

Election, Covenant, Messiah, and the Future

in

Jewish and Christian Theology

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The **traditional Christian schema** regarding election, covenant, Messiah, and the future can be stated with some brevity. God, the creator of all things in heaven and earth, freely chose to create the world. God also, from the depths of God's own wisdom, chose Abraham as the father of the people of Israel, promising Abraham that God will be with and bless his offspring. This choosing or electing of Abraham and Israel is inscrutable. God follows through on his covenant by rescuing Israel from Egypt and reestablishes the covenant with Moses and Israel at Sinai. This covenant calls for Israel to be God's people, to be obedient to God's will as embodied in the Ten Commandments. Through a long and difficult history, Israel repeatedly fails to be obedient to God and the covenant, resulting in a series of communal catastrophes of military defeat and exile. In response to these catastrophes, Israel looks forward to an eventual restoration or redemption by God through a representative national leader called "Messiah." The Messiah does indeed come in Jesus of Nazareth, but the Jewish people by and large reject him as the Messiah and crucify him. God raises Jesus from the dead and calls Jew and Gentile alike to a new covenant, to the church as a new community. By rejecting Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, Israel has been rejected by God and superseded by the church, the new Israel. Those who confess Jesus as Messiah or Christ are to be saved in the midst of a world that is rushing toward a future of divine judgment and culmination. Jews will only be included in such salvation if they accept Jesus as the Messiah and their Lord and Savior.

With variations here and there, **this schema of ideas reigned in most forms of Christianity until the Holocaust called such matters into serious question among Christians.** The Holocaust was demonically imposed upon Jewish people—just because they were Jewish people—against the backdrop of almost two millennia of Christian diatribe against and mistreatment of Jews. While a handful of Christians repudiated the Nazi action against Jews and struggled heroically to thwart the Nazi juggernaut, many so-called "Christians" actively participated in the destruction of Jews and many other Christians watched apathetically. **Was the Holocaust an inevitable development of traditional Christian teaching?** If so, in what respects and how shall we rethink our understanding of Judaism and Christianity? At the same time, the Holocaust has caused some anguished reappraisals within Judaism.

This study guide stands under the long and dark shadow of the Holocaust and is written by Christians trying to understand the heart of the Christian gospel in relation to Judaism. In this section, we will examine some issues and differentia between Jews and Christians and among Jews and among Christians. Contemporary Judaism is not a monochrome reality; there are large and important differences among Jews. So, too, with Christians: the differences are sometimes overwhelming. Herein we will try to look carefully and hopefully truthfully, even as we look fallibly and limitedly. We are attempting to examine from a Christian perspective how Jews and Christians agree and differ in their understanding of election, covenant, Messiah, and the future.

The **concepts of election and covenant go together in most Jewish and Christian thinking.** God is understood as one who acts freely, that is, can make decisions without necessity or coercion. **Without God being free to act, the concept of election would become unintelligible.** Election or chosenness is something God freely does; God does not have to do it. Jews and Christians agree that God elected or chose

Israel for a special relationship to God. The choice of Israel was not based on any virtue or distinctive characteristics of Israel that warranted God's choice. Rather, God chose Israel as an act of love and grace; in this sense, beyond saying it is a free act of God's grace, God's choice of Israel is inscrutable.

There is, therefore, **an inscrutable particularity about God's election of Israel**. This particularity cannot be reduced to some general principle of explanation, for example, that God was doing the same thing for all peoples. It can also be noted that **for Christians the particularity of God's election of Israel has its counterpart in the particularity of the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth**. Both particularities resist being explained away or subsumed under general principles.

It should be apparent that this Hebraic concept of election or chosenness can become offensive to other peoples of the world. It raises the question: if God elected Israel, then are the other nations left out of God's plans? Likewise, if God acted uniquely in Jesus Christ, then does God not act in other nations and religions? If God elects some, are not those unelected thereby excluded? These are difficult questions, but for both Jews and Christians, they are old questions.

When God elects Israel, God also enters into **covenant** with Israel. God first covenanted with Abraham in calling him out of Ur and promising that his offspring would be specially blessed. This covenant with Abraham was renewed with Moses and Israel at Sinai. A covenant is not a contract negotiated by two competent equals, entailing mutual obligations on both parties. Rather, for Jews and Christians, God takes the initiative and calls Israel into covenant. This calling is sheer grace on God's part, and God promises to bless Israel and be Israel's God. On Israel's side, God lays down certain conditions for Israel's faithful obedience to the covenant, generally referred to as the Ten Commandments or more broadly as **Torah**. Hence, the Torah shows Israel how to be faithful to the covenant with God. Fulfilling Torah is fulfilling the covenant of being God's chosen people.

What, we might ask, is the purpose of the covenant between God and Israel from the standpoint of Judaism? Different answers abound. Sometimes Israel is said to be a light to the nations, especially by obeying Torah and forsaking idolatry. Yet for Jews, the purpose of the covenant was never to make Jews out of the Gentile nations. Some Jews today, however, emphasize that Jewish people are called to no further purpose than to be obedient to Torah—which includes the pursuit of justice even for the Gentile neighbor—and to await the final redemption that God will someday bring. From a Christian standpoint, the purpose of the covenant was to be the theater in which God finally works God's redemptive purpose in Jesus Christ for Israel and the world.

But the covenant story in Israel and Christianity sometimes gets confusing. The Torah is given by God's grace; in grace God already loves Israel. Israel does not have to do Torah in order to be loved by God. But what happens if Israel does not keep Torah? Will God then punish or forsake Israel? In making covenant with Israel, God makes **promises** to Israel; but are the promises conditional on Israel's own faithfulness to the covenant? The Hebrew Scriptures wrestle valiantly with this very question. God is shown repeatedly renewing the covenant and being faithful in spite of Israel's failures and unfaithfulness. God will not abandon and forsake Israel in the face of Israel's disobedience. Yet, when bad things happen to Israel, like the conquests and exiles by Assyria and Babylon, is this God's punishment for an unruly people? Are bad things, such as the Diaspora and the Holocaust, to be interpreted as God's punishment of Israel? The book of Job is a profound Jewish dramatization and meditation on the theological ramifications of these questions.

Jews today still wrestle with these questions and there is a wide spectrum of opinion. We may ask whether there are any historical consequences, whether positive or negative, to being God's people. Is faithful Israel historically rewarded, and disobedient Israel historically punished, if not forsaken? For traditional Jews, Israel remains God's chosen people, but the Holocaust severely strains any possible interpretation that God was disciplining or punishing Israel in the death camps. For other Jews, the notion of Israel's election or chosenness is an embarrassing idea in a pluralistic world. For these, the idea of election is a burden of historic proportions that has provoked others to attack and demean Israel. Also, some Jews have pondered passionately whether the Holocaust itself is a sign that God hid and forsook the Jews or even that God is really dead. Yet even in all this, there is among Jews of many different theological opinions, the strong

common conviction that the founding of the State of Israel and the reclaiming of the land is a sign of the continuation of God's election of Israel.

Here it is appropriate to introduce the term *Messiah*. In Hebrew it means quite simply "the anointed one," and in Greek it is translated as "Christ." In Hebrew Scriptures, kings and priests are the main figures who are anointed of God. But as Israel comes to grips with the frightening, destructive upheavals in its life as it is victimized by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and finally Rome, the questions of hope and salvation emerge again and again. All along Israel thought that the Creator God had a redemptive purpose for Israel and the whole world; this was the strong Hebraic conviction that history was going somewhere. But the question emerges with urgency: can Israel have hope in the Creator God even in the midst of violent devastation and exile and Diaspora? There thus emerges a hope for a future restoration of Israel by a righteous leader sent by God, probably a kingly leader. Such an anointed one would restore Israel among the nations and usher in real peace and justice. These are the loose-fitting themes that comprise what might be called the messianic hope of Israel and Judaism.

Contemporary historical scholarship has now led us to believe that in the time of Jesus, the hope for a Messiah was not nearly as precise, definite, and widespread for the ordinary Jew as Christians have historically assumed. It is, therefore, probably not true that all Israel possessed a common and clear concept of Messiah and self-consciously rejected Jesus as Messiah. But the early Jesus movement within Judaism did come quickly to apply the term 'Messiah' or 'Christ' to Jesus as a way of understanding who he was and what he had done.

As the break between the synagogue and the church widened, two issues became sharply posed. First, whatever the church might believe about Jesus as Messiah, a typical Jew would know that the Messiah's coming would be marked by the restoration of Israel and the reign of peace and justice. To such a typical Jew, it is not obvious and tangible that peace and justice have come in Jesus of Nazareth. Second, not only is there no obvious reign of peace and justice, but a Messiah who was crucified on a tree was hardly commensurate with common notions of looking to a royal anointed one who would restore and vindicate Israel.

Hence, **Jews and Christians have some different assumptions when they talk about Messiah.** For Jews, the Messiah has not yet come, as evidenced by the absence of peace and justice and a fully restored Israel. For Christians, the Messiah has come in Jesus of Nazareth and manifests the very presence of God's kingdom, and Jesus' resurrection is the promise of a full realization of the kingdom of God in the future. The Messiah suffered on the cross, showing the suffering of God in the midst of and at the hands of sinful humanity, and was raised from the dead as the promise that no future can separate us from the love of God. In retrospect, we can appreciate how difficult and bracing, perhaps liberating, it would be for a Jew to call Jesus Messiah.

However, Christian belief in Jesus as the Christ is more than the belief in Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Jesus is called the very Word of God, the Son of God, and the one who comes as God's gracious gift to Israel and all humankind. In Jesus, God has fulfilled the covenant with Israel and has established a new covenant with the church and the world. Jesus is the one who all Israel, from Moses to the prophets, looked for eagerly — if unwittingly — as the Redeemer of Israel and the world.

In our time, some careful rethinking has taken place from the Christian side. Two questions can be stated. First, is the new covenant with the church of Jesus Christ one that **replaces** Israel's covenant or **fulfills** Israel's covenant or is simply God's **new** covenant with the Gentiles? Second, is Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, a Messiah **for Israel** or only **for the Gentiles**? Put another way, does Jesus have any theological significance for Israel, as well as for Gentiles?

Few Christian theologians and churches today would want to argue that God's new covenant with the church of Jesus Christ replaces, supersedes, and cancels God's covenant with Israel. This would mean that Israel has ceased being God's chosen people and has been replaced by the church. It is this belief that has for Christians rendered Israel useless, aimless, and subject to abuse. In rejecting this long-standing tradition of the church, some would argue that the very terms 'Old Covenant' (Old Testament) and 'New

Covenant' (New Testament) are inappropriate theologically in our time.

Then what should we say about Jesus and the church? Are these simply to be understood as God's redemptive action only for the Gentiles? Israel's covenant, it might be said, remains intact, and in Jesus, a Jew, God opens up a new way for Gentiles. This is a very prominent interpretation by Christian theologians today. But it renders virtually unintelligible that the earliest church was made up of Jews and that the Jewish Paul thought Jesus Christ was certainly a gift of God for Paul himself. To say Jesus Christ is only for the Gentiles is to say a Jew would be making a conceptual mistake to confess Jesus as the Christ and Lord and Savior. This is a conclusion that many Christians are unwilling to draw.

If it is false to speak of Israel as superseded and rejected by God and if it is unconvincing to speak of Jesus Christ as being only for Gentiles, how should Christians speak of God's covenant with Israel and God's covenant in Jesus Christ? Can we then say that Jesus Christ **fulfills** the covenant between God and Israel in the sense that God takes up Israel's side in the covenant by being flesh and word in Jesus the faithful Jew? Here "fulfill" does not mean cancel or reject or repudiate, but is that which brings to completion. Neither does fulfill have to mean that the covenant with Israel was empty until Jesus; rather, fulfilling has the same function in Jesus Christ as Jeremiah's hope for a new covenant that will be written on the hearts of Israel. Hence, for Jeremiah the covenant with Israel will be fulfilled when it is written on every heart. So too in Jesus Christ, the covenant is fulfilled by God-in-the-flesh taking up the cause of Israel. Here we could say, then, that **Jesus Christ is God for Israel and for all humanity, as pure unbounded grace. In Jesus Christ God was at work reconciling Jew and Gentile to Godself.**

Certainly this last interpretation is not one that a religious Jew would find congenial. And the reasons for this are not hard to find. Jews and Christians will, perhaps, inevitably forever disagree about Jesus Christ, so long as Christians assert that God's redemptive actions in Jesus were unique and decisive for all humanity, including Israel. Drop this assertion and what is left of Christian belief, except a modified Judaism for Gentiles? Drop this assertion and you can say Judaism is for Jews and Christianity for Gentiles.

Here **the Christian can revisit the doctrine of election**. Certainly Israel was chosen by God, and chosen by God to have its salvation and the salvation of the whole world worked out in its people's history. Jesus, the Word of God from the beginning and made flesh in Israel, is the one truly elected by God in electing Israel. In God's election of Jesus Christ, it is determined by God—before all time—that Israel will be the history in which God will work out God's election of all humanity to salvation. Election thus means God's gracious decision to use the particularity of Israel and the particularity of Jesus Christ for the universal redemptive purpose of saving a lost humanity. Hence, the election of Jesus Christ and the church does **not** cancel the election of Israel but brings it to its proper fulfillment as the redemption of Israel and the world. Put simply, **in Jesus Christ, Israel and the nations are elected by God for salvation.**

Does the church have a mission to the Jews? This is one of the most vexing questions in contemporary discussion. Clearly, any sense of mission as coercive proselytizing must be firmly repudiated. Yet on the one hand, it seems natural that Christians, to the extent they believe that God acted in Jesus Christ for all, would want to share that witness with their Jewish brothers and sisters. Certainly, it would seem presumptuous to **refuse** to confess and witness to this gospel. On the other hand, a mission to the Jews suggests that Jews don't know God and may not be saved apart from **confessing** the lordship of Jesus Christ. This, however, would seem to repudiate God's election of Israel and would inappropriately narrow the scope of God's salvific work in Israel and in Jesus Christ on behalf of all humanity.

Does the Jew or Judaism have a mission to the church? It has not been the practice of Judaism to seek the conversion of Gentiles to Israel's faith. As we have said, traditionally Judaism has had no mission to Gentiles. But can a Christian see in Judaism a mission, if not one of conversion, but of witness to the church? Certainly—it can be answered—Judaism serves as a witness to the church that God's grace is inscrutable and free and never the possession of the church and under its control. Judaism can witness to the church that the Messiah's work is not yet completed; peace and justice do not yet reign in the affairs of humankind. However much the church may believe that something ultimately decisive was enacted for God and humanity in Jesus Christ, there is still much to be consummated in a future yet to come.

Jesus Christ is unintelligible to the Christian without seeing him in the history of Israel as the chosen people of God. **It is Jewish flesh that God used before Jesus and uses in Jesus to reconcile a sinful world. Christians deny the real incarnation of God when they neglect the Jewishness of Jesus.** And yet, it is precisely the differing beliefs about Jesus that mark the line differentiating Jew and Christian. It is an insult to either faith to declare—from some vaunted general point of view—that they believe the same thing, really. Yet, it is also an insult to assert that they worship different Gods. The conversation must go on to discern the ways of faithfulness in both synagogue and church.

For Christians the hopeful word is that the God whom they know in Jesus Christ, and about whom they speak in trinitarian terms, is first and last the **God of Israel**. Even as this God speaks a gracious word of salvation in Jesus Christ, so too the Christian knows God is faithful from beginning to end to God's specially chosen people Israel. Just as the Christian possesses a hope in the ultimate triumph of God's grace as known in Jesus Christ and Israel, and not a hope grounded in the Christian's own righteousness, so too the Christian knows Jews as included in the triumph of God's grace.

And yet this hope is not obvious and evident in a troubled world and is not corroborated by a facile reading of contemporary history. Even so, however much the present hour may involve suffering and worldly defeat, the Christian learns from Israel and Jesus Christ that in the end God's love and justice will be the last Word. **The Holocaust cautions that God's reign is not readily apparent in the affairs of history, and yet the Christian believes that the God—who suffered on Christ's cross—suffered with unfathomable sorrow the horror of God's children burning in the ovens of hate.** The Messiah has come, and he is one who suffers and in suffering finally triumphs as the Ultimate Companion of the world's victims and even of the world's tyrants.

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