

# STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

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## What Can a Catholic Learn from the History of Jewish Biblical Exegesis?

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## 1. Introduction

The publication of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, is a landmark achievement. I can still remember reading an account of its appearance in the *New York Times* several years ago in which its contents were summarized. At the very head of that article was the observation that both Jews and Christians await the coming of the Messiah, the Jews await his first coming while Christians await the second.<sup>1</sup> In one sentence this document had pulled the rug out of a number of supersessionist readings of the Old Testament in which Christians had long argued that hopes of Jewish Messianism were completely fulfilled in the New Testament. In this essay I would like to take up the document's challenge that the Christian church take seriously the exegetical traditions of the Jewish tradition and focus my remarks on the theme of how Judaism has understood the biblically-grounded motif of Israel's election.<sup>2</sup> In brief, it will be my contention that the church has much to gain by appreciating how Jews understand their own calling.

Before turning to that, a few preliminary remarks are in order. Though the document makes some rather far-reaching proposals about how the Old Testament should be viewed by the Christian reader, it is not the case that a Christian reading is ruled out *tout court*. The tragic impact of the Shoah or the Holocaust has dramatically heightened Christian sensitivity to Judaism and the Jewish scriptures. "It may be asked," our document declares, "whether Christians should be blamed for having monopolized the Jewish Bible

<sup>1</sup> The Jan. 18, 2002 article by Melinda Henneberger was titled: "Vatican says Jews' Wait for Messiah is Validated by the Old Testament."

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, I have found the document's own account of the election of Israel to be a bit weak.

and reading there what no Jew has found. Should not Christians henceforth read the Bible as Jews do, in order to show proper respect for its Jewish origin?" The document continues:

In answer to the last question, a negative response must be given for hermeneutical reasons. For to read the Bible as Judaism does necessarily involves an implicit acceptance of all its presuppositions, that is, the full acceptance of what Judaism is, in particular, the authority of its writings and rabbinic traditions, which exclude faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.<sup>3</sup>

This paragraph should be particularly interesting to the Catholic reader because of the inextricable link it makes between scripture and tradition.<sup>4</sup> Although this is both a defensible and commendable position, it would seem to provide a considerable obstacle for the Christian who wishes to make use of the Jewish exegetical tradition, for it is precisely that tradition that explicitly excludes faith in Jesus

<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2002), §22.

<sup>4</sup> See §10-11. The document declares that "Christianity has in common with Judaism the conviction that God's revelation cannot be expressed in its entirety in written texts [§10]." And it continues by drawing upon a couple of citations from the Second Vatican Council's *Dei Verbum*:

Scripture is defined as the "Word of God committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit"; but it is Tradition that "transmits to the successors of the apostles the Word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and by the Holy Spirit to the apostles, so that, illumined by the Spirit of truth, they will protect it faithfully, explain it and make it known by their preaching" (DV 9). The Council concludes: "Consequently, it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws its certainty about everything which has been revealed," and adds: "That is why both – Scripture and Tradition – must be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence" (DV 9).

as a viable exegetical option. Now one might predict from such a vantage point that there would be little utility in the ongoing exegetical traditions of Judaism for the Christian reader. But here is where our document offers a surprise. Though it resists quite strongly the notion that a Jewish reading must necessarily become the reading of the church, it does not rule out the possibility that Jewish readings may well be of some theological assistance to the church. Indeed my language is much too weak here when I say it allows for some *possible* utility. "The Christian can *and ought to admit* [emphasis is mine]," the PBC declares, "that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish sacred scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion."<sup>5</sup> And, significantly, it is precisely this quotation that attracts the attention of then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his preface to the document.

It is my firm opinion that the ongoing tradition of Judaism offers a treasure trove of insights from which Christians can profit. In this way the *living* tradition of Judaism has a degree of revelatory value for the Christian community. Let me illustrate this by considering the way in which the Bible has construed the office of the prophet.

## 2. The Office of the Prophet

The common assumption of many readers of the Bible is that the prophetic office is one that conveys to the human community the judgments of God. Perhaps the most famous scriptural exemplar of this understanding is that of Isaiah 6. In this chapter, Isaiah finds himself standing amid the gathered divine council as it deliberates over the fate of the human community below. God then asks, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" To this Isaiah replied, "Here am I,

<sup>5</sup> §22.

send me." Then follows the message that Isaiah is to deliver to the people of Israel. The movement in this passage is distinctively from the heavenly to the earthly realm.

No doubt one reason this image of the prophet has proven so popular in modern scholarship is its natural link to the concerns of the social justice movement. The stirring lines of Amos – "let justice roll down like a mighty river" – were a point of inspiration for Martin Luther King Jr. To be prophetic in the contemporary parlance of the church means to convey some point of incisive social criticism against the powers that be. The prophet is a mediator of the heavenly standards of justice.

Yet, the Biblical prophet had another important side to his job description. He not only conveyed the verdicts of the heavenly high court to the people who resided below, but he also conveyed the prayers and concerns of the Israelite community to the God who dwells above. To the average reader this notion of the prophet's responsibility may seem a bit odd. We can understand why God would need human messengers to convey his word to us. After all, we are limited, finite creatures who require outside sources for our knowledge of the world. But is God similarly in need of a human intermediary? One would think the answer would be an emphatic "No!" Yet, within the literary world of the Bible God is frequently depicted as having this precise need.<sup>6</sup>

The classic instance of this, to which we shall return, is the tale of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32. No sooner has the covenant been formally set in motion than Israel violates one

<sup>6</sup> The classic article that articulates this aspect of the prophetic task is: Yochanan Muffs, "Who Will Stand in the Breach? A Study of Prophetic Intercession," in his volume, *Love and Joy. Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 9-48.

of its most important stipulations. As a result, God becomes extraordinarily angry:

9: And the LORD further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiff-necked people; 10: now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them; and make of you a great nation."

The striking line here, of course, is the request that Moses step aside so that God may bring this project of electing the nation of Israel to a temporary halt ("... *now, let Me be*"). Why does God seek Moses' permission? Why wouldn't God simply proceed to judge Israel according to the nature of her deeds? Isn't this within His rights? For some reason, God leaves himself open to the intervention of Moses. And Moses loses no time in making the most of this opportunity:

11: But Moses implored the LORD his God, saying, "Let not your anger, O LORD, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. 12: Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with an evil intent that he delivered them [...]' 13: Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how you swore to them by Your self, and said to them, 'I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess for ever.'" 14: And the LORD renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.

Here Moses makes two points. First, that God's reputation will suffer considerable damage should he put an end to the people he has acquired at such great cost; and second, that God really has no right to act in the way he has proposed since he would then be violating his own solemn vow. *According to the logic of Moses' prayer, God had tied himself to Israel in such a way that he cannot extricate himself.* In response to this prompting on the part of Moses,

God relents and rescinds his decree. Moses as the quintessential prophet has intervened and turned the wrathful hand of God away from Israel.

### 3. Misreading Jonah

The fact that Israel's prophets were charged with the responsibility to speak on behalf of Israel was not lost on the thought of the Rabbis. Indeed, in an oft-cited text from the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* we can see how deeply ingrained this sensibility was.<sup>7</sup>

Thus you find that there were three types of prophets. One insisted upon the honor due the Father as well as the honor due the son, one insisted upon the honor due the Father without insisting upon the honor due the son; and one insisted upon the honor due the son without insisting upon the honor due the Father.

The midrash begins by dividing the prophets into three groups: those that stand up for the honor of both Father and son, that is God and Israel, and those that insist only on the honor of the Father (God) or the son (Israel). Jeremiah will represent the first group.

Jeremiah insisted upon the honor due the Father and honor due the son. For thus it is said: "We have transgressed and have rebelled; But Thou hast not pardoned" (Lam 3:42).

Here Jeremiah begins by rebuking Israel by acknowledging her rebellious nature but then turns to rebuke

<sup>7</sup> I will cite from the edition of Jacob Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), Vol I: 8-10. I have altered the translation slightly.

God for not acknowledging Israel's repentance.<sup>8</sup> Because Jeremiah upheld both the honor of God and Israel, he is rewarded:

Therefore his prophecy was doubled as it is said: "And there were added besides unto them many like words" (Jer 36:32).

The second prophet to be considered is Elijah.

Elijah insisted upon the honor due the Father, but did not insist upon the honor due the son, as it is said: "And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts" (1 Kgs 19:10). And thereupon what is said? "And the Lord said unto him: Go return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place (1 Kgs 19:15-16). The expression "in your place", can have no purport other than: I am not pleased with your prophesying.

According to the Rabbis, Elijah has protected the honor of God by taking his word of judgment against Israel at face value. But because he did not step forward to speak on behalf of Israel, God brings Elijah's career as a prophet to an end. Elisha is raised up with the hope that he will speak against God on behalf of Israel. The last prophet to be examined is Jonah:

Jonah insisted upon the honor due the son but did not insist upon the honor due the Father, as it is said: "[The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go at once to Nineveh...'] But Jonah rose up to flee unto

<sup>8</sup> In the eyes of pre-modern interpreters, the book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah.

Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3). What is written about him? "And the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying" (Jonah 3:1). [...] R. Nathan says: Jonah made his voyage only in order to drown himself in the sea, for thus it is said: "And he said unto them: Take me up and cast me forth into the sea" (Jonah 1:12).

It is not clear at first glance what is going on in the Jonah text. According to the midrash, Jonah knows that the warning he is appointed to deliver to the Ninevites will have its effect. The Ninevites will amend their ways and God's initial decree will be overturned. Why does this offend Jonah? Because he knows that Israel will not be so amenable to the prophetic decrees that she will hear from her great prophets and as a result will be sent into exile twice: first in 721 BCE when the kingdom of Assyria will do the dirty work (and Nineveh was located in Assyria) and then again in 587 BCE when the Babylonians will be the culprits. Jonah finds this an untenable situation since there is no possible way for him to defend Israel. Hence our midrash concludes, Jonah resolves the problem by fleeing from before the face of God. Better to uphold the honor due to the son (Israel) than to the Father (God).

It must be emphasized that this midrash does not represent the "plain-sense" of our text. This midrash is so consumed with the conventional role of the prophet as spokesman for Israel that it overrules what the text itself it about.<sup>9</sup> However, it is striking to compare this rabbinic

<sup>9</sup> In my view, a better solution to the problem of the book of Jonah has been proposed by the prominent Israeli biblical scholar Uriel Simon (*Jonah: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the new JPS translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999). He argues that the principal concern of the book is with a fundamental principle of theology: how is the principle of justice to be understood in relationship to the principle of mercy? For Jonah the problem with God is that he too easily

misreading with another misreading that many contemporary Christian scholars have assumed. Operating under the assumption that the book was written in the post-exilic period (and there are good linguistic reasons to see the matter this way), they argue that the book's main concern is to combat the rising xenophobia during the early post-exilic era.<sup>10</sup> Israel's status as the chosen nation had so ossified into a position of privilege, these scholars claim, that the book of Jonah was written to demonstrate that there were indeed individuals outside of Israel who were righteous, indeed even more righteous than Israel.

The difference between this Jewish reading and the standard Christian approach is striking. In the Jewish reading the role of Israel is so exalted that a prophet can go so far as to stick a thumb in God's eye to protect it whereas in the putative Christian reading the role of Israel is so suspect that any concern for the genealogical purity of the Israelite people becomes the occasion for a prophetic diatribe. Now as stated above, I think that both views diverge from the simple sense of the biblical book itself. However, I want to consider in more detail the "strong reading" that the Jewish tradition has offered us. What I would like to suggest is that the *Mekhilta* has offered us a meaning that arises out of the "simple sense" of what defines the prophetic office but

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relies on mercy and so overlooks the profound evil that the Ninevites have committed and will commit again in the future. For the author of the book, however, it is not within the ken of any mortal being to know how God conducts the proper calculus regarding the relation of mercy to justice. All we are to know is that mercy is stronger than justice and to pray that God will incline to that stronger trait.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the introductory material and annotations in two well respected study-Bibles: *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (New York: Oxford, 1991), 1186-1188; and *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1990), 1137-39.

is not itself the "simple sense" in its present deployment. This is by no means an odd thing in the history of exegesis, i.e. that the midrash shows all the right instincts but has applied them in the wrong place.

What I would like to suggest is that the high valuation of Israel that is assumed by the *Mekhilta* can be of considerable value to the Christian reader. In order to substantiate that claim, it will be useful to consider the role of Israel in the book of Psalms.

#### 4. All Israel

I would like to consider two psalms, 14 and 53. As soon as one casts a quick glance over them one notes something unusual. They seem to be identical! However, another point has troubled readers. The psalm begins with the complaint of an individual but ends with a prophecy of the salvation of all Israel (v. 7). The curious change from an interest in the individual to that of the community at large has long been recognized as resulting from the editorial work of a later scribe. Indeed, it fits in well with a marked tendency of the final redactor of the Book of Psalms to bring the theme of Israel's eschatological redemption to the fore.

Given the fact that the Book of Psalms has been "shaped" so as to allow an eschatological reading to emerge, it is not at all surprising that Jewish readers of Psalm 14 have found in this "late addition" something of a key to the whole. The most famous of all medieval Jewish interpreters, Rabbi Solomon son of Isaac, widely known by his acronym as "Rashi," illustrates this well. Rashi is cognizant of the fact that Psalm 14 will reappear later in the Psalter as Psalm 53, but asks why there are these two psalms that bemoan the human predicament but conclude in a resounding affirmation of God's pledge to restore Israel.

The first psalm, Rashi reasons, is about the destruction of the first Temple and the hope for the rebuilding of the second. The second psalm is about the destruction of the second Temple and the hope for another in the Messianic Age. In this way, Rashi keeps his gaze focused on the past, but he does so in a way that is reminiscent of Israel's lived liturgical life for the dates of the destruction of both the first and second Temples are memorialized on the same day, the 9th of Av. So it is fitting that these tragic events that are typologically related to one another in the Jewish tradition be memorialized in two psalms that look almost identical to one another.

However, there are other Jewish readings of the two psalms. Rabbi David Kimchi (d. 1235) chose to follow a less historical path than Rashi. He understood the subject of the psalm not as Israel in the 6th century living under the shadow of the Babylonian invasion but rather as the Jewish people who abide perennially in exile.<sup>11</sup> Kimchi writes with respect to Psalm 14: "This Psalm is also about the exile. The fool says in his heart: 'there is no god.' The fool is the king of the foreign nations in whose power Israel resides. He considers in his heart when he harms Israel ... that there is no God, no judge, no arbiter in the world who will repay a person according to his deeds."<sup>12</sup>

For Kimchi, of course, these kings of foreign nations were the rulers of Spain, France, and Germany where many Jews in his day lived and suffered periodically from

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* has two different entries on the subject of the exile, one that details the *historical circumstances* that led to the devastation of the province of Yehud in 587 BCE – it can be found under the heading "Exile" – and another on the *existential plight* of the people Israel living in the wider diaspora of the Gentile world – this entry is found under the Hebrew word for exile, "*Galut*."

<sup>12</sup> David Kimchi, *Perush Ha-Shalem al Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967), 34.

persecution. Here the psalmist's prayer that God redeem Israel is echoed in the *siddur*, or Jewish prayer book. For on every Shabbat and during the major festivals, the Jewish people routinely turn to God and pray that he fulfill his promise to restore his people Israel so that they may enjoy the presence of God in Jerusalem. For Kimchi, then, this psalm is not about a moment in Israel's distant past, but is emblematic of her present state as an exiled people living under the shadow of possible persecution. If Augustine was able to actualize the Psalter in a Christian way by understanding the voice of the Psalter as the *totus Christus*<sup>13</sup> – the "whole Christ" meaning head and members – we could say that Judaism makes a similar move in understanding the voice of the Psalter as the *totus Israel*.

## 5. Jesus Unites his Voice with that of Israel

One might think that reading the psalm in this way would only be of interest to Jews. However, we Christians should recall that what we know of the last hours of Jesus' life is heavily mediated by the Book of Psalms. Indeed, if one removed all the events that are tied to a psalm in Matthew's account of the passion, there would be almost no story to tell.<sup>14</sup> The most important of these words from the psalms are the last ones Jesus speaks: "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani*, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Mt. 27:46]. As all are aware, these words come from the opening lines of Psalm 22.

<sup>13</sup> On the concept of the Totus Christus in Augustine, see the fine essay of Maria Boulding in *Exposition of the Psalms 1-32* (The Works of St. Augustine; Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), 50-65.

<sup>14</sup> My selection of Matthew is somewhat arbitrary. One could conclude the same thing from Mark or Luke. On the subject of the use of the psalms in the passion narratives, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), II: 1452-1465.

Much ink has been spilled in recent years in trying to enter the mind of Jesus, efforts that are not of much service here. The point of the Matthean text is not so much the inner psychology of Jesus, but the adoption of a specific scriptural voice: the voice of the righteous sufferer, a voice well known in the Psalter and other Second Temple Jewish literature. Though it is true, from the perspective of systematic theology that Jesus' experience of God-forsakenness on the cross is something that allows him to represent all humanity before the Father, it should be emphasized that the primary *historical* referent of Jesus' cry is that of a *righteous sufferer within Israel*. It is Matthew's insight that through the voice of this specific man of Israel the cry of all humanity is heard.

Michael Wyschogrod has aptly noted that the Old Testament prophets and servants of God always emerge from and return to Israel, no matter how universal their particular theological interests may be.<sup>15</sup> And this Israel-centric perspective is not only present on the cross but also on the lips of the disciples during the days just prior to Christ's ascension. Note the question they put to Jesus in Acts 1:6-8:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Though these devoted followers of Jesus had clearly seen the crucifixion as the negation of Jesus' messianic pretensions, after the resurrection they came to learn that it was rather the precise moment of the substantiation of those

<sup>15</sup> See his article, "Incarnation," *Pro Ecclesia* 2 (1992): 208-215.

claims. Yet even from this enlightened perspective, the disciples cannot let go of the idea that the vindication of Jesus by the Father must have its primary referent turned toward the plight of Israel. *And Jesus does nothing to dissuade them from that view*. When the disciples ask Jesus if he is going to bring in his kingdom, it is important, as Robert Jenson observes, to note closely what he does not say.<sup>16</sup> Jesus does not announce that their hopes for a restored Israel are misplaced, nor does he introduce any other sort of pietistic fudge: "Well, it really isn't that kind of kingdom, you see, it's more spiritual." No, there is nothing of this – the kingdom of God still takes its bearings from the scriptures of Israel. God's mighty act of salvation will go *through Israel* outwards toward the nations.

So when Jesus cries out "my God, my God why have you forsaken me?" there is explicit evidence in the New Testament that obliges us to see *Jesus as uniting his voice to that of forlorn Israel*. As Christopher Seitz has observed, the words Jesus speaks when he enters fully into "that far country" are not new words expressive of his unique emotional state, rather they are old words, used words, words that Jesus had been taught in synagogue.<sup>17</sup>

I would assume that my comments so far ought to be, if not somewhat pedestrian, at least non-controversial. They are the result of taking seriously the Jewish character of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. In the theological circles in which I travel, there seems to be an emerging consensus that taking the Jewishness of Jesus seriously is only to the gain of the theological enterprise.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Jenson, "Toward a Christian Theology of Israel," *Pro Ecclesia*, 9 (1999): 49.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Seitz, *Seven Lasting Words: Jesus Speaks from the Cross* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 33.



## 6. Moses' Prayer of Intercession Christologically [Re-]considered

If we can see that Jesus assumes this representative role on the cross, we can perhaps read the story of Moses' intercessory prayer in Exodus 32 in a new light. Here the high view of Israel that we have been tracing has clear benefits for high Christology. As the Jewish biblical scholar, Yohanan Muffs has argued brilliantly, Moses is not simply an exemplary being standing before God. In fact, *he represents part of God to God*. He assumes a part of the divine personality such that – and here I am going slightly beyond what Muffs has said – one cannot properly pick out the full characterization or identity of God by only attending to what the subject identified by "God" in the story says. "God allows the prophet to represent in his prayer His own attribute of mercy," Muffs declares, "the very element that enables a calming of God's [angry and vindictive] feelings."<sup>18</sup> Because the prophet is a necessary, non-negotiable element in the rendering of the identify of God, the midrash can go so far as to say that God wept when Moses was ready to hand over his soul to death: "God said, who will stand against Me on the day of my wrath (cf. Ps 94:16). This means, Who shall protect Israel in the hour of My anger? And who will stand up in the great eschatological war for My children? And who will speak up for them when they sin against me?"<sup>19</sup>

If we attend carefully to the theological sensibility of this midrash, the basic framework of the Christological mystery should come into focus. On Holy Thursday we witness the Christ's dark night of the soul as he enters the Garden of Gethsemane in order to plumb the depths of our "godforsakenness." When he utters his words of dereliction

<sup>18</sup> Muffs, "Who Will Stand in the Breach?": 33.

<sup>19</sup> From Midrash Tanhuma as cited in Muffs, "Who Will Stand in the Breach?": 33.

on the cross, he ties himself to all humanity through the specific voice of forlorn Israel. Thus, when God wills to raise this man on Easter Sunday he is not simply electing to raise him; rather, in the act of raising Jesus from the dead, God commits himself to raising all those who will join themselves in faith to him, the Jew first and then the Gentile.

Robert Jenson frames the matter in his characteristically laconic fashion: While Jesus is in the grave the Father faces a dilemma, he can either "have his Son and us with him into the bargain, or he can abolish us and have no Son, for there is no Son but the one who said, 'Father forgive them!'"<sup>20</sup> Certainly one of the reasons that the early church labored so hard to make sure that Jesus was fully man was so that this representative aspect would be efficacious. As Gregory of Nazianzus put the matter, "what has not been assumed cannot be healed."

If we were to paraphrase Jenson we could say: The God of Israel faces a dilemma at the base of Mt. Sinai when Israel chose to violate the terms of the covenant and fall from his good graces. He can either have his prophet and Israel with him into the bargain, or he can cast Israel aside and have no Moses, for there is no Moses but the one who has tied his fate to that of Israel. God, of course, can do nothing of the sort; for should God reject Israel, Moses argues, he would be rejecting something of himself.

## 7. Conclusion

In this essay I have asked the question whether a Christian can read the Bible as the Jews do. If we mean by this following the lead of Judaism in every detail the answer

<sup>20</sup> Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), Vol. 1: 191.

is obviously no. For one thing, the linkage between the Bible and tradition is inseparable in Judaism; the written Torah can never be divorced from Oral Torah. But if we follow selective, but central themes such as the doctrine of "all Israel," I think the answer can be yes.

What I have tried to show is that God commits himself to Israel in a way that is deeply analogous to how he commits himself to Jesus Christ. Indeed, in this respect, I simply follow the lead of Michael Wyschogrod who has argued that:

"... the Jewish people, as a people, in some degree and in some form is the dwelling place for God in the world. ... This is the utter seriousness of the election of Israel. God has decided to tie himself to a people, to a people defined by a body, by the seed of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, and this people, who constitute a physical presence in the world, are at the same time the dwelling place for God in the world."<sup>21</sup>

To the degree that we understand the metaphysical importance of Israel's existence, to that same degree we get a better purchase on the identity of the person of Christ and his relationship to Israel and the world.

And this is the reason the Old Testament takes the office of the prophet so seriously. The prophet must represent Israel before God, because Israel represents God's mission to the world. When Moses dies, the midrash reveals, God weeps over what might happen should the world lack such an intercessor. It is as though God requires some second agent in order to render his full identity. He is one even as he is two. One could approach the figure of Christ in Gethsemane in a similar fashion. As he struggles over the course of his mission ("If it be your will, take this cup from

me") the fate of all humanity stands in the balance. We rejoice with the angels that Christ does not forsake his designated role and abides by the will of his divine Father. The God-man who voices this consent is the same God-man who will assume our state of godforsakenness on the cross. And in this close nexus between the identity of God and his prophet we get a glimpse something of what Christian theology has attempted to explore in the mystery of the Trinity. It is the very two-ness of the Son and the Father during the passion that will impel the Christian tradition to ponder the complexity of God's oneness. From this deep pondering will emerge the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission makes a bold claim when it asserts that the Christian reader can be instructed by post-biblical Jewish reflections on the Bible. Due to its brevity it did not illustrate in any concrete form how this might be the case. In this essay I have tried to show how Israel's own understanding of her election and her prophets provides a good occasion for the Christian reader to be so tutored. Just as Israel was to represent God's purposes in his larger created order, so too was God's son. It is perhaps no accident that both Israel and Jesus bear the title of God's first-born son.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Wyschogrod, "Incarnation": 212-13.

<sup>22</sup> See Exod 4:22 and Mark 1:11 and parallels.