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Christianity in Jewish Terms

Ed. by T. Frymer-Kensky, D. Novak, P. Ochs, D. F. Sandmel and M. A. Signer. Westview Press, 2000

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This edited volume consists of thirteen chapters with a significant epilogue by George Lindbeck and the editors (as listed above). In September 2000 the editors had already published a statement in the *New York Times* and other newspapers entitled [Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity](#). This volume is a scholarly extension of that statement. Its purpose is to help Jews relearn the vocabulary of their own faith and then, within this vocabulary, to help them recognize and understand the main Christian tenets of their neighbour's faith. It is also intended to assist Christians in learning the main tenets of Judaism and thereby to rediscover its significance as a source of their faith and as a dialogue partner.

Each chapter, consisting of three essays, treats a key theological concept in Judaism and Christianity. In the first essay a Jewish scholar teaches about a particular area of Jewish theological tradition and then offers ways for Jews to understand a corresponding set of Christian beliefs. In the second essay, another Jewish thinker from his or her perspective offers another way of understanding the same Jewish and Christian beliefs. In a third essay, a Christian scholar responds to the first essay showing its significance for his or her understanding of Christianity.

This book is a significant milestone in Christian-Jewish understanding. The participants are leading scholars in their respective faiths and disciplines, holding distinguished chairs in some of the leading universities in the USA. The publication marks a positive, mainly Jewish, theological response to the dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish-Christian relations, especially to the signs of a new improved Christian attitude toward Jews. The increasing number of statements from official church bodies, acknowledging the revision of their understanding of Judaism (whether as a failed religion or as a preparatory religion finding its crown in the emergence from it of Christianity) has opened the way to allowing Judaism to be rightly appreciated for its contribution to world civilization, and for its ongoing contribution to humanity's religious quest. The authors of this volume consider now is a most fitting time for Jews (in association with some leading Christian theologians) to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity.

It is encouraging to note how the change in Christian attitudes has actually proved a catalyst in Jewish reaction. In an essay on "Christian-Jewish Interactions over the Ages" Robert Chazen deals briefly with negative and positive interactions across the centuries. In a significant chapter on "Scripture", Michael A. Signer considers Jewish and Christian attitudes whilst Hindy Najman looks at Philo of Alexandria and George Lindbeck reflects on postmodern hermeneutics and Jewish-Christian dialogue. In similar vein David Novak, Elliot Dorff and Stanley Hauerwas consider commandment and ethics. One of the most interesting chapters is that on "Israel", with Irving Greenberg, David Fox Sandmel and R. Kendall Soulen discussing Israel, Judaism and Christianity, and Israel and the church in the context of covenantal pluralism. I will return to that later, but first I want to choose one of the thirteen chapters and consider it as a representative of the approach and format of the book.

Menachem Kellner considers 'How Ought a Jew View Christian Beliefs about Redemption?' He takes Paul's use in Romans of Habakkuk 2:4, "the righteous shall live by his faith", as his starting point; he then discusses what he takes to be two Jewish alternatives to this reading:

- a. that of Rav Simlai, who, in the talmudic tractate Makkot, apparently sees the faith spoken of by Habakkuk in terms of loyalty to the commandments
- b. that of Maimonides, who apparently sees the faith spoken of by Habakkuk in terms of correct intellectual apprehensions.

Kellner sees Paul as focusing on the individual – what a person must do in order to be saved from damnation – whereas Jewish thinkers have traditionally focused on what the Jewish people must do corporately to achieve redemption.

Kellner concludes that a Jewish view of redemption must emphasize a number of issues: thisworldiness, good works, and truth. Paul's view of redemption as expressed in Romans seems to be wholly other-worldly, divorced from good works, and focused entirely on truth. In this Paul is similar to Maimonides, the first Jew to ask even a similar question, though the force of Jewish tradition draws the latter to focus on good works as well. Kellner views Paul as being misled by his un-Jewish view of original sin which caused him to ask the wrong question rather than the proper Jewish question, "what must we do in order to make the world messiah-worthy?"

In the second Jewish essay in this chapter, "Redemption: What I have Learned from Christians", Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer deplores the simplistic boundary drawing of Jews and Christians over the centuries, noting that it is deceptive to claim that what divides the two peoples on redemption is the simple question of the messiah coming for the first or the second time. Her approach is rather one of looking at Christian views of redemption with a view to understand, and, perhaps, to learn. Starting with H. Richard Niebuhr's famous book, *Christ and Culture*, she notes his five characteristic Christian responses to living in the contemporary world, Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture. In Fuchs-Kreimer's opinion, what has happened is that the model of 'Christ and Culture in Paradox', the one most typical of the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther, is the version of Christian faith that most Jews have in mind when they speak of the differences between Judaism and Christianity. This is not so surprising considering that Jewish thinkers, coming to Christianity in the modern period, read Paul through the eyes of Luther, and both through the eyes of latter-day German scholars.

Unfortunately, what is only one strand of Christianity has been seen by many Jews as the representative or norm of the whole. In this strand, the image of Paul and his stress on human sinfulness is as Jews have described, and all the initiative in divine-redemption is a matter of God's unilateral action in a world that is corrupt. But this somewhat dualistic, world-denying type of faith, Fuchs-Kreimer acknowledges, has been rejected by Christianity as a whole. The created order is good, even though it has been corrupted; the same God who created the world will also redeem it through Christ. The most extreme forms of dualism are simply not good Christian theology.

This author goes on to consider Christian Counterculturalism and Christ the Transformer of Culture. Using historical examples, she finds parallels between the Rule of St Benedict and Judaism – in both the heavenly city depends on people obeying the law, treating each other in ways that are dictated to maximise the community's effectiveness. In Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, she finds an emphasis that the final consummation of human history will come with human and divine effort, a notion that Jews can easily recognize.

In a section entitled "What I Have Learned from Christians", Fuchs-Kreimer notes that Christianity is so very varied and complex that it is difficult to make generalizations. Each type of Christianity holds teachings and challenges. From Paul she has learnt a healthy scepticism of all human projects. She

sees Paul's criticism of the law as neither a critique specifically of Judaism, nor only a meditation on the role of the gentiles, but a critical recognition that all human systems which we create, be they Jewish law or church law, especially when they are taken as ultimate, are likely to be deeply flawed. From Benedict and the Mennonites and other critics of culture, she is reminded that we need to take a step back from our culture and not to be too closely identified with it. From Moltmann she has learnt to link theology to "helping to bring the messiah", a theme that is underemphasized in many Jewish writings, despite the claim that Judaism is an activist religion. She concludes that a reaction to Christian claims may have caused Jews to back away from a redeemer who comes in human form, but whilst not holding that he has come, she still finds the idea of his coming in human form intriguing since this means "redemption is thus not merely a time" (p.284).

In the third essay in this chapter, Clark Williamson offers "A Christian View of Redemption". He sees in Kellner's view of Paul evidence for the fact that seldom have Jews and Christians been able to understand one another except as examples of bad religion. "The Christian stereotype of Judaism as arid, legalistic, grace-less, and devoid of faith is familiar. Kellner's views are the other side of the stereotype: Christianity is individualistic, otherworldly, unconcerned with doing good works, focused entirely on truth, and exclusivist with regard to salvation. One can find Christians who live the stereotype, but there is no basis for it in Paul" (p.286).

Williamson argues that Paul, like the later mishnaic version of the same words, believes that "all Israel will be saved" and that this comes from his firm belief in God's chesed, what Christians call God's grace. Paul's whole argument in Romans 11 is to counter the rise of early displacement theology in his gentile followers in Rome, an understanding of redemption that is social and this-worldly (though this is not to deny that he also understands redemption in ultimate terms). Williamson goes on to note that Paul's negative statements about the law always have to do with membership requirements, whereas his affirmative statements about the law all occur in relation to discussions of moral behaviour. Abraham is primarily important for Paul because he is the recipient of the promise of God's blessings for the world, blessings that were promised to both Abraham and the gentiles, and not to either one at the expense of the other. Part of the meaning of redemption for Paul and his school was that the "hostility" between Jews and gentiles would be overcome.

This chapter reveals the dialogical nature of the whole book, Jewish input on Christian concepts and a Christian response to one of these Jewish contributions, an excellent format for dialogue. By way of evaluation, it is clear that dialogue should be a means of coming to understand, even to appreciate, the difference of the other. The concentration on a particular Christian theme not only focuses the argument but facilitates on-going comparison and contrast between the faiths. Rather than building boundaries to secure one's traditional stance, the kind of dialogue exemplified, for example, in Fuchs-Kreimer's essay is one that presumes the boundaries as already in existence and not requiring further fortification, but looks instead for common approaches to similar human needs.

Also relevant is the issue of what constitutes, or which strand represents, Christianity. The partial must not be mistaken for the whole, nor the peripheral for the centre. Similarly, what view of Paul is current or dominant in the most recent scholarship? I was conscious that in the exchange between Williamson and Kellner, we were really considering a dominant but now outdated view of Paul, against Williamson's more recent image. It is exceedingly difficult for scholars outside of a religion to determine which authors or perspectives to adopt. Possibly the solution to this dilemma lies in the contribution of New Testament scholars who are themselves Jewish, and who are thereby able to make informed judgements on current scholarly trends. Since Paul's writings have only recently come to be seriously studied from a Jewish perspective, and since the present trend in New Testament study is to try to present Judaism fairly, rather than as an opposing religion to be presumed inferior, it follows that the most recent scholarship is a prerequisite to genuine dialogue.

I will now return, as promised, to take a brief look at the interesting chapter on 'Israel'. In this, Irving Greenberg discusses 'Judaism and Christianity: Covenants of Redemption', David Fox Sandmel,

'Israel, Judaism and Christianity" and R. Kendall Soulen responds to Greenberg in an essay on 'Israel and the Church". Soulen argues for the plausibility of Christian faith – the church is what one might expect to come into existence once God's promise to Abraham – 'in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen 12:3) – has been fulfilled. Citing K. Barth, he claims that a promise fulfilled does not mean its end and replacement but its completion; a fulfilled promise is still a promise. He offers the analogy of the ringing of a dinner bell for the meal; but the bell is not the meal itself, only a call to signal its coming. Greenberg, however, claims that the first Jewish believers in Jesus rang the bell but it was the gentiles who came to dinner as God had intended. This covenantal pluralism approach asserts that the resurrection had a spin off only for gentiles but not for Jews. Soulen's response is that the crucified messiah must have universal significance, the new creation is as extensive as the old. He acknowledges however, that Christians cannot yield to the view that God's covenant has been annulled for Jews. Paul's conundrum was that he held both views simultaneously: the gospel is for all, including Jews who refuse it, but God is faithful to his covenant with them. Later Christians lost Paul's vision and omitted the latter claim, whilst Greenberg rejects the former, viewing the resurrection as having only significance for gentiles. This fascinating chapter concludes that for contemporary Christian theology the issue is now not about whether Jews are God's chosen people but how. Soulen's conclusion is that the church is related to Jews in a way that includes both dependence and independence; independence to preach to all but dependence in that the gospel requires affirmation of God's fidelity to the Jewish people.

Other important and relevant chapters in this substantial publication deal with the suffering of God's chosen, exile and return, embodiment and incarnation, Jewish and Christian views of the image of God. Peter Ochs, David Ellenson and David Tracy offer an illuminating discussion of God, including sections on the Christian Trinitarian view as well as 'A Jewish View of the Christian God'. In a fascinating epilogue, George Lindbeck looks at Israel, the covenant and the future and the editorial team offer a Jewish response.

This book deals with the entire history of Jewish-Christian relationships and some parts of it therefore are more immediately relevant to the contemporary inter-faith context but, as the comments above indicate, most of the central discussions deal with the very significant moments in the interaction between the two faiths, particularly the emergence and early development of Christianity, and the abiding difference between it and Judaism. As such this volume deserves careful and serious consideration, whether in university or seminary teaching, or in inter-faith dialogue encounters. Hopefully it may mark the beginning of the end of the denigration of Judaism in much Christian preaching and teaching, the start of a new, more mature, era of understanding where Christians rid themselves of the sectarian attitude which requires that we continue to condemn Judaism in order to convince ourselves that we are right. Theologically, it may be significant as a boost to Christian self-understanding, not in negative reaction to Judaism, but in positive affirmation of its own earliest identity. On the Jewish side, the hearing of what the basic categories of Christian belief sound like in Jewish terms, in a new atmosphere of mutual respect and confidence, may be truly to understand them for the first time.

The contributors' goal of seeking to heal the divisions between human reason and Jewish as well as Christian faith may itself be very fruitful, and also contribute substantially to greater understanding between Judaism and Christianity by assisting in distinguishing the real from the apparent differences.