The Ways of God: Judaism and Christianity

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**A Document for Discussion within the Church of Sweden. Approved by the General Synod of the Church of Sweden on September 19, 2001. **

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Introduction

This document concerns the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. Its aim is partly to provide some basic reflections, made after many years of dialogue between representatives of the Church of Sweden and of Judaism, and partly to formulate starting points – from this perspective – for continued work in the Church of Sweden concerning its own faith, confession and teaching.

It is important to clarify from the very beginning that in this context, when using the terms “the Jewish people” and “Judaism”, we do not primarily mean historical phenomena. Rather, we speak of *a contemporary people and the faith of this people,* the millions of men and women now living who call themselves “Jews”, and the traditions – biblical, theological, ethical, ritual, historical, political – that are at the core of Jewish religious and ethnic identity.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has worked for almost half a century with the issue of the relationship between the Christian faith and Judaism. A presentation of this process was given in *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People: Statements by the WCC and its Member Churches*.[1] It gives the following summary of the fundamental consensus found in official documents from the Churches:

- God’s covenant with the Jewish people is still valid;
- Antisemitism is a sin against God and human beings;
- Coercive proselytism directed towards Jews is incompatible with Christian faith.

In that text the two latter points are described as emanating from the first and fundamental insight that God’s covenants are eternal and were not annulled when the Christian Church arose.[2]

In 1988, a consultation was held in Sigtuna, Sweden, to discuss the document Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue, which the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches had, in 1982, urged the member Churches to study and act upon. It says among other

things:

Teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism in certain Christian traditions proved a spawning ground for the evil of the Nazi Holocaust. The Church must learn so to preach and teach the Gospel as to make sure that it cannot be used towards contempt… (3:2)

There are special reasons for the Lutheran community to be unambiguous on this question. The Lutheran World Federation, at its seventh General Assembly in 1984, approved a statement that was commended to the member Churches. Preparatory work for this had been done at a special consultation in Stockholm in 1983 when it was stated:

We Lutherans take our name and much of our understanding of Christianity from Martin Luther. But we cannot accept or condone the violent verbal attacks that the Reformer made against the Jews.

Further on in the report it is emphasised that Christological reading of the Scriptures should not lead to anti-Jewishness, and even less to antisemitism. In connection with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II the House of Bishops of the Church of Sweden made a pronouncement whereby it strongly distanced itself from antisemitism:

It is now fifty years since World War II ended in Europe. When the gates to the concentration camps were opened, the world could see the full extent of the persecution of the Jews. A systematic crime had been committed against the Jewish people and thereby against all humanity.

In the history of the Church, antisemitism has many times been present in proclamation and action, obscuring the Holy Scriptures' view that all human beings are equal before God. Anti-Jewish statements made by Martin Luther have been used for antisemitic purposes. The attitude of acceptance, shown by some Swedish clergy and Church members towards Nazi ideas during the war, made our Church an accessory to what was perpetrated.

Today, antisemitism is still alive in different parts of the world. Anti-Jewish statements are made and anti-Jewish actions are performed in our society as well. These are signs that bode ill; they worry and challenge us and all people of good will to be vigilant.

We repudiate all forms of antisemitism. We must learn from history and reject all attempts to deny the atrocity that was committed in the centre of Christian Europe and all tendencies to diminish the importance of what happened. We seek to work in our Church for the eradication of all that can be interpreted as antisemitism or contempt for the Jewish people, and to work for the defence of their right to their own history, faith and practices.[3]

Represented by several distinguished theologians, the Church of Sweden has been, and still is, involved in the ecumenical work to establish theologically-rooted principles concerning Christianity's relationship to Judaism. Since its foundation in 1951, the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem has functioned as a theological meeting place, where the relationship

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between the Church and the Jewish people is studied, reconsidered and revised.

However, the Church of Sweden has not yet officially taken a stand on the issues of principle that have been discussed in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, nor on the recommendations made by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. It is therefore important for the Church of Sweden to define its approach.[4] Today we are all obliged to react against the signs of explicit or implicit antisemitism and xenophobia. Antisemitism touches the heart of Christianity, and if it is not condemned, it will poison the teachings and life of the Christian faith.

Furthermore, for the Church to function as a dialogue partner in multi-faith society, it is necessary to have a well-developed theology of religions.

A Common Heritage

When World War II was over, Jews and Christians of different denominations and approaches gathered in the Swiss town of Seelisberg to discuss how they could work together against antisemitism through spreading knowledge and by improving the relations between different groups. The most concrete contributions from the 1947 conference to the post-war dialogue between Jews and Christians are the Ten Seelisberg Points. These points have had such a significant impact that the Seelisberg meeting must be regarded as a new development in the encounter between Jews and Christians. The first point is about the image of God:

Let us not forget that the same living God speaks to us all in the Old as well as the New Testament.

The point of departure for both Christianity and Judaism is the people of God and the history that their common Holy Scriptures describe. At the beginning of our era there were within the Jewish people several religious or political groups, each claiming to represent the true interpretation of the Scriptures. As time went on, two main approaches crystallised: the Rabbinic which developed into what we today call Judaism, and another which became the Christian Church. The difference between them was not one of acceptance or repudiation of the Holy Scriptures, rather of their interpretation: was Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah whom the Old Testament Scriptures foresaw, and the New Testament proclaims – or were the Scriptures to be interpreted from the viewpoint of *Torah*-observance as it is expressed in Rabbinic texts?

However, the demarcation lines run deeper than just a controversy over whether Jesus was the Messiah or not. The Messianic concept has been interpreted in many different ways within Jewish tradition. A number of historical personalities have appeared with Messianic claims and won supporters without having been expelled from the Jewish community. All these forms of Jewish Messianism are alike in as much as the Messiah is interpreted as a human being with a great historic task, given by God.

The Christ that the Church confesses in Jesus is something more – crucified, dead, buried and risen. He was and is, according to the faith of the Church, the truth about God – God's *logos* – incarnated in the world. He is the Son of God and is worshipped as true God and true human being. But such an interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures is theological dynamite; it has caused lasting separation between the Church and Judaism.

Hence two movements grew from the same roots, each claiming to be faithful to the old tradition. In one of the movements, the Church, the majority of adherents gradually came to be Gentile. The Church sees its mission as a duty to proclaim the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to all people. Through him, all people may be included in God's covenant.

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Against this background, it was not long before “the Jews” or “the Jewish people” were seen only through the lens which presented Judaism as the antithesis of Christianity. After such a conceptual move, there is a risk that one no longer sees – or wants to see – all that is common to the two movements. However, as Christians we share with Judaism the Scriptures we traditionally call the Old Testament. Thus, to identify merely the Old Testament system of thought with Judaism, and that of the New Testament with Christianity, is erroneous.

Jesus was a Jew and related what he said and did to Jewish tradition and piety. In this environment, Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand. He took the Holy Scriptures as his point of departure, and he explained them in his teachings. He included the words of the Psalms in his prayers, just as Jews and Christians still do. The Jewish creed (*Shema‘*), faith in a God who reconciles and restores – which is so strongly associated with Jesus as a person – and the double commandment of love were all found in the Holy Scriptures of the Jews and were fundamental truths for Jesus as well.

According to the Jewish tradition in which Jesus lived, God is the one who reconciles and restores. The Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, was – and is – the peak of the Jewish ceremonial calendar. Through mercy God writes off the debt of the people, thus renewing his covenant. Thereby the sin and shame that have multiplied during days gone by, and have been confessed and cried over during the days before Y*om Kippur*, are abolished. A people, free from guilt, are sent out once again, in the words of Martin Buber, “to harvest pearls for the Kingdom of God”. From the perspective of the Day of Atonement, an ethical idea becomes clear as well: the one who has been forgiven should also forgive others, the person who has had his debt written off should not hold others to their debts. This thought, common to Jews and Christians, is clearly expressed within the Christian tradition in the Lord’s prayer.

All these ideas play a fundamental role in the teachings of Jesus. In his parables as well as in the way he associates with people feeling guilt, Jesus relates to and develops, in word and deed, the Jewish motif of atonement and forgiveness. This motif actually constitutes one of the fundamental patterns in the Gospel portrayal of the life and work of Jesus.

God’s Covenants

Different attempts have been made by Christians to interpret the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Three models in particular have been used. In all of them, the idea of the covenant is central, and we will therefore describe them from this perspective, while noting that concepts like “replacement theology” are controversial.

Replacement Theology

The Christian view of Judaism and the Jewish people has often been described in the Church as “replacement theology”; that is, the idea that the Church, as the new Israel, has replaced the Jewish people and the new covenant has replaced the old. A number of biblical passages have been chosen over the years to support such a theological interpretation.[5] One consequence of replacement theology is the idea that Judaism, ever since the Church was founded, rests on a cancelled contract and thus, after the appearance of Jesus, is a theological anachronism.

This idea is still alive in many Christian traditions. It does not necessarily lead to an antisemitic approach. Nevertheless, it has contributed to depreciation of Judaism and *de facto* paved the way for anti-Jewish movements during many periods in history. According to this view, the Jews are a people that has “made the wrong choice” much to its own misfortune. Part of the burden of guilt for the persecution of Jews rests with the Christian Church and may to a significant extent be traced back to simple but very widespread forms of replacement theology.

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However, belief in the new covenant and its promises does not imply the conclusion that God has annulled his covenant with the Jewish people. This view builds on the following understanding of the Bible: throughout the Bible God enters into covenants. The covenant concept is more or less part of God's essential nature – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's wish for a relationship with humanity is already expressed in the covenant with Noah, which includes and blesses everything that has been created. In the covenant with Abraham, he and his descendants are blessed. In the covenant at Sinai, the people of Israel is eternally tied to God. Jesus Christ established a covenant, which is explicitly open to all peoples.

In principle it is hardly possible to contrast these covenants with each other or to declare one of them annulled at a certain point in history. The more we see these covenants as manifestations of God's nature and will, the more difficult it becomes to substitute one covenantal expression of his wish for community in place of another covenant. This would be logical presumptuousness – an attempt to control God from the limited human perspective. If we look at the New Testament witness as a whole, the conclusions of replacement theology are not self-evident. Romans 11, which is essential for understanding the Church and salvation, sees Gentile Christians as "wild olives" that are grafted onto "pure olives". Viewed in the light of this metaphor, both covenants are fundamentally one organic unit. However, such an approach to the covenants does not remove all tension between Jewish and Christian traditions.

Parallel Covenants

In more recent dialogue theology, a model of interpretation has been introduced according to which there are two parallel roads to salvation – one for the Jews and another for all other peoples. This model expresses an ideal of tolerance which is very attractive to many. It is also in line with a traditional Jewish view of Israel in relation to other peoples: the Jews have been chosen by God as "a light to the nations", to be a constant reminder of God's covenant with Noah. Within the framework of this covenant, there is already one road to righteousness and salvation for all the nations. From a Jewish perspective, all that is needed is a positive relationship to God, to fellow human beings and to all creation. Christianity fits into this framework as well, if only its monopolistic claims are abandoned. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (U.K.) goes even further and advocates religious pluralism based on the covenant of Noah:

Just as after Babel there is no single universal language, so there is no single universal culture, no single universal tradition and no single universal faith. The faith of Abraham left room for other ways of serving God, just as the English language leaves room for French and Spanish and Italian.[6]

The fact that Christian mission to the Jews has not been particularly successful is seen by some as a theological problem, but is interpreted by others as support for the idea of two or even several different "roads". However, the model of parallel covenants leads to other problems; for example, it questions the unique revelation in Christ. The theory of parallel covenants implies a diminution in Christian self-understanding, when texts referring to the universal role of Christ are toned down.

Roads Converging at the End of Time

Another pattern of interpretation assigns the question of salvation for the Jewish people to the eschatological dimension of Christian thought. Old Testament prophetic promises about Israel's ingathering to the Holy Land are then associated with signs that according to the New Testament precede the end of time, when God will reveal the identity of the Messiah to the Jews (Rom 11). In the meantime the Christians, while awaiting the return of Jesus, are joined with the Jews in their belief in a Messiah. For the Christians he has come in Jesus; for the Jews he will come at the end of time. According to such a view, the Lord has not regretted his promises to the Jewish people. The Church should confirm these promises and together with the Jews trust in the promise of new

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heavens and a new earth, where righteousness abides (2 Peter 3:13).

On the one hand, this model gives to the Church precedence regarding the interpretation of the Messiah. On the other hand, it confesses that the Sinaitic covenant is still valid for the Jewish people. It is not a model of interpretation particularly well suited to serve as a basis for true dialogue with people of Jewish faith. If we wish to approach the painful history of the Church's actual treatment of the European Jewish minority over the centuries, we must do so with humility and self-criticism, which are not easily compatible with this eschatological model of interpretation.

God's Secret

Models of the kind presented above seem to presume that we Christians know more about God's counsel and his ways than he has vouchsafed. The Church must be particularly on the watch against patterns of thought that we know by experience are fraught with risks of humiliating people of other faiths.

Deep down, all religions contain something mysterious, the innermost nature of which no one can penetrate. Perhaps insight into this is more important for all dialogue than the ambition to try to clarify what makes up the differences and similarities of different faith traditions. When pride in one's own tradition is combined with humility before one's own and other peoples' heritages, a true dialogue may begin:

There is in every religion, beyond what can be explained, a *mystery*, a last secret, which remains unreachable for outsiders. We, Jews and Christians, can go a long way together and talk to each other, but sooner or later we will arrive at a closed door, to which the Christians have a key, but we do not. When we come to this closed door, we Jews can do nothing but bow our heads in reverence before it and stay silent. We ask and expect – and this is the purpose of our dialogue – that the Christian world shall learn to revere the mystery that is the innermost core of the Jewish religion, that which is difficult for outsiders to grasp and difficult for us to explain.

This was said by Marcus Ehrenpreis,[7] Chief Rabbi in Stockholm between 1914 and 1951, and it is a reminder that ultimately the core in all faith, Jewish as well as Christian, is mysterious, a secret of God, before which both Jews and Christians should feel humble.

The New Testament does not provide unambiguous answers to the questions that have been discussed here. Its stories easily lead to contradictions if the full consequences of different texts are drawn out in an attempt to construct a systematic theology without taking into account the different historical situations in which they were written. All these texts were created in a different situation than the one challenging us today. In their time, Judaism was an established – and sometimes even hostile – religion in the regions where Christianity first grew. Paul and the other apostles could not foresee the suffering that their Jewish brothers and sisters would experience when Christianity became the religion of the majority. Whether the Sinaitic covenant was still valid for the Jewish people who had not confessed that Jesus was the Messiah is hardly an issue in the New Testament, even though the question is asked and answered favourably in Romans 9-11. In New Testament times, it was important to establish that Gentiles could be included in the covenant without first becoming Jews.

Therefore, we cannot speak dogmatically on issues where the statements of the New Testament are wholly or partly open to different interpretations:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return? For from him and

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through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

Our Guilt

When the Christian Church became the state religion in the Roman Empire, coercive measures were initiated against Judaism. The Jewish people could no longer grow through the influx of non-Jews (proselytes) who wanted to become part of the covenant people. On the contrary, Jews were required to convert to Christianity. The Jewish people certainly decreased in number under these new circumstances, but they survived as a minority in Christian countries.

The part of the Jewish people that did not give in to the coercion of the State and the Church was regularly subjected to harsh persecutions. The oppression was often provoked by brutal theological clichés: “The Jews are the people from whom God has taken his hand”; “A curse rests upon them”, and “the Jew wanders without a home and without roots throughout this world”, etc. The most serious accusation was that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. Many ideological motives for pogroms were thus picked up partly from a biblical sphere, and partly from anti-Jewish Church proclamation.

It is indeed true that on many occasions responsible Church leaders as well as several rulers tried to protect Jewish inhabitants and provide them with some legal protection. This history is not totally dark. But in that part of the world which in the 18th century continued to identify itself with the term Christendom (rather than “Europe” or “Russia”), Jews were largely treated as outsiders and were met with contempt and suspicion.

The antisemitism which we know from the twentieth century takes most of its motifs from sources other than the Christian conceptual world. Racist myths and ideologies have taken the place of religious stereotypes. If Jews had previously been held in contempt because they confessed the wrong faith, antisemitic ideologies began to describe them as a kind of human being that was dangerous or worthy of contempt. This kind of “racial-biological” antisemitism did not receive much positive response among the leadership of the Christian Churches. On the contrary, leaders of the Church in many countries condemned it. On the other hand, the brutal antisemitism of our millennium owes much of its historical and psychological background to those hostile attitudes towards the Jews that had grown over a period of many centuries, to which the Church must beyond doubt plead guilty. The defence of European Jews, mobilised during the ’30s and ’40s in European states, was certainly not insignificant, but the support for the protection of Jewish lives was in most places ambiguous, fearful and insufficient. Most European Jews were annihilated in that part of the world where the Christian Church had exercised its influence from powerful positions.

The Land

In Jewish tradition, the land of Israel has always been deeply meaningful. Love of and a sense of covenantal bond to the land, in which the prophets worked and the Temple stood high on the holy mountain, is an inseparable part of the life and history of the Jewish people. Our respect for Judaism should also include this part of the Jewish tradition. Strong feelings for the “Holy Land” are a common characteristic of Jewish and Christian piety. However, for many Jews the covenantal bond with the land has a theological dimension that it does not have in a similar way for most Christians. Our respect for this position does not necessarily mean – no more here than in any other context – an uncritical acceptance of religiously motivated claims for certain land areas.

Exile and alienation are overwhelming experiences in the long history of the Jewish people. Very early – even during the Babylonian suffering – a tradition emerged, according to which the people could live a satisfactory Jewish life in a religious and ethical sense anywhere on earth. This

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tradition has become a dominant influence in Jewish thought.

To determine theologically what role the land plays in Jewish faith and ideas is hardly possible. Among Jews around the world, there is a very wide spectrum of thought regarding this issue. Some of these ideologies were formulated during the 20th century and are a political expression of Jewish national sentiments. In this document and its theological context we shall discuss neither political Zionism nor the present State of Israel.

For Jews, just as for Christians, the name Jerusalem – both as a place and as a concept or metaphor – will always be laden with meaning. First, Jerusalem is a place connected with faith in the one God, the creator and father of all peoples. Secondly, for many within Jewish and Christian traditions, Jerusalem symbolises the hope for peace (Hebrew, *shalom*); such a peace, in which all power-seeking wars and territorial conflicts are overcome by the power of God's righteousness, is his will.

The Christian Witness

The Church must, if it wants to keep its integrity, confess Jesus as the Messiah, to whom already the Old Testament scriptures bear witness. It confesses that this Jesus has risen from the dead and that he is Lord (Greek, *kyrios*) in a divine sense. The Church further confesses that God's eternal Son became human in Jesus so that we, through him, may know God himself. The Church teaches that God's covenant is open to all those who believe this and who trust in the salvation that God has revealed to us through Jesus Christ. This confession of faith in Jesus Christ made by the Church lies outside the framework of Jewish faith. Christology is what separates Jews and Christians:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Cor 15:1-5).

While both draw much of their water from the same well, the lines of demarcation separating the two traditions are obvious. Thus Christianity stands, historically and theologically, in a unique relationship to Judaism which is different from its relationship to any other religion. Indeed, Jesus confirms the old tradition in relation to the double commandment of love as well as the motif of reconciliation and forgiveness. The fulfilment of that tradition implies that he himself becomes the sacrifice of reconciliation that possesses eternal divine validity.

As one consequence of this, it is impossible for us as Christians to look down on, much less condemn, Jewish faith. That would imply contempt for the faith, in which Jesus lived and died. Christian faith should comprise both respect for the Jewish faith and a clear confession that Christ fulfilled the biblical promises and opened the possibility for all people to enter into God's covenant. As a practical consequence of this, Christians should approach Jews to discuss that which unites and separates our traditions. A deeper knowledge of Jewish faith is also likely to bring us closer to Jesus himself, and thereby to the God that enters into eternal covenants and whose ways are ultimately beyond the grasp of humans.

It is hardly the differences in teaching that have been the main reason behind the deep and long-lasting conflict between the Church and the Jewish people. Theological differences may cause grave disputes and discord, but they cannot by themselves lead to the traumatic history that for ages developed between Christians and Jews in the West; insults, persecution and oppression

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can. The prerequisites for a living dialogue were non-existent under the conditions in which Jews have lived in Europe for so long.

The challenge that now faces the Church is to create new parameters for dialogue between people of Christian and Jewish faith. Although theological differences may persist, yet through respectful dialogue and practical co-operation we may help “mend the world” (Hebrew, *tikkun ha-‘olam*).

Teshuvah

Humanity is called to abandon destructive and enslaving patterns of behaviour and turn to God and to the world to come. Belief in God’s call is fundamental in Jewish and Christian traditions. For Jews as well as Christians, God is the one who offers people a new beginning and a new direction when they are lost.

In Jewish tradition, the concept “returning” (Hebrew, *teshuvah*) expresses this possibility, constantly offered human beings by God; in the New Testament, the Greek word *metanoia* is used. In the Bible, this word does not imply merely individual penance and improvement. Rather, it implies that men and women together turn towards God and the future that God prepares – the Kingdom of God.

Today all peoples face severe threats, largely caused by human beings. Destruction and death in many parts of the world are caused by imprisonment in old patterns of conflict. We face a growing, tragic dilemma because of our failure to treat properly the common creation: our earth, and our fellow creatures. The gifts of grace, which the riches of the earth represent, are received by us, yet shared without a reciprocal sense of justice (Hebrew, *tsedakah*).

Here, *metanoia* means both a challenge to change one’s mind and a trust that this change will be possible with the help of God. People of Jewish and Christian faith have a joint responsibility to proclaim this sign from God, and through this sign to overcome mutual antagonism.

God’s face is turned towards humankind and the whole of creation. From God’s face blessings pour over all those who are in his covenant. People of Jewish and Christian faith can surely unite in the prayer that humanity will turn to its Creator and receive God’s blessings. Nothing could better make us draw closer to each other than worship of the one God who renews everything.

Notes

1. A. Brockway et al., ed., Geneva 1988.
2. Brockway, 183.
3. Minutes of the House of Bishops 10th May 1995.
4. Our proposition builds partly on the Seelisberg points (1947), which have played an important role for later Church documents on this issue and partly on the World Council of Churches study document *Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, 1983. We have also taken into consideration those Church documents that have been collected by Alan Brockway *et al*. In Swedish, there are a number of texts on the issue, such as *Kyrkan och det judiska folket* (“The Church and the Jewish People”), which is a collection of essays published in 1991 by the Church of Sweden Mission and the working party of the then Creedal Committee on dialogue between religions.
5. “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom” (Matt 21:43)”; “For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4).
6. J. Sacks, *Faith in the Future*, London 1995, p. 79. Sacks actually speaks of several roads — one for each people — not just two; this really constitutes a fourth model.
7. *Judisk tidskrift*, 6 (1933), p. 299.

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