

Introduction: The Election of Israel and Christian Theology

Framing the New Jewish-Christian Encounter

Introduction

In an article entitled “Salvation Is from the Jews,” the late Richard John Neuhaus writes the following with regard to Jewish-Christian dialogue: “I suggest that we would not be wrong to believe that this dialogue, so closely linked to the American experience, is an essential part of the unfolding of the story of the world.”¹ The rivalrous and troubled tale of these two religious communities has been a constant thread in the history of the West, and the tumultuous events of the twentieth century have yielded a new chapter in the relationship between Christians and Jews. The burgeoning of this new relationship holds great promise for healing, reconciliation, and redemptive partnership, and its full impact is still being played out. While one cannot be sure where this new trajectory will lead, one can point to the key events that provoked it and explore the ways in which Christians and Jews are responding to and engaging in it.

1. Richard John Neuhaus, “Salvation Is from the Jews,” in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 65–77. Originally published in *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 17–22.

Scott Bader-Saye points to two “seismic events” in the twentieth century that shattered old models and paved the way for new ones. First, he describes the “demise of the Christendom paradigm, in which the church was positioned as the spiritual sponsor of Western civilization.” Amidst an increasingly globalized society, Christianity has become merely one world religion among many. Second, Bader-Saye points to the Holocaust, “the systematic attempt by a ‘Christian nation’ to eradicate the Jews.”² In 1980, it was estimated that by the end of the twentieth century, more would have been written about the Holocaust than about any other subject in human history.³ The Holocaust brought the plight of the Jewish people onto the center stage of world history, and the eyes of Christians were opened to the dark streak of supersessionism and anti-Judaism that runs through Christian history.

To Bader-Saye’s list of two seismic events, two more must be added. The creation of the modern state of Israel holds inestimable significance, and Jewish liturgy hails this event as the “first flowering of our redemption.”⁴ Questions about the theological significance of this political event abound, and Christians have found it “difficult, if not impossible, to see Israel as just another nation.”⁵ Finally, the latter half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of the Messianic Jewish movement, a development that has posed a significant challenge to the regnant understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Messianic Jews refuse to accept a mutually

2. Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel after Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 1.

3. George M. Kren and Leon Rappaport, *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier, 1994), 1.

4. *The Koren Sacks Siddur: A Hebrew/English Prayerbook*, trans. Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren, 2009), 522.

5. Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?: What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), 12.

exclusive construal of these two religious traditions, and their communities tangibly embody this posture.

These four factors have contributed to a widespread reassessment of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, and the effects of this shift continue to ripple outward. The post-Holocaust era has seen a number of significant official Christian statements that chart a new way of relating to Judaism and the Jewish people,⁶ and prevailing trends in biblical scholarship mirror this development.⁷ In turn, the Jewish world has recognized that the Christian reassessment of Judaism requires a response, and this response has come in a variety of forms.⁸ These developments represent a new kind of Jewish-Christian encounter, made possible by Christians who increasingly recognize and renounce the supersessionism that has plagued Christian history and Jews who increasingly acknowledge that Christian theology is not inherently anti-Jewish.

While these various trends are far too diverse and multifaceted to adequately treat in one study, my purpose in the pages that follow is to explore and assess one individual thread in the fabric of this twentieth-century reappraisal between Christians and Jews. In particular, this study approaches these developments from a

6. Among the most significant of these documents are the Catholic Vatican II statements *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*. For analysis of these and related Christian statements, see Michael B. McGarry, *Christology after Auschwitz* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977) and Geoffrey Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations since the Second World War* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988).
7. With regard to biblical scholarship, see, for example, Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Vintage, 2000); Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2007); and the work of Mark Nanos (much of which is available at www.marknanos.com). With regard to Pauline scholarship, Magnus Zetterholm coined the term “radical new perspective” to designate a group of scholars for whom “the traditional dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity is not the fundamental assumption.” Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 161.
8. For one significant expression of this Jewish response, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al., eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000).

theological and doctrinal perspective, focusing specifically upon the christological and ecclesiological revisions that have accompanied and provoked this widespread reassessment. I begin by explicating a key doctrinal question posed by Catholic theologian Bruce Marshall, whose lucid and theologically rigorous approach frames the entirety of this study. Through the lens of Marshall's question, each chapter assesses a key twentieth- or twenty-first century theologian (and, in the case of chapter 3, a group of theologians) who has significantly contributed to the theological reenvisioning of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. My goal, in essence, is to retrace some of the key moments in the recasting of Christology and ecclesiology in light of Israel and to point the way toward potential future directions in this unfolding intellectual trajectory.

The purpose of the present chapter is to lay the framework that will guide this study. After reviewing Marshall's perspective and setting up the key question that governs my approach, I will further establish one of the theological mainstays of Marshall's criteria, namely the ongoing connection between the Jewish people and Jewish practice. I will then delineate the scope of this study by defining the "new Jewish-Christian encounter" and will provide an overview of what is to follow.

Marshall's Challenge

While Bruce Marshall has not (yet) written a complete work on the question of Israel and the church, he addresses this topic in a number of articles and chapters in books.⁹ As we will see, his cogent approach

9. See Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 169–79; Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures: The Jewish People and Christian Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81–100; Marshall, "Elder Brothers: John Paul II's Teaching on the Jewish People as a Question to the Church," in *John Paul II and the Jewish People: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, ed. David G. Dalin and Matthew Levering (Lanham, MD: Rowman &

prioritizes both a restructuring of traditional theological loci as well as an adherence to orthodox Christian doctrine. Marshall's desire to see the tradition reworked within the bounds of orthodoxy provides the framework for my study.

A Christian Affirmation of the Election of Israel

According to Marshall, the widespread reconception of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has, from the Christian side, hinged upon one particularly significant fulcrum. In his words, "The theological point of departure for our century's critical reassessment of the church's relation to the Jewish people is the proposal, now commonly made, that Christians ought to share a wider range of beliefs with Jews than they have in the past, and one belief in particular: that the biological descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are permanently and irrevocably the elect people of God."¹⁰ Part and parcel of this affirmation is a repudiation of the long-held Christian belief that the church has replaced Israel as God's elect. This, for Marshall, is the very definition of "supersessionism." In order to renounce the supersessionist claims that have so perniciously clung to Christian theology, the church must come to share in the belief of Israel's permanent election. According to Marshall, such an affirmation entails upholding ("at least") the following elements:¹¹

1. The elect people of Israel are the biological ("according to the flesh," as Rom. 9:3 states) descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Littlefield, 2008), 113–29; and Marshall, "Christ and Israel: An Unsolved Problem in Catholic Theology" in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in honor of Jon D. Levenson*, ed. Joel S. Kaminsky and Gary A. Anderson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 330–50. Also of interest is Marshall, "Truth Claims and the Possibility of Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Modern Theology* 8, no. 3 (July 1992): 221–40.

10. Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures," 81.

11. The following is my paraphrase of Marshall's list, which can be found in *ibid.*, 82–83.

2. As such, a distinction between this biological family and all other peoples of the earth is presupposed.¹²
3. This biological family receives God's favor as his "treasured possession" (Deut. 10:14), not because of anything they have done but because of God's choice.
4. To this people belong both the promise that they themselves will be blessed by God and that through them God's blessing will come to all peoples on earth.
5. This elect people has special responsibilities toward God, namely to observe Torah, which is incumbent upon them alone.

As Marshall explains, the first two principles describe who the elect people are, and the following three describe the content and consequences of their election.¹³ In these five principles, Marshall is driving toward a larger point that is seldom recognized by Christians, that is, the connection between the election of the Jewish people and the practice of Judaism. According to Marshall, theologians who seek to avoid supersessionism must affirm God's ongoing election of Israel and Israel's unique covenantal obligations.

Before addressing this point directly, it is important to expand further on the second affirmation in Marshall's list, namely that a distinction between the Jewish people and all other peoples on earth is "presupposed."¹⁴ That the Jewish people be identifiable as a unique people is an essential element of their election. In Marshall's words, "Visible distinction from the nations is . . . necessary for the election of Israel; it is among the constituent or integral parts of the existence of the Jewish people as God's chosen."¹⁵ According to Marshall,

12. Marshall draws on the thought of Michael Wyschogrod, who emphasizes the "carnal" nature of Israel's election. See *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 175–77.

13. Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures," 82–83.

14. As we will see in chapter 3, this contention is a central tenet in the thought of R. Kendall Soulen.

Israel's election "would be void if the biological descendants of Abraham indeed received God's promised blessing, but had ceased to be identifiable as Abraham's descendants, that is, as Jews. The permanence of Israel's election thus entails the permanence of the distinction between Jew and Gentile."¹⁶

Marshall contends that the incarnation is the final safeguard that this distinction will always remain. Jesus' Jewishness and membership in the people of Israel is irreducibly constitutive of his identity. By virtue of God taking on Jewish flesh in the person of Jesus, "God's ownership of this Jewish flesh is permanent. In the end, when all flesh shall see the glory of the Lord, the vision of God will, so the traditional Christian teaching goes, be bound up ineluctably with the vision of this Jew seated at God's right hand."¹⁷ Because Jesus' Jewish identity is only meaningful within the context of the Jewish people as a whole, "in owning with unsurpassable intimacy the particular Jewish flesh of Jesus, God also owns the Jewish people as a whole, precisely in their distinction from . . . Gentiles; he cannot own one without also owning the other."¹⁸ The incarnation of God in Jesus is the concentration and intensification of the indwelling of God in the Jewish people collectively.¹⁹ God's singling out of this particular people (and this particular man) as his dwelling place in the world makes explicit the distinction of the Jewish people from the rest of the nations.²⁰

"How then," Marshall asks, "is the distinct identity of the Jews, and so Israel's election, to be maintained?"²¹ In his words, "The obvious

15. Marshall, "Christ and Israel," 340.

16. Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures," 91.

17. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, 178.

18. *Ibid.*

19. I further explore the connection between God's incarnation in Christ and God's incarnation in the Jewish people in chapter 3.

20. While the "content" of election comes to be shared with the gentiles through Christ, the distinction between Jew and gentile remains. See Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures," 91.

21. *Ibid.*

answer is by Jewish observance of the full range of traditional Jewish law (*halachah*, which embraces both the written and oral Torah, that is, both biblical and rabbinic law—see point 5, above). This observance, in which the Gentiles will surely have no interest and to which God’s electing will does not obligate them, will be the chief means by which Abraham’s descendants can be identified.”²² This leads us back to Marshall’s key observation that affirming Israel’s permanent election is inseparable from affirming the ongoing practice of Judaism.

Marshall makes this connection explicit in his assessment of Pope John Paul II’s contribution to the conversation. While it is possible to affirm the election of the Jewish people without affirming the ongoing practice of Judaism (and vice versa), John Paul II is notable for maintaining a high regard for both. Speaking at the Chief Synagogue in Rome in 1986, the pope invoked the words of *Nostra Aetate*: “The Church of Christ discovers her ‘bond’ with Judaism by ‘searching into her own mystery.’” According to the pope’s interpretation, this statement implies that “the Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion.” Thus the pope declared to the Jews in Rome, “You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.”²³

In light of the special bond that exists between Jews and Christians, John Paul II contends that Christian self-understanding must take

22. Ibid. According to Michael Wyschogrod, a Christian reassessment of Torah lies at the heart of improved Jewish-Christian relations. In his words, “If the Christian view of the law as a law of death remains in force, then the estrangement between Christianity and Judaism will prevail.” Wyschogrod, “A Jewish View of Christianity,” in *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 162.

23. Quoted in Marshall, “Elder Brothers,” 115.

into account not only the Jewish people but the Jewish religion as well. According to Marshall,

If another religion is intrinsic to our own identity, then we can only understand the import of our own beliefs—we can only grasp whom we ourselves are—by coming to know and appreciate the beliefs, the religion, of another community. When we say this about the relationship of the Church to Judaism, we are pinning down our own identity, in some irreducible way, on a community which is, as the pope goes on to say, clearly distinct from our own, and one whose beliefs are in some very important ways opposed to our own.²⁴

Significantly, that the pope's words were addressed to the Jews in Rome affirms that their physical descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob makes them the referents of God's enduring covenant with Israel: "Not only is faithful Israel before Christ the root from which the gentiles live in Christ, but faithful Israel now, the Jews gathered with their chief rabbi in the Great Synagogue of Rome, are the root from which the gentile Church now lives in Christ."²⁵ The coming of Christ reinforces rather than diminishes the Jewish people's unique covenant with God, a covenant that necessarily undergirds and informs the church's identity.

While the pope's words make a strong claim with regard to Christianity's self-understanding, they also make an important point about Jewish existence. The pope recognizes the integral connection between Jewish identity and the practice of Judaism, namely that the former ultimately depends on the latter. As Marshall rightly explains,

The Jewish people cannot continue to exist in the long run without Judaism. . . . The irrevocable election of the Jewish people evidently requires the permanence of their religion. . . . Without Judaism, the Jewish people would surely, if slowly, disappear from the earth, as other ancient people have done. They would cease to be a distinct people, and

24. Marshall, "Elder Brothers," 116.

25. *Ibid.*, 118.

vanish into *gentilitas*, as medieval Christian theologians called the mass of us not descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²⁶

Marshall brings to the fore the reality that the election of the Jewish people cannot be affirmed and upheld without also affirming the ongoing practice of Judaism: “In permanently electing Israel, it seems that God has also permanently willed the practice of Judaism.”²⁷ Judaism is the means by which the Jewish people uphold their covenant fidelity to God and remain distinct from all other peoples—tenets that Marshall identifies as being central to the doctrine of Israel’s election.

Having established what a Christian affirmation of Israel’s election entails and what is at stake in maintaining such an affirmation, Marshall explains the difficult theological task that now confronts the church. Affirming Judaism as part and parcel of Jewish election requires that the church rethink its stance toward a religious tradition that has been developed in distinction from—and often in tension with—the Christian tradition. As Marshall says, “The discovery that Christians ought to share with Jews a belief in the permanent election of Abraham’s children poses a challenge for Christian theology, one which in some respects has not been faced seriously since the second century.”²⁸ The heart of the challenge focuses on how Christians can simultaneously affirm the irrevocable election of the Jewish people and “the universal, ecclesially mediated saving mission of Christ.”²⁹

While Marshall’s Catholic ecclesiology equates “God’s call to salvation in Christ” with “a call to enter and remain within the Catholic Church,”³⁰ his question retains its force outside a Catholic context. Moreover, the question is equally relevant for Christians

26. *Ibid.*, 122.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Marshall, “Christ and the Cultures,” 91.

29. Marshall, “Christ and Israel,” 3.

30. Marshall, “Elder Brothers,” 121.

more generally who understand salvation to be mediated through Christ and his church and who affirm the universality of Christ's call to discipleship. How can these claims, which constitute mainstays of Christian orthodoxy, be upheld alongside the affirmation that "the existence of faithful Jews is not simply an empirical likelihood or a devout hope, let alone an evil God puts up with, but belongs to God's own good and unalterable purposes"?³¹

It is this question that frames this study. As I survey a number of Jewish and Christian theologians, my assessment of their thought is based upon the dual doctrinal affirmations sought by Marshall. Thus, I pose the following question to each theologian: To what extent does his or her thought affirm (or contribute to the affirmation of) both the universal, ecclesially mediated saving mission of Christ and the irrevocable election of the Jewish people, which necessarily includes the ongoing practice of Judaism?

A Survey of Existing Approaches

While Marshall does not himself offer a definitive answer to how these doctrinal tenets may be affirmed, he identifies three ways in which theologians have generally approached this issue, noting difficulties with each of them. He also tentatively pioneers a fourth possibility, though he raises questions about the adequacy of this option.³² Let us review each of these in turn. First, one may assert that "the Jews, or at least some of them, are not really called to life in the Church, or at least not in the same way, or to the same life, that the gentiles are." In its strongest form, this stance affirms two separate "saving arrangements in the world, one through carnal election and Torah for Jews, the other through faith in Jesus Christ for gentiles."³³

31. *Ibid.*, 122.

32. Marshall expounds the first three options in "Elder Brothers" and the fourth in "Christ and Israel."