges from dialogue.⁵⁹

Kogan believes that Christians have a place in the economy of Israel’s God and God’s mission to repair a broken world. Part of our Christian task is to “disentangle” the positive aspects of our “inheritance” from the negative elements of anti-Judaism in our history, belief and practice.⁶⁰

Some Jews have objected to Kogan’s thesis that he has over-inflated the meaning of “Israel” to include gentiles. He asks them, “If Christians now understand that through Jesus they joined themselves to Israel’s still functioning covenant rather than replacing one that had run its course, why should Jews not agree with this insight and accept Christianity as a branch of the good stock of Israel?”⁶¹

Idolatry threatens every religious tradition. In the case of Judaism, Kogan is concerned about “ethnolatry,” the threat that the Jewish people become the very center of worship. Without denying a sense of their “peoplehood” as crucial, Jews “must never forget that Israel exists for the glory of the Holy One….” God has initiated more than one religious people.⁶²

The fruit of forty years of Jewish-Christian dialogue has been the public recognition by many churches that “the church did not replace the Jews.” What is the fruit on the Jewish side? Kogan affirms that “…through Jesus, Christians joined Jews in the worship of the God of Israel.” The covenant “between God and Israel” is open to Gentiles. “Israel” means “all who followed the one true God….” “…Jews and Christians
are…root and branch of the same ongoing covenant.…” God has revealed truth in the history of “two distinct but closely related communities.”

Kogan goes so far as to speak of “Jewish Israelites” and “Christian Israelites” using overlapping “symbol systems.” In Judaism “Israel” stands for a “collective individual redeemer.” In Christianity the figure of Jesus plays this role. He affirms that: “…what the collective individual redeemer (Israel) accomplishes in Judaism, the single individual redeemer (Jesus) does in Christianity….” This insight frees Kogan to find the parallels in the two traditions and believe that they “both are of God.”

**Covenant in the Reformed Tradition**

How could these open and plural understandings of covenant challenge and renew Protestant self-understanding and practice? How could they inspire the Reformed family of churches to rediscover the distinctive symbol of covenant in our own tradition?

Among Protestants, an understanding of “covenant” was most developed in Reformed theology where it “usually refers to God’s gracious promise to Abraham and his spiritual descendents that God will be a God and father to them and that they, enabled by God’s grace, will live before God in faith and loving obedience.”

There are both inclusive and exclusive themes toward Judaism in Reformed covenant theology. A distinction was made between a “covenant of works” begun with Adam, and a “covenant of grace” that begins with Abraham and comes to fulfillment in Christ. There was an emphasis on unity in the “covenant of grace.” What is interesting to note here is that Old Testament Israelites are put under a “covenant of grace” rather than “works.”
Covenant themes run through most of the Presbyterian Confessions. They are the basis of our sacraments. The Confession of 1967 states, “God expressed his love for all mankind through Israel, whom he chose to be his covenant people to serve him in love and faithfulness…. Out of Israel, God in due time raised up Jesus…. He was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel.”

These themes became part of the Reformed doctrine of the church as summarized by Eugene Osterhaven:

The Christian church is the new covenant form of the people of God, the Israel of this age. It lives as the body of Christ, in communion with its head. It is as much a holy people, separated unto God, as was Israel of old. It is in the world but not of it. Its present existence is a pilgrimage, its destination eternal life with God.

The challenge of Jewish – Christian dialogue to this Presbyterian understanding is that our Confessions only refer to the Jews of the Old Testament. The sixteenth and seventeenth century Confessions assume that one becomes part of the “covenant of grace” by baptism and faith in Christ. How are Jews today part of the “covenant of grace”?

If Jews like Michael Kogan can imagine an open covenant, extending Israelhood to Christians, can Presbyterians imagine an open “covenant of grace” that includes the Jewish people? Certainly a new understanding of the covenant began with the statement of the 1987 General Assembly, “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews” from which I quoted previously in Section I.
Any future Presbyterian confession of faith must address the vital reality of the Jewish people beyond biblical times.

V. Some Objections to “Mutual Enhancement” of Protestants and Jews

A. The on-going Middle East conflict has so profoundly distanced Jewish leaders and organizations from mainline Protestant denominations, leaders and networks that a deeper dialogue and mutual enhancement have become fraught with accusations of anti-Judaism and public embarrassment.

This is an extremely important concern. If someday a General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to divest Presbyterian holdings in certain corporations that do business with the State of Israel, official relations between Jewish organizations and the denomination would be strained to the breaking point. However, our experience in the Presbytery of Chicago over the years has been that Jewish leaders continue to reach out to Presbyterian leaders and congregations.

Likewise Presbyterian leaders continue to be in dialogue with Jewish leaders and organizations. Sometimes the issues of the Middle East are the topics of discussion. And sometimes we agree to dialogues where we take those topics off the table to discuss other issues.

For example, in January 2008 the Chicago Board of Rabbis hosted a Bible study (Hevrusa) on the figure of Abraham for Presbyterian clergy and other Christian leaders. Rabbis and clergy studied together in large and small groups. The study was facilitated by Sarah Tanzer, a Jewish faculty member and New Testament scholar from
McCormick Seminary, and Esther Menn, a faculty member and Hebrew Bible scholar from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Just a few years prior, it would have been hard to imagine leaders from both communities meeting to study scripture together.

B. The Mosaic sense of God’s covenant as divine promise and commandment to the people Israel, taking the form of written and oral Law, collides with the Protestant emphasis on sola gratia (‘by grace alone’) and sola fide (‘by faith alone’) as the ground of salvation. An emphasis on covenant as a common symbol may ignore the theological differences in its meanings.70

The centrality of the Law or Torah in Judaism and Paul’s argument against “works of the law” on behalf of faith in Christ in Galatians 2:15 – 3:29 is a significant difference between the two traditions. In Deuteronomy 6:20 - 25 liberation from slavery precedes the gifts of land and the law. The covenant is summed up in the Ten Commandments that reference God’s act of liberation (Deuteronomy 5).

In contrast Paul re-evaluates the “works of the law” in Galatians. Reference to the faith of Abraham and the covenant with him that preceded the giving of the Law, a covenant that includes Gentiles, replaces the centrality of the Law given to Israel. The Law takes on a different value and function, secondary to faith. It has become the “curse” from which redemption is needed (3:13); a prison (3:23); a guard; a disciplinarian (3:24) before the coming of Christ. Not only has the law been displaced from centrality, it acquired negative associations. Abraham becomes the model of faith,
not obedience to God’s command. The association of the Law with liberation and land drops out of Paul’s argument.

Reinhold Niebuhr’s writings before 1958 also exhibit negative evaluations of Jewish law and legalism (his specific concern was Halachah, “proper and normative behavior” involving diet and the Sabbath). In his writings from 1939 – 1955, he poses a dichotomy between “legalistic” and “prophetic” Judaism. Normative Judaism fails to receive adequate attention in his work.

In The Nature and Destiny of Man, he critiques legalism as “intrinsically deficient” because according to the New Testament the Law cannot:

1) “do justice to the freedom of man in history”;
2) “do justice to the complexities of motive which express themselves in the labyrinthine depths of man’s interior life”;
3) “restrain evil.”

For the Christian he claimed “the doctrine of grace is the most significant distinction between Christianity and Judaism.” Niebuhr believed that “Christ’s revelation of a divine love which both negates and fulfills all law stands as the final norm of life.” Given this distinction, how could Niebuhr learn from the different valuation and function of the Law in Judaism?

Over time, he changed his mind on certain points. By 1958 he recognized that playing off “legalistic” Judaism against “prophetic” Judaism did not do justice to the evidence. He discovered “the dimension of love in the Jewish interpretation of the law.” He discovered “the resources of grace which have been exhibited in Jewish
legalism." Finally, he found ethical resources in Judaism, both for the person and society that were lacking in Christianity. Between Christians and Jews there were different and contrasting beliefs about law and grace but not absolute ones.

As a point of dialogue between Jews and Christians today, Paul’s negative valuation of the Law in Galatians stands alongside other New Testament texts in Matthew, James and Luke, and even in Paul’s use and references to the Law in Romans. There was more than one valuation and use of the Law in first century Christianity. The Law as predicated on liberation, and as an expression of love and justice provides covenant resources for both traditions.

C. The Jewish focus on a particular covenant, election and mission collides with the universalism of Christianity in both its traditional and modern forms. An unqualified Christian universal mission threatens the survival and flourishing of the Jewish people. Yet such a mission seems obvious from the New Testament and the global reach of Christian churches.

Two of my colleagues at McCormick Seminary, Ted Hiebert and Sarah Tanzer, have asked whether in this third objection we are dealing with “traditional stereotypes” here of “universal Christianity” and “particularistic Judaism.” Do these stereotypes hide the different dimensions of universality and particularity in both traditions and their trajectories of development over time?

Two important concepts used in both traditions are “the elect / chosen people” and “salvation.” Hiebert and Tanzer summarize: “Christianity is universal in defining who
may be part of ‘the elect,’ but it is particularistic in defining who gets ‘salvation.’ Judaism is particularistic about who may be a part of the ‘chosen people,’ but it is universal in its definition of who may have a share in ‘the world to come.’”

In the history of early Christianity, the belief developed that there is “salvation only for those within <the Christian community>; equal opportunity to join for those” beyond the community. Hiebert and Tanzer see this as a “direct result of… Gentiles entering the Christian community.” Early Christianity was universal in its “mission to the world.” But they note its exclusivity: “you have to convert to receive salvation.” Thus they find a “trajectory” that runs from “Paul to John to Justin Martyr”: “the difference between Judaism and Christianity is drawn more…sharply and the Christian attitude toward Judaism becomes more exclusive.”

Things developed differently in early Judaism. Survival issues were at stake with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and the Diaspora of the people. Judaism survived by its call to be a “kingdom of priests.” The practice and codification of “purity regulations” staked out clearer boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. At the same time, as a people living in Diaspora, the relation of Gentiles to Jewish hopes for “the world to come” came into play.

Hiebert and Tanzer find the stereotypes lead us to misunderstand both traditions: “In Christian theology, the community defines the boundary of the elect and the saved. In Judaism, election / chosen people and salvation / world to come are detached from each other. You do not have to be part of the elect to have a share in the world to come, and ethnicity alone is no guarantee of a share in the world to come.”
What to make of this reconstruction of the history of differences for Jewish – Christian relations today? Any dialogue between the two communities must attend to not only scriptural texts and theological concepts, but how these texts and concepts were used over time and the history of their effects on Jews and Christians. Stereotypes about each other’s beliefs and practices are the occasion for alienation and frustrate dialogue. When these stereotypes are tested by the results of critical exegesis and the history of early Christianity and Judaism, opportunities for revising our reading of texts and concepts open up. Christians can learn to hear how Jews understand themselves on their own terms and relate that back in such a way that Jews find themselves finally understood. Likewise, Jews can understand Christianity in new terms. The work of historical-critical scholarship is essential to the dialogue.

D. The differing messianic expectations of Jews and Christians and the different understandings of Jesus’ identity (‘failed messiah’ versus incarnation of God and Savior of the world) make deep dialogue and mutual enhancement difficult if not impossible.

Like the word ‘covenant’ shared by Jews and Christians, the word ‘messiah’ carries many different meanings in the two traditions. The variety in first century Judaism makes it difficult to ask if Jesus was the Jewish messiah. Michael Kogan summarizes the diversity:

As there was no “mainstream” Judaism <in the first century>, there was no single messianic expectation. Some expected a human Messiah of David’s line, a king who would bring victory over the Romans, political independence to Israel, and an era of peace and justice to the world… Others expected a heavenly figure,
preexistent and eternal, who would come with clouds and angels to judge and redeem Israel and the whole creation... Others expected two Messiahs, one royal, one priestly, with the Aaronic anointed taking precedence... One group spoke of a Messiah who dies before the last judgment... Others spoke of a suffering innocent... And many expected direct divine intervention into history without any Messiah figure at all.82

In dialogue with Christians, Kogan proposes that Jesus was “a Jewish Messiah” but one who serves to open the covenant to Gentiles. He was a “redeemer from Israel” rather than “the redeemer of Israel.”83

For Niebuhr the topic of Messianism is another point of similarity and difference between Jews and Christians. In the New Testament, “the meaning of life in history and the relation of history to its divine ground have been fully revealed in Christ; though the meaning will not be fulfilled till the end of history.”84 So in Niebuhr’s Christology there is both an already and a not yet. Christ is both the disclosure of history’s meaning but the fulfillment of that meaning has not yet appeared. As Rice summarizes, for Christians the continuity between Jewish and Christian Messianism is that “The promise of God to Israel was, in Christ, confirmed, extended, and clarified.”85

A problem for Niebuhr in dialogue with Jews is that a Christ who reveals the meaning of history without redeeming it does not fulfill several Jewish meanings of “messiah.” But Rice writes that for Niebuhr, “Christ was not the expected Messiah of Judaism.”86 And this undermines the anti-Jewish Christian claim that “Judaism rejected its own prophetic heritage in repudiating Jesus as ‘the Christ’....”87
The offense of Christian Messianism is that it proclaims a crucified Messiah and not a “triumphant Messiah.” Niebuhr claimed “in the drama of <Jesus’> crucifixion, we have a revelation of the divine mercy in which God takes the sins of the world upon himself.”

Talk of a messiah or the messianic brings Christians and Jews together for “where a Christ is not expected” there can be no messianic claim on history. Niebuhr extends Paul’s metaphor that the crucified Christ is a “stumbling block to Jews.” For Jesus “must disappoint, as well as fulfill, expectations…. Every messianic expectation contains an explicit or implicit assumption that history will be fulfilled from the particular locus of the civilization and culture which has the expectation.” This critique applies to both Jewish and Christian expectations.

Christ, according to Niebuhr, failed to live up to Jewish expectations. And yet Niebuhr claimed to find the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New, a point of Christian difference in his dialogue with Jews. Perhaps at this point he most differs from later Christian theologians like Paul van Buren, Clark Williamson, A. Roy Eckardt, and John Pawlikowski who do not read Jesus’ story as the fulfillment of prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. This is probably due to the maturing dialogue between Christians and Jews in the late twentieth century which Niebuhr along with others helped to initiate.

Finally he affirmed that truth is something human beings can never absolutely have. The truth of Christ belongs to God, and not to the Church, which is always tempted to the “spiritual pride” that it possesses the truth.
VI. Conclusion

The practices of Jewish-Christian can help to renew Protestant congregations and institutions via learning Jewish survival skills, practices of identity-formation, and ways of negotiating secular, pluralistic societies. We can learn from Jews that attracting vast numbers of members is not the most important sign of vitality or faithfulness in the service of God. A small people in partnership with God can change and enrich the earth. A greater engagement with our Jewish neighbors can help us discover what we may do in partnership with Jews to repair the world. What we can learn from this engagement will serve us well as we engage with others like the growing Islamic community in North America and Europe.92

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1 The word “mutual enhancement” refers to shared learnings in dialogue between Jews and Christians about beliefs and practices that help to renew one or both communities. For example, how could the Jewish mission tikun olam, “to repair the world,” move some Christian missions beyond concern for individual souls without healing their societies?
3 John 1:47b NRSV.
4 In this paper the name “Israel” refers to the people of God constituted by the covenant with Abraham and established at Sinai. The modern-day nation of Israel is designated as “the State of Israel.” “Israel” names a religious people across time and space. “The State of Israel” names a modern nation that defends the Jewish people’s right to exist among other nations. It is important not to confuse these two uses of the name “Israel.”
8 Mary C. Boys, ed. Seeing Judaism Anew, xiii-xix.
12 Fox, 93.
13 Rice, 112.
14 Ibid., 115.
15 Ibid., 119, quoting from Niebuhr’s introduction to Waldo Frank, The Jew in Our Day (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), 11.
17 Rice, 122.
18 Rice, 125.
20 Rice, 125.
21 Rice, 126.
22 Rice, 127 quoting from Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 101; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 193.
23 For this translation, see Geoffrey H. Hartmann, “Imagination,” in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs (New York: Free Press, 1987), 451. The word is found in Genesis 6:5: “every inclination of the thoughts of <humankind’s> hearts was only evil continually”.
25 Ibid., 362.
26 Ibid., 362-3.
27 Ibid., 363.
28 Ibid., 363-4.
29 Ibid., 364.
30 Ibid., 365.
32 Ibid., 142.
33 Ibid., 145.
34 Ibid., 148-9.
35 Ibid., 149. For God’s work beyond Israel, Greenberg cites Gen. 14, 18ff; Num. 22-24; Isa. 20, 21, 23; Jer. 1:4-10. For the presence of the other nations at the “end of days,” he cites Isa. 2:1-4; Mic. 4:1-5; Isa. 57.6-7.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 149-50.
38 Ibid., 150.
39 Ibid., 152.
40 Ibid., 154.
41 ‘Halachah’ is Hebrew for “the way.” It means “Law established or custom ratified by authoritative rabbinic jurists and teachers. Colloquially, if something is deemed halakhic, it is considered proper and normative behavior.” In Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. Christianity in Jewish Terms, 404.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 153.
44 Ibid., 154.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 157.
50 Ibid., 157-8.
51 Ibid., 158.
52 Ibid.
53 Michael S. Kogan, Opening the Covenant, 10. This may be Kogan’s translation of Exod. 19:5-6.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 33.
56 Ibid., 34.
57 Ibid., 34-5.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 35.
60 Ibid., 72.
61 Ibid., 75.
62 Ibid., 75-6.
63 Ibid., 166-7.
64 Ibid., 167.
69 Ibid., 87.
70 David Fox Sandmel, “Israel, Judaism, and Christianity,” in Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. Christianity in Jewish Terms, 166: “Jews can recognize Christians as people who believe in the God of Israel. From a Jewish perspective, however, that belief, in and of itself, does not make Christianity part of Israel, as we understand Israel, that is, a people that has a special covenant with God who has given us a specific land. Although Christians can acknowledge that Israel’s covenant with God is eternal, fidelity to Jewish tradition precludes our recognition as Israel of those who do not meet our definitional criteria.”
72 Rice, 130 quoting from Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 105-6; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 196.
73 Rice, 131.
74 Ibid., quoting from Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 104; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 193-194.
75 Ibid., quoting from Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 104; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 195.
76 Ibid. See Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 185-188.


94 From a handout entitled “Universalism (Inclusivity) and Particularism (Exclusivity): Perspectives from Christianity” by Hiebert and Tanzer for their course “Biblical Foundations of Jewish and Christian Difference,” 1.

95 From a handout entitled “Universalism and Particularism” by Hiebert and Tanzer for their course “Biblical Foundations of Jewish and Christian Difference,” 3. Note that in Reformed theology it is God, not the community, who ultimately “defines the boundary of the elect and the saved.”


97 Rice, 129, with reference to Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 101-2; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 193.


100 From a handout entitled “Universalism (Inclusivity) and Particularism (Exclusivity): Perspectives from Christianity” by Hiebert and Tanzer for their course “Biblical Foundations of Jewish and Christian Difference,” 1.

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103 Rice, 129, with reference to Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 101-2; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 193.


105 From a handout entitled “Universalism (Inclusivity) and Particularism (Exclusivity): Perspectives from Christianity” by Hiebert and Tanzer for their course “Biblical Foundations of Jewish and Christian Difference,” 1.

106 From a handout entitled “Universalism and Particularism” by Hiebert and Tanzer for their course “Biblical Foundations of Jewish and Christian Difference,” 3. Note that in Reformed theology it is God, not the community, who ultimately “defines the boundary of the elect and the saved.”


108 Rice, 129, with reference to Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 101-2; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 193.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid., 123.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid., quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, Pious and Secular America, 99; Brown, ed. The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, 192.

113 Ibid., quoting from Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume II: Human Destiny, 16.

114 John Pawlikowski has proposed an incarnational christology that has no need of the traditional Christian theme of Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by a messianic Jesus who then replaces Jewish Messianism: John Pawlikowski, “Christology and the Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Personal Theological Journey,” Irish Theological Quarterly 72 (2007), 147-67. For a summary of his nuanced position, see Michael S. Kogan, Opening the Covenant, 154-64.


116 A shorter draft of this paper was presented at the Sixth International Academic Conference of Korean, Brazilian and German Theologians, Hanshin Theological Seminary, Korea, 19 August 2008.