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FEATURE TOPICS:

THE CENTENARY OF ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL
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Response to: Jewish-Christian Dialogue about Covenant

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

Response to Ruth Langer:
*Jewish-Christian Dialogue about Covenant*William H. Bellinger
Baylor University

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Allow me the irreverence of an old story. Several centuries ago, the Pope decreed that all the Jews had to leave Italy. There was, of course, a huge outcry from the Jewish community, so the Pope offered a deal. He would have a religious debate with a leader of the Jewish community. If the Jewish leader won the debate, the Jews would be permitted to stay in Italy. If the Pope won, the Jews would have to leave. The Jewish community met and picked an aged and wise Rabbi to represent them in the debate. The Rabbi, however, could not speak Latin, and the Pope could not speak Yiddish. So it was decided that this debate would be a silent debate.

On the day of the great debate, the Pope and the Rabbi sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. The Rabbi looked back and raised one finger. Next, the Pope waived his finger around his head. The Rabbi pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope then brought out a communion wafer and a chalice of wine. The Rabbi pulled out an apple. With that, the Pope stood up and said, "I concede the debate. This man has bested me. The Jews can stay."

Later, the cardinals gathered around the Pope, asking him what had happened. The Pope said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground to show that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us of our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community crowded around the Rabbi, asking what happened. "Well," said the Rabbi, "first he said to me, 'You Jews have three days to get out of here.' So I said to him, 'Not one of us is going to leave.' Then he tells me the whole city would be cleared of Jews. So I said to him, 'The Jewish community stays right here!'" "And then?" asked someone. "Who knows?" said the Rabbi. "He pulled out his lunch and I pulled out mine."

We do often talk past each other. I am grateful for Rabbi Langer's paper and have learned much from it. There are a variety of expressions of the relationships indicated in covenants. I think we are on the same page in terms of the importance of the Noachic covenant and in terms of how our traditions shape our interpretations. We read biblical texts from the mapping of our own traditions and are sometimes unaware and surprised by that. Let me illustrate with a text to which I have already referred. Gn 15:6 says, "He trusted in the Lord, and he reckoned/counted it to him righteousness." Christian tradition has pretty consistently taken the statement as an affirmation that God counted Abram's trusting of the promise as righteousness. It is possible,

however, that Abram is the one counting God as righteous in affirming again the promise of progeny. That would be consonant with the God-Abram relationship elsewhere. The use of the term 'righteousness' here challenges what I often find contemporary Christian readers bring to such a text. The term does not mean doing the right moral thing in the sense of good old American works-righteousness. It rather suggests right relationship or fidelity to a relationship. So following the traditional interpretation, Abram trusts the divine promise and so is faithful to the relationship with God. In the same way, Noah is described in that narrative as righteous before God. Noah and Abram trust and worship in the context of that relationship. Now what I have just done is read Gn 15:6 in line with Paul's use of the text in Gal 3 and Rom 4. I have had some awareness of that part of my hermeneutical assumptions in reading the text for some time, but it was really in reading the work of the Jewish scholar Jon Levenson that my awareness became full. He refers to the interpretation of the verse from Philo of Alexandria in light of Gn 26:5 that Abram "carried out all the divine law and all the divine commandments," an interpretation more in line with the New Testament book of James. That is a very different way to read Gn 15:6. The two ways are tied to the mapping of the two different traditions.

I heard two lectures in the last week by E. P. Sanders of Duke University. Thirty years ago he wrote *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* and in that volume established that Judaism is a vibrant interpretive tradition; it is not consumed by legalism, as some Christian stereotypes suggest. When I read with Jewish interpreters as conversation partners, I see my Christian hermeneutic more clearly and I am stopped in my tracks by a different interpretive tradition. It keeps me honest. I cannot assume my traditional reading. I might have to support it. I interpret the Hebrew Scriptures as a Christian, but that is not the only interpretive tradition. I have the sense that Jewish interpreters read the Scriptures in terms of faith as lifestyle. Christians tend to want to work at the basis behind the lifestyle. Surely both provide pieces of the puzzle. And surely there are other pieces of the puzzle in the goal of grounding ourselves in "Another." Thank you.