

# *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*

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## FEATURE TOPICS:

THE CENTENARY OF ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL  
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## Response to: Exploring Covenant in a World of Faiths

## CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

Response to William Bellinger:  
*Exploring Covenant in a World of Faiths*Ruth Langer  
Boston College

Delivered at the Houston Clergy Institute, March 6, 2007

As we all know, the Bible is a vast and complex text, containing multiple voices from multiple periods. Therefore it is possible for two people ostensibly to read the same Bible but to hear very different things from it. Dr. Bellinger and I are not hearing very different things from the Bible, but we do both read this text through the lenses of our own traditions and our own academic disciplines.

One element that keeps our readings of covenant from being very different is Dr. Bellinger's preference for a narrative approach over a source-critical approach to the Bible. This means that we are, at least, telling the same story, because we are both reading the biblical narrative as it has been received, not according to how it might have been created. Source critical methods fragment the text and assign the fragments to different social and political settings. Those reading the Bible this way then connect the pieces of the individual sources and hear the narrative through the chronology of these sources rather than their juxtaposition in the text we have received. In this reading, Sinai, the covenantal apex of the Pentateuchal narratives and central to traditional Jewish self-understanding, becomes ahistorical.

While Jewish biblical scholars are increasingly convinced that source criticism does represent the history of the formation of the text itself, Judaism itself, i.e., the religious traditions of Jews from the point that Torah became authoritative until modernity, builds on a reading of the text that respects and even requires its narrative integrity. Thus, Judaism's understanding of covenant, as part of this tradition, also builds on the received text – and here quite specifically the Masoretic text, not the versions of the Septuagint or the Samaritans or the Qumran community. Therefore Dr. Bellinger's narrative approach gives us much more basis for dialogue than some other alternatives.

But even within this narrative integrity, Jews and Christians lift up certain elements differently. Jews emphasize the continuity between Genesis and Exodus, thus understanding there to be a fundamental continuity between the patriarchal and the Sinai covenants. Just as Sinai is particular to the children of Israel, so too are the patriarchal covenants. The rabbinic understanding of the continuity of these two covenants extends to their suggesting that first Isaac and then Jacob spend time studying at the Yeshiva of Shem and Eber, their ancestors, a

rabbinic-style academy and law court focusing on the study of the preexistent but as yet unrevealed Torah!<sup>1</sup>

Within the patriarchal covenants, Judaism places much more emphasis than Christianity on the covenants of the land. In the Torah itself, living physically in the Land of Israel is central. Fulfillment of all of the Torah's commandments is possible only there. These include the commanded sacrificial worship of God in the Jerusalem Temple, agricultural laws that apply only within the borders of the land, many of which have connections to Temple rituals, instructions on how to run a government and a judiciary, and how to be in relations with other nations. While some of these, like the instructions for a judiciary, have some role in directing Jewish life outside the land too, even there, when Jews are subject to other nations, many elements of local law will trump the internal Jewish teachings. Without Jewish autonomy, and autonomy in the particular land about which Torah speaks, there cannot be a full expression of Judaism.

Dr. Bellinger makes specific reference to God's repeated promise that "all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you." (Gn 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14) In Jewish thinking, it is not clear precisely how this happens, but in general, it is understood to apply to the Jewish people (or, more technically correct: the children of Israel), in their continuing integrity in their relationship to the other peoples of the earth. The various peoples of the earth will not become part of Israel; nor will Israel lose its distinctive identity and covenantal relationship with God in the process of bringing the rest of the world to blessing. The realization of this blessing is mostly understood to be part of the messianic future – and Jews in general do not understand themselves to be there yet. And of course, Jeremiah's prophecy about a new covenant also applies to those, for Jews yet unexperienced, messianic times. There are conflicting interpretations of this verse in Jewish tradition, differing on whether that new covenant will be radically discontinuous with the Sinaitic Torah or simply another expression of it.

Dr. Bellinger raises another point to which I would like to respond when he suggests that covenant functions as an antidote to fear. As a Jew living today, I simply cannot make this assertion. We cannot simply rely on God for even the most essential protection, that of our lives. Six million of my people, one in three of all Jews then alive, were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators in the Holocaust. Can we see God's protection here? Is it that God stopped Hitler before he completed his task? That is hard to justify. And how do we respond to today's existential threats? The president of Iran calls publicly for the utter annihilation of Israel while building his country's nuclear capabilities, and the UN hesitates even to censure him for this arrogant breach of their charter! Simply fearlessly relying on God is a recipe for another Holocaust, probably not just against Israel, but against the United States and the west as well. And this question remains very real for Israel even on the more local level, with Hizbullah and Hamas similarly dedicating themselves to Israel's annihilation. Although there is no unanimous Jewish teaching on this point, many suggest that covenantal life requires an activist human response to threats. God is with us as we work to save ourselves, perhaps seen in our ability to develop and use technology. Simply relying on a miraculous salvation is to fail to recognize it when it comes.

A story that I thought was Jewish, but that appears on the internet that it comes in secular, Buddhist and Christian varieties too, encapsulates this understanding: A man was drowning in the ocean. He prayed to God to save him. A few minutes later a boat came and offered to pick

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<sup>1</sup> Moses Aberbach, "Shem: In the Aggadah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) 18:453.

him up and take him to shore. The drowning man refused and the boat left. Another boat came and offered to save the man and he said no, and the boat left. Finally a third boat came and said, "I can help you." Once again the drowning man said, "No." When he died he said to God: I trusted you. Why didn't you save me? God said: I sent you three boats!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from "Jewish Jokes," <http://jokes.jewish.net/joke.php?id=975&listtype=3>, June 15, 2007.