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Christianity in Jewish Terms

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A Précis and Evaluative Commentary

by Jay Cooper Rochelle

This important new book contains essays on themes Jewish scholars have chosen to be those most challenging and useful to Jewish-Christian dialogue in the new century. Each chapter has a lead essay written by a Jewish scholar, followed by responses from a second Jewish scholar and a Christian scholar. This project is the result of work by the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies of Baltimore.

The book begins with "[Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity](#)" that was published as a full page with signatories in the *New York Times* for 10 September 2000. This statement broke new ground as the first to state in carefully chosen words that "Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon," nor "an inevitable outcome of Christianity." This assertion was controversial in the Jewish community and prevented several prominent Jewish scholars from signing. The total statement acknowledges the commonality between Christians and Jews in scripture, the understanding of God, moral principles, and the place of Israel. One paragraph assures Jews that Jewish practice would and need not be weakened by acknowledging and pursuing new relationships with Christians. Dabru Emet is generous and cordial and begs to be taken seriously and practically by Christians.

The opening chapters of the book discuss "what to seek and what to avoid in Jewish-Christian dialogue," a helpful set of suggestions by David Novak, and a brief history of Christian-Jewish interactions over the ages by Robert Chazan. Then follow chapters on the Shoah, God, Scripture, Commandment, Israel, Worship, Suffering, Embodiment, Redemption, Sin and Repentance, and the Image of God. The Epilogue contains a brief essay by George Lindbeck on the future of the dialogue, followed by a discussion among the editors on the same theme. The following notes cover some of the major chapters.

In the chapter on Israel, Irving Greenberg says that the Covenant is both central to Israel's understanding of calling and an innovation unknown to previous religions. Greenberg explores this theme of Covenant and suggests that, broadly, the theme does two things: first, it gives dignity and stability to humans and makes them know that God is deeply involved with them; and secondly, covenant teaches humans not to consider their power as absolute, but within a framework of accountability and relationship to God.

Greenberg's special twist is his claim that to avoid totalitarianism, human culture, power, and institutions must be broken up into smaller units. The concept of covenant allows for smaller groups to bond together in order to engage in tikkun olam (repairing the universe); but this call to change the status quo has to be framed within a humane setting, hence the election of Israel as "pace-setter for humanity." Israel comes into being as the mediator between the world-as-is and the world-as-it-might-be, between reality and ideal.

The covenant with Abraham and Sarah shows that election is a gift to family and not to individuals. The children of Israel are teachers to humanity to bring the message of the presence of God – which is the blessing of Abraham – and the call to walk the way of the Lord through life (144f.). The covenant at Sinai provides an expansion beyond blood-ties and family to the inclusion of mixed multitudes in the election of God (146). To be a blessing to the world, Israel must play three roles (148ff): as *teacher* – passing on values to the next generation; making the witness; as *model* – creating a liberated zone where the covenant values are lived; and as *coworker for redemption* – in concert with other nations.

Greenberg insists that the vindication of Israel alone would be "a morally unsatisfactory outcome of the divine election of Abraham" (149). His position is that the New Covenant of Christianity (149ff.) had to grow out of Judaism in order to retain and extend the values of Judaism. This covenant had to find its autonomous existence in order to include others, and it would grow separately while Judaism renewed under rabbinic flowering. This covenant is initially signaled by the crucifixion of Jesus and the resurrection experience of the disciples.

Troubles arose when Christianity emphasized the divinity of Jesus to the horror of the Jews. Greenberg says that, to distance themselves from developing Christian theology, Jews relinquished their own values of grace, love, and the pathos of divine suffering as having become too Christianized. In their distancing of themselves from Jews, unfortunately, Christians eliminated halachah, spiritualized redemption, and took away the need for the land. Both developing religions lost by these moves.

With time, Greenberg says that the narrowing of the message penalized Christianity because the growing stress on asceticism devalued the spiritual significance of pleasure. On the other hand, Jews saw pluralism only within Judaism, hence they concluded that Christianity was illusion and idolatrous because it worshiped a man.

After the Shoah (154ff.) the theme of Covenant, according to Greenberg, requires further re-thinking. Greenberg's view is that we must now stress that contempt cannot be separated from human responsibility, and that pluralism is God's intention in the world as a check on the sort of behavior and thought that leads to holocaust(s).

To continue the development of Jewish-Christian relationships, we need to take the view, says Greenberg, that Christianity grows out of the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants, just as does Judaism. Christianity is thus a "divinely inspired attempt to bring the covenant of tikkun olam to a wider circle of Gentiles" (155). The Jewish focus on family can become tribal and needs a corrective. One could see Jesus as a "failed messiah," and allow that concept to become fully formed in a variety of interpretive ways (156).

David Novak, in his chapter, stresses that the *mitsvoth*, or commandments, fit into *halachah*, the entire system of observance of the laws of the Torah. The *mitsvoth* are ways to be faithful within a covenant relationship. The question of creating a life which is fit to our faithfulness is not the issue between Christians and Jews; the division, as Novak rightly observes, is over what the commandments are, "and this *what* depends on *when* and *where* one hears them and *how* one is to do them" (117). The Christian understanding was that, since Messiah had come in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, many of the laws of the Torah could be dropped. Hence the ritual and *kashruth* laws were abandoned. This means that the difference of Judaism from Christianity and Christianity from Judaism is still greater than any commonalities the two communities now share (124).

Novak suggests two ways to develop commonalities: first, through the broad area of ethics, the proper structure of human relationships; and secondly, through the analogies between forms of worship as praise to the God who is the source of the covenant and the ethical relationships called for by the covenant.

In Leora Batnitsky's chapter on suffering, she calls attention to three ways the suffering of Jesus Christ has been interpreted. First, Christ is seen as the suffering servant of God – the model for which is Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This reverses the usual view of suffering as result of sin; the retributive view is overturned in the Christian reading of Isaiah. The customary biblical view is that God's blessings are showered on the good, with retribution visited on the wicked; suffering is thus punishment for sin. A minority report is found, e.g., in Deuteronomy 3: suffering is not the result of moral inferiority but from a kind of superiority. Second, Christ's death is vicarious, i.e., substitutionary; and third, Christ's suffering brings consolation to others – II Cor. 1:3-7.

Batnitsky claims that the central difference between Judaism and Christianity is that Jews have seen the suffering servant as the whole people of Israel, whereas Christians see the servant focused in the figure of Jesus. With regard to suffering and chosenness, both the rabbis and the early Christians disconnect sin from suffering but maintain the view that suffering and election go together. Suffering has played a key role in the narrative of Israel because of the suffering of the Jews across the centuries. The two perceived reasons for Jewish suffering have been, first, their failure to live up to their potential, and second, the inability of the nations to follow their example. Jews tend to stress suffering as the just chastisement of the beloved son who has gone astray.

In a look at the theme of suffering in the middle ages, we learn that Judah Halevi argued that the Jews suffered for two reasons: First, by assimilation with other nations, they lose their chosen status; or second, they are the heart of the body of the world and thus suffer when the other organs are ill. Thomas Aquinas argues similarly to Halevi, but with this important difference: suffering cannot eradicate sin, only grace can, but suffering is a step toward spiritual health. Christ serves thus as an example to others.

"In both cases, the suffering of God's chosen is the result of a rejection of God. But in the Christian case this rejection is caused ultimately by human nature, whereas in the Jewish case it is caused ultimately by human choice" (213). For Jews, suffering can be averted, for Christians it is inevitable. This is a fair reading of traditional Christian teaching.

In modernity, Jews argue that suffering has no intrinsic value, no value apart from its witness to the strength of monotheism (the view of Hermann Cohen). Again, modern views are that sin is a deviation from God that results from human freedom, but not a disease that fatally harms human nature or requires inordinate suffering.

After the Holocaust, many Jewish thinkers have abandoned the view that suffering is necessarily connected to chosenness. While some affirm the theological and ethical value of suffering, any view that suffering has intrinsic value is rejected. The Christian view (as noted by reference to Simone Weil and C. S. Lewis) holds that intrinsic value may be found in suffering to match the theological and ethical value. The danger is that of valorizing suffering in itself. (Batnitsky's choice of Simone Weil is an odd one: a Jew by birth, Weil identified with the Christian faith but was never baptized, and thus never became part of the church.)

Emmanuel Levinas, Batnitsky adds, tries to find a way out by affirming the meaninglessness of suffering, on one hand, while he maintains that suffering for others may be an ethical choice that redeems the suffering, so to speak, from meaninglessness. In fact, for Levinas, the very meaninglessness of another's suffering makes it imperative for me to enter into it.

In his response to Batnitsky's chapter, Robert Gibbs objects that contemporary views by such thinkers as Levinas, Cohen, and others are, in fact, considered by most Jews to be not Jewish, at all, but Christian. Gibbs' own view is that ethical choice requires vulnerability and thus the possibility of suffering. Unfortunately, the view of suffering as ethical and valuable is writ deep in the history of Judaism and cannot simply be erased because of the Holocaust.

Gibbs offers his own three ways to see suffering:

1) suffering is *representative* - someone suffers for the sake of others. This view continues to hold the most possibility because it preserves one's suffering in the context of all suffering and offers a place to see oneself suffering to aid others - this is a bridge between Jews and Christians.

2) *subordinating* - someone suffers for himself but within a larger whole. This view makes our suffering merely part of all the suffering of the world.

3) *totalizing* - someone suffers with others to achieve something larger. The whole world needs suffering in order to achieve unity, and Jewish suffering simply fits into the larger whole.

Gibbs also writes of the asymmetry of suffering; my suffering is unique, particular: "who suffers is a vital aspect of interpreting representative suffering" (225). We cannot make sense of or put a judgment on another's suffering but we can claim that our own suffering is meaningful.

John Cavadini, in his response, sums up two tensions he sees in Batnitzky's essay: the tension between retributive and vicarious suffering; and the tension between affirming the theological/ethical value of suffering for others while denying the value of suffering itself. To find a way out he turns to Augustine (231ff.), who taught that we are bound up in original sin, almost "intrinsic" sinfulness; each act of sin is a reenactment of the original sin of choosing one's own good above God. This allows Augustine to make a theodicy, a "justification for God," based on the evil we experience as retribution for original sin. At the same time this original sin is not personal, which allows Augustine to say that there is no necessary connection between sin and punishment (suffering). Suffering is evil for Augustine; it is not intrinsically valuable, and only in Christ can we perceive it to have any value. Christ's voluntary identification with our suffering can give meaning to our involuntary suffering. Faith in Christ, for Augustine, enables the Christian to use something which is otherwise unusable; namely, suffering. Thus Cavadini charts his (Augustinian) path out of the predicament.

Lawrence Hoffman covers the Jewish background to Christian worship in his chapter. This chapter is a real tour de force, and would be useful to lift for teaching purposes in any church or college. Hoffman asserts that Christianity and Judaism are (at least) two distinct and different religions, though they begin from the same point of origin: the Judaisms before and shortly after the Temple was destroyed (70 C.E.). After the destruction of the Temple, in part due to the messianic claimants from the time of Jesus until the end of the second Jewish revolt led by Simon bar-Kochba (132-135 C.E.), and in part due to Christian development apart from observance of all the *mitzvoth*, the two movements emerged separately by mid-second century. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the heart of the Christian story. While this belief was in continuity with a portion of the Jewish community, it became the dominant motif in the expansion of Christian faith whereas the Jewish "master story" continued to be the Exodus motif.

Mission efforts into territories where Judaism was not well known or unknown led to further diminution and downplaying of the common background. After the validation of Christianity and its legitimization as religion of the Roman Empire from 313-350 C.E. under Constantine and his followers, the distinctions increased until the common background was no longer memorable or recognized. By the time of the first written resources for worship (ca. 600 C.E. for both faiths), we are dealing with two totally different religions.

The addition of table fellowship (Lord's Supper) to word service (Synagogue) distinguished Christian from Jewish worship and led in the direction of further sacramental development. Baptism, while it has origins in Jewish proselyte baptism at and after the time of Jesus, was a ritual that took on a clearly different meaning among Christians. Daily prayer, always close to ordinary people in Judaism, became in time the domain of monastics in Christianity and consequently became estranged from

the lives of the common folk. The note of expectancy for the return of Jesus the Christ also marks a difference between Jewish and Christian worship. Christians sound the note *maran atha*, "Our Lord, come!" in their liturgies. The Eucharist celebrates the presence of the risen Christ in the life of the community through the visible means of bread and wine.

The development of ranks of clergy also separates Christianity from Judaism. Jews never "ordained" rabbis until America. Concomitant views of priesthood among Christians are foreign to Jewish thought.

The Jewish liturgy achieved its basic structure and calendar, Hoffman notes, by 200, the Christian by 325. Jewish liturgy originally was divided between temple and home, Christian liturgy between church and home (with daily prayer at home). After the destruction of the temple the synagogue took on more the quality of a worship center.

The similarities between Christian and Jewish worship include looking backward to covenant: Israel at Sinai, Christians on Calvary; and looking forward to messianic future, whether first or second coming. Both religions have a concept of liturgy as *ordo* (*siddur*) with some basic shared contents: a call to prayer, scripture reading(s) following by exposition; prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and the note of expectancy for the coming kingdom. Jews and Christians share a two-fold understanding of remembrance (*zakkar=anamnesis*) as both our immersion in the remembered event (Passover, Lord's supper), and the call upon God to remember his people gathered in prayer via covenant. Hoffman underlines our commonality in sharing the three notes of *sacrifice*, *remembrance*, and *thanksgiving*, although he prefers "praisegiving" because of different understandings of grace (185-187).

Robert Wilken in his response notes (199) that "what binds Christian worship to Judaism is the language and imagery of prayer; what sets it apart is the person of Christ, who is present in both parts of the liturgy." Wilken adds *sacrament* to the three notes Hoffman sounds and claims, rightly, that this frames the unique difference.

This is an accurate statement of the difference, and it is to Hoffman's credit that he did not enter the thicket of sacramental views and theologies, but reports instead on the primary distinctions. Sacramental theology separates Christian worship even further from its origins, as does the increasing emphasis upon a separate caste of ministry, which in time develops into the threefold office of bishop, priest, and deacon. In order to be complete, Hoffman would have had to cover this development; but in order to remain open to dialogue, he chose wisely in not covering that territory. Nonetheless this remains at the center of differences between Judaism(s) and Christianit(ies) in our own day and, to the degree that sacerdotalism and so-called "high" sacramental theology are the majority view, to that degree will Christians remain separated from Judaism.

To sum up, then: the level of scholarship is consistently high throughout the book; the responses are often as interesting as the keynote essays. The book breaks new ground in several areas, but I suspect it will break new ground in *all* the areas it covers for people who are not fully acquainted with the depth of dialogue that has been taking place between Jews and Christians over the last forty years.

The level of readability is that of most anthologies, uneven. Some essays are much more difficult to understand than others. In some cases, the responses do not always match the content of the essays; this is due, in part, to last-minute changes in some of the lead essays over which the editors had no control. Understanding will, of course, depend on the reader's familiarity with the foundations of Judaism and/or Christian theology.

This book served as the text for an adult course which I taught in Fall of 2000, with both Jewish and Christian participants, under the auspices of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies of Muhlenberg

College, Allentown, PA. A follow-up course was held in Winter of 2001. The comments above about the readability of the text are based not on my own reading alone, but also on comments from the class.