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Jewish-Christian Dialogue about Covenant

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Jewish-Christian Dialogue about Covenant

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In 2002, the dialogue held between the US Catholic Bishop's Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues issued a statement called "Reflections on Covenant and Mission." Reflecting on the developments in Catholic teaching about Jews and Judaism since *Nostra Aetate*, issued in 1965, the Catholic part of the statement took the daring step of affirming that if God's covenant with the Jews is eternally valid, then it must be salvific for Jews, and thus there is no justification for a Christian mission directed to Jews. There is no reason that Jews ought to become Christians. This statement was quite controversial. It received serious criticism not only from parts of the Protestant world, but also from some significant Catholic theologians. How could Christians simply dismiss Jesus' commission to his disciples? When the resurrected Jesus appears in the Galilee, he commands, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Mt 28:18b-20a)¹

I begin with this, not because I plan to talk about Christian understandings of covenant, but because I want to highlight what has been termed "theological dialogue."² This isn't a dialogue about how we should respond together to poverty or social justice issues in our society. There, we both draw from many of the same prophetic visions and our differences are mostly those of how we understand a shared goal. This also isn't a dialogue about our interpretation of a particular biblical text. We can build relationships by learning together how our traditions understand a shared text, but the topic itself doesn't really address how we think about each other.

The topic of covenant is fundamentally different, because it directly affects how we think about each other. If I understand that I am in covenant with God, not just as an individual, but as a member of a community, then I need to understand whether you are a member of that community too. If you are a member of my community, well and good, but what about if you are not? Do you have a relationship with my God? How can I understand it?

In the early decades of Christianity, Christians and Jews both engaged in polemics about the other in a struggle for the hearts, minds, and faith of Jews and pagans. In the process,

¹ A consequence of the controversy is that this document is no longer available on any official Catholic website. It can be found, though, on websites devoted to Christian-Jewish relations, like the website of our Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College.

See http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/interreligious/ncs_usccb120802.htm, but a search of the site (www.bc.edu/cjl) will also lead to subsequent discussions of this document.

² This is not dialogue about points where we find easy agreement or where our disagreements have little practical consequence.

Christians came to claim that they were the true heirs to God's covenant with Israel, and the Jews, through their sins, had forfeited this status. According to this teaching, Jews were no longer in favor with God and could only regain divine favor by accepting God's new covenant, foretold by Jeremiah and revealed through Jesus. Thus, Christianity, in virtually all its manifestations until the post-Holocaust era, denied that Jews were in a valid, ongoing relationship with God. Thus, it was radical when *Nostra Aetate* declared, "Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made." It was even more radical when Pope John Paul II explicitly taught that Jews are "the people of God of the Old Covenant, *never revoked* by God,"³ "the present-day people of the covenant concluded with Moses,"⁴ and "partners in a covenant of eternal love which was never revoked."⁵ A logical outgrowth of these conciliar and papal statements was, to the framers of *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, that there should be no Christian mission to Jews.

Even before the drafting of *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*, this context of dialogue was beginning to feel one-sided. Catholic and Protestant theologians were confronting their heritage of anti-Judaism and seeking new theological understandings that would avoid the path that at best had turned a blind eye to persecutions of Jews through the centuries and at worst, encouraged the persecutions themselves. How were Jews responding to this? Sitting on the sidelines and cheering? Yes, but that itself was possibly undermining the dialogue. It appeared as if the Jewish participants were setting themselves up as superior – and power dynamics undercut dialogic relationships. This cheerleading seemed to suggest that Judaism was perfect and had no equivalent hard work to do. It also suggested that Christians ought to learn about Judaism in order to rethink their theological categories, but Jews need make no similar effort to understand Christianity; the Jewish function in the dialogue was solely to present Judaism accurately and to vet Christian ideas. Our Christian dialogue partners were voicing concern about this uneven relationship.

Taking up this challenge in the Jewish community has not been simple. To begin with, there is not a deep and broadly developed tradition of doing theology among Jews. The intellectual elite of the traditional Jewish community dabbled in such topics – Maimonides wrote his *Guide for the Perplexed* – but their status and influence derived from their knowledge of *halakhah*, the rabbinic discussions about the concrete *details* of that covenant, often translated as Jewish "law." Maimonides' *Guide* created vituperative international controversies but his legal code, his *Mishneh Torah*, is universally revered. While covenant as a category of Jewish theology certainly exists from the Bible on, you will not find much extended discourse on Jewish understandings of covenant until modernity, except, perhaps, in refutations of Christian polemics! Scholars a century ago did publish books on Jewish theology, but these were apologetics, collecting the tidbits scattered throughout the literature into some coherent statement so that they could say to their Christian neighbors: "We've got a theology too!"

Underlying this is the reality that Jewish intellectual traditions and Christian intellectual traditions simply work differently. The Jewish intellectual tradition puts enormous effort into defining precisely the terms of the covenant, for example, delineating what activities violate the commandment to rest on the Sabbath, or prescribing the responsibilities incumbent on the owner of an ox that gores other animals or people.⁶ But these aren't areas that receive the

³ John Paul II, "Address to the Jewish Community in Mainz, West Germany," November 17, 1980.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John Paul II, "Address to Jewish Leaders in Miami," September 11, 1987.

⁶ As prescribed in Ex 21.

attentions of the intellectual elite of Christian traditions. Today's dialogue thus asks Jews to bring to the table discussions that fit neatly into Christian categories of thought, but that don't always fit so neatly into Jewish traditions of learning. I raise this as an observation, not a criticism. There is some tradition of thinking in theological categories in Judaism, and Jews have been educated into the intellectual categories of western European Christian civilization – while few Christians have really become conversant in Jewish texts. Thus, we find dialogue on covenant and other theological topics taking place on well defined spots on the Christian theological map, places that are less well defined on the Jewish map.

An example of this issue of mapping: as part of Boston College's undergraduate theology core, I teach a two-semester course that compares Judaism and Christianity. One obvious topic for this course is our understandings of sin and repair of sin. Both of our traditions understand sin to be something that violates our covenant with God. In Judaism, we begin with as precise an understanding of the terms of the covenant, of God's commandments, as we can manage. Sin, then, is a violation of any one of the 613 commandments of Torah (or their subcategories). A traditional Jew can therefore tell you quite explicitly if a certain action is sinful. A sin violates a term of the covenant, but generally not the covenant itself. Contrast this with a Christian understanding that defines sin in philosophical or attitudinal terms, as a turning away from God, as a breach in the relationship of covenant. Thus, I can't translate Christian conceptions of sin and breach of covenant neatly onto my Jewish mapping of the topics to which we give the same English names because the essence of the sin and the definition of covenant are radically different.

I discovered this only when I realized that I was trying to get Christianity to express itself on the Jewish map and define sin in concrete detail, something that would have fundamentally distorted Christian teaching. So we need to be wary of similar distortions in the reverse, when we try to understand Jewish covenant by speaking in the vocabulary and topography of the Christian theological traditions. This may be why Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik forbade Jewish participation in theological dialogue, at least for those with less grounding in Jewish texts.

Dialogue thus requires some point of overlap in our conceptual maps from which we can then move to understand differences. For example: Jews and Christians can compare their understandings of the Abrahamic covenants because we share Genesis and its description of these events. We can bring Islam into this picture because some of the patriarchal narratives of the Hebrew Bible appear in the Quran. But if we wanted to include Hindus or Buddhists? We'd have to shift and broaden our topic. Similarly, Jews and Muslims can discuss elements of dietary laws or even penal codes – but Christians are interested only in their ethical implications.

With this mapping issue in mind, let's turn back now to our discussion of covenant. Christians engaged in dialogue had done extremely difficult work, turning a self-critical eye to their own traditions, and beginning a difficult process of developing theological arguments that would justify a different understanding of Jews, not as competitors for God's love, not as people rejected by God, but as people who share God's love and who journey with Christians in covenant with God towards a promised end of days.

What can Jews say about Christians' relationship with God? Do we have a need for self-criticism in this realm? In my opinion, the answer here is adamantly yes, and the reasons for concern are deeply embedded in our halakhic traditions as well as in our historical experience. But note, the self-critical work needs to be done within our own mapping of the concepts.

To begin with, Jewish sources give very little positive space to Christianity, and except in polemical contexts, amazingly little space to Christianity at all. Christianity simply did not matter much to Jews, at least as long as Jews were subject to pagan or Muslim rule. Rabbinic traditions perpetuate the Bible's construction of the world as consisting of Israel and a largely undifferentiated mass of גוים, gentiles. Rabbis easily dismissed Christian claims to be part of the covenant that God gave to Israel, for the key terms of that covenant were: circumcision for men, observance of the dietary laws, and Sabbath rest, precisely what Paul and the other apostles determined were unnecessary for gentiles entering the covenant under Christian auspices. In Jewish eyes, that entirely delegitimized their claim to be Israel.

How then might gentiles be in relationship with God? The rabbis, by the third century CE, i.e., before Christianity became a dominant force in their world, had developed the concept of the Noahide covenant, a covenant between God and all humanity. Compared to the 613 commandments of Torah, this covenant contains only seven laws, constituting the basic requirements of civilized human existence. The earliest statement of this tradition reads:

The children of Noah were commanded concerning seven commandments: about having a system of adjudication; and about idolatry; and about blasphemy; and about improper sexual relationships; and about murder; and about robbery; [and about eating a limb from a living animal].⁷

David Novak points out that this tradition represents a new situation in which there is no longer an intermediate status, like the Second Temple period “god-fearer” or “resident stranger” (*ger toshav*), between Jew and Gentile. Jews are subject to all of Torah; Gentiles are subject to this shorter and older list of commandments. Jews and Gentiles are differently commanded in their paths to holiness.⁸

But functionally, this gentile path is working according to the Jewish map. The Noahide covenant operates according to the most fundamental theological category of rabbinic Judaism – that God communicates the criteria for human behavior through commandments. This is a functional equivalent to Karl Rahner's assertion that all people, even if they do not know it, are saved through Christ – Christianity's fundamental theological category. The concept of the Noahide covenant teaches that because God gave the Torah specifically to Israel and not to the rest of the world, God does not expect the rest of the world to be bound by all its terms. However, God's pre-Sinai demands of humanity did contain this shorter list of commandments, which includes prohibitions of the cardinal sins of murder, sexual immorality,⁹ and idolatry.¹⁰

These, then, set the standard of proper behavior, the *mitzvot*, for the rest of humanity, a standard that most world religions meet easily. Thus, the traditional Jewish view of the non-Jew emerges from the categories of Judaism's own understanding of its relationship with God. To pre-modern Jews, this understanding of the world was self-evident and usually subconscious. It is only in our times that we can question whether the conceptual categories framing the Noahide

⁷ Novak, *Image* 25-34. Novak's historical reconstruction of the emergence of this concept is inconsistent with the understanding of Boyarin and others that the real separation of the communities only occurred in the third or fourth centuries, a date not inconsistent with the redaction of the Tosefta text.

⁸ The reference is to incest and adultery.

⁹ All other commandments are negotiable in order to save a human life.

¹⁰ Novak suggests that rabbinic reaction to the pagan sacrificial custom of tearing the heart out of a living animal generated the otherwise anomalous inclusion of the prohibition of eating a limb from a living animal in this list (*Image* 240-41).

laws impose a cultural construct that is incomprehensible or inappropriate for our non-Jewish neighbors. However, these laws remain a critical part of Jewish heritage. The challenge is to reinterpret them today.

From an internal Jewish perspective, these Noahide laws had the practical effect of creating a yardstick by which to categorize the nations and assess the degree of possible Jewish co-existence with them. People who accepted upon themselves these commandments were *ipso facto* righteous and their communities civilized. This created the possibility of economic and political cooperation as well as cultural exchange and dialogue. Most Gentiles, with whom Jews lived, easily met four of these requirements. They had a system of justice; they considered murder, robbery, and sexual immorality to be criminal activities. More problematic were the questions of idolatry and its attendant crimes of blaspheming God and making offerings from living animals,¹¹ but even so, economic necessity usually encouraged Jews to find a solution. The talmudic rabbis understood pagan Romans to be merely participants in ancestral custom, and not actual believers in their idolatrous rites. Their intent was worship of God, so they were not true idolaters.¹²

How does Christianity fit here? Rabbinic texts consistently present the Byzantine Empire as “Rome,” making no distinction based on religion. The Gentile nature of Pauline Christianity, the development of trinitarian theology, particularly with the concomitant emergence of a rich iconography, made it difficult for Jews to accept Christians as monotheists and non-idolaters. Jews probably felt no need to develop a new category to accommodate Christian reality.¹³ Rabbinic Judaism in the Talmudic era was, in any case, generally more interested in preserving Judaism by preventing interaction with the surrounding cultures than in building bridges. One need only study the talmudic tractate Avodah Zarah (Strange Worship, Idolatry) to be struck by the deep suspicion the rabbis had of their gentile neighbors.

But Jews living as a tiny minority in medieval Europe could not cut off all relations with their Christian neighbors and live. Therefore, they developed ways of understanding Christian practice so that, for Christians, it would not constitute idolatry, though for Jews it still would. Therefore, Jews could enter into business relationships with Christians. In the end, this was more practical *halakhah* than good theology, but it was a recognition that Christians are in relationship with God that is right, for them.

It is precisely this lack of good theology and also the prevalence of suspicious and occasionally even vile statements about our neighbors that we Jews need to reckon with as we participate more and more deeply in dialogue. We can understand many of these difficult

¹¹ Novak, *Image* 124-29. There is no question that this category applies to Christians and Muslims, the peoples with whom Jews have had the most significant interactions historically. Asian religions, with the exception of some forms of Buddhism, potentially provide much deeper challenges because of their polytheism and idolatry. It is likely that were significant centers of Jewish civilization to come to have regular contact with adherents of these traditions, ways would be found to define them as Noahides too.

¹² Holocaust survivors have a particularly difficult time setting aside suspicions and hatred. The virulent anti-Semitism rampant in the Arab and Muslim worlds these days, the calls for a new holocaust emanating out of Iran, also reduce Jewish readiness to participate in this self-critical process. We can convincingly challenge difficult texts when the situations that generated them no longer exist.

¹³ A full exploration of this statement requires understanding the complex interactions between Jews and Christians in the first three or four centuries of their evolutions into mature religious systems. Undoubtedly, they did influence one another, positively and negatively, and we know that, on the one hand, there was sufficient social and cultural intermingling to elicit strident opposition from both the rabbis and persons such as John Chrysostom, and, on the other hand, significant scholarly interchanges by men such as Origen and his rabbinic contemporaries. However, theological understandings of the “other” do not always play out on the street, for better or for worse.

traditions as defensive responses to the anti-Judaism of the world in which our ancestors lived. But some still shape some Jewish thinking about our neighbors.¹⁴

But when we confront these traditions, acknowledge their sources in times when Jews were persecuted, and acknowledge that much of the Christian world is genuinely trying to remove the sources of this persecution from their hearts and minds, then we are called upon to go further than the Noahide covenant takes us. Christians understand themselves to participate in God's covenant with Israel. Catholic hierarchs feel strongly that there is only one covenant, that which took on new form with Jesus. Can Judaism theologically find a place for this claim?

I think that the answer is "no," because in Jewish understanding, God's covenant with Israel has a very explicit set of terms, those of the 613 commandments. One who joins Israel becomes subject to this Torah.

But – Judaism also has no reason to insist that God has only one covenant with humanity or even with Israel. Instead, God has made a succession of cumulative covenants with Israel, beginning with the Noahide covenant common with all humanity, and then becoming specific with Abraham and the covenants of circumcision and of the land of Israel (and we need to underscore the importance of the covenant of the land for Judaism). The full terms of the covenant were given only at Sinai; only after Sinai does God speak of the Sabbath as a covenantal marker; and God bestows the covenant of sovereignty only with David. Are these all parts of the same covenant? Not necessarily.

So why can't God make a covenant with another people? In fact, rabbinic tradition says that God wanted to, but one nation after another rejected the divine offer of Torah, until Israel responded "we will do and we will obey" – נעשה ונשמע. From a Jewish perspective, we are limiting God's infinite love and abilities if we have the hubris to claim that God can only make a covenant with us! There is no requirement of eternal exclusivity! Therefore, I have many fewer problems with recognizing, as a Jew, that God is in a covenantal relationship with other peoples, and that their covenants with God may have differing terms, terms that were and are more appropriate to these other peoples than Torah.

Such a model has the advantage of differentiating between different groups of Noahides according to the particularity that they ascribe to themselves. It means that the teachings of Christianity, Islam, and maybe even other religions are true teachings from God – but meant for other people just as God gifted the Torah and its myriads of requirements as a special responsibility of בני ישראל, "the children of Israel." Because God's teachings to Christians began within the Jewish world, it was also God's will that Christians have a share in the books of the Jewish Bible, even if Christians interpret its contents differently. Similarly, God willed that early Muslims know and be influenced by Jews and Christians and their Scriptures.

Is this satisfactory to Christians? Probably not entirely, but it is my attempt to express an inclusive theology of covenant through the language and tools that my tradition gives me. I must map my theology within the native terrain of Jewish tradition, just as Christians use Christian categories. Do we need to end up with a single "truth"? Judaism would not say so. What we do need is to understand each other's honest attempts to make a positive space on our own maps for the integrity of the others with whom we live and work.

¹⁴ Holocaust survivors have a particularly difficult time setting aside suspicions and hatred. The virulent anti-Semitism rampant in the Arab and Muslim worlds these days, the calls for a new holocaust emanating out of Iran, also reduce Jewish readiness to participate in this self-critical process. We can convincingly challenge difficult texts when the situations that generated them no longer exist.