
The God of Israel in the Theology of Robert Jenson

Robert Jenson numbers among the world's most influential living theologians, and his *Systematic Theology* may yet prove to be one of the most learned and stimulating written in English, or any language, in the last fifty years.¹ As Jenson continues to apply his breadth of knowledge to all manner of theological, ecclesial, and cultural concerns, one theme has attracted much of his energy and focus for over a decade. Indeed, the “theology of Israel” that comes to fruition in the *Systematic Theology* displays Jenson's determination to work through the implications of a “newly demanding” confrontation with the fact of Judaism.² This concern is intimately connected to another major concern of this period—a “christological” and “creedal” critical theory of Scripture. The abiding theological authority of the Old

1. See for example the concluding comments of John Webster, “Systematic Theology after Barth,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 258.

2. Robert W. Jenson, “Reversals: How My Mind Has Changed,” *The Christian Century* (April 20, 2010): 30–33.

Testament for the church emerges as an important aspect of these emphases. Jenson has described this encounter as an awakening:

I have realized how urgently the church needs a Christian theology of Judaism. It is all very well to renounce supersessionism, but how then *should* the church understand Judaism's continuing existence? In the next decades, powerful historical forces will drive Judaism and the church ever more closely together, and if they are to stand together, they will have to know why that is a good thing to do. It is not for Christian theologians to say how Judaism should regard its new partner, but the church on its side must find understanding that reaches far beyond good will.³

He has also worked hard to model the active and invested engagement expressed by the aforementioned convictions. In addition to numerous articles, chapters, and colloquia, Jenson continues to participate in Jewish-Christian discourse, has team-taught with a Jewish scholar and co-chaired an institute based in Israel and Princeton that sponsors Jewish-Christian working parties.⁴

The last century of Christian theology has witnessed a powerful and influential renewal of Trinitarian theology, which has been accompanied by significant discourse between Jewish and Christian theologians. The two movements are clearly connected. The Holocaust, or "Shoah," has left an indelible mark on Jewish-Christian dialogue. Such horror convinced many that Christians could, in the words of Eberhard Bethge, "no longer give expression to their faith without attending to the objections of our Jewish partners."⁵ While, at least in principle, Christian dogma has always insisted that Jews be understood as the "unique bearer of God's salvific covenant, into which the gentiles had been grafted by the unmerited grace of Christ,"⁶ there remains a tendency to drift toward emancipation from Jewish roots. Closely connected with this orientation is the marginalization of the Old Testament, observable from the time of Marcion and more recently

3. *Ibid.*, 31.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Michael Wyschogrod, *Das Reden von einem Gott bei Juden und Christen*, ed. C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (Bern: Peter Lang, 1984), 13, cited in Eberhard Bethge, "Christology and the First Commandment," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4:3 (1989): 261.

6. David Bentley Hart, "A Symposium on Dabru Emet," in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 186.

in variations of modern liberal Protestantism. However, the last fifty years have seen a widespread rejection of supersessionism from many denominations. This attitude has been reflected in statements from many churches including documents such as *Nostra Aetate* from the Second Vatican Council.⁷ This climate has also encouraged unprecedented levels of cooperation between Christian and Jewish thinkers. The contribution and influence of Jewish thinkers such as Michael Wyschogrod, David Novak, Peter Ochs, and Jon Levenson has also been important to this “new encounter” with Judaism. At the heart of this interaction is a commitment to take seriously the continued election of the Jewish people and an effort to identify and correct deeply ingrained currents of “anti-Judaism” within Christian identity. Theologians have with new vigor set out to remind Christianity of the centrality of the God of Israel to the gospel and theology proper.

This rapprochement highlights crucial questions, not only for a Christian theology of Israel, but also for Christian theology proper. As Bruce Marshall has pointed out, there are less than satisfactory ways of avoiding supersessionism. One such response is to insist on a complete distinction between Judaism and Christianity—in this case the church does not simply supersede Israel, it represents a new (superior) religion. Another strategy has been to rethink the primacy and uniqueness of Christ so as to mitigate the offense of triune identification with the God of Israel. Jenson’s theology is vigorously post-supersessionist in its implicit refutation of these twin errors. This analysis involves a distinct approach to this striking feature within Jenson’s dogmatic system, his theology of Israel, and the identification and import of the God of Israel for the church. Jenson, as a theologian who views himself working in service of this church, understands the God of Israel to be in a determinative and central position in its ongoing story. This book seeks to contribute to the ongoing critical evaluation of Jenson’s work through exploration of the influential role the God of Israel plays in his theological system.

For Jenson, the thoroughgoing identification of the God of Israel

7. Promulgated on October 28, 1965.

with the agent of Jesus' resurrection is a foundational theological proposition. He states: "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt."⁸ This theme permeates Jenson's system, so that the story of the gospel and the identification of the God who raised Jesus from the dead are fundamentally located in the ongoing story of Israel and the church. Jenson's prominent themes of Trinity, time, and church are thus undergirded by a foundational commitment to the God of the scriptural narrative. Indeed, Jenson maintains, "The doctrine of the Trinity is but a conceptually developed and sustained insistence that God himself is identified by and with the particular plotted sequence of events that make the narrative of Israel and her Christ."⁹

The God of the Christian gospel is a particular God, and not a "hitherto unknown God," but an "already reliably identified God, JHWH, the God of Israel."¹⁰ Crucially, identification of this God by resurrection does not replace or add to this paradigmatic predecessor, but verifies it.¹¹ Thus christological verification gives narratable content to the defining question of Jenson's project: the identity of God.¹² Attempting to identify and speak rightly of this God is the fundamental burden of Jenson's theology. Every signature theme of his work is intrinsically linked to this concern.¹³ As Gabriel Fackre observes, this conception promotes "an antisupersessionist view of Israel consonant with an unfolding story."¹⁴ The triune God is with all attendant complexities the God of Israel. "Forgetting" that this God in particular is still the God of Israel today is, according to Jenson, the church's most regular apostasy.¹⁵

How then should supersessionism be defined, and why is it deeply

8. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 63.

9. *Ibid.*, 60.

10. This phrasing is Kendall Soulen's, "YHWH the Triune God," *Modern Theology* 15:1 (1999): 45.

11. Jenson, *Triune God*, 44.

12. Jenson states, "The identity of God is the only important religious problem, and thinking through his identification the task of theology." See Robert Jenson, "What Is Salvation?" *Dialog* 12:3 (Fall 1973): 201.

13. Most obviously: the triune God, God's relation to history and time, and the nature of the church.

14. Gabriel Fackre, "The Lutheran Capax Lives," in *Trinity, Time and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 96.

15. Jenson, *Triune God*, 42.

problematic? Supersessionism, otherwise known as replacement theology, implies in its broadest sense that the church has replaced Israel in God's purposes. In Jenson's words, supersessionism is "the teaching, explicit or implicit, that with Christ's coming and the birth of the church, the salvific role of Israel as a separately identifiable people is simply over."¹⁶ Furthermore, such a belief generally implies that "the church succeeds Israel in such a fashion as to displace from the status of God's people those Jews who do not enter the church."¹⁷ By extension, continuing Judaism represents unfaithfulness.

Kendall Soulen, a key figure in the identification of latent supersessionism in modern Trinitarian theology and interlocutor with Jenson, outlines three modes of supersessionism.¹⁸ The first, economic supersessionism, posits that God had always intended the eventual replacement of Israel. With the advent of salvation in Christ Israel's existence became obsolete. This kind of supersessionism primarily depicts Israel's election as prefiguring that of the church. Israel after the flesh is superseded because of the arrival of the church, not primarily because of its disobedience. According to Soulen, this "logically entails the ontological, historical, and moral obsolescence of Israel's existence after Christ."¹⁹ With his coming, Jesus, the one Israelite, fulfills all God's plans and promises regarding Israel.

The second mode of supersessionism is punitive. This view emphasizes that Israel's place is superseded as a punishment for disobedience. In other words, "God abrogates God's covenant with Israel . . . on account of Israel's rejection of Christ and the gospel."²⁰

The third mode—structural supersessionism—might best be described as a kind of "Israel-forgetfulness." This kind of supersessionism overlooks or circumvents the significance of God's dealings with Israel. In this case Israel's witness to God's identity is marginalized. Such an account often narrates salvation history with

16. Robert W. Jenson, "Toward a Christian Doctrine of Israel," *CTI Reflections* 3 (2000): 8.

17. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 193.

18. R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 30.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

minimal attention to Israel's story. For the most part this skips over God's substantive dealings with Israel. Structural supersessionism remains a deeper problem than economic or punitive accounts because it is founded in a particular way of understanding the theological and narrative unity of the Christian canon. Too often, such an account leaves little room for Israel's election to remain constitutive of the economy of which Trinitarian faith is predicated.²¹

Jenson, on the other hand, makes an articulate case for the compatibility of Trinitarian theology and non-supersessionism. As he notes, many attempts to avoid supersessionism presume that avoidance cannot be accomplished without retreating from the church's classic christological teaching—Jenson is intent on rebutting this assumption. Supersessionism is so problematic because, whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, it has the insidious effect of rendering God's identity as the God of Israel largely indecisive for Christian understanding. Israel's characteristic ways of witnessing to the character of God are thus transcended. Jenson argues this pattern is grounded in a misconstrual of the place of the Old Testament in Christian life. This testament is not dispensable, but rather indispensable to the act of interpretation the apostles conducted in light of their encounter with the risen Christ, and the act that all Christians must undertake. Thus, although supersessionism is a doctrinal problem, it is also fundamentally a hermeneutical issue insofar as it separates the divinity of Jesus from the particularity of his Jewishness, and the Gospel narrative of Jesus' life from the Old Testament story of Israel's life. In Jenson's estimation, supersessionism is also symptomatic of the church's avoidance of embodied realities. He persuasively argues that when Christian theology considers the body of Christ it also considers Israel. The Torah made flesh is, in this view, the God of Israel incarnate. Supersessionism in all its forms disables the capacity to apprehend the God of the gospel as YHWH. In other

21. Ibid. Interestingly, for all the insight of Scott Swain's *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), and its important analysis of Jenson's Trinitarian theology, there appears to be little acknowledgment of the *abiding* significance of the God of Israel.

words, a supersessionist hermeneutic distances the identity of God from Israel-relatedness.

Unresolved understanding of Israel's place in the will of God has been, Jenson insists, perhaps the "chief subterranean agitator" in Christian history.²² The importance of this subject for Jenson can be clearly seen in the material content of his two-volume *Systematic Theology*, but it is the fruit of his extensive prior work; several significant articles, chapters, and books written since *Systematic Theology*; his contribution to the debate over supersessionism; and his ongoing dialogue with Jewish theologians.²³ Jenson's perspective is unreservedly that of a Christian theologian, and it is from this standpoint that he insists that neither the religion of "old Israel" nor that of rabbinic Judaism can be regarded as an "other" religion—whether this can be reciprocated by continuing Judaism or not. The problem he addresses, and which motivates this book, is internal to Christian theology: "How should Christian theology, for the sake of its own truth and mission, think about Israel? And most poignantly, about continuing Jewish identity?"²⁴

A central characteristic of Jenson's work, then, is not merely his assent to non-supersessionism, but his attempt to conceive of its full implications for theology proper and the church. He notes, "It is the church's mission to tell all who will listen, God included, that the God of Israel has raised his servant Jesus from the dead, and to unpack the soteriological and doxological import of that fact."²⁵ Additionally, Jenson argues, "The time of the church occurs within the advent of Christ to fulfill the Old Testament. Thus until the Last Judgment and our resurrection, Christ has *not* yet come in the way that fully consummates Israel's history."²⁶

This conception of the church and Israel is an innovative and influential theme in Jenson's theology, influencing key doctrinal areas

22. Jenson, "Toward a Christian Doctrine of Israel," 2.

23. For an account of this journey see "Reversals." Jenson also refers to his role as co-chair of a Jewish Christian cooperative based in Israel and Princeton.

24. Jenson, "Toward a Christian Doctrine of Israel," 3.

25. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* 36 (Oct. 1993): 19.

26. Jenson, *Works of God*, 336.

including the Trinity, Christology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, soteriology, and eschatology. An assessment of the significance for Jenson's system of the identification of the God of Israel requires critical examination of the confluence of concerns and influences that animate his depiction. His overall thought, however, proves somewhat resistant to insufficiently nuanced categorization. A formidable feature of his work is his extensive interaction with a wide range of thinkers from many periods and schools of intellectual history. It is not often clear that there are significant changes of direction in this thought, but often extended exposition of issues develop as projects and contexts require it. These might be more helpfully viewed as shifts of focus, or more developed thinking arising from particular projects.²⁷ Jenson's theology of Israel and Judaism is a prime example of this. Although his most explicit work on a theology of Israel and Judaism arises later in his career as a result, as he sees it, of interaction with thinkers like David Novak, Peter Ochs, Michael Wyschogrod, and Kendall Soulen, and in no small measure by way of discussions arising from the colloquia initiated by Richard John Neuhaus,²⁸ this analysis highlights how the theological inclination toward this focus is grounded and enabled in the orientation of his earlier work. What emerges over a long career is a work that scaffolds upon itself with often complex interconnectivity.

A central characteristic of Jenson's work is not merely his recognition that the same God who rescued Israel from Egypt raised Jesus from the dead, or the related step of renovating his theology in a non-supersessionist fashion, but his attempt to conceive of the full implications for doing so in Christian theology, in the church's self-

27. Carl Braaten, Jenson's long-time friend and collaborator, seems to corroborate this in his essay "Eschatology and Mission in the Theology of Robert Jenson," in *Trinity, Time and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 298–311. Three autobiographical articles from different stages of Jenson's career also provide substantial insight into his influences and concerns. See Robert Jenson, "About Dialog, and the Church, and Some Bits of the Theological Biography of Robert W. Jenson," *Dialog* 11:1 (Spring, 1972): 38–42; "A Theological Autobiography, To Date," *Dialog* 46:1 (Spring, 2007): 46–54; Jenson, "Reversals," 30–33.
28. Jenson recently remarked that, in his wife Blanche's opinion, Neuhaus' invitations into the "Ramsey Colloquium" and the "Dulles Seminar" had rescued his "theological life from the doldrums." Importantly, these contexts connected Jenson with new and old conversation partners, such as David Novak and George Lindbeck respectively. See "Reversals: How My Mind Has Changed."

understanding and in the church's relation to Israel and continuing Judaism. This identification of God as the God of Israel serves to anchor Jenson's Trinitarian theology in the very particular story of God with a peculiar people in history. It is also an attempt to elucidate, in faithfulness to the scriptural narrative, how this one God works in Israel and the church to bring about his purposes in the consummation of all things. This book assesses the impact this understanding of the God of Israel has on Jenson's wider systematic framework including its effect on the overall coherence of his thought. In so doing it situates his work within the wider dogmatic tradition, insofar as this illuminates and scrutinizes his work.

I maintain that Jenson's attention to the centrality of God's identity as the God of Israel permeates his theology, and its profound importance for Christian theology, is convincingly developed by Jenson himself. In an effort to elucidate the significance of the God of Israel in Jenson's system, the first six chapters focus on extrapolation and analysis, highlighting questions and important principles. These chapters also seek to place Jenson among his influences. Chapter 7 undertakes a critical discussion of the observations and questions that have arisen in previous chapters and gives more extensive room for the insights of the wider theological community. Chapter 8 builds on these insights in a discussion of the implications of Jenson's proposals for non-supersessionist theology and for a Christian theology of Judaism. By way of outline, this introductory chapter identifies broad motifs that indicate the centrality of the God of Israel to Jenson's thought. These dominant orientations or strands are also explored more fully in the following chapters. Chapter 2 explores the formation of Jenson's biblical hermeneutic and the influences that shape it, in particular, Jenson's convictions regarding the abiding significance of the Old Testament. In chapter 3 I continue to extrapolate how Jenson conceives God's involvement with canonical Israel. The God of Israel's relation to Jesus is developed in chapter 4. Jenson's doctrine of God continues to be highlighted as the centrality of Jesus' place in Israel is discussed. Chapter 5 explores the crucial interrelation between

Trinitarian doctrine and the oneness of the God of Israel. Jenson's construal of the people of God is examined in chapter 6, along with particular reference to the eschaton. In chapter 7, I ask whether the abiding significance of the God of Israel's identity is undermined by Jenson's tendency to conflate the being of God with the divine economy, and by promoting futurity at the expense of protology. I contend that, despite Jenson's stated intentions, the identity of the God of Israel is sublated within a temporal schema of Trinitarian becoming, which also renders the antecedent basis of Jesus' unique identity as the "beloved Son" indeterminate, and impairs the capacity to speak of the incarnate Christ as an active subject in the God of Israel's mission.²⁹ Chapter 8 assesses how the God of Israel's relation to the church and continuing Judaism in Christ is to be considered. This is augmented by a discussion of how the "where" of Christ is critical to the account. The book's argument is summed up in a brief conclusion.

The Context for the Inquiry

Adolf von Harnack once remarked:

To repudiate the Old Testament in the second century was an error, which the great church was right to reject; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate from which the Reformation was not able to free itself. But to conserve it in the nineteenth century as a canonical source is the result of religious paralysis in the church.³⁰

29. See most significantly (in one book dedicated to Jenson's thought) the arguments incorporated in Swain, *God of the Gospel*. It will become evident that I concur with much of the analysis in Swain's rich and carefully written work. However, I submit that his depiction of Jenson's Trinitarian theology drastically underplays the importance of the abiding significance of God's identification as the "God of Israel." This is a concern highlighted by one of Jenson's most prominent interlocutors on this subject, R. Kendall Soulen. Soulen's most recent work, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices*, exemplifies constructive work on naming God with deep appreciation for the abiding significance of the God of Israel's identity. Soulen's "research paradigm" extrapolates concerns common to Jenson's, even though, regrettably, Soulen has restricted his analysis of Jenson, to date, to works prior to the *Systematic Theology*. His ongoing analysis could show how Jenson has developed in this regard. The modest and central aim of this book is to exposit Jenson's thought in such a way as to clarify the critical importance of the God of Israel's abiding identification for his theology, and indeed for theology proper, noting where standing criticisms intersect, and considering even where Jenson might hinder his own intentions.

30. Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium Von Fremden Gott* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1921), 248.

A remarkable amount has transpired over the last century that would dispel such a notion. Even so, a popular regress to pseudo-Marcionism is never so far from the church's actual life and confession. Take, for instance, the not uncommon inference that God in the New Testament is somehow nicer than the God found in the Old Testament. Debate in Pauline scholarship continues to divide scholars over the most constructive way to understand Paul's attitude toward Israel. How should the proper balance of continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and biblical Israel be determined? In practice, Harnack's point is too often indicative of an abiding confusion over the authoritative relevance of the Old Testament and the God identified, as Jenson would say, by and with its narrative. The significance of Harnack's position was not lost on his young student Karl Barth. Harnack's support of German war aims were a major factor confirming Barth's rejection of liberal theology. Even though Barth's own relationship to Jews and Judaism has been subjected to considerable critical scrutiny,³¹ he was convinced he must confess, "The Bible as the witness of divine revelation in Jesus Christ is a Jewish book. It cannot be read and understood and expounded unless we openly accept the language and thought and history of the Jews, unless we are prepared to become Jews with the Jews."³²

As a Trinitarian theologian unmistakably working in the wake of Barth, Jenson has not failed to appreciate the importance of the God of Israel, Judaism, and Israel "after the flesh," for Christian theology proper. As will be further discussed, Jenson's work seeks to go beyond Barth in important ways, not least of which is his attempt to avoid the abstraction some have argued is inherent in Barth's proposals.³³

Against the cautions of his professors at Luther Seminary, Jenson began to show interest in scholars like Günkel and Mowinckle, and in

31. See especially the study by Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew: Karl Barth's "Doctrine of Israel"* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), and more recently Mark R. Lindsay, *Barth, Israel and Jesus: Karl Barth's Theology of Israel* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

32. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, G. T. Thompson, and Harold Knight (London: T&T Clark, 2009), §19, 56 (511 in fourteen-volume edition).

33. This is helpfully summarized by Eugene F. Rogers Jr., "Supplementing Barth on Jews and Gender: Identifying God by Anagogy and the Spirit," *Modern Theology* 14:1 (January 1998): 43-81.

so doing discovered an appetite for study of the Old Testament. This study instilled in the young Jenson an abiding conviction regarding the Old Testament's authoritative place in Christian theology.³⁴ In recent years Jenson has advocated a broadly canonical approach to Scripture's final form; however, he has rejected not so much the validity of historical-critical scholarship as its hegemony in modern exegesis. While the finer points of Jenson's biblical hermeneutic will be discussed in chapter 2, what is evident in Jenson's advocacy of a unified canonical and christological "mega-narrative"³⁵ is not ignorance of the critical issues regarding the formation and diversity of the Old Testament, but a sublation of concerns alien to the church's reading of its own book.

The history of God with people is to be understood as a whole. Along with other prominent scholars like Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jenson was influenced during his time at Heidelberg by the Old Testament theology of Gerhard von Rad. He especially notes von Rad's "construal of the Bible's unity as an historical unity, constituted by leapfrogging promise, fulfillment, new promise, and so on."³⁶ Also prominent in his conception of Israel's history is the thought of Göttingen professor and influential Old Testament scholar Walther Zimmerli. This influence remains in Jenson's depiction of narrative coherence whereby the Bible tells the story of the one God who is identified by two chief events, the exodus and the resurrection. The God of Israel's identification is not superseded by the events of Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection, because this gospel story is the climax and content of a history told by the Old Testament. Jenson outlines:

Indeed, the question is not whether the church has this canon but whether this canon acknowledges the church: May Israel's holy book be so read, without violence to its coherence and historical actuality, as to accept Jesus' Resurrection and the appearance of the church as its own denouement?³⁷

34. Jenson, "A Theological Autobiography," 47.

35. See Jenson, "Reversals."

36. Jenson, "A Theological Autobiography," 49.

37. Jenson, *Triune God*, 30.

The Question of Fulfillment and Continuance: Israel's Denouement?

Can Jesus' resurrection and the appearance of the church be the denouement—the unraveling of the complexities of the plot of God's history with Israel—without compromising the integrity of this history's ongoing purpose? The answer to this question relies on Jenson's dramatic configuration of time and history.

Drama and coherence appropriate to the story are vital factors in Jenson's overall construal of reality: "To be is to have a role in the story of Jesus."³⁸ To be temporal is to be a story that awaits a proclaimed conclusion. Because people are stories, they have a plot. While we live, our story is of course unfinished. Each of us lives our lives as the hero of a drama missing its last act. "What am I here for?" remains an open question. This is why the reason for living is not self-evident; it is always a question and death is the key to the answer. Only death makes our life a bounded whole. But, of course, this is not a whole that one can apprehend. We do not live the now of our death—I am never this bounded whole for myself. The now of my death can never be an item of my memory, and so it reinterprets all our hopes and promises the same way: "It might have been." We posit a suitable end to our story. This is the essence of religion according to Jenson. The religious quest is the human attempt to take care of our own ending. It is the invention of eternity in the flight from temporality.

This brings us to an important principle in Jenson's reflections on temporality. Life is orientated to the future. To be is to be a relation to the future. Early in his career Jenson had learned from Bultmann "to see time as the horizon of the Bible's explication of human life; and to understand God's transcendence as 'the Insecurity of the future.'"³⁹ Futurity has remained an important aspect of his theology, but he insists that Bultmann failed to "narrate the crisis in which God will be the End."⁴⁰ So, Jenson's program emerges as an insistence that the

38. Robert W. Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 133.

39. Jenson, "About Dialog,"⁴⁰.

gospel is a promise with content; the word of a narratable future, and of God as the power of that specific future. The narrative specificity comes from the story of Jesus. The gospel is the narrative of what happened with Jesus spoken with the claim that this story tells the final destiny of those who hear it told. The gospel is the only promise that can remain unconditional in the face of death. It is “faith”—not “religion”—to the extent that it renounces an “eternity in which all is already accomplished.” When we say, “He is risen,” part of what we say is that we will await the unknown future with anticipation.

Ultimately, religion is the retreat from time and history to timelessness. To affirm the story of the crucified is to renounce religion’s eternity in which all is already accomplished, to reject the persistence of the beginning. So, while appropriating Schleiermacher’s conception that religion is a universal human propensity, Jenson from an early point in his career adopted the general tone of Barth’s *Römerbrief*. The message of Jesus’ death and resurrection “appears as an event adventitious to the human religiosity in which it occurs.”⁴¹ It is this emphasis on the eschatological future that numbered Jenson among the “Theologians of Hope.” Unlike Bultmann, however, Jenson cannot sever this future from the past event of Jesus. Crucially, he sees that the future word of hope that frees from the past is given vital descriptive content by the occurrence of God as a describable historical event. So, does this christological commitment dispossess Israel of the particularity of its election, of its capacity to experience the fulfillment of God’s promises to it? No, for in this one Israelite God acts for all creation. Jenson insists:

At bottom, the claims Christians make about Christ all merely unpack the one claim of his Resurrection, within a discourse in continuity with that of the Old Testament. They unpack the claim that prior to the general resurrection and vindication of Israel, one servant of Israel and her God has already been raised and vindicated.⁴²

40. *Ibid.*

41. Jenson, *Triune God*, 56.

42. Jenson, “Toward a Christian Doctrine of Israel,” 8.

The vision promised to Israel of consummation and peace has come about; Ezekiel's question as to whether the dry bones could be revived has been answered. *But*—and this is the essential point—not in such a way that history has ended. Jenson argues that, “as the rabbis have always insisted, had the Messiah simply arrived, were Jesus' resurrection and Ascension his advent as such, things would have to look rather different than they do.”⁴³

Consequently, Jesus has not yet come so finally as to fulfill the promises to Israel. This will only happen at the end of the age when the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, is incorporated into the life of God. Easter, and for that matter Pentecost, have not ended God's intention for continuing Israel that in the form of rabbinic Judaism is a parallel body to Christianity. The parousia is delayed as a blessing to both the church and continuing Judaism. The “time between the times” is a means to graft in the gentiles and draw unbelieving Israel. The future has not yet happened, but the Spirit actively makes the content of this future reliable. Jenson's denouement unfolds with the church and the synagogue together, and only together, as the present availability to the world of the risen Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

For this reason the Old Testament cannot be regarded as mere background or “preparation for the gospel.” An important foundation to Jenson's current theology, and a vital claim for ongoing reception of his work, is the rejection of the premise that a Christian doctrine of God can be coherently maintained in functional separation from the God of Israel. This does not eliminate the possibility that Jenson's identification of God is insufficiently shaped by the God of Israel,⁴⁵ and this possibility will be further explored. This question

43. *Ibid.*, 9.

44. Robert W. Jenson, “Toward a Christian Theology of Judaism,” in Braaten and Jenson, *Jews and Christians*, 13.

45. Indeed, this is the point that Kendall Soulen makes regarding Jenson in his influential article “YHWH and the Triune God,” *Modern Theology* 15:1 (1999): 25–54. This article and its identification of a “functional supersessionism” in Jenson's work invites greater attention to this matter in Jenson's project as well as ongoing conversation between Jenson and Soulen. Jenson has since been very affirming of Soulen's project. However, it is important to note that Soulen's article, published in 1999, was written without reference to the more nuanced argument in both volumes of his *Systematic Theology*, and relies substantively on *The Triune Identity: God according To The Gospel*, Reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

notwithstanding, it is of central importance to reiterate that Jenson's insistence on the "oneness" of God's identity is thoroughly christological, pneumatological, and supremely Trinitarian.

This reality highlights an inherent tension for any post-supersessionist theology. Does insistence on a "high" Christology and consequent Trinitarian identification effectively dispense with or intrinsically sublimate an abiding conception of God's identity as the God of Israel? Michael Wyschogrod makes clear that from a Jewish perspective, "The question of the one and only God in Judaism and the one but Trinitarian God in Christendom is the last and most difficult question for the Jewish-Christian dialogue."⁴⁶ It is the most difficult, because as Wyschogrod understands, it involves an "immovable" object. Just so, Bruce Marshall, one of a number of "postliberal" theologians working in the area of post-supersessionist theology, warns that

a successful post-supersessionist theology will have to show that belief in Israel's permanent election is at least compatible with, and if possible more strongly implicated in, the unrestricted epistemic primacy of the narratives which identify Jesus, and thereby in the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity.⁴⁷

As a theologian at the forefront of Trinitarian theology, Jenson has long insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity solves theological puzzles rather than obscures them. As Wolfhart Pannenberg also notes:

The Trinitarian doctrine of the church does not "associate" something else to this one God, but claims that the one God is one with his revelation in Jesus, as the Hebrew bible taught that the transcendent God is present in the world through his name, his glory (kabod), and his wisdom.⁴⁸

The God Jesus proclaimed was the one God of Israel.⁴⁹ Equally, Christian

46. Wyschogrod, *Das Reden von einem Gott bei Juden und Christen*, 261.

47. Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 177.

48. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "A Symposium on Dabru Emet," in Braaten and Jenson, *Jews and Christians*, 183.

49. Richard Bauckham has argued it is still meaningful to refer to a predominant "monotheism" in Second Temple Judaism, even given the contestable use of the term to describe worship of the one God in Israelite history. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

theology's manner of approach to any perceived dichotomy between Israel and the church cannot be to make its theology less Trinitarian.⁵⁰ As highlighted earlier, a key to the way Jenson negotiates this apparent tension can be found in his construal of the christological center.

Barth, Eternity, and the Christological Center

Jenson emphatically agrees with Karl Barth that a “perhaps implicit construal of election is at the heart of a theology, and must be Christological—Christ both elects and is the one primarily elected.”⁵¹ Consequently, Barth maintains (according to Jenson) that election rightly taught is the summary of the gospel.⁵² Election accordingly testifies to an affirmative choice by God: it cannot be good news if it testifies to a “Yes” and a “No” equally. Election and reprobation are not equal partners. Acceptance is the real content of God's choice. Election must therefore be about Jesus Christ, for he is the content of the gospel. In Jesus Christ the God who elects and the man who is chosen come together. Election is an event in God's life—it is a particular interior act in which God relates to a reality other than Himself.⁵³

This agreement with Barth accompanies a fundamental and determinative move in Jenson's theological project. He relates in a 1972 autobiographical article that he had learned from Barth to “confess the earthly history of Jesus as itself the ‘crisis’ of all other time.”⁵⁴ However, Jenson fears that in the equation of eternity with Jesus' time there is a danger of drawing “Christ off and back into a Calvinist place ‘before all time.’”⁵⁵ As we have seen, Jenson maintains that eternity cannot be a timelessly available other realm. He sees in Barth's view of eternity a form of “supra-temporality” that only partly corresponds to what time is for us. Jenson sees that for Barth the God who is revealed to us in economic action is a genuine disclosure of God in God's immanent self.

50. Jenson particularly criticizes Paul van Buren for doing this.

51. Jenson, “A Theological Autobiography,” 50.

52. Jenson, *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1963), 142.

53. *Ibid.*, 145.

54. Jenson, “About Dialog,” 40.

55. *Ibid.*

Nevertheless, he is worried that a metaphysical distance occurs when God as we encounter God is in fact perceived as a disclosure of some God “behind” the economy.

In principle, Jenson questions whether the long history of God with humanity can be comprehended in one great pretemporal decision. He wants to assert that throughout history with fallen humans God continues to choose. The unity of the history of Jesus Christ occurs in the “succession of the deeds of which his history is composed.”⁵⁶ Therefore, reconciliation cannot be regarded as the implementation of what is really accomplished with the first event of that history. Jenson thus feels that in Barth redemption is actualized in pretemporal eternity. Reconciliation is in danger of being concretely removed from real human history. He considers that, for Barth, Jesus Christ occupies the place of the absolute decree of old Calvinism and while he (Barth) abolishes the distinction between a God enthroned in abstract eternity and a God-in-Christ who in time carries these plans out, Jenson wants to speak more concretely of the life of Jesus Christ in created time and space. He writes:

Mary is the Mother of God. *Unus ex Trinitate mortuus est pro nobis*. One of the Trinity is a Palestinian Jew, who came eating and drinking and forgave sin and prophesied implausible glory. Jesus saves. These and more sentences like them are the great metaphysical truth of the gospel, without which it is all religious palaver and wish fulfillment and metaphorical projection. Jesus really is Lord, because he is one of the Trinity; and that is our salvation.⁵⁷

So, Jenson maintains that God makes his eternal decision in our history. The oneness of God’s eternal will is not given from eternity but is achieved in temporal history. The unity of this eternal will is an event occurring in time at the cross. Accordingly, God’s decrees and acts cannot be comprehended as one save through the course of human history. By defining the history in time as the revelation and

56. Jenson, *Alpha and Omega*, 155.

57. Jenson, “Jesus in the Trinity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 8:3 (Summer 1999): 318, also in Jenson, “With No Qualifications: The Christological Maximalism of the Christian East,” in *Ancient and Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century. Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden*, ed. Kenneth Tanner and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 22.

analogy of eternal history, Jenson considers that Barth is in danger of relegating the fact of reconciliation to eternal history. Where Christ's history is considered "principle and essence" of all happenings, that very history is close to becoming an abstract metaphysical idea.⁵⁸

Because God is the history of salvation, God is made known to Israel through what happens to them, and the Gospels make known the action of God in Jesus. With this big picture in mind, Jenson warns that "imprecise talk of the novelty and absoluteness of the revelation in Christ can easily lead us astray."⁵⁹ He takes this phrase from Hans von Campenhausen, and he uses it to stress that the God who spoke to old Israel was in the person of the same Christ. He strongly resists a "Christomonism," which he tentatively associates with Barth, instead maintaining that while all reality is indeed centered and accomplished in Christ, revelation encompasses the whole history of God with his people. Jenson's step is thus to propose that the unique revelation in Christ includes his actual incarnate presence in the history of the Old Testament. The implications of this proposal will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

From a Christian theological perspective Jenson must affirm the priority of the Old Testament, because it was the only Scripture of the earliest church. If the gospel is as Jenson relates—"The story about Jesus in Israel, told as a promise"⁶⁰—then that promise can only be understood in light of Israel's Scripture, which stands as a necessary antecedent to the church.

An Alternate Metaphysics and the Interpretive Act of Theological Discourse

Fundamental to Jenson's manner of "doing theology" is the understanding that theology itself is the hermeneutic of the church's speaking of the gospel, and this task, he asserts, is legitimate to the

58. Jenson, *Alpha and Omega*, 167.

59. Jenson, *Canon and Creed: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 22.

60. Jenson, "A Theological Autobiography," 48.

degree that it is bounded by fidelity to the interpretive act the apostles undertook. This does not entail saying the same thing, but doing the same thing. First and foremost, then, Jenson is a theologian in service of the church. Indeed, he could have it no other way if theology is thinking what to say about the gospel. The community that undertakes the discussion of gospel proclamation is the church; a Christian theologian has no context outside of this. Like Barth, Jenson agrees that we may only speak meaningfully (not perfectly) because of God's free self-disclosure.⁶¹ He notes: "Revelation is the self-interposition of God whereby he intrudes into our life stories by grace to make himself present to be talked about."⁶² The possibility of human speech about God is thus grounded in God's gracious revelation. Our subsequent witness is interpretation of God's self-interpretation. But, for Jenson, Lutherans locate theological reflection at the actual occurrence of the word as the thinking done while uttering the gospel. This marks a crucial distinction in the "architectonic" of Barth and Jenson, and is also indicative of Jenson's position in a general "turn to language," which sees him interact more extensively with Bultmann's students Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, as well as analytic philosophers like John Searle and J. L. Austin.⁶³ John Webster, in the translator's introduction to Eberhard Jüngel's *God's Being Is in Becoming*, identifies this same basic dispute in the orientation between Barth and Bultmann. For Bultmann the hermeneutical question, "What does it mean to speak of God?" contrasts with Barth's concern to spell out in what sense we must speak of God.⁶⁴ Jenson agrees: God can "come to speech" only because language is "commandeered" by God—"God-talk" is an ongoing interpretive process. In this way theological work entails reinterpretation, not merely repristination. Katherine

61. As Jenson notes, "Between God and us there is no beholding of what just is, there is rather a conversation that like any good conversation opens to discovery and creation." Robert W. Jenson, *A Large Catechism* (Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1999), 10.

62. Robert W. Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For: The Sense of Theological Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 8.

63. Swain is surely correct to identify this connection in Jenson's influences, even though, as he notes, Jenson draws from a wide range of thinkers. See Swain, *God of the Gospel*, 68n177.

64. Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God In The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), xi.