

Who Is Israel?

BY DAVID FOX SANDMEL

Traditionally, both Jews and Christians have considered themselves to be the heirs of biblical Israel, God's chosen people. Perhaps more than any other difference between Judaism and Christianity, this claim to be God's covenantal partner has defined the tragic history of relations between Jews and Christians. It is also the single aspect of Christian theology that has changed most radically since the Shoah, as a result of the process of Christian self-examination, of the dialogue between Jews and Christians, and of advances in critical scholarship concerning religion in the Greco-Roman world.

After a brief look at the meaning of "Israel" for Jews, I will examine some classical and contemporary Christian understandings of what it means for Christians to be Israel.

Jews as Israel

For Jews, the word "Israel" has three interrelated meanings. First, it refers to a people descended from the patriarchs and matriarchs. Second, this people Israel has a special covenant with God, first established with Abraham and subsequently renewed at Sinai. Third, ac-

cording to our tradition, God has given us a specific land, the land of Israel.

In English and in most other modern languages, we refer to ourselves as "Jews" (French, *Juifs*; German, *Juden*). The word "Jew," however, is not the original name. "Jew" occurs rarely in the *Tanach* or in the *siddur*.¹ Our oldest name is *Yisrael*, Israel; we call ourselves *am Yisrael*, "the people of Israel," and *benei Yisrael*, "the children of Israel."

In non-Orthodox prayer books, one of the first benedictions to be recited in the morning is "Praised are You our Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe who has made me *Yisrael* (an Israelite)."² Similarly, in the Talmud we find, "a *Yisrael*, even though he [or she] sins is still a *Yisrael*."³ The fact that most translators render *Yisrael* in both the morning benediction and the talmudic dictum as "Jew" underscores the point. Indeed, the *Shema* doesn't make sense to some Jews until it is rephrased as "Hear, O Jews! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." We, and others, may use the word "Jew," but our name is Israel.

An Open Family

As the children of Israel, we are the

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descendants of our ancestors: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebecca; and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. Jacob was given the name Israel during his encounter with God described in Genesis 32. And Jacob had twelve sons who, in turn, became the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, Israel is a people, an extended family in which all Jews are related. But the family is open. Those who become “Jews by choice” are adopted into the Jewish people and become indistinguishable members of the family.⁴

“Israel” also refers to a particular event, since we are the people who entered into the covenant with God at Mount Sinai:

Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, and Moses went up to God. YHVH called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples’”(Exodus 19: 2-5).

Finally, as Israel we have a deep emotional attachment to a particular place that we also call Israel. The phrase “land of Israel” is much older than the modern State of Israel; it is found in the book of Samuel, and is used regularly by Ezekiel. In the light of a history marked by persecution and genocide, the existence of an independent Jew-

ish state, also called Israel, has made the connection to both the land and the state an integral part of what it means for contemporary Jews to be Israel.

Christians as Israel

The Christian understanding that the church has become God’s covenantal partner — has become Israel — can be divided into three stages. The first stage was quite short, lasting only a generation or two after Jesus’ execution, and can be found in the writings of Paul. During this stage, the earliest followers of Jesus, both Jewish and Gentile, saw themselves as part of, or at least in relationship to, the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition.

The second stage began as Christianity started to develop an identity independent of Judaism, as early as the composition of the Gospels, and continued into the modern period. In this stage, Christianity came to view itself as the “new Israel.” Christians are partners with God in a “new” covenant through Christ, and God’s covenant with old Israel, with the Jews, is no longer in effect.

As a result of their unfaithfulness to God, as recorded in the Tanach itself, and culminating in their rejection of Jesus Christ, the Jews are disqualified from continuing as God’s covenantal partners. In its extreme and most dangerous forms, the church as “spiritual Israel” is diametrically opposed to the Jews as “carnal Israel”; the church is the “true Israel” and represents God and good; the Jews are the “false Israel” and represent Satan and evil.

During the third stage, in the years since the Shoah, official church bodies and Christian theologians have been reconsidering what it means for both Christians and Jews to be “Israel.” I will now briefly examine each of these stages.

Paul’s Perspective

Christianity began as one of many groups within the complex religious world of Second Temple Judaism. As the movement that evolved from the followers of Jesus grew, it attracted relatively few Jews, but was taken up by many Gentiles. By the middle of the second century of the common era, Christianity and rabbinic Judaism were well on the way to becoming separate religions.

One of the challenges for emerging Christianity was defining the relationship between an increasingly Gentile church and Christianity’s Jewish roots. What did it mean to be a Gentile who believed that Jesus as the risen Christ was the Messiah promised to Israel by the God of Israel, especially when most Jews — Jesus’ own people — did not accept Jesus? How could Gentiles share in God’s promise to Israel and worship the God of Israel without being Israel?

Whereas the Gospels portray the tension between Judaism and emerging Christianity in the harsh rhetoric of religious polemic, it is the apostle Paul who first tries to provide a theological resolution for the question of the relationship of Christianity to the God of Israel. This attempted resolution is found most succinctly in Romans 9-11.

Covenant and Choice

Paul begins by affirming God’s covenants with the people Israel. He then suggests that God’s promise is not limited to the physical descendants of Abraham, that is, to the Jews. Rather, the essential aspect of God’s covenant with the Jews is not the Jews per se but the fact that God made a choice and that God continues to have the power to choose whomever God wants. Paul states, citing Exodus 33:19, that it is God’s choice, or God’s grace, that ultimately determines whether mercy is bestowed upon a person or not. Likewise, and here Paul cites Hosea 2:23, God can choose other covenantal partners if that is God’s will.

In this section of Romans, Paul also discusses the place of Jewish law in the new covenant. Paul believed that the law by itself was insufficient to ensure redemption or salvation. Faith in the risen Christ is essential: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

Thus for Paul, although God’s choice of Israel is a historical fact and remains valid, God retains the freedom to choose whomever God wills; God’s salvation is not restricted to Israel simply because God has a covenant with it. “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him” (Romans 10:13).

Continuing Covenant

As a Jew, Paul was greatly distressed

that Israel had not heeded God's message of salvation brought through Jesus (Romans 10:14-21). Nonetheless, Paul steadfastly proclaims God's continued covenant with the people of Israel as well as his own allegiance to them.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew (Romans 11:1-2).

Indeed, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is, in part, an effort to bring Israel to faith in Christ by provoking their jealousy (Romans 11:13)!

At this point, Paul invokes the famous metaphor of the olive tree from which some branches have been broken and onto which other branches have been grafted (Romans 11:16-24). The tree, both roots and branches, is Israel, the people with whom God made an everlasting covenant. The broken branches are those of Israel, the nation that has rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ. The grafted branches are those of the nations who have accepted the gospel.

Old and New Israel

Gentiles who believe in Jesus become part of Israel — that is, God's covenantal partners — and are able to share in the salvation brought by the Savior who comes from Israel. In Paul's view, it is Israel's rejection of Jesus that has made possible the election of the Gentiles, and the faith of the Gentiles

is an essential part of God's plan for Israel.

Paul has described a "new" or, more accurately, "true" Israel consisting of those who have faith in Jesus Christ. This true Israel is not made up of the descendants of Jacob/Israel (though they are not necessarily excluded from it); rather it is the community of both Jewish and Gentile believers, that is, the church.⁶

Paul understood the relationship between the old Israel (the descendants of Jacob) and the new Israel (the church) to be reciprocal; each needed the other in order to achieve final salvation. At the same time, Paul believed that God's promises to the old Israel were irrevocable and would be fulfilled, although admittedly, his understanding of that fulfillment — inasmuch as it required faith in Jesus as Christ — was not one that his contemporaries among the Jews would have accepted.

The Church as the True Israel

The first and second centuries were years of self-definition for both Judaism and Christianity. As Christianity grew and spread through the ancient world, it had to assert its own identity. As part of this process of self-definition and differentiation, each tradition drew distinct boundaries that excluded the other, and each claimed to be the exclusive heir of biblical Israel.

The Christian understanding of the church as the "new" Israel came more and more to exclude the "old" Israel. This exclusion is found even in Gospel documents, which often portray the

Jews rejecting Jesus and Jesus (and/or God), in turn, rejecting the Jews and turning to the Gentiles.⁷ Whereas Paul saw a new Israel that included both “Jew and Greek,” later Christianity saw (and some Christians today continue to see) the new Israel (Christianity) superseding the old Israel (Judaism).

Justin Martyr (c.165 CE), an important early church father, uses the term “true spiritual Israel” in referring to the church in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin argues that since the God of Israel acted in Jesus Christ, it is in the church rather than in Israel that the God of Israel is now found.

An important difference between the position of Justin and the one articulated by Paul in Romans 9-11 is that Paul affirmed the irrevocable nature of God’s promise to the people of Israel. Justin, and thereafter most of Christianity into the modern era, viewed God’s relationship with “Abraham’s physical descendants” as transient, at best.⁸ The historical consequence of this theology was a growing antipathy to Jews and to Judaism in most of the Christian world.

Christianity Reconsiders Israel

We now come to the third stage in the development of Christian identity as Israel, in which the Shoah becomes a defining moment for Christianity. The long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism made the Shoah possible.⁹ Many of the people who carried out Hitler’s Final Solution considered themselves Christians.

In confronting this stark reality,

some post-Holocaust Christians have reexamined aspects of traditional Christian teaching, especially the concept of the church as the “true Israel,” and have offered new definitions that differ from those of Paul and classical Christianity. Among the fundamental questions probed by theologians such as Paul van Buren, Rosemary Radford Reuther, George Lindbeck, and Franklin Littell are:

- What are Christians to make of the persistence of the Jewish people?
- Is the church the new Israel? If so, who are these people? If not, what happens to the doctrines of promise and fulfillment, law and grace?
- Is Jesus of the people Israel? For whom is he the Messiah?
- What of Israel’s land and state?

In addition, many official church bodies have issued public statements that reflect these concerns. In the documents of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church reassessed its teachings about Jews and Judaism; it has continued this reassessment in subsequent documents.

Protestant churches have made similar pronouncements. For example, in 1987, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted a resolution titled “The Relationship Between the United Church of Christ and the Jewish Community.” It stated:

The United Church of Christ affirms its recognition that God’s covenant with the Jewish people has not been rescinded or abrogated by God, but remains in full force, inasmuch as “the gifts and the call of

God are irrevocable" (Romans 11: 29).¹¹

Rejecting Triumphalism

The moral imperative to disavow triumphalist teachings that have led to atrocities in the past is the driving force behind the Christian theological re-evaluation of Jews and Judaism. Hans Kung, a Roman Catholic theologian, examines the history of Jewish-Christian relations and states:

Only one thing is of any use now: a radical metanoia [reorientation], repentance and re-thinking; we must start on a new road, no longer leading away from the Jew, but toward them.¹²

Kung concludes that the church's opposition to the Jews is tantamount to opposition to God. Furthermore, the church "must seek in every way to enter into sympathetic dialogue with the ancient people of God." Kung also argues that the church and Israel are two distinct peoples of God:

Like Israel and following Israel, the Church sees itself as the journeying people of God, constantly being delivered from bondage, constantly wandering through the wilderness of this age, constantly maintaining the tension between thankful commemoration and hopeful expectation and preparing itself for its entry into the promised land, the messianic kingdom, the goal that always lies in the future.¹³

The Place of Jewish History

The realities of history are also the starting point for Kendall Soulen's book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. In his critique of traditional Christian theology, Soulen argues that it has essentially omitted the history of Israel/Jews from its telling of its own story. In his reconstruction of what he calls "the standard canonical framework," there are four stages of history. First, God creates the world and humanity. Second, humanity, through the sin of Adam and Eve, disobeys and falls. Third, "lost humanity" is redeemed in Christ. Fourth, God brings the final redemption of the world at the "end of time."

The church (that is, those who believe in Jesus as Christ) is Israel inasmuch as it has become the people of God through its fidelity to Jesus Christ, not because it is descended from a single ancestor. Its status as a people is not defined solely by the promises of Sinai, nor does it necessarily entail a connection to any particular land. Noticeably missing from this rehearsal of the Christian sacred story is any mention of what we Jews would consider the core of our history. In this view, the Jews and their story are irrelevant to the story of the new, true Israel, Christianity.

Soulen notes, however, that significant parts of the Christian church today reject supersessionism and affirm God's fidelity to the Jewish people. From there we ask: What are the implications of this new development for the rest of Christian theology?¹⁴

Soulen offers his own answer:

Christians should acknowledge that God's history with Israel and the nations is the permanent and enduring medium of God's work as the Consummator of human creation, and therefore it is also the permanent and enduring context of the gospel about Jesus.¹⁵

Rather than viewing the history of Israel and the nations as preparation for the gospel, Soulen argues that this history "surrounds the gospel as its constant horizon, context, and goal."¹⁶ He suggests that Christianity cannot understand itself unless it posits an Israel whose covenant with God coexists with and informs the new covenant.

Scott Bader-Saye, another Christian theologian who has considered the meaning of election for contemporary Christianity, refers to the church as "God's chosen people with Israel."¹⁷

Along with/Instead of

The concept of the church as the people of God along with the Jews, a concept that does not depend on denying Jews our identity and covenantal legitimacy, is a radical shift in Christian thinking. This step has required painful soul-searching and theological courage on the part of those Christians who have taken it. The Jewish community should view this shift positively; it signifies a real change in Christian understandings of Jews and Judaism and creates a profound basis for cooperation and exchange.

Above and beyond this basis for exchange, however, we ought to ask another question: Does this new shift among Christians have theological implications for Jews? Does the recognition on the part of some Christians that we Jews continue to be Israel in covenant with God require that, in turn, we must acknowledge the legitimacy of the church's claim to identify with the name "Israel"?

As I have tried to show in this brief essay, Jewish and Christian definitions of what it means to be Israel are quite different from one another. Jewish tradition already recognizes and affirms Gentiles who acknowledge the oneness of God. Jews can recognize Christians as people who believe in the God of Israel. From a Jewish perspective, however, that belief, in and of itself, does not make Christianity part of Israel, as we understand Israel, that is, a people that has a special covenant with God who has given us a specific land.

Although Christians can acknowledge that Israel's covenant with God is eternal, fidelity to Jewish tradition precludes our recognition as Israel of those who do not meet our definitional criteria. This is but one of the enduring differences between Jews and Christians, and we must not only accept but also affirm this difference if we are truly committed to supporting each other's integrity.

Changes in Christian theology regarding Jews and Judaism, however, do challenge us to find new ways to relate to Christians and Christianity. Now that some in the Christian world affirm God's continuing covenant with

the Jews, we need to consider the theological implications of their claim to be in covenant with that same God.

1. The Hebrew word *yehudi* in its various forms appears twenty-four times outside the book of Esther, where it is used regularly. Though most often translated into English as “Jew,” in context the best translation may be “Judean.”

2. In the Orthodox prayer book, the same benediction is found in a negative formulation: “who has not made me a Gentile.”

3. See B.T. *Sanhedrin* 22a.

4. Thus a Jew-by-choice is given a Hebrew name reflecting the family relationship — X the son/daughter of Abraham and Sarah.

5. Paul uses the plural “covenants,” probably a reference to successive covenants with Abraham as well as to the covenant at Sinai. It should be remembered that what we have of Paul’s writings is a collection of occasional letters, not an organized, worked-out theology. All interpretations of Paul are, by necessity, constructions.

6. Cf. Galatians 3:7, 9, 14, 29; 6:19.

7. See, for but one example, Matthew 22:33–41.

8. Much of Christian anti-Semitism can be traced to the view that the Jews (“carnal Israel”) had rejected Jesus, indeed, had crucified him.

9. The term “anti-Semitism” is problematic. It is important to differentiate between religiously based and racially based prejudice against Jews. Some consider only the latter to be “anti-Semitism.” Nonetheless, although it is important to distinguish different types of “Jew-hatred,” it seems to me that the term

“anti-Semitism,” despite its shortcomings, is now understood to encompass both “religious” and “racial” Jew-hatred.

It is also important to stress that although Christian anti-Semitism made the Shoah possible, “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon,” to quote “*Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), xix.

10. See Peter Ochs, “Jewish and Christian Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, edited by David Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 607. Ochs’ article provides a good synopsis of this trend in contemporary Christian theology.

11. For more on this resolution and its implications, see Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, “God’s Continuing Covenant with the Jews and the Christian Reading of the Bible,” in *Prism: A Theological Forum for the UCC* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1988), 60–75.

12. Hans Kung, *The Church*, translated by Ray and Rosaleen Oekenden (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), 138.

13. *Ibid.*, 148.

14. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 3.

15. *Ibid.*, 110.

16. *Ibid.*, 176.

17. Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), 148.