

# Redefining Covenant: Moving Toward Catholic Non-Supersessionism in Covenantal Considerations

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# Redefining Covenant

Moving Toward Catholic Non-Supersessionism in  
Covenantal Considerations

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This project is dedicated to all those who work to  
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who strive to bring an end to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism

# Introduction:

## The Purpose of This Project

Perhaps the most fundamental notion of what makes a specific religious tradition unique from others is the way in which its members perceive themselves in relationship to God (or whatever deity/deities they chose to worship). At least for Judaism and Christianity, such an idea immediately conjures conceptions of covenant. At an exceedingly basic level, covenant is the core of how Jews and Christians each relate to God and follow God's commands. Covenant, for each of these traditions, is the vehicle in which moral precepts are based and the way one discerns what it is God wants humanity to do. In both religious traditions, covenant is the crux of what it means to be either a Christian or a Jew. Covenant gets at the core of belief and at the elemental relationship between the faithful people and God. It is the essence of faith.

As *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* states, covenant is broadly defined as “[a]n agreement or contract between two parties.”<sup>1</sup> In the Old Testament, “covenant” is

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, s.v. "Covenant," eds. Geoffrey Wigoder, Fred Skolnik and Shmuel Himelstein (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 187.

translated from the Hebrew word *berit*. While the exact etymology is not entirely known, most scholars would argue that “*berit*” has its origins in the Akkadian “*biritu*,” meaning “fetter,” or something similar to the idea of binding.<sup>2</sup> Thus “covenant” is the way Jews and Christians see them as bound to God, as tied to God. Judaism, being the older of the two traditions, originally conceived of the ideas and Christianity later adopted understandings based on the original Jewish covenant. Of course, though, Christianity shifted those understandings to mean something different.

As Christianity developed after the Christ event, an environment of competition arose where each tradition felt the need to either defend their beliefs, or attempt to spread their beliefs. This competition led to the tumultuous history between Christianity and Judaism that ultimately culminated in the horror of the Holocaust. Indeed, throughout the centuries Christians frequently persecuted the Jewish minority among them. Over the years Christianity formed a harmful theology of covenant known today as “supersessionism,” which claims that the Jews had broken their covenant with God, because of a collective guilt for killing Christ. Christianity, therefore, claimed that when the Jews broke their covenant, Christianity inherited it as the rightful followers of God and his messianic message. This led to highly anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic environments. However, after the Holocaust, the Catholic Church recognized the dire situation and saw the troubling effects of such thinking. Thus, during the Second Vatican Council the Church radically shifted its thinking about Jews and Judaism. Section four of *Nostra Aetate* teaches that Jews are no longer considered collectively responsible for the death of Christ. Fifty years since that shift, the Church has developed these teachings further,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



recognizing the ongoing validity of the Jewish covenant with God. In a recent Vatican reflection, written to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Church spelled out what it considers its current theology of covenant to be in regard to Judaism.

However, the problem remains that the roots of supersessionism are still deeply ingrained within Catholic doctrine. Even five decades after officially recognizing the need to change Catholic theology, the Church continues to struggle to develop a doctrinally coherent completely non-supersessionist model for understanding Jews and their covenant. The goal of this thesis, therefore, is to suggest potential means for today's Catholic Church to resolve this issue. By pushing current doctrine, the Church can move closer and closer to solving the issue of covenant, which has long prevented right relationship with its Jewish brothers and sisters.

I have divided this project into two parts. Part I aims at defining the ways in which Jews and Catholics each think about covenant individually, from a more internal standpoint. Chapter One delves into Jewish notions of covenant and also attempts to highlight the way in which Jews have attempted to perceive Christianity in relation to the covenant so as to develop a more inclusive model for themselves. Similarly Chapter Two explores Christian ideas of covenant, employing the 2015 Vatican reflection that was written for the anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. Likewise, Chapter Two proposes ways that Catholics can perceive Jews in relation to the covenant. In Part II, Chapter Three synthesizes the individual ideas of covenant presented in the first part of the thesis and offers a model by which Catholics can acceptably redefine the way they think about Jews in terms of covenant and perhaps most importantly, in a non-supersessionist manner.

Since the Church decided to begin to reconsider its problematic theology at the time of the Second Vatican Council, it has struggled to redefine what exactly it means by “covenant.” Part of the issue is that, fundamentally, while both Judaism and Christianity use the term “covenant,” they each mean radically different things by it. The purpose in completing this project then, is to contribute to a much needed dialogue that will help Christians continue to reconsider and redefine their flawed covenantal theologies of the past and mend their relationship with Judaism.

# **PART I:**

## **Defining Covenant**

# Chapter One:

## ***Berit*: Jewish Understandings of Covenant**

*Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (Exodus 24:3)*

### ***Introduction***

“*B*erit” (ברית), the Hebrew term for “covenant,” appears in multiple contexts in the Hebrew Bible. From this, and continuing in Jewish theology today, it develops a multiplicity of meanings, meanings that do not fully overlap with the Christian use of the term. While similarities between the two traditions certainly exist, it is counterproductive to only focus on points of similarity and ignore areas where

we differ in thought and/or practice. This chapter focuses primarily on the Jewish understandings of “covenant.” We will first ask what Jews mean by the term “covenant,” then consider how this shapes Jewish perspectives in relation to Christianity.

For Jews, covenant ultimately is rooted in Scripture. In the simplest terms, to be a Jew who is covenanted with God means to accept the Torah (the Pentateuch) and its commandments, traditionally understood as having been given to Moses at Mt. Sinai by God, and conventionally understood as numbering 613.<sup>3</sup> Because these commandments are legal, law is an essential element of this understanding of covenant, but to reduce this covenant to only “law” would be incomplete. The Jew, while recognizing the importance of faith, does not define it as an essential characteristic of what it means to be in covenant with God. This is one area where Christianity and Judaism differ greatly.

An outsider who equates the Jewish covenant with biblical law might understand this to be a closed, mechanically applied concept. However, the Jewish concept is multifaceted and complex. Jews live according to traditions of interpretation of the Bible known as the Oral Torah. This extensive and ever-growing library contains evolving arguments over how best to follow the law/covenant and apply it to new contexts. Therefore, this chapter will also explore how the covenant is more than just law from the Jewish perspective.

Although the Sinai covenant with its commandments is the primary expression of covenant for Jews, Jews understand from the events recorded in the Hebrew Bible that God covenants with different individuals and groups in various ways. Jews, then, recognize the idea of a multiplicity of covenants; there is no singular covenant that

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, how this finds expression varies among the different movements of the contemporary Jewish community.

encompasses all others. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, different covenants emerge with different purposes. These different covenants also apply to varying groups of people, inherently raising the question of who is included or not? When Christians dialogue with Jews, then, about “*the covenant*” Jews have with God, they need to identify which covenant is intended. In what follows, I will explore in more detail Jewish understandings of: the Noahide covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Sinaitic covenant, and the Davidic covenant. Each of these are deeply rooted in the biblical texts.

### ***The Noahide Covenant***

After the great flood of Genesis, God makes a covenant with Noah:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

It is important to recognize that this, known as the Noahide covenant, is the moment in which God begins explicitly covenanting with humanity. Genesis explicitly states here that the covenant God makes after the flood is open to Noah and his descendants, i.e., to all people subsequently as all others were annihilated in the flood. In fact, the text of

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<sup>4</sup> Gen. 9:8-17 NRSV.

Genesis points out that the covenant is open to even non-humans, as God states that the covenant is for “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”<sup>5</sup> The flood was a reaction to deeds against all of creation, and thus the covenant also is between God and all of creation.

It is only later Jewish tradition that describes what observing this covenant means for humanity. The Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 56a states that “the descendants of Noah were commanded with seven precepts: to establish laws, (and the prohibitions of) blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, theft, and eating the blood of a living animal.”<sup>6</sup> The Talmud itself cites six of these seven precepts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Tosefta *Avodah Zarah* 8:4.<sup>7</sup> Eugene Korn, citing the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 56a-57a), points out that, “[n]ormative Talmudic opinion...derives the commandments from Gen. 2:16, but the generality of the verse and rival opinions citing other texts indicate that this text is probably only *post-facto* support for the concept.”<sup>8</sup> While the Old Testament itself does not explicitly group these seven *mitzvot* (commandments) together, the Oral Torah does, making the Noahide covenant part of the received tradition through Moses. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish rabbi, holds that six of the precepts of the Noahide covenant were given to Adam: the “prohibition of idolatry, of blasphemy, of murder, of adultery,

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<sup>5</sup> Gen. 9:16.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Eugene Korn, "Noahide Covenant: Theology and Jewish Law," Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, [http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/sourcebook/Noahide\\_covenant.htm](http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/sourcebook/Noahide_covenant.htm) (accessed December 7, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> While the exact origin of these precepts is unknown, what is exceedingly clear is that Tosefta *Avodah Zarah* 8:4 does contain the Noahide laws, minus the law concerning the consumption of the blood of a living animal. The text, however, does state that there are seven laws, but only specifies six.

<sup>8</sup> Korn, "Noahide Covenant: Theology and Jewish Law," Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, (accessed December 7, 2015).

of robbery, and the command to establish courts of justice.”<sup>9</sup> Noah was given a final seventh commandment: to not consume the limb of a living animal, because permission to eat meat was given only after the Great Flood.<sup>10</sup> The Tosefta, as is typical of this text, does not cite a source for the seven commandments, simply that the descendants of Noah were commanded to follow them.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most defining features of the Noahide covenant is that, in Jewish understanding, it extends to all humanity. Jewish understanding is that the Noahide covenant is incumbent upon all humanity. Therefore any human who does not keep its precepts sins in the eyes of God. While Jews certainly are also bound by the precepts of the Noahide covenant and descended from Noah, they identify themselves as “Israel” and not as the general category of “Noahides” (*benei Noah*).<sup>12</sup> The Noahide covenant is universal, rather than particular. Irving Greenberg suggests that its function is to beckon humanity to join the process of actively trying to fix the flawed world<sup>13</sup> (the contemporary understanding of *tikkun olam*), of moving closer to the covenantal “ideal.” This ideal reaches for a perfect world. Arguably, if all of humanity is actively following the seven commandments of this covenant, then the world would be as it was in the Garden of Eden, before sin. Thus, followers of every religion who work toward making the world a better place and that obey these seven commandments, are within the

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<sup>9</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, ‘Laws of Kings’, 9:1 cited in: Isadore Twersky, trans., ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 221.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> Tosefta, *Abodah Zarah* 8:4 cited in: Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Tosefta*, Neziqin (The Order of Damages) (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1981), 341-342.

<sup>12</sup> Eugene Korn, "Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 6, no. 1 (2011), 7.

<http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1911/1717>

<sup>13</sup> Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 55.



covenantal bounds of the Noahide covenant. This covenant emphasizes the potential equality of all humanity.

Going beyond what is explicit in the Talmudic tradition or in Maimonides' restatement of it, Greenberg also suggests that the Noahide covenant is at the heart of what it means for God and humans to interact. God's promise to humanity is that He promises to sustain. What Greenberg argues is that God will provide for people as needed and He will care for the well being of the inhabitants of the Earth. It is in this sense that God joins Himself to humanity, God limits Himself to be in relationship with the world. His infiniteness joins with the finiteness of the world. Greenberg continues to point out that God limits Himself because He agrees to never again destroy creation by a flood, even though He still retains the power to do so. This limitation, however, is how God establishes His covenant and thus His relationship to human creation. It is the most basic level of covenant.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Abrahamic Covenant***

While the Noahide covenant offers the essential connection for all of humanity to God, it is not, in Jewish understanding, the pinnacle of covenantal life. The universality of covenantal life, found in the Noahide covenant, is simply the beginning. God also makes particular covenants, exclusive to Israel. Recall, however, that no covenant is superseding/taking the place of another; they all remain in effect.

Biblically speaking, no single text constitutes the Abrahamic covenant, but rather a number of key chapters illustrate the development of God's covenantal relationship

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 55-57.

with Abraham, the next covenant that Jews claim today. Throughout these texts important elements appear that define the substance of this covenant: the promises of descendants and land, and the commandment to circumcise on the eighth day.

### **Promise of Descendants**

In Genesis 15, God promises Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars.<sup>15</sup> Later, in Genesis 17, perhaps the most detailed portion of this covenant, God promises Abram that he shall be the “ancestor of a multitude of nations.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai’s to Sarah, and again states that the covenant will be not only between Him and Abraham, but also Abraham’s descendants. God reiterates a similar promise after Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac.<sup>17</sup> The covenant, therefore, like the Noahide covenant, is not only between God and Abraham, but is a continuous covenant, here for Abraham’s descendants, which is why Jews (and Christians and Muslims) today understand themselves as being heirs to it.

However, the covenant also contains a genetic component. It carries the sense of being handed down through birth, just as was promised to Abraham that his descendants would also be members of the covenant. Classical Judaism maintains that, in fact, one cannot leave the covenant. If someone is born to a Jewish mother, or after age thirteen is converted to Judaism, he or she is considered Jewish for life and cannot leave the covenant. Even if one leaves the Jewish community, or converts to another religion, they are still considered Jewish; they simply may have certain privileges revoked, such as

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<sup>15</sup> Gen. 15:5.

<sup>16</sup> Gen. 17:4

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 22:17.

being married in the Jewish community, or being buried in Jewish cemeteries.<sup>18</sup> The Talmud states “[a] Jew, even if he has sinned, is still a Jew.”<sup>19</sup> A similar idea exists in Christianity with baptism: once someone is baptized a Christian they are not understood as leaving the Christian community because of any particular sin. They permanently remain Christian once they are baptized, even if they stray away from their community.

### **Promise of Land**

In Genesis 12, Abram is passing through the city of Shechem (in the present day West Bank) when God first promises him land saying, “To your offspring I will give this land.”<sup>20</sup> The text does not specify the extent of the land, just that a certain land is promised to Abram and his offspring. Later on, Genesis 15 does describe the extent of the land. God says, “[t]o your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”<sup>21</sup>

The biblical statements found here in Genesis 12 and 15 highlight the importance of the Land in Jewish understanding. The Land holds such importance to Jews because it is covenantal and therefore part of the fundamental understanding of how Jews see themselves in relationship to God. In simple terms, the Land is important because it is an

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<sup>18</sup> Elliot Dorff and Louis E. Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 266.

<sup>19</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 44a cited in: Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, 266.

<sup>20</sup> Gen. 12:7

<sup>21</sup> Gen. 15:18-21. For a discussion of what this perhaps means, see: Nili Wazana, *All the Boundaries of the Land: The Promised Land in Biblical Thought in Light of the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014).

element of God's covenantal promise to Abraham and his descendants. Even though Christians also understand themselves as within the Abrahamic covenant, they do not consider the land to be one of its essential elements. A certain reverence is given to the land only as the place in which Jesus lived.

### **The Command to Circumcise**

Importantly, in Genesis 17, God commands Abraham to circumcise himself and all male members of his household because this is the sign of the covenant:

God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."<sup>22</sup>

Circumcision is so necessary that any male who is not circumcised is specifically mentioned as someone who breaks the covenant. Circumcision is to occur on the eighth day of a child's life not only for Abraham's future descendants, but also for those who are slaves in his household, so not necessarily just for his direct, genetic offspring.<sup>23</sup>

### **Why is Circumcision Necessary for Judaism?**

Circumcision differs from all other commands that God gave to Abraham in covenantal contexts, in that it alone is a *commandment* for Abraham's descendants to

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<sup>22</sup> Gen. 17:9-14

<sup>23</sup> Thus, circumcision becomes a necessary element of conversion to Judaism for males.

observe for all time. Why is circumcision given such emphasis? Talmudic and Midrashic traditions offer a number of explanations for why the command to circumcise is part of the Abrahamic covenant. One early rabbinic tradition records four different possibilities. R. Ishmael argues that circumcision is great because it is mentioned thirteen times in conjunction with “covenant” in Genesis 17, while R. Yose points out the importance of circumcision because it even overrides the prohibition of labor on the Sabbath (i.e. if a child’s eighth day falls on the Sabbath he still must be circumcised). The same tradition points out that R. Meir claims circumcision’s importance is highlighted by the fact that Abraham was not considered “perfect” until his moment of circumcision, despite all his great deeds beforehand. Finally, Rabbi Judah I, the Patriarch, states that the command to circumcise holds the equivalent importance of the other precepts of Torah.<sup>24</sup> The mere fact that there are four different answers in this rabbinic text suggests that there is no single best answer to the question.

For Jewish men who lived in the Greco-Roman world, circumcision was a very public display of identity. In a time when public baths and the gymnasium were prominent gathering places and involved public nudity, circumcision was an obvious distinguishing factor. Those who surgically reversed their circumcision publicly rejected their Jewishness. To uphold the command to circumcise was then exceedingly important for Jews in this period because it became part of their identity among the Gentiles. This reality underlies the rabbinic interpretations that go well beyond the original biblical text.

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<sup>24</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Nedarim* 31b-32a cited in: Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Yehoshua Hana Rawnitzki and William G. Braude, *The Book of Legends Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 455.

Another understanding holds that the prophet Elijah is symbolically present at every Jewish boy's circumcision, sitting at the right of the *Sandek* (godfather). Every male is seen as a potential Messiah, so Elijah is present at this event.<sup>25</sup> Circumcision therefore carries a messianic connotation although that is not its primary function.

### Circumcision as "Perfecting Oneself"

Rabbi Meir's interpretation reflects a different value. He had said that Abraham was not considered "perfect" until his moment of circumcision, despite all his great deeds beforehand. A similar Midrashic tradition relates a parable told by R. Levi. When a Roman noblewoman is placed before the emperor, she is concerned that he will find imperfection with her. The emperor simply states that the nail on her little finger is a bit too long and that she should cut it to remove the defect. R. Levi parallels this to Abraham's circumcision as a means of perfecting himself.<sup>26</sup> Another similar tradition, tells of a pagan philosopher who questions R. Hoshiaia as to why, if circumcision is so important to God, it was not commanded before Abraham, namely to Adam at creation. The two go back and forth over a number of arguments, but R. Hoshiaia ends the debate by emphasizing that everything created on Earth during the six days that God created needs perfecting of sorts. He says, "mustard needs sweetening, vetch needs sweetening,

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<sup>25</sup> Herbert Loewe and Claude Goldsmid Montefiore, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 256-257.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis Rabbah 46:4; Yalkut, *Lekh Lekha*, §81 cited in: Bialik, Rawnitzki and Braude, *The Book of Legends Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 456.

wheat needs grinding, and *even man needs finishing*.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, circumcision is a covenantal act because through it, humans cooperate in and complete God’s work of creation. Recall, however, that circumcision is the *mark* of the covenant and not the covenant itself. Thus women are certainly not excluded from the covenant because they cannot be circumcised.

### Circumcision, Covenant, and Christianity

With whom exactly does God make this covenant of circumcision? The Bible states that it is with Abraham and his descendants, who must respond by circumcising their male children as well as the slaves of their household. The slaves would require circumcision to make them fit to live in the household, though this does not bring them into the covenant fully unless they convert. The question then becomes whether this covenant encompasses all the descendants of Abraham? In biblical tradition, the covenantal tradition goes only to one son of each patriarchal generation, Isaac and Jacob, excluding Ishmael and Esau. Later Judaism understands Ishmael’s descendants to be the peoples of Arabia, eventually the Muslims, and Esau’s descendants to be Rome, eventually the Christians. While St. Paul understood Christians to be the true descendants of Jacob and that Jews had forfeited this birthright by their rejection of Christ, he did not understand circumcision to be incumbent upon Gentiles who joined themselves to Israel through the church. When the early Church began evangelizing the Gentiles, St. Paul did not require circumcision of them, even though circumcision is the main marker of

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<sup>27</sup> (emphasis added) Genesis Rabbah 11:6; Pesikta Rabbati 23:4 cited in: Bialik, Rawnitzki and Braude, *The Book of Legends Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).

belonging to the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>28</sup> In essence, it is clear why the Jewish community did not see Gentile Christians as having joined Israel and its covenant: they did not require circumcision. This gentile community quickly became the dominant element of the church. Early Christians, of course, did understand themselves as belonging to the covenant, even if they were not circumcised. This means that to the Jewish mind only Jews have a share in the Abrahamic and the later Sinaitic covenant with God. This comes as no surprise.

### ***The Sinaitic Covenant***

*“These are the statutes and ordinances and laws that the LORD established between himself and the people of Israel on Mount Sinai through Moses.”<sup>29</sup>*

The Sinaitic covenant, sometimes referred to as the Mosaic covenant, for a Jew is understood to be the epitome of covenantal life with God. At its core, the Sinaitic covenant, biblically speaking, does not boil down to one particular Scripture passage, but rather is the first five books of the Bible as a whole: the Pentateuch. The Torah contains 613 *mitzvot* (commandments), which at a very elementary understanding is like the Jewish “rulebook” or “handbook” for living according to God’s will and His commands. But understanding Torah and being included in the covenant is so much more than simply following rules. It is what constitutes Jewish life as a whole. Practically everything in Jewish thought and theology could be understood from this level. Torah, law, and covenant, are all at the heart, the absolute core of Jewish life. It is the crux of what it means to be a Jewish person. Interpretation and debate of Torah is what has led to the

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<sup>28</sup> See Romans 2:25-29

<sup>29</sup> Leviticus 26:46



vast library of Jewish literature, which is considered authoritative to those who adhere to these traditions. Different beliefs on what is right practice according to Torah is what opened the door to the development of separate traditions of Judaism. Yet even for Jews adhering to different contemporary movements (i.e. Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Orthodox, etc.), Torah is still at the heart of it all.

*Halakah*, the Hebrew term used to denote the laws of Written and Oral Torah as a whole, can be translated literally as something like “the way to walk” or “the way to go,” suggesting that it denotes proper behavior. Jewish law even includes commandments that may seem to exist on an exceedingly basic level. For example, Sinaitic law includes commandments such as: what to eat, purity laws pertaining to things like disease or menstruation, or laws on property and social aspects of Jewish life, like marriage. It is therefore the most comprehensive understanding of Jewish covenantal life. Importantly, what the Sinaitic covenant suggests then, is that there is not really separation between the religious and non-religious aspects of Jewish life; Torah constitutes it all. Of course the answer to every question Jews may have on how to live their life may not be perfectly answered in the text or have even been answered at all. Certainly 613 commandments of the written Torah do not inherently and in a distinctly clear manner define the entirety of life. The Oral Torah is the interpretation of these commandments and their application to an infinite number of situations in current Jewish life. These laws are all understood to be given directly from God to Moses and therefore must be followed as closely as possible; it is divine command.

Oral Torah, in rabbinic Judaism answers questions such as how one is to understand Jewish law when discussing things that had not existed when the law was

given; for example, how to abide by the law when dealing with modern technology like cell phones or computers. While the law gives a snapshot of a historical setting, it still is understood to apply to a contemporary context. How exactly that applies, though, has always been one of the fundamental questions of Judaism. A major question then is what does it mean to live according to Torah? What does it mean to live within the Sinaitic covenant? This ends up being an inner Jewish discussion, but it is still a necessary concept to understand what Judaism has been for the past two thousand years.

### **Sinai, Sin, and Struggle**

How do Jews understand themselves to be participating in covenantal life under the Sinai covenant? A simple way of understanding covenant for a Jew is similar to understanding what sin means for a Jew. Judaism defines a sin as a violation of one of God's commandments, the terms of the covenant. Living with covenant means that one is continually attempting to avoid sin. Yet, if one sins, the covenant itself remains unbroken; simply a term of the covenant has been violated and repentance plus other appropriate repair is expected. This contrasts with the Christian perception of sin, which is defined in more "philosophical or attitudinal terms," more as a turning away from God, a harming of the divine-human relationship.<sup>30</sup> Fruitful dialogue requires acknowledging this difference.

According to Jewish thought, what does it mean to live covenantally according to Torah and its laws? As an expression of the intensity of one's love for God, one should

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth Langer, "Jewish-Christian Dialogue about Covenant," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 2, no. 2 (2007) 12.  
<http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1441/1450>

struggle with the Torah; one should debate and go back and forth about particular texts and the applications of certain commandments and their sub-commandments. One midrashic tradition holds that

Moses said to Israel: Know you not with what travail I gained the Torah! What toil, what labour, I endured for its sake. Forty days and forty nights I was with God. I entered among the angels, the Living Creatures, the Seraphim, of whom any one could blast the whole universe in flame. My soul, my blood, I gave for the Torah. As I learnt it in travail, so do you learn it in travail, and as you learn it in travail, so do you teach it in travail.<sup>31</sup>

Jewish tradition, therefore, maintains that to live in the Sinaitic covenant, to live in the fullness of covenant with God, means to struggle with the covenant and the law that constitutes the covenant. It means learning it to the best of ones abilities and also teaching it to others as best one is able. Another tradition adds, “[t]he words of the Torah endure only with him who would suffer death on their behalf.”<sup>32</sup> Still another maintains, “God gives Torah only to him who puts himself in pain for it.”<sup>33</sup>

### **The Chosen People**

In Exodus 19, God “chooses” his people, the people Israel. Important to repairing the relationship with Christianity, and more fully understanding the other, maintaining a particular covenant, being a “chosen people,” does not mean to say from the Jewish standpoint that they are better than any other faith or in someway superior, or somehow in God’s eyes above people who are not Jewish. In fact a number of Jewish traditions hold that Israel struggled initially with being the “chosen people.” One tradition holds

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<sup>31</sup> *Sifre Deuteronomy*, Ha’azinu, §306, f. 131b cited in: Loewe and Montefiore, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 135.

<sup>32</sup> *Berakot* 63b cited in: Loewe and Montefiore, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 136.

<sup>33</sup> *Tanna de Be Eliyyahu* cited in: Loewe and Montefiore, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 156.

that God went to all the other nations of the world before arriving at Israel. God had offered the covenant to all the other nations who denied it, but Israel simply accepted it, having not yet been approached by God, without even hearing its terms.<sup>34</sup> Israel, then, is “chosen” in that they accepted the covenantal terms, unlike the other nations. Another tradition holds that the covenant was forced upon the people Israel by God when God held a mountain above their heads and said they either had to accept the covenant or He would kill them all by crushing them with the mountain.<sup>35</sup> So Israel being the chosen people in this tradition was mere coercion. Being the “chosen people” is really understood in contemporary Jewish theology as being a model group to other peoples of the world. It means being an example to others as how one should live one’s life according to God’s will within the covenantal restraints. Of course, the Bible points out countless times how Israel failed and violated the terms of the covenant in some way. “Chosenness” simply emphasizes selection by God for receiving the covenant. It is not meant to connote superiority over others.<sup>36</sup>

### ***The Davidic Covenant***

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<sup>34</sup> *Sifre Deuteronomy*, §343; *Numbers Rabbah* 14:10 cited in: Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, 265.

<sup>35</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 88a; Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 2b cited in: Dorff and Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Theology: A Reader*, 266.

<sup>36</sup> For Catholic theology, this offers a challenge to the modern understanding of evangelization because if God has indeed chosen the Jewish people, and his covenant is unrevoked, then the need for active mission to the Jews is no longer necessary. In other words, if the Jews are already included in the covenant, and they are the chosen people of God, then why would Catholics feel the need to evangelize to the Jews? Currently the Church does not maintain an institutional mission to the Jews, but certainly they maintain that Catholics should continue to bear witness to their faith in Christ.

Even more exclusive than the previously discussed covenants is the Davidic covenant, which includes only those who are of the Davidic line. As God tells King David:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.<sup>37</sup>

David's offspring, Solomon, will be established as a king and will "build a house for [God's] name" (i.e. the building of the Temple). God continues by promising this lineage kingship forever. Later, Jews understood this as promise that when the messiah comes it will be of David's line. The Davidic covenant also includes a promise of land, similar to those found in the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants. As the covenant states, "and I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more."<sup>38</sup>

The Davidic covenant, unlike the other covenants, does not explicitly use the term "*berit*."<sup>39</sup> Because of the unique format of the Davidic covenant, some might not even recognize it as a covenant on an initial reading. The Davidic covenant, however, is perhaps one of the most challenging covenants addressed in modern covenantal scholarship, because questions about how it interacts with the Sinaitic covenant. Jon Levenson presents two major schools of thought: the integrationists and the segregationists. Levenson states, "the integrationists are those who see the Davidic Covenant as at least compatible with the Sinaitic or even as an extension or adaptation of

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<sup>37</sup> 2 Samuel: 12-13

<sup>38</sup> 2 Samuel: 10

<sup>39</sup> Jon D. Levenson, "The Davidic Covenant and its Modern Interpreters," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1979), 206.

it. The segregationists, by contrast, believe they detect a tension between the two, which they may view even as antithetical.”<sup>40</sup> However, Levenson argues against the polarization represented by these two views. He suggests a middle ground, essentially in which he argues that the Sinaitic covenant and the Davidic covenant ought not to be compared. The point being that the context/setting of both of these covenants is drastically different from the other and therefore, the two should simply be understood as separate. Levenson argues that the covenants should not be compared simply because they are both covenants. His proposed solution, in very simple terms, really seems to be saying that integrationists and segregationists should simply agree to disagree.<sup>41</sup> Levenson argues a more proper model of understanding these two covenants interacting suggests that there simply be acknowledgement that these covenants need not be compared or contrasted with the expectation of a fruitful outcome.<sup>42</sup>

Christianity and Judaism, however, can look together at the Davidic covenant when exploring messianic ideas. Christianity, obviously, interprets the messianic promise as fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Judaism, however, awaits the messiah in the Age to Come. Despite this difference, Christianity’s and Judaism’s ideas about the Parousia are exceedingly similar. In simplified terms, the messiah will come (or come again) and the covenant will be fulfilled in the Age to Come. The Davidic covenant is a point where Christians and Jews can engage in fruitful dialogue and have theological discussions about eschatological ideations.

### ***Challenges to Including Christianity Covenantally***

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 215.

## Theological Challenges

To begin with, the Sinaitic covenant to the Jewish mind is something exclusively Jewish. Simply put, followers of other religions are neither biological descendants of the patriarchs (or adopted by Jewish means of conversion), nor do they accept the 613 *mitzvot* of Torah. This tends to be a point where most Jews agree. Major issues with Christian inclusion involve the violation of even Jewish understanding of the Ten Commandments.<sup>43</sup> Scripture states, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”<sup>44</sup> To the Jewish ear, this mandates an absolute monotheism that the Christian Trinity violates. This commandment, in Jewish understanding, also invalidates of any form of divine incarnation because God would never take on a physical form that could be turned into an image or idol. In other words, there can be no likeness or sculpture or “stand-in” physicality to God’s nature.<sup>45</sup> Maimonides understands belief in the Incarnation simply as an act of limiting God. To suggest that God is physical, finite, and limited is to suggest that God is not God at all.<sup>46</sup> Gentile Christianity deemed a number of the Jewish laws as ceremonial and no longer as being in effect.<sup>47</sup> For one example, Gentile Christianity, under Paul, said that circumcision was no longer a physical need, but discusses his idea

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<sup>43</sup> Korn, “Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View,” 9.

<sup>44</sup> Exodus 20:2-4

<sup>45</sup> Korn, “Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View,” 9-10.

<sup>46</sup> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, I:50 cited in: Eugene Korn, “Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View,” 10.

<sup>47</sup> Paul expresses this idea in his Epistle to the Galatians (3:1-14)

of “circumcision of the heart.”<sup>48</sup> When Gentile Christianity made such distinctions, it logically follows that what Jews heard is that the Sinai covenant was not applicable.

Mary Boys has suggested that perhaps Christians somehow stood with the Jews at Sinai; however, this idea has generally been rejected not only by Jews, but even by a number of Christian scholars. Rabbi Korn explains that to suggest that Christians are a part of the covenant, but somehow exempt from some of the laws of Torah, inherently implies a form of supersessionism because this implies the Sinai covenant in its totality is no longer valid.<sup>49</sup> From a Christian perspective, though, this is difficult to agree with. as any exclusion of Christians from the Sinai covenant undercuts their understanding of what covenant means. This will be explored more in a subsequent chapter.

### **Historical Challenges**

Even furthering the challenge of including Christianity is the history of the two faith’s relationship. The history of Christian-Jewish relations, from the first century, has been tumultuous to say the least, full of polemic, often from both sides. Once Christians held political power, this polemic also turned to violence. Christianity, particularly the Catholic Church, however, must recognize that the spiteful teaching of contempt ultimately aided in the progression of the terrible acts of the Shoah. While the Shoah was certainly not an inherently Christian event –the Christian churches were not the direct perpetrators – the Christian churches, at a corporate level, did nothing to prevent or stop the events from occurring and some individuals were active participants. It was the harmful, exclusive, and supersessionist theology that facilitated an environment in which

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<sup>48</sup> As seen in Romans 2:25-29

<sup>49</sup> Korn, "Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View," 8-9.



the Shoah occurred.<sup>50</sup> This long history of persecution at Christian hands is one major reason why Jews, traditionally, reject Christian sharing in the covenant beyond Noah. There was no motivation to do otherwise.

### **Potential Jewish Perspectives**

Some of the more progressive Jewish thinkers in contemporary theology, however, have suggested that Christians may have a share in the Abrahamic covenant. Rabbi Eugene Korn importantly cites that there was growth in Christian toleration of Judaism between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He emphasizes that some rabbinic authorities at this time emphasized the importance of Christianity to Judaism, because despite disparities between the two religions, Christianity did help promote major fundamental principles of Judaism (i.e. existence of God, *creatio ex nihilo*, Noahide morality, belief in Sinaitic revelation). These major rabbinic thinkers are those such as R. Moses Rivkis, Rabbi Jacob Emden, and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.<sup>51</sup> Korn furthers the arguments of these thinkers by pointing out that commonly they are each ultimately arguing that Christianity is acting as a player in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Korn himself argues that Christianity certainly shares in the Abrahamic covenant. The close relationship between Judaism and Christianity suggests that Judaism must go beyond accepting Christianity just as a Noahide religion.<sup>52</sup> Christianity is “closer to Judaism in history, mission and content than, for example, any Asian religion that may

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<sup>50</sup> For more on this history see: Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). As well as: Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> Korn, “Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View,” 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

teach the Noahide commandments.”<sup>53</sup> The next logical step then means that somehow Christianity is involved in the Abrahamic covenant, although this carries obvious problems. For example, Christianity does not mandate circumcision even though it is an absolutely essential piece for being included in the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>54</sup>

Rabbi Irving Greenberg has radically suggested that to live in the covenant for a Jew also means to encounter Christianity. It is clear to anyone who knows biblical history why Christianity requires Judaism for understanding its identity; the reverse is not so obviously the case. Greenberg’s argument offers a means for Judaism to see Christianity as a theologically necessary religion because of Judaism’s own covenant. He argues firstly, that the concept of Israel being a chosen people has advantages to the rest of humanity. Just as Abraham and Sarah are models of right behavior to the Jewish community, just as Abraham and Sarah were chosen, the Jewish particular covenant can be a model for the rest of humanity.<sup>55</sup> He states, however, that these particular covenants run the risk of

parochialism, tribalism, or amoral familism (that is, a Mafia-like morality), and loss of solidarity and of responsibility for all humanity. Therefore, particular covenants need to be corrected and refreshed by encounters with other particular covenants and by ongoing contact with humanity at large as well as with the universal covenant.<sup>56</sup>

Rabbi Greenberg then continues by pointing out that Christianity is could be seen as maintaining its own particular covenant which allows for relationship with Judaism, which maintains another separate covenant. Meaning that Christianity and Judaism are

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>55</sup> Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 44.

understood as having their own independent covenants with God that can work together in order to avoid possible negatives such as tribalism. In a sense, to Greenberg, it works as a system of checks and balances. The turbulent history between Judaism and Christianity, in Greenberg's view, is partially a result of misconstruing the covenantal relationship. The two should have been cooperating, but instead they competed.<sup>57</sup> Just as the Midrashic traditions cited previously suggested the need to struggle with Torah and covenant, Greenberg suggests the same by using other religions and groups as a mean to refine one's own religion and to avoid moving into theologically dangerous categories. He understands the distinct particular covenants as refining one another.

Greenberg, however, adds a caveat by reflecting on a previous essay he wrote entitled, "Covenants and Redemption." Greenberg states that in this essay he claimed that the birth of Christianity was perfectly timed "to take advantage of the spiritual search taking place within the Hellenistic world."<sup>58</sup> In essence, Judaism and Christianity were set against each other from the start, because they felt the need to immediately contradict the fundamental faith claims of the religious other. Judaism took a defensive position, while Christianity, a more aggressive approach. Ultimately though, what Greenberg claims is that even though these traditions were set against one another initially, in today's world, Christians ought to be able to celebrate the Jewish covenant as unrevoked and renewed, while also celebrating their return to the Land. Jews on the other hand, according to Rabbi Greenberg, ought to recognize that the Resurrection and Incarnation were not phenomena to be argued over and seen as a means of contradicting Judaism, but rather they were intended as signals for the Christian community to bring them into

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 44.

further relationship with God.<sup>59</sup> On these grounds, such theology does not deal with the entire scope of the covenantal impasse. It does, however, push the bounds of contemporary religious thinkers in order to continue to fix the flawed relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

It is the more recent Christian development of its theology in relation to Judaism that has opened the door to Jewish development of these more positive theologies. As Christianity recognized the problematic fault and guilt it carried in history, particularly in terms of the events of the Shoah, it simultaneously realized the need for a new theology of Judaism and other non-Christian religions. This spurred many of the discussions and documents that came out of the Second Vatican Council. It was clear that hard supersessionism – the idea that God no longer covenants with Jews and that Christianity has replaced Judaism in that covenant – which was the traditional Christian view beforehand, was no longer acceptable. Judaism then, in turn, was more able to develop a more positive theology of Christianity. It is the hope of many that the continuance of dialogue and scholarship on these topics will further develop these positive theologies of one another.

### ***Conclusion***

In our times, Judaism, therefore, maintains what is referred to as by some as a “multiple covenant theology” when considering Christianity and other religions. As Korn states very broadly about all non-Jewish religions, without specific regard to Christianity:

Jews stand obligated as partners with God in one divine covenant containing 613 commandments, while non-Jews stand under the divine covenant of the seven

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

Noahide commandments. Importantly, each covenant is valid for its respective adherents and there is no compelling theological or moral need for Noahides to convert and enter into the Jewish covenant. Noahides participate in an independently authentic covenant that prescribes a separate, valid, and religiously valuable way of life.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, Jewish tradition holds that non-Jews who keep the Noahide commandments are considered in God's eyes "more beloved" than Jews who do not maintain the fundamental aspects of covenantal life under their 613 commandments.<sup>61</sup> Another Jewish tradition teaches that, "righteous non-Jews have a share in the world to come."<sup>62</sup> It is clear, then, that Jewish tradition understands covenant to mean a multiplicity of covenants. There is more than just one covenant that God has with all of humanity. There are numerous covenants that God has, some entirely inclusive, while others are more particular. Each covenant, however, is equally valid for its respective community. It is in this sense that Judaism maintains a positive view salvifically of non-Jews.

For Jews, the pinnacle of covenantal life is found in the Sinatic covenant. One might say it means living according to the Jewish laws and commandments as outlined by Torah. Again, however, as noted in previous sections, Torah is in a sense a fluid idea. While it has significant static authority, it also offers room for deliberation and flexibility. In fact, deliberating the words of the text and struggling with what exactly God commands in his covenants to a Jew is an essential part of covenantal living. Recall that even the name "Israel" itself means struggling with God, or wrestling with God.

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<sup>60</sup> Eugene Korn, "Rethinking Christianity: Rabbinic Positions and Possibilities" in: Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn, *Jewish Theology and World Religions* (Oxford; Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 194.

<sup>61</sup> Jacob Emden, *Seder Olam Rabah Vezuta*, cited in: Goshen-Gottstein and Korn, *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, 194.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

The Noahide covenant, Abrahamic covenant, Sinaitic covenant, and Davidic covenant all coexist within Judaism. Neither is understood as superseding another and each is important in its own regard. They are seen as building upon one another and extending the notions of covenant to a fuller understanding. Each plays an important role that cannot be removed. Some of the covenants are viewed as universal (Noahide) while others are particular (Abrahamic/Sinaitic/Davidic). Each, however, is necessary for understanding the fullness of what it means to be in relationship to God as a Jew, and offering potential means of understanding non-Jews in covenant with God as well.

# Chapter Two:

## ***Diatheke: Catholic Understandings of Covenant***

*“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”*  
(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

### ***Introduction***

Just as in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “*berit*” (ברית) is used to connote covenant, the Septuagint, and after it, the New Testament, similarly translate covenant from the Greek word “*diatheke*” (διαθήκη). The thirty-three appearances of this term in the New Testament, when translated as “covenant,” suggest a number of different things, depending on the way that it is used. For example, sometimes it is used to refer to the covenants found in the Old Testament, such as those with David and Abraham, and other times it is used to discuss the “new covenant” in Christ (i.e. with the institution of the

Eucharist, fulfillment of messianic promise).<sup>63</sup> *Diatheke*, however, can also be translated as “testament.” Thus, for Christians, covenant “designates the Sacred Scriptures...as well as the solemn agreement God initiated in favoring Abraham’s descendants.”<sup>64</sup> Covenant, therefore, takes on a different meaning for Catholics than Jews. Not only is this seen doctrinally, but scripturally as well. The texts of the New Testament, especially when read alongside the books of the Old Testament, often suggest “covenant” to mean something strikingly different than how Jews understand covenant. This creates a situation where Jews and Christians in general, not just Catholics, will frequently be discussing covenant or covenantal ideas and fail to recognize they are speaking past each other, simply using the same language, the same word in fact, to discuss vastly different concepts.

This chapter aims to analyze the concepts embedded in the Catholic understanding of covenant in order to differentiate its understandings from the Jewish understandings discussed in Chapter One. My vehicle for doing this will be the recently released Vatican document, “‘The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable’ (Rom. 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ‘Nostra Aetate’ (No. 4)” (henceforth “Gifts and Calling”). Utilizing this reflection on covenant from the Vatican, the following sections of this chapter roughly constitute a commentary that mimics the section structure of the “Gifts and Calling.” Note, however, that this chapter has some additional

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<sup>63</sup> A. Yonick, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Covenant (in the Bible),” 2nd ed., Vol. 4 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 324-325.

<sup>64</sup> Robert L. Fastiggi, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Jewish-Catholic Relations (Theological Dimensions Of)” Vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale, 2010), 601.



clarification in sections which are not explicitly found in “Gifts and Calling” (i.e. the section below titled “*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*”).

“Gifts and Calling” never defines its understanding of covenant, so a first task is to uncover it. As David J. Bolton has suggested, one current definition of Catholic covenant is that it is the continuation/fulfillment of the Jewish/Old Testament covenant including the covenant made through Moses. Covenant, according to this definition, ultimately leads to universal salvation through Christ. Bolton also explicitly points out the Church’s definition of covenant as not including a specific mission to Jews.<sup>65</sup> “Gifts and Calling’s” ultimate question, though, is how Catholics understand God’s covenant with the Jews and what the implications are of this understanding.

## ***“2. The Special Theological Status of Jewish Catholic Dialogue”***

The relationship Catholicism has with Judaism is unlike any other relationship Catholicism maintains with any given non-Christian religion. Catholic thinking about Jews and their covenant has developed greatly in the fifty years since the Second Vatican Council’s promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*. Indeed, the second section of the “Gifts and Calling” addresses specifically the “special theological status of Jewish-Catholic dialogue.”<sup>66</sup> As the fourteenth paragraph of the document highlights, this special status is partially due to the fact that Jesus himself was a Jew, thus, in a sense, making Jews the “elder brothers” or “fathers in faith” as Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI

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<sup>65</sup> David J. Bolton, "Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 1 (2010), 39.

<sup>66</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ""The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29)," Vatican Curia, <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/1357-crrj-2015dec10> (accessed December 12, 2015), sec. 2.

respectively referred to them. The document states that understanding Jesus' Jewishness is to better understand his message. "Gifts and Calling" points out that Jesus himself was a descendant of Abraham and a son of David, as presented in the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, which indeed ties Jesus to the Jewish covenant. As a descendant of Abraham and son of David, Jesus is in the eyes of his followers the Jewish messiah, and thus Christianity as it developed continued to understand him in such a way.<sup>67</sup> Understanding Jesus as messiah is fact a major point of distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Seeing Jesus as a Jew in his historical context, especially as how it relates to covenantal understanding, is "indispensible for Christians."<sup>68</sup>

Importantly, in continuing to develop further what the current Catholic understanding of covenant is, the second section of "Gifts and Calling" formally establishes two absolutely non-negotiable characteristics of covenant in the Catholic understandings: 1) covenant is inherently and ultimately tied to salvation, and 2) Christ is the one and only means to achieving that salvation, although that does not explicitly necessitate baptism into the Church. This particular section of "Gifts and Calling" addresses these two characteristics of Catholic covenant by emphasizing "the special theological status of the Jewish Catholic dialogue." In emphasizing this special status, the Church raises a number of related points (namely that Jesus himself was a Jew and also that the Church historically developed out of Judaism), which in turn surfaces the two covenantal characteristics just named.

Christianity's development out of Judaism was a gradual process and not a distinct break at a singular moment in time or a specific event. "Gifts and Calling" points

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., par. 14.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

to the fact that at one point in time the Church itself was composed of both “Jewish Christians” and “Gentile Christians” (otherwise referred to as the *ecclesia ex circumcisione* and the *ecclesia ex gentibus* respectively) and that the separation between Christianity and Judaism only really occurred once the Gentile Christians developed a religious milieu that was less tolerant. In a sense, Judaism for the early Christians had lost the personal aspect. In other words, Jesus as a Jew had understood himself as a biological descendant of Abraham, but as the Gentile church developed it necessitated a different understanding in order to distinguish itself from the so called “*ecclesia ex circumcisione*.” This then partially leads to the horrible history of anti-Semitism known today within the Christian churches, though certainly that was not the only factor.<sup>69</sup>

### ***Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus***

In examining the history of anti-Semitism in the Christian churches, an initial task is to examine the traditional doctrinal views about those outside Christianity, with an eye to Judaism. Dating as far back as the third century,<sup>70</sup> the commonly known Latin phrase *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation) was frequently cited as the shorthand answer to the Church’s doctrinal belief on salvation. For many early Church thinkers, the doctrine followed literally as the phrase suggested: without the Church, without Christ and the church’s means of participation in his death and resurrection, salvation was unattainable. Consequently, since the time of the early Church, Christians and Jews have disagreed in their understandings of salvation, leading

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., par. 15-16.

<sup>70</sup> See Saint Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle 72: *Ad Jubajanum de haereticis baptizandis*, 3rd century, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050672.htm>.

to a tumultuous relationship between the communities. Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church, must acknowledge that throughout this history, they regularly expressed and even acted out their animosity toward a Jewish minority. Jews had long been accused of deicide – of being Christ-killers. Hatred was spread early through polemical writings such as the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin Martyr’s “Dialogue with Trypho,” and Tertullian’s “Against the Jews.” Anti-Jewish riots occurred throughout history, including during the time of the Crusades. Forced conversions of Jews were attempted. Yet, while the Jewish community also wrote polemics, such as *Toledot Yeshu*, history shows that it was almost always the Jewish minority being at best tolerated, and at worst, physically attacked.<sup>71</sup>

This spiteful religious and racial intolerance ultimately culminated during World War II with the events of the Holocaust and its systematized mass killings of European Jewry under Hitler’s regime. During that time the Christian churches did little to intervene or prevent the horrific events that occurred. Yes, there were instances in which individuals provided life-saving aide to Jews seeking help, risking their own lives by doing so, but at an institutional level, next to nothing was done. That is not to say that the Shoah was by any means a solely “Christian” occurrence. Certainly, the secular Nazi regime was the perpetrator of the horrific events, but the Christian churches did little to stop what happened. One could argue that had the Christian churches intervened, many of the mass killings might have been prevented.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> For mentioned documents see: "Texts from the History of the Relationship," Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship> (accessed January 23, 2016).

<sup>72</sup> For more on the Christian churches during this time see both Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University

### *Nostra Aetate* and Its Subsequent Documents

Recognizing the horror of the Shoah, the Catholic Church began to reevaluate its relationship to Judaism during the period of the Second Vatican Council. The situation was dire; the Church could no longer push the topic aside. After three years of deliberation and drafting, mostly under the direction of Cardinal Augustin Bea, with consultation from a number of members from the Jewish community such as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Council finally promulgated *Nostra Aetate* on October 28, 1965. Otherwise known as “The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” *Nostra Aetate* was the seminal conciliar document that set the Church toward better relationship with a number of other religious traditions; it dealt with Judaism in section four.<sup>73</sup> While the document is certainly limited in its scope, it was the necessary push moving the Church needed toward repairing its relationship with Judaism. Importantly, *Nostra Aetate* formally states that the Jews were not collectively responsible for killing Jesus Christ; it also, in the wake of the Holocaust, “decries hatred,

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Press, 2004). and Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).; For more on the historical relationship between Christianity and Judaism see: Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?: Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000) 39-74. For an official Church document see: Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_16031998\\_shoah\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html) (accessed May 1, 2016).

<sup>73</sup> To see the declaration itself see Second Vatican Council, “*Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions],” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) (accessed December 10, 2015).

persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”<sup>74</sup>

While not addressing covenant directly, it hints at larger theological claims when it says:

The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.<sup>75</sup>

By quoting the Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Romans, the Church subtly implies that there is more to be said about covenant than simply the exclusivist teaching of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. In quoting Paul, the Council appears to suggest that the covenant the Jews have is ongoing and unrevoked; yet, the text does not explicitly make such a claim. Nonetheless, this lays the foundation for such a theology to emerge later on, as seen in more recent documents, including "Gifts and Calling."

Fifty years after *Nostra Aetate*, the Church's relationship with Judaism has greatly improved and large strides have been made to repair what was once broken. The reflection from the Vatican, "Gifts and Calling", in section one reviews this tumultuous past and also calls *Nostra Aetate* the continued basis for future work. It was *Nostra Aetate* that led to the establishment of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews in 1974, under the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (now called the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, as of 1989). This Commission has published a number of major documents, which have aided in improving the Jewish-

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<sup>74</sup> Second Vatican Council, "*Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions]," sec. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Christian dialogue since its founding. These are: “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (No.4)” (1974), “Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church” (1985), “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah” (1998), and now “Gifts and Calling” (2015). While these documents indeed have improved the dialogue since the Second Vatican Council, they certainly were not published without critical response from the Jewish community, especially to “We Remember” in 1998.<sup>76</sup>

“Gifts and Calling” importantly points out that these documents also “cannot replace personal encounters and face-to-face dialogues,”<sup>77</sup> highlighting the special status that dialogue with the Jews holds for Catholics. Because Judaism is Christianity’s “elder brother” to use Pope John Paul II’s language, it is the source from which Christianity originates, something long ignored by Christians. *Nostra Aetate* points out that the first followers of Christ were Jews (just as the incarnate Christ Himself was Jewish). Indeed, Christ during his life practiced the regular religious traditions and customs of His Jewish community. In fact, the ultimate problem that the Jewish authorities had with Jesus at the time of His crucifixion was not mainly His message or theology, but rather His claim to be acting with divine authority.<sup>78</sup>

“Gifts and Calling” makes some subtle claims about covenant based on Jesus’ Jewishness. The document states, “[f]ully and completely human, a Jew of his time, *descendant of Abraham, son of David*, shaped by the whole tradition of Israel, heir of the

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<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of these responses, see Ruth Langer’s forthcoming “The Impact of *Nostra Aetate* on Jews,” in *The Catholic Church and Interfaith Relations: Nostra Aetate and Beyond*, ed. John Merkle.

<sup>77</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 14.

prophets, Jesus stands in continuity with his people and its history” [emphasis added].<sup>79</sup> Thus, the document fully recognizes Jesus’ Jewishness and in that capacity he was a part of the covenant. That Jesus himself, as a descendant of Abraham and of David, was within the Jewish covenant in its fullness, reverses the harmful traditional view of the so-called *ecclesia ex gentibus*, distinguished Jesus’ and the church’s covenantal status from the already well developed *ecclesia ex circumcision*. This type of thinking was the seedbed for supersessionist theologies.

What “Gifts and Calling” fails to point out is that Jesus would also have been considered an heir of the Sinaitic covenant through Moses, as would any faithful Jew at the time. Yes, this is implied when the document states that Jesus is fully Jewish, but I think that the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews is making a restrained argument by not explicitly mentioning it. The language of the document seems to suggest that Christians, as the followers of Christ the Jew, have clear claims to the covenants up to Abraham, as well as the Davidic covenant. While “Gifts and Calling” certainly does not refute the understanding that Christians are the heirs of the New Covenant, the writers seem to have deliberately chosen to mention Abraham and David and not Moses/Sinai.

Does this exclusion of Jesus and Christians from the Sinai covenant work? The answer is complicated. According to the discussions of the previous chapter, Jews might find it comfortable because Catholics do not follow all the laws as written in the Torah (i.e. diet, Sabbath timing, etc.). However, for Christians, it is problematic. Removing the Sinai covenant entirely removes absolutely essential elements of Christian teaching like the Ten Commandments and moral laws. Yet, its claim to the Sinai covenant was part of

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<sup>79</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 14.



Christianity's historical supersessionism – the idea that Christianity has replaced Judaism in covenant with God. This exclusivist theology understood Jews to have forfeited their right to covenantal life because of their collective guilt for the death of Christ. *Nostra Aetate*, section four began the reconsideration of this when it states:

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.<sup>80</sup>

Supersessionist/replacement theologies are thus no longer considered acceptable doctrinal thinking. However, what remains largely unresolved is how to articulate a new understanding of covenant in light of this that integrates the Sinai covenant.

One major contribution towards solving this problem is the Church's explicit recognition of the unrevoked nature of the Jewish covenant. This, however, raises the question anew of how to understand the relationship between Jewish and Christian covenanting with God. As "Gifts and Calling" states in paragraph 35:

[s]ince God has never revoked his covenant with his people Israel, there cannot be different paths or approaches to God's salvation. The theory that there may be two different paths to salvation, the Jewish path without Christ and the path with the Christ, whom Christians believe is Jesus of Nazareth, would in fact endanger the foundations of Christian faith. Confessing the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation through Jesus Christ belongs to the core of Christian faith.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Second Vatican Council, "*Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions]," sec. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "'The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable' (Rom. 11:29)," par. 35.

In this, “Gifts and Calling” is drawing on *Dominus Iesus*, released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000. It states:

Above all else, it must be *firmly believed* that “the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. *Mk* 16:16; *Jn* 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door.”<sup>82</sup>

While the document later specifies that it does not necessarily mean non-Christian individuals are automatically salvifically damned, it does make it clear that understanding salvation as separate from Christ is theologically flawed from the Catholic perspective. Therefore, recent ideas such as the “dual covenant theory” which proposes two parallel (separate, but equal) means of covenanting are seen as untenable in the Church’s eyes. The Church traditionally argues that the “New Covenant” is rather a *continuation* of the “Old Covenant” which lays Christian claim to the entire Jewish covenant. Such theologies separate Christ from his Jewish roots and biblical Israel as seen in Scripture. Philip Cunningham even proposes such ideas could be understood as a form of Marcionism.<sup>83</sup> The idea of Christian continuance of the Jewish covenant however, still runs the risks of forming a supersessionist theology. The challenge, then, is how to deal with this dilemma.

One element of the solution, begun in *Nostra Aetate*, is recognizing Jesus’ Jewishness. Importantly, what this does for Catholics and Christians is that it ultimately

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<sup>82</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Dominus Iesus*, Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” (2000) VI, 20. cited in: Second Vatican Council, “*Lumen Gentium* [the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church],” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (accessed December 10, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> Philip A. Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews*, (2015), 206.

removes claims to supersessionism. If Jesus was and is fully a Jew, then to say Christianity has replaced God's covenant with the Jews removes the incarnate Jesus from covenantal life and causes a theological quandary. Even if we consider Jesus' death and resurrection to transform the covenant, which Christians do indeed believe, removing him from the Sinai covenant is still flawed thinking. To say otherwise diminishes the importance of Jesus' humanity in the Christian mind; it would invalidate one of the reasons Jesus Himself became human, "*Logos made flesh.*"<sup>84</sup> In a sense, it could be considered a type of heresy to say that Jesus was or is not a Jew.

But Jesus still remains one of the main defining characteristics for differentiating Jews and Christians. While Jews can recognize the historical Jesus, as a figure who lived and died a Jew, who "belong[ed] to their people, a Jewish teacher who felt himself called in a particular way to preach the Kingdom of God,"<sup>85</sup> they do not claim Jesus as Messiah because He does not fulfill what the messiah is foretold to achieve as written in the Hebrew Bible, a point Christians themselves can recognize. Jews expect that the Messiah will bring a return to right order on earth, akin to Christian understandings of general salvation. Jews can, however, understand Jesus as someone who did God's will and what God wanted him to do. For Christians, God through Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection *reshapes* the Jewish covenant to make it *universally available*. This reshaped covenant also makes salvation from sin available to individuals, especially after their deaths. Without Jesus, covenant is impossible to the Christian mind, because covenant would still simply be God's covenant with the Jews. Covenantally then, Jesus is a major

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<sup>84</sup> See John 1:14 NRSV

<sup>85</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ""The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29)," par. 14.

defining point for Christians. It could be argued that He is really *the* defining point. But to understand covenant completely in Christianity necessitates Judaism because otherwise Jesus could not be understood in the context in which He lived, as a faithful Jew. Judaism therefore helps to define Christian self-understanding, a task that sounds foreign initially because historically the two traditions have been in tension with one another.

Yet, as “Gifts and Calling” in paragraph 18 states, some individuals still try to justify a replacement theory using The Epistle to the Hebrews. Such interpretations claim that the text is directed at the Jews; however, GC negates such claims saying the text was written “rather to the Christians of Jewish background who have become weary and uncertain. Its purpose is to strengthen their faith and to encourage them to persevere, by pointing to Christ Jesus as the true and ultimate high priest, the mediator of the new covenant.”<sup>86</sup> The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews also points out that the Epistle to the Hebrews turns to as validation the covenantal claims in the Old Testament Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, which promises a “new covenant.” Hebrews is presented as using Jeremiah as a means of providing reassurance to its Jewish-Christian audience, which was questioning their faith at the time of its writing. Importantly, The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews seems to be dismissing any ongoing claims to that Hebrews could be used to support arguments that assert that the Epistle negates the possibility of legitimate ongoing Jewish covenant. “Gifts and Calling” even points out at the end of paragraph 18 that *Nostra Aetate* explicitly avoids referencing the Epistle to the Hebrews and instead references Paul’s writing to the Romans. “Gifts and

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., par. 18.

Calling” names Paul explicitly as the author of Romans, but avoids such naming with Hebrews. It would appear that, in accordance with contemporary critical biblical scholarship, The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews is intentionally avoiding giving the Epistle to the Hebrews Pauline authority, which could potentially strengthen supersessionist claims.

In its understanding the so-called “new covenant” in Christ in light of the Old Testament text (i.e. Jeremiah), Hebrews ties the notion of covenant to the idea of salvation. As the early Christians questioned their newfound faith, the Epistle to the Hebrews answered by encouraging them to understand their salvation via a new covenant in Christ. The language of Hebrews is certainly supersessionist, at least on the surface. “Gifts and Calling,” following guidelines for Catholic interpretation of Scripture established in a string of twentieth century documents, understands it in its historical setting and interprets this aspect to be a product of its polemic, not generating a theological requirement.<sup>87</sup> This neutralizes this text and provides a much more fruitful basis for continued dialogue with our Jewish covenantal partners.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, in the last paragraph of section two, “Gifts and Calling” emphasizes that because the faith the Jews found in the Bible (i.e. the covenant) is the foundation for understanding Catholic faith, Judaism has a special status in the eyes of the Church. While religious relations with other traditions are important, the relationship of the Church and Judaism is unique. Judaism could be understood as being more closely

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<sup>87</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” Vatican Press, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020212\\_popolo-ebraico\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html) (accessed April 1, 2016). II, B, 5, 42.

<sup>88</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 18.

related to the Church than another other tradition. The reverse argument has been made from the Jewish community as well.<sup>89</sup>

### ***“3. Revelation in History as ‘Word of God’ in Judaism and Christianity”***

The third section of “Gifts and Calling” immediately highlights the contrast between Judaism and Catholicism when understanding covenant and salvation. It was not until after Christ that salvation became intrinsically tied to the covenant. Therefore, as “Gifts and Calling” states, “In order to instruct his people on how to fulfill their mission and how to pass on the revelation entrusted to them, God gave Israel the law which defines how they are to live (cf. Ex 20; Deut 5), and which distinguishes them from other peoples.”<sup>90</sup> Covenant then, for Jews, is not tied to salvation as a Catholic understands it, but rather to living according to the law. Catholics understand their own salvation to be dependent on their having receiving their covenant from the continuing faithfulness of Israel to its covenant, even though throughout biblical history many of the chosen people had moments where they turned from the covenant.<sup>91</sup> As “Gifts and Calling” states in paragraph 22:

Like the Church itself even in our own day, Israel bears the treasure of its election in fragile vessels. The relationship of Israel with its Lord is the story of its faithfulness and its unfaithfulness. In order to fulfil his work of salvation despite the smallness and weakness of the instruments he chose, God manifested his mercy and the graciousness of his gifts, as well as his faithfulness to his promises which no human infidelity can nullify (cf. Rom 3:3; 2 Tim 2:13). At every step of his people along the way God set apart at least a ‘small number’ (cf. Deut 4:27), a ‘remnant’ (cf. Is 1:9; Zeph 3:12; cf. also Is 6:13; 17:5-6), a handful of the faithful

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<sup>89</sup> See Eugene Korn's chapter in: Goshen-Gottstein and Korn, *Jewish Theology and World Religions* (Oxford; Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 210.

<sup>90</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 21.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 22.

who ‘have not bowed the knee to Baal’ (cf. 1 Kings 19:18). Through this remnant, God realized his plan of salvation. Constantly the object of his election and love remained the chosen people as through them – as the ultimate goal – the whole of humanity is gathered together and led to him.<sup>92</sup>

God’s willingness to forgive, then allowed the conditions for the covenant’s next iteration, through Jesus.

Fascinatingly then, it seems that “Gifts and Calling’s” question here of how Jews are saved via the covenant is really an internal Catholic discussion. Jews do not seem to understand salvation to be the primary purpose of covenant as Catholics do. The question of salvation in “Gifts and Calling” is dealing with the heart of Catholic faith rather than Jewish self-understanding. Should this even be a question that Catholics are asking then? If we understand Christ’s saving message to be universal and available even to non-Christians (another non-negotiable characteristic of covenant in current Catholic theology), then yes, we are justified in trying to understand how exactly members of other religious traditions are saved. The mechanism of this salvation remains a divine mystery. It was not really until after the considerations of the Second Vatican Council that the question even surfaced in contemporary discussion.

Phillip Cunningham points to theologian Gregor Maria Hoff who “has made the fascinating suggestion that Christians might think of their relationship along the lines of the classic christological formulation of the Council of Chalcedon.”<sup>93</sup> Hoff says:

From a Christian point of view Judaism and Christianity are both inter-dependent – and as expressed in the language of the Council of Chalcedon – *inseparable and distinct*, linked together. God’s self-revelation in history desires the salvation of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews*, 208, see footnote 77.

all humanity. This disallows any notion that Israel is to be excluded from salvation for failing to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the messiah.<sup>94</sup>

Chalcedonic language famously employed “inseparable and distinct” when describing Jesus’ human and divine nature. It would appear that Hoff, in emphasizing such language, is attempting to reduce the amount of mystery behind Jewish salvation. From the Christian point of view, Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection allow for universal salvation; however, as Hoff points out, that necessarily relies on Jesus being both human and divine. Hoff argues that Christian theology of Trinity is reliant upon the Jewish preservation of their notion of monotheism. Thus, “inseparable and distinct,” as Hoff implies, means that Christianity is reliant upon Judaism’s theology of God and to think that Jews are not saved, therefore, would actually also undermine the Christian theology of Jesus as a universal savior. However, Catholics still cannot understand how this process occurs.

Importantly, in the twenty-third paragraph, “Gifts and Calling” points out that although Catholics see themselves as being the “new people of God”<sup>95</sup> such thinking does not mean that supersessionist theologies are acceptable. Understanding the Jewish covenant to be invalidated, or nonexistent, would be a misunderstanding of covenant, according to this paragraph. This statement is essentially a reiteration of the same point made in *Nostra Aetate*, section four. However, I would challenge “Gifts and Calling’s” language in stating, “[t]his does not mean that Israel, not having achieved such a

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<sup>94</sup> Gregor Maria Hoff, “A Realm of Differences: The Meaning of Jewish Monotheism for Christology and Trinitarian Theology,” in *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships*, ed. Philip A. Cunningham and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 218. cited in: Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews*, 208.

<sup>95</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 23.



fulfillment, can no longer be considered to be the people of God.”<sup>96</sup> Framing such a statement as a double negative gives the appearance of some hesitancy on the part of the Church in making such claims. To state that Israel has not “achieved such a fulfillment” is a bit hypocritical and counterintuitive to what the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews seems to be attempting to argue overall. To say that the people Israel has not achieved such a fulfillment as has the Church as the new people seems to edge on supersessionism, which is exactly what the Church is saying should not be done. To say such a thing seems to imply that the covenant is indeed revoked and has somehow ended. I would challenge the Church by asking how have the Jews not achieved a fulfillment if the possibility of their salvation remains open through Christ?

Such language is also ironic in light of what follows it in the twenty-fourth paragraph, which offers a unique point of comparison between Christians and Jews. In fact, I applaud the language of this paragraph, which intentionally states, “God revealed himself in his Word, so that it may be understood by humanity in actual historical situations.”<sup>97</sup> By using language such as “Word” rather than explicitly stating “Christ” or a strictly Christian interpretation of God’s revelation, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews left open the possibility for an important point of comparison between the two religious traditions, but also made a distinction between the two. “Word” for Catholics means Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John famously opens:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...and the Word became flesh and lived

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., par. 23.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., par. 24.

among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.<sup>98</sup>

The Doctrine of the Incarnation is rooted in this passage. John states, "The Word became flesh and lived among us," which for Catholics means the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Jesus, the fulfillment of the Old Testament writings, is now seen as human, as flesh, and as a means of God's presence on Earth. It sounds a little unusual to the Christian ear, but one could understand Jesus then as *being* the Old Testament. Jesus *is* the Word made flesh. The twenty-fourth paragraph of "Gifts and Calling" highlights this interesting point of comparison. Jews could then be understood from "Gifts and Calling" as following God because they follow God's *Logos*, or God's "Word," via Torah, which at its most fundamental level, is the first five books of the Old Testament. In other words, Jews could be seen as covenantal partners because they follow Torah, which for Christians *is* Jesus. When Pope Benedict XVI was still known as Joseph Ratzinger he proposed a very similar theology.<sup>99</sup> Covenant then could be understood for Catholics as ultimately following the Word, which is comprehended as following Jesus.<sup>100</sup>

From the ideas present in section three of "Gifts and Calling" it could be concluded that understanding Jews as following a different covenant, via Torah, would be a misunderstanding. Torah and Jesus are both understood as being the Word of God, not separate entities. While Judaism and Catholicism each interpret covenant in different

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<sup>98</sup> John 1:1-5, 14 NRSV

<sup>99</sup> See Joseph Ratzinger, *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der eine Bund*, p.72. cited in: Christian Rutishauser S.J., "'The Old Unrevoked Covenant' and 'Salvation for all Nations in Christ'," in *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships*, ed. Philip A. Cunningham and others (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 236, see footnote 76.

<sup>100</sup> The idea of *Logos* theology will be clarified further in Chapter Three. I mention it here simply as an element of the discussion, however, "Gifts and Calling" does not explicitly discuss this idea.

modes, the Catholic understanding indisputably must understand Jesus and the means to ultimate salvation via that covenant. As “Gifts and Calling” states, “Christian faith proclaims that Christ’s work of salvation is universal and involves all mankind. God’s word is one single and undivided reality which takes concrete form in each respective historical context.”<sup>101</sup> Ultimately from the Catholic perspective, we understand Jesus to be both the means in which we covenant with God and the means in which we achieve salvation; however, such understanding does not negate or replace Jewish understanding of covenant and could be interpreted in such a way that leave validity in both traditions. “Gifts and Calling,” as well as the rest of the Church’s history of documentation on the matter, leaves Catholic thinking at an impasse. Yes, for Catholics, Jesus is the means of universal salvation, and yes Jews are saved and also remain in covenant with God, but it would appear that the Church’s answer to *how* that all occurs for Jews is simply divine mystery.

#### ***“4. The Relationship Between the Old and the New Testament and the Old and New Covenant”***

The fourth section of “Gifts and Calling” reaffirms many of the characteristics of Catholic understandings of covenant already stated, but it also builds on them. It opens by definitively stating, without question, “The covenant that God has offered Israel is irrevocable.”<sup>102</sup> Doing this sets an important precedent, especially where such discussion

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<sup>101</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 25.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., par. 27.

and reflection could lead into the dangers of supersessionist theologies. This problem emerges almost immediately, when the text continues:

[f]or Christians, the New Covenant in Christ is the culminating point of the promises of salvation of the Old Covenant, and is to that extent never independent of it. The New Covenant is grounded in and based on the Old, because it is ultimately the God of Israel who concludes the Old Covenant with his people Israel and enables the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.<sup>103</sup>

While this point importantly defines Catholic understanding in terms of how covenant and salvation are connected, it does so by language that borders on supersessionism. Perhaps it employs terms such as “New and Old Covenant” for lack of better alternatives, but each inherently implies an order, where the “Old” would be seen as outdated and replaced. Its use of the word “concludes”, however, is likely the most problematic. While it may be intended as meaning “to bring about as a result,”<sup>104</sup> the word could easily be interpreted as meaning ending the covenant with Judaism and replacing it with Christianity, which is exactly what the Church is trying to move away from. The positive point here, though, is how the covenant is salvifically tied to and also seen as continuous with the covenant of the Old Testament.

A question that arises immediately, however, is what iteration of covenant? In other words, what does the Church understand when it talks about God’s covenant with Israel? When the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews states that “[t]he covenant that God has offered Israel is irrevocable”<sup>105</sup> presumably they mean to argue that the whole of the Jewish covenant is not revoked. Perhaps this is why the following

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Merriam-Webster, “Full Definition of Conclude,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conclude> (accessed May 1, 2016). no. 4.

<sup>105</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 27.

sentence quotes Numbers 23:19 and also calls attention to 2 Timothy 2:13 saying, “God is not man, that he should lie.”<sup>106</sup> The Commission apparently means to state that the entire Jewish covenant is incorporated; however, for clarity’s sake and to remove the possibility of misinterpretation it would do better to clearly state this as being the case.

It could be construed from this document that the Commission is arguing that God has not revoked the covenants of antiquity with Judaism and somehow contemporary Jewish life is not in accordance with the will of God. Indeed, there are those who make such claims based on their reading of *Nostra Aetate*. In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI spoke at Auschwitz saying, “[d]eep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid.”<sup>107</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, in stating this, invoked the Sinai covenant, which he stated is valid forever. It would seem that the Church’s theology agrees that the irrevocable covenant is the covenant started in antiquity, which continues for Jews into contemporary life.

In paragraph thirty-four of “Gifts and Calling” the Church seems to be engaging with precisely this issue when discussing St. Paul’s imagery of the olive branches in Romans 11. Here, “Gifts and Calling” seems to be stating that on one hand the Church cannot understand itself merely as a branch of Judaism, but on the other hand the Church is reliant on Judaism, particular in regards to the “Old Covenant.” This would suggest the full and complete Jewish covenant. I do, however, think the Church’s responsibility is to clarify this so that the work completed in improving Catholic-Jewish relations since the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., quoting Num. 23:19.

<sup>107</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Address at Auschwitz,” in *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, ed. Franklin Sherman, Vol. 2 (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 214.

Second Vatican Council not be used to create the polemical, supersessionist, and anti-Semitic religious milieu that had existed before the council.

Covenant, being understood as a single covenant history and leading up to contemporary religious life, is defined in “Gifts and Calling” as “a relationship with God that takes effect in different ways for Jews and Christians.”<sup>108</sup> By rejecting Marcion’s thinking in 144, the early Church recognized that Judaism was not made entirely obsolete by the existence of Christianity. The Church recognizes the validity of the Old Testament and the need for it as well as the Jewish roots, which are grounded in those texts, from which Christianity itself inherently draws some of its knowledge. Catholicism though must also recognize the New Testament or else the foundations of Christian faith lose their grounding. The New, however, is not to be seen as replacing the Old.<sup>109</sup> With the development of Christianity, a new means of reading and interpreting Scripture was born and thus new understandings were also born.

“Gifts and Calling” points out, however, that Christianity cannot deny the validity of the Jewish interpretation of Scripture, calling upon the Pontifical Biblical Commissions document “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” (2001).<sup>110</sup> Obviously, however, this does not mean that the Catholic Church is agreeing with everything that Judaism states, otherwise two separate traditions would not have developed. In other words, while it calls the Jewish reading “possible,” it is not stating that the Jewish reading is authoritative. Perhaps an important next step for the future would be to clarify that what is meant here is that the Scriptural interpretation of

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<sup>108</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 27.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., par. 28-30.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., par. 31.

contemporary Jewish covenantal life is valid for Jews. This idea is helpful to state not only because it offers points of comparison and mutual dialogue between these two religious traditions, but also because it removes the danger that these positive statements about Judaism could be applied only to the Jews of antiquity. To say the Jewish reading of Scripture is a possible one is an acknowledgement of the ongoing vitality of Judaism despite the Christ event; yet, while such a claim is incredibly important to the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, such a claim is not an entire theological validation of Judaism.

Scripture, therefore, assumes a necessary and important role in covenantal life in both Catholicism and Judaism, although it certainly is not their totality. In recognizing this, however, the Church's understanding of "testament" frequently has a very blurred line with "covenant." In Judaism, "covenant" heavily relies on the Torah, to the point where "covenant" can be primarily understood as living life according to Torah.<sup>111</sup> Likewise, in Catholicism, living according to Scripture, according to the Old and New Testament could be a way of partially understanding "covenant." As paragraph thirty-two of "Gifts and Calling states, understanding Scripture is a means of "rightly understanding God's will and word"<sup>112</sup> which is "rooted in the faith of Abraham."<sup>113</sup>

"Gifts and Calling" asserts that for Catholics, the New Covenant found in Jesus Christ as described in the New Testament is not a means of replacing, annulling, or concluding the covenants of the Old Testament; rather it is the fulfillment and renewal of

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<sup>111</sup> Church has not explicitly specified if it understands Oral Torah to be included in these possible interpretations of Sinai, although it has implied it by citing Oral Torah in some of its documents.

<sup>112</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ""The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29)," par. 32.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

it.<sup>114</sup> The New Covenant thus is absolutely reliant on the Old Covenant. This assertion highlights another covenantal non-negotiable: that there must only be one single covenantal history. This assertion, however, again verges on supersessionism. What do fulfill and renew mean in this context? Catholics have an obligation to clarify this language to avoid misinterpretations both by Jews and by members of the Church. . Paragraph thirty-two also confusingly uses words and phrases which inherently suggest either multiple covenants or the replacement of covenants past. Saying things such as “previous covenants” or even “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” implies that 1) there are multiple covenants, an idea which the Church clearly does not recognize because it requires a single covenantal history, and 2) that some covenant has replaced another or terminated the existence of another. Perhaps, part of the issue is that the Church relies on Scriptural language and therefore cannot simply abandon specific words, even if they carry supersessionist implications. However, such an issue could be easily remedied by carefully nuancing the definitions of these words in a contemporary understanding, so that both Catholics and Jews alike understand exactly what is meant when the Church makes such claims.

However, “Gifts and Calling” does seem to continue to try to reinforce the idea of the continuing validity of the Jewish covenant in terms of contemporary life and not just situating it in antiquity. This idea is reinforced when “Gifts and Calling” interprets Paul’s image of the grafting of the olive branches in his Epistle to the Romans (chapter 11). “Gifts and Calling” argues that while the new branches (Christians) have origins elsewhere, they still require the root of the plant onto which they are grafted (Israel) and

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



would die if they were not attached to that plant.<sup>115</sup> It can easily be seen then how denying a contemporary Jewish covenant would also be denying contemporary Catholicism and all of contemporary Christian life. Christianity requires the existence and ongoing vitality of the Jewish covenant. The Church needs Judaism *today* because without Judaism *today* there is no Church *today*. How this works, though, remains a mystery. Paul's metaphor of the olive tree grew out of his own struggle to understand his own reality; Paul's struggle still finds echo in this discussion.

#### ***"5. The Universality of Salvation in Jesus Christ and God's Unrevoked Covenant with Israel"***

The fifth section of "Gifts and Calling" defines what covenant means at its core for Christians, but also what Jews perhaps find most difficult to deal with when trying to reconcile the Christian notions of covenant. For Catholics, indeed all Christians, covenant must remain under a single path, under only one approach through Jesus Christ. Because of the so-called "Christ-event," that is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Christians believe in the universality of salvation. Covenant and salvation, again, are therefore intimately tied in Christian thinking. Ideas such as the dual covenant theory or arguments for multiple paths of salvation are therefore expressly denied by the Church which proclaims salvation through Christ alone.<sup>116</sup> The figure of Jesus Christ then presents a potentially irreconcilable point of difference between Jews and Catholics. Indeed, for each to remain within the limits of their own faith, Jews cannot acknowledge Jesus as the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., par. 34.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., par. 35.

messiah, and Catholics certainly could not deny him as the Christ. For either community to do so would be to deny their own religious tradition.

“Gifts and Calling” points out that when Catholics proclaim Jesus as the sole means to salvation, this does not mean to exclude non-Christians, namely Jews, from salvation. It emphasizes that the salvation of Jesus is universal. As the document states “[t]hat the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery.”<sup>117</sup> The question then, is not whether or not the Jews are saved, but rather *how* they are saved. “Gifts and Calling” points out that the difficulty for Catholics, when it comes to trying to answer this question, is how one could understand both Jews and Catholics as being in covenant with God and ultimately saved, yet one community confesses Christ and the other does not. The document hints that the answer simply will be unknowable until the Eschaton.<sup>118</sup> Note, however, that “Gifts and Calling” is addressing the question of Jewish salvation from a purely internal Christian understanding. The document does not address Jewish self-understanding or ask if Jews would understand themselves as saved in the way that Catholics understand. This discussion is not inherently designed for dialogue, but rather informs the Church’s thinking about a specific “mission” to the Jews.

I believe that the figure of Jesus Christ and thus covenant and salvation are simply areas of discussion where beliefs will never fully be reconciled. We must simply agree to disagree, but respect the beliefs of the religious other and continue to dialogue in order to gain a better understanding. In fact, to completely attempt to reconcile all religious

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., par. 36.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., par. 37.

differences between Judaism and Catholicism would risk returning to the pre-*Nostra Aetate* goal of the homogenization of the two traditions. Today we recognize that each religion brings important and distinct qualities to the larger world. The importance in dialogue is that it allows us to gain an appreciation for the other and shape our understanding so as not to perceive one religion as superior to another, whether or not one believes certain things are right or wrong. Indeed, the matter instead boils down to respecting beliefs and reshaping our thoughts and approaches in order to maintain that respect.

To that extent, while “Gifts and Calling” warns its readers to recognize the limitations of their own faith and not to read into texts such as *Nostra Aetate* things that are not explicitly stated,<sup>119</sup> it recognizes that there is much work to be done and that the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* toward the end of the Second Vatican Council was simply the beginning of the contemporary dialogue.

#### ***“6. The Church’s Mandate to Evangelize in Relation to Judaism”***

Particularly in light of the events of the Shoah, the Church recognizes the sensitivity of the matter of evangelization. While the Church carries out no distinct and particular mission to the Jews (or anyone else), “Gifts and Calling” emphasizes that Catholics are still to “bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ”<sup>120</sup> and to do so in a “humble and sensitive manner.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., par. 38-39.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., par. 40.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

The Christian mission therefore is not to go out and convert all Jews, but rather to bear witness to the truth that is found in Jesus Christ. “Gifts and Calling” encourages the Catholic community to remain steadfast in the call the Lord has given the Christian community, but also to not try and force the mysterious means of salvation that only the Lord knows. In this, “Gifts and Calling” relies heavily on a number of other Church documents<sup>122</sup> that have essentially redefined this charge to evangelize as passively bearing witness by the way one chooses to live, rather than explicitly seeking baptism of the religious other (including those beyond Judaism). The Church in this manner is respecting the right to religious freedom. Yet, the Church maintains that baptism is necessary for salvation, but also that universal salvation is still available, even though not all people are baptized. To the Church, how salvation occurs for non-baptized peoples is divine mystery.

Baptism then offers a major stumbling block for Catholics in understanding universal salvation especially in terms of Judaism, because if we recognize that Jews are saved, but they are not explicitly baptized, then we verge into a territory without a definitive answer. Not only then is Jesus Christ necessary for salvation, but also baptism into the Church. Therefore, for the Church, universal salvation via the covenant is not completely defined in terms of how it all occurs systematically. The Church understands

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<sup>122</sup> For example see: Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Vatican Curia, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html) (accessed March 17, 2016), par. 8, 9.; as well as: Saint Pope John Paul II, "*Redemptoris Missio*: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate," Libreria Editrice Vaticana, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html) (accessed May 1, 2016), par. 55.

a great deal of salvific occurrence to be divine mystery. Thus Judaism is integrally connected to the Church in this manner.

### ***“7. The Goals of Dialogue with Judaism”***

The final paragraphs of “Gifts and Calling” remind readers of the fruits of dialogue and the ultimate goals of dialogue, especially as it pertains to ideas of covenant, which truly aims at the crux of what it means to be Christian or Jewish. Firstly, an obvious goal of the dialogue is to gain a better understanding of the religious other. Particularly when it pertains to Scriptural interpretation, “Gifts and Calling” points out that Jews and Christians alike can benefit from the way in which the other reads and interprets sacred texts.<sup>123</sup> Likewise, the educational institutions of the Catholic Church should dedicate significant effort to teaching its students, particularly those who seek ordination and leadership within the Church, the curricula found in *Nostra Aetate* and the documents that stem from it. Such dialogue can contribute to furthering the Church’s understandings of Judaism and developing its curricula so that in learning to know Judaism the Church comes to love Judaism.<sup>124</sup>

The final four paragraphs emphasize working for things like social justice, peace, reconciliation, and other contemporary world issues on a mutual basis. Working toward solving issues such as peace in the Holy Land, combatting racial discrimination and anti-

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<sup>123</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 44.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., par. 45.

Semitism, as well as alleviating poverty and human suffering are suggested means of continuing to reap the benefits of dialogue in concrete ways.<sup>125</sup>

It could easily be argued, especially in a contemporary setting, that in striving for a better world, Jews and Christians alike can understand themselves as witnessing to their respective faiths and thus more closely engaging in covenantal life.

### *Synthesis*

While “Gifts and Calling” is an important new document in advancing the Church’s understanding of Judaism, it also muddles previous definitions of covenant. The document both clarifies and clouds Catholic perceptions of their Jewish relative.

It is clear that “Gifts and Calling” fails to specify which covenant in Jewish understanding is valid (i.e. Abrahamic or Sinatic). It also fails to explicitly recognize whether or not Oral Torah is recognized in the Church’s claim to the unrevoked Jewish covenant. By this, is the Church still, somehow saying that the validity of the Jewish covenant is compromised? Perhaps the real issue is that the Church wishes to recognize the ongoing validity of the covenant the Jews maintain with the God of Israel, the same God Christians worship; however, in maintaining its own doctrine, Scripture and tradition, the Church struggles to uphold its own orthodoxy in an entirely non-supersessionist manner. It is almost as if some supersessionism was built within the very doctrine of the Church itself. My personal struggle then is how to understand Judaism in a non-supersessionist manner, how to sustain my own personal, Catholic orthodoxy while

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., par. 46-49.

still viewing my non-Christian brothers and sisters in a positive light. Is it even possible to have a non-supersessionist theology of Judaism?

Before the Second Vatican Council, “covenant” had much clearer if problematic boundaries, namely, the covenant had been inherited from Judaism, made “new” via Christ, which made the Jewish covenant obsolete. In this former understanding, Christians were saved because of the Christ event, and Jews had been excluded from the covenant and thus salvation because of their so-called decide, the claim that the Jews were responsibly collectively for the death of Christ and therefore had lost their covenantal relationship with God. Salvation, being inherently tied to covenant for Christians, was limited to those only explicitly in the Church (“*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*”).<sup>126</sup> However, with the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, the Church began to engage in serious dialogue with Judaism and its previously rigid understanding began to break down. Since then, the Church has identified that the Jewish covenant with God retains its ongoing validity. Problematically, though, especially in light of traditional Church thinking, the Church no longer professes a clear definition of covenant or a systematic understanding of Jewish salvation.

“Gifts and Calling” defines covenant as “a relationship with God that takes effect in different ways for Jews and Christians.”<sup>127</sup> Both are valid. It also states that “[t]he New Covenant for Christians is therefore neither the annulment nor the replacement, but the

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<sup>126</sup> For example, as presented in: Fourth Lateran Council, "The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215," Fordham University, Paul Halsall, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp> (accessed May 1, 2016), Canon 1.

<sup>127</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 27.

fulfillment of the promises of the Old Covenant.”<sup>128</sup> But these definitions are vague to the point that they are not really even definitions at all, but rather simple affirmative statements, simply naming only pieces and parts of what covenant is, but failing to deliver a complete picture. The difficulty here is that the more the Church seriously considers Judaism, the less clear the definitions of covenant are becoming, as “Gifts and Calling” highlights.

While the Catholic overarching concept of covenant has broken down, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, however, does make a number of concepts clear in “Gifts and Calling.” Firstly, the teleological end of covenant is salvation. This understanding stands in stark contrast to Jewish conceptions where salvation and covenant are much more loosely linked. Yet, the Church makes undeniably clear that salvation must be universally through Christ and Christ alone, although how salvation happens for those who are not baptized has yet to be fully understood. “Gifts and Calling” clearly states, “[c]onfessing the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation through Jesus Christ belongs to the core of Christian faith.”<sup>129</sup> This universal salvation is open to all people, even non-Christians. This brings together a series of non-negotiable understandings that do not easily work together. If we understand Christ to be the sole mediator of covenant and of universal salvation, then how are we to understand non-Christians (i.e. Jews) within this?

The Church also makes clear in “Gifts and Calling” that there can only be one single covenant history and therefore only one means of covenanting, one people of God, and therefore a single covenant. Namely, the single covenant theory is necessary because

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., par. 32.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., par. 35.



Christians understand themselves as being in covenant with God via Jesus who fulfills the covenants God had previously made with the Jewish people. “Gifts and Calling” asserts, “The theory that there may be two different paths to salvation, the Jewish path without Christ and the path with Christ, whom Christians believe is Jesus of Nazareth, would in fact endanger the foundations of Christian faith.”<sup>130</sup> It is the Church’s view that a single covenant history is absolutely necessary, because otherwise the figure of Jesus Christ as a universal savior would be questioned. This is where Christian thinking verges on supersessionist theology and must make it explicitly clear that covenant is not to be perceived of in terms of replacement theology or in a means by which Judaism becomes obsolete. “Gifts and Calling,” however, is clearly cognizant of the issue and attempts to resolve it, as it states in paragraph seventeen:

A replacement or supersession theology which sets against one another two separate entities, a Church of the Gentiles and the rejected Synagogue whose place it takes, is deprived of its foundations. From an originally close relationship between Judaism and Christianity a long-term state of tension had developed, which has been gradually transformed after the Second Vatican Council into a constructive dialogue relationship.<sup>131</sup>

“Gifts and Calling” makes these non-negotiable statements about Catholic views of covenant, which aid in the way in which Catholics define their relationship with God. However, in doing so “Gifts and Calling” makes a number of issues unclear and leaves them unresolved. The document states that salvation is a universal phenomenon open to all peoples, Christians and non-Christians alike; however, it does not claim to understand how salvation for non-Christians occurs. Catholics affirm Jesus Christ as the sole means for covenant and ultimately salvation, and understand Judaism as being in an irrevocable

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., par. 17.

covenant with God. “Gifts and Calling” seems to clearly say, “yes” to the question of if Jews are saved or not. The document, however, explicitly leaves it a mystery as to how that occurs. Thus, the Church maintains that while it does not understand the mechanism for Jewish salvation, certainly God himself does understand it.

Another important and related piece of the puzzle left unclear is how direct membership in the Church is to be understood in terms of salvation. In other words, how should those not baptized be understood in terms of covenant and therefore salvation as well? The question that really ultimately arises and is left unanswered by “Gifts and Calling” is: does salvation happen outside or only inside the covenant? If Catholics understand salvation as happening outside the covenant then what is the purpose of the covenant? Why would we have the covenant if its not needed for salvation? On the other hand, to say that covenant is necessary for salvation seems to become dangerously exclusive especially in terms of baptism. More explicitly, though, the Church has historically expressed its call to evangelize directly through baptism. Thus, the question becomes should the Church maintain its mission to non-Christians in this manner? The Church has since changed the way in which the call to evangelize is interpreted The Church today holds that freedom of religion should be respected, but it struggles with how to reconcile the need for baptism for inclusion in the covenant with the universal salvation of Christ. Affirming the eternal validity of God’s covenant with the Jews only adds further layers of complexity. “Gifts and Calling” leaves this needing further discussion and clarification. It does not explicitly name the discussions that had previously occurred about evangelization in general and it fails to reiterate what is meant by evangelizing mission, especially in regards to Judaism.

Because Jews and Christians have radically different concepts of covenant, the fact that “Gifts and Calling” only explicitly defines covenant in relation to Judaism and never specifics fully the basic self-understanding of Catholic covenant becomes problematic. Developing new language for discussing covenant not only will allow for clearer dialogic communication, but it will create opportunities to discover where supersessionist language is embedded in Christian tradition. In changing the way Catholics speak about covenant we can reform the way Catholics understand Judaism. The Church has stated that it wishes to remove supersessionist and all anti-Semitic notions. Redefining our language of covenant will aid this. As an obvious example, in discussing God’s covenant with Jews, the Church would do well to acknowledge explicitly that this includes the Oral Torah. Although one could argue the Church has validated Oral Torah implicitly by naming the Jewish interpretation of Scripture as a possible one<sup>132</sup> as well as citing Oral Torah in “Gifts and Calling,”<sup>133</sup> this specification forecloses arguments that the Church really intends only that the Old Testament is irrevocable.

Working on creating language anew for the way Catholics speak could ultimately be viewed as a means of carrying out what was proclaimed in *Nostra Aetate* and its subsequent documents. While some of the words we use are unchangeable because they are scripturally rooted, we can change the way we understand the specific words in order to more fully understand how non-Christian religions, especially Judaism, are ultimately

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<sup>132</sup> In Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2001), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020212\\_popolo-ebraico\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html).

<sup>133</sup> See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 24.

saved. “Gifts and Calling” is a document that continues to push Catholic thinking toward a more progressive thinking of Judaism, but much is left unanswered. While the document helpfully situates the contemporary dialogue it also opens the door to many more questions than those it actually addresses. The document indeed pushes the previous boundaries of Catholic understand to some extent, but it also reiterates the hesitancy of the Church to confront the issue and make more clear what is meant by what is stated in the text.

# **PART II:**

# **Redefining Covenant**

# Chapter Three:

## Redefining Covenant: A Non-Supersessionist Model for Catholic Consideration

*God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”*  
(Genesis 9:12-16)

### **Introduction**

The title of this chapter, “Redefining Covenant,” might make a number of individuals uncomfortable, and rightly so. To infer that something as seemingly foundational and firm as the concept of “covenant” might be redefined, when it comes to religious thought seems like an outrageous claim. One would rightly think that to redefine the covenant of a particular religious tradition is to redefine the religion itself because it shifts the understanding of the adherent’s relationship to God. However,

here I do not mean to suggest that what is being changed is the essential core of the religious tradition, but rather that the community is developing a new understanding of its contemporary relationship to God because its received articulation of it is no longer fully adequate. For example, just as the United States Constitution is constantly reinterpreted and adapted to its contemporary setting, we might also understand covenant to shift its meaning to fit modern religious thought. It suggests a dynamism that shifts interpretation, but not the principles on which it was founded.

The redefinitions of covenant, however, should not simply be reduced to Jews and Christians upon everything. Covenant inevitably will mean different things to Jews and Catholics, or we would risk homogenizing the two faiths. Instead, these differences in meaning should be celebrated. To attempt to find a diluted compromise between the two understandings would be a misunderstanding of the ongoing dialogue.

If we Catholics today are to confront what our covenant truly demands in regard to Judaism, then our current understandings of covenant from a Catholic perspective requires a new definition. Indeed, the gaps identified in “Gifts and Calling” in the previous chapter demonstrate that our current doctrine insufficiently explains “covenant.” Pre-conciliar Catholic understanding of Jews and covenant was supersessionist and hence strictly exclusivist,<sup>134</sup> yet in spite of the Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate* and the documents which stem from it, the Church has yet to formulate an entirely coherent and non-supersessionist understanding of covenant. Such a teaching would need to reconcile

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<sup>134</sup> In a covenantal context, this term refers to a theology that excludes any other tradition. Thus, Christian exclusivists argue that no non-Christian tradition, including Judaism, can be a part of the covenant. See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

the problems that arise when beliefs of Jews and Christians collide. This chapter proposes a solution to this problem and asks: What is an appropriate redefined understanding of covenant for Catholics today, and how are Catholics to understand their Jewish brothers and sisters in regards to this covenant, particularly as it relates to salvation?

### ***What Does Covenant Mean to Catholics Today?***

Church documents tend to use “covenant” as if it needs no definition. However, as we have seen, this results in considerable ambiguity and internal contradictions. By redeveloping its language about covenant, the Church might carefully and precisely nuance what certain words mean as well as the mechanisms by which Catholics can understand their Jewish brothers and sisters.

This contemporary Catholic redefinition of covenant must root itself in the spirit and teachings of *Nostra Aetate*. Only in this way can we continue to reshape our understandings of covenant in a non-supersessionist manner while still maintaining our faithfulness to Catholic doctrine. The challenge is to redefine covenant within the bounds of non-negotiable Catholic beliefs about covenant and thereby not compromise our fundamental faith statements. Is such a task even possible? We will begin by considering what, at a foundational level, are the shared essential elements of covenant for Jews and Catholics. What are the boundaries of the concept? What could covenant not exist without, and at which point does covenant break down into something else? Then we can turn to understand the specifically “Catholic mode” of interpreting that covenant, a mode that typically will focus on defining the essence of the concept rather than its particulars.



### **Covenant as Commandment/Law**

Perhaps the simplest, and most fundamental understanding of covenant, is identifying covenant as commandment or law. At a very rudimentary level, covenant is simply a rulebook of sorts. As seen in Scripture, God makes covenants between himself and humanity multiple times (i.e. Noahide, Abrahamic, Sinaitic, etc.). Particularly in the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants, God's stipulations for his chosen people exist as commandment or law. Thus, keeping the covenant is understood as following the laws that God set forth. For example, in the Abrahamic covenant, God stipulates the command to circumcise.<sup>135</sup> While commandment is the basis for the relationship on which covenant is grounded, covenant is not simply a set of commandments detached from the commander. Therefore, God's initiation of the relationship is obviously an essential component.

Note that for Catholics and Jews, covenant as law is not as clear-cut as it may seem, because for each of these traditions this category means radically different things. Jews understand God's commands to be the 613 laws of the Torah, the interpretation of which are expressed in Oral Torah, also considered part of the covenant. For Catholics, who see the covenantal law as transformed through Christ, covenant as law takes on a much more abstract meaning. Despite differences in interpretation, covenantal commandment/law for both Jews and Catholics, is the foundation for the way in which humans relate to God.

### **Covenant as Relationship**

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<sup>135</sup> Genesis 17:10-14, NRSV

“Gifts and Calling” states that for both Jews and Christians, covenant is by definition “a relationship with God.”<sup>136</sup> Relationship is a primary purpose of the covenant and its essence. Therefore, covenant cannot be reduced to merely a rulebook or set of guidelines. Were the aspect of relationship removed, this would in fact make the covenant obsolete. “Gifts and Calling” as acknowledges that this relationship with God occurs differently for Jews and Catholics, but it never specifies this difference in detail – it is left ambiguous. It implies that the difference in covenantal relationship for Jews and Catholics is simply the difference between adhering to the Old or the New Covenant respectively.<sup>137</sup>

However, “Gifts and Calling” does not pursue this to its logical end. From the Catholic standpoint, recognizing Judaism and Christianity as separate religious traditions, but unified under one covenant, suggests that there is more than one way of relating to God. Just as a parent might relate differently to each child, so too does God have a unique relationship with individuals of both traditions; however, the essence of the relationship remains constant. It is a simple, but necessary piece of covenant.

### **Covenant as Choice**

Covenant as a relationship, however, implies that one chooses to be in relationship. Generally speaking, relationships are a choice. Relationships require active participation and imply that there is a sort of dynamism. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission stated in 2001:

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<sup>136</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 27.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

The notion of covenant then, by its very definition, is opposed to an election of Israel that would automatically guarantee its existence and happiness. Election is to be understood as a calling that Israel as a people is to live out. The establishment of a covenant demanded on Israel's part a choice and a decision every bit as much as it had for God.<sup>138</sup>

Simply put, both God and the people he relates with via the covenant choose to be in relationship. Whether that means the relationship is flourishing or struggling is another discussion, but the choice to relate exists nonetheless. God chooses His people and His people choose Him in response. Difference in relationship, however, does not suggest that either of those relationships invalidates the other. From a Catholic perspective, then, Jews are simply a community with whom God chooses to relate, but in a different way. Covenant then, takes on significant flexibility as a category.

For Catholic understandings though, different ways of relating do not mean different covenants; all relations with God occur under a single covenantal history, which necessitates the interaction of Christ. From the Catholic perspective, though, this means that God offers grace through Christ to different communities who then respond, appropriately, in various ways to this same grace. Thus, both Jews and Christians receive the same grace from God under the same covenant, ultimately leading to salvation in Christ, but that Jews and Christians respond differently. Both responses are acceptable to God because both forms of the covenant were initially communicated by God to these communities.

### *Addressing the Problem of Supersessionism*

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<sup>138</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," par. 37.

If there is only a single covenantal history, how can Christians understand in a non-supersessionist manner how Christ interacts with Jews? Former modes of thinking about this yielded a theology that considers the so-called “Old Covenant” obsolete or replaced by the “New Covenant.” Even well known Catholic voices who aim to push Catholic thinking such as Karl Rahner struggle to define how Christ interacts non-supersessionally. It is ironic that Christ, who in life constantly interacted with Jews (the people of his own tradition) and related to God the Father as a faithful Jew, becomes the basis for exclusion of Jews when we begin to think about covenant. This section will explore some proposed solutions to this dilemma, beginning with Rahner’s contribution.

### ***Rahner and “Anonymous Christianity”***

The Second Vatican Council’s document *Lumen Gentium* 16, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, opens the door to one way of solving this issue when it states that “[t]hose also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”<sup>139</sup> This was further developed by the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner (1904-1984). He was among those who, in light of the Council’s new considerations of non-Christian religions, offered further suggestions for evaluating the salvation of those who did not necessarily recognize Christ as God and as Messiah. In this, he drastically reconsidered the axiom “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.” Rahner is known for coining the term “anonymous Christianity,” which is a theological argument for a way that Christians

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<sup>139</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church], II, 16.

can understand the salvation of those outside Christianity. It is Rahner's understanding of the religious other which the Catholic Church has essentially adopted today.<sup>140</sup>

Rahner did not coin the term "anonymous Christianity" in any one particular work, but rather a number of his texts consider the religious other. His texts *Spirit in the World*, *Hearer of the Word*, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, and the twenty-three volume *Theological Investigations* are particularly useful. In his essay titled "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" included in *Theological Investigations*, Rahner says:

We prefer the terminology according to which that man is called an 'anonymous Christian' who on the one hand has *de facto* accepted of his freedom this gracious self-offering on God's part through faith, hope, and love, while on the other he is absolutely not yet a Christian at the social level (through baptism and membership of the Church) or in the sense of having consciously objectified his Christianity to himself in his own mind (by explicit Christian faith resulting from having hearkened to the explicit Christian message). We might therefore put it as follows: the 'anonymous Christian' in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is oriented in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.<sup>141</sup>

This theory aims at answering the crux of the question of salvation: who can be saved and who cannot? In simpler terms, who is in and who is out? Is salvation an exclusively "Christian" phenomenon? In contrast to the conventional answer which insisted that in the age of Christ,<sup>142</sup> salvation comes only through the Church, Rahner insists, in the words of Francis A. Sullivan:

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<sup>140</sup> For reference to the Catechism see: Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. ed. (Vatican City: Washington, D.C.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, distributed by: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 846-848.

<sup>141</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 14 (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 283.

<sup>142</sup> On this understanding of the various ages, see: John T. Slotemaker, "Omnis Observator Legis Mosaycae Iustus Est Apud Deum: Robert Holcot's Theology of the

that...until non-Christians become so convinced of their obligation to accept Christianity that it would be a mortal sin for them not to do so, their own religion continues to be the way in which God must intend that they express their relationship with him and arrive at their salvation.<sup>143</sup>

It is clear then, that in post-Conciliar Catholic thinking, Rahner's understanding pushes the Church's understanding of salvation. Salvation then is still limited to being through Christ, but how that salvation is attained may or may not be explicitly and directly through "Christian" belief. For non-Christians, though, salvation occurs mysteriously.

Rahner ties his anonymous Christianity inherently to his ideas about grace. He suggests that because God's grace is freely offered to all people and is accepted through human free will, salvation is thus available to all people. This saving grace, though, is made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, logically, grace must be oriented toward Christ and originate in Christ; without Christ, salvific grace is impossible. It would appear that this argument limits God's saving grace only to Christians; however, Rahner adds a perspective that incorporates the possibility of non-Christian salvation. For non-Christians to achieve this salvation, they must "accept this grace implicitly and subjectively in the radical love of [their] neighbour...[and have] in [their] basic orientation and fundamental decision, accepted the salvific grace of God, through Christ, although [they] may never have heard of the Christian revelation."<sup>144</sup>

Rahner would argue, though, that Christ is actively a part of history and that man is transcendently linked to Christ through an ever-present orientation of man toward God.

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Jews," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 10, no. 1 (2015).

<http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/9185/8260>

<sup>143</sup> Francis Aloysius Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 172.

<sup>144</sup> Gavin D' Costa, "Karl Rahner's Anonymous Christian - A Reappraisal," *Modern Theology* 1, no. 2 (1985), 131-148.

Rahner says that this orientation is “borne, liberated, and made radical by supernatural grace.”<sup>145</sup> It is clear then, from a Rahnerian perspective, that the salvific grace of God is inherently tied to Christ. Whether that means direct belief in and faithful worship of Christ is another matter.

Rahner, however helpful, is not above criticism, as theologians such as John Hick and Hans Küng demonstrate.<sup>146</sup> These criticisms, however, are less of the Rahnerian theory itself, than of Christian exclusivism as a whole. I find them important considerations nonetheless. Essentially each suggests that it is rather conceited for the Church to claim sole salvific truth. To say that someone is an “anonymous Christian,” as Rahner put it, is assuming, first, that these non-Christians even want the title of “Christian,” and second, that the Church, via Christ, is without any doubt the sole means to salvation. While the “anonymous Christian” title seems like a theological compliment to those who view it from within the Church, it could also be understood as potentially harmful and offensive by those who stand outside it, especially by Jews who have had a tumultuous relationship history with Christianity.

The contemporary dialogue and its affirmation of the permanence of God’s covenant with Judaism leads us to a dilemma. Who has the ability or right to decree which religious tradition is valid? While completely comprehending the necessity of accepting Christ as the absolute foundation of what it means to be Catholic, to be Christian, one can also easily perceive the consequences of this to our non-Christian

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<sup>145</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 320.

<sup>146</sup> For more on Hick’s theology see: John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974). For Küng’s theology see: Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

brothers and sisters. This has led many to ask whether Catholics are simply to understand as universally applicable their own beliefs that salvation is dependent on Jesus Christ? Or may they understand other faiths as just as religiously valid as their own, meaning that perhaps God interacts salvifically with Jews in a different but equal manner? Catholic doctrine answers these questions with an absolute “no,” labeling such thinking as “relativism.”<sup>147</sup> How, then, is the Church to reconcile this dilemma and maintain both the universal salvific significance of Christ and the validity of God’s covenant with the Jews? Is it even possible? Does Rahner go as far as possible, doctrinally?

We must also ask: how does Rahner’s perspective on salvation fit with the Church’s current teachings that were first articulated by Pope John Paul II in 1980 during his “Address to the Representatives of the West German Jewish Community: when he referred to Jews as “the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God”?<sup>148</sup> How can Christians, who understand covenants to be saving, accept that the Jewish covenant is valid, but hold that salvation is unattainable by it alone? Is it sufficient that Jews be “anonymous Christians” if their covenant is unrevoked?

### ***Christian Claims to Covenant Rethought***

Perhaps we can take Rahner’s idea further; still allowing Christ to be present in the covenant of the Jews, we can analyze, via Christ, why the covenant remains unrevoked. I do not think it is possible to make overarching broad statements about

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<sup>147</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Dominus Iesus*, [Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church],” sec. 22.

<sup>148</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Address to the Representatives of the West German Jewish Community,” in Franklin Sherman, *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, Vol. 1 (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 179.



covenant and salvation for all non-Christian religions at once. If this type of idea were to be used for other non-Christian religious traditions, it would have to be on a case-by-case basis. However, because Jesus himself was a Jew, and a faithful Jew at that, Christ validates the Jewish covenant, as it was originally made, through his life, death, and resurrection. This validation of the Jewish covenant, Jewish salvation comes through its mechanisms, not through those that emerged after Christ's resurrection. This does suggest that there are multiple covenants, because as St. Paul teaches, the Christian covenant draws its legitimacy from precisely this Jewish covenant.<sup>149</sup> In Christian understanding, Jesus was free of sin, meaning that he did not breach the covenant of his community, the Jewish covenant. In addition, Christ acted as the "covenantal modeler," demonstrating another valid path to access the same covenant Christians follow, equally desired by God. The debates in Judaism are ultimately over how to best follow the law, how to best keep the covenant. Jesus was familiar with this understanding and participates such in debates over Scripture and Jewish law with the Jewish authorities at the time.<sup>150</sup>

If Catholics claim Jesus as the "perfect human," which is he often called, then we must understand his life to be an example of how we should live. Just as we say the prayer He taught us (i.e. the Lord's Prayer<sup>151</sup>), we must understand His theology of Judaism in a similar manner. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these

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<sup>149</sup> See Rom. 9-11 (specifically Rom. 11:17-24).

<sup>150</sup> As seen in Luke 2:41-52

<sup>151</sup> Matt. 6:9-13

commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>152</sup>

When Jesus states this He is speaking of the *Jewish* covenant, the one that He adhered to. It is clear that Jesus states that the covenant the Jews maintain is not any different in any shape or form, by even one letter, until the end times, the end of the world which both Jews and Christians alike wait for. Until that time, however, it is clear that each tradition must anxiously wait, but in solidarity with one another. It is imperative that the Catholic Church in particular, in light of its spiteful history with the Judaism, continues to work to make amends and work towards a non-supersessionist theology of the Jewish covenant, unlike the “soft” supersessionist theology we have today.

The move from full observance of the Sinaitic covenant (according to Jewish definition), however, comes after the Resurrection when the church encounters the Gentile community. Paul highlights this shift by refocusing covenant on Abrahamic ideas. As seen in Romans 4, Paul emphasizes covenant via the Abrahamic definition, but he reinterprets it in a new “Christian” sense. He says:

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

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<sup>152</sup> Matt. 5:17-20 NRSV

“Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;  
blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.”

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.<sup>153</sup>

Thus it is clear in Pauline theology, that Abraham offers a pivotal point from which covenant can be rethought. Paul then even explains from a practical sense how a Christian rethinks the covenant (i.e. without circumcision). Perhaps a helpful way of approaching a non-supersessionism would be through a reconsideration of Paul’s theology of covenant through Abraham. However, such theology would have to be careful not to deny the Sinaitic covenant, and also avoid a theology that has multiple covenants.

Indeed, official Catholic theology unequivocally rejects the idea of a multiplicity of covenants and insists upon one universal covenant through Christ. This means that there is just a single covenant history. Perhaps a solution is to focus on the teleological aspect of covenant, the idea that Christians and Jews share “covenantal goals.” Both groups are trying to achieve the same thing: right relationship with God, even though that means different things for both traditions Both groups are working constantly to better

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<sup>153</sup> Romans 4:1-12

themselves as people, to better the world and to do the work of God. This avoids a focus on the differences, like how to understand Christ and his role in the covenant, and it also avoids the supersessionist search to subsume Judaism into Christianity and homogenize the two traditions. Christians also need Judaism for their own self-understanding, which requires maintaining Jewish uniqueness.

What are the details of this covenant? Christian understanding of covenant can be understood as significantly “shared” with Jews up through Abraham (with the exception of circumcision and the land). Yet, without pieces of the Sinaitic covenant, Christianity would lose additional elements such as the Ten Commandments or other moral laws. It is this difference over the details of what covenant consists of where Jews and Christians really differ and where trouble emerges. Catholics understand “the covenant” to be the continuance of the covenant through Abraham, Sinai, and ultimately through Christ, but this opens up supersessionism and a denial of Jewish understandings of their own covenant.

A less supersessionist view of covenant would be for Christians to nuance their claim to the details of the Sinai covenant, in accordance with the Church’s traditions of differentiating between moral and ceremonial law.<sup>154</sup> Why? Quite simply, because Christians do not follow the 613 laws of Torah as do Jews. Jewish law really is Torah at its core.

Another alternative for moving toward non-supersessionism is that the Church could understand covenant as continued through Christ who extends the Abrahamic

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<sup>154</sup> This tradition originally comes from St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. For a description see: Brown, B. F., S. A. Long, J. C. H. Wu, and T. A. Wassamer. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Natural Law” 2nd ed. Vol. 10. (Detroit: Gale, 2007), 188-189.

covenant rather than the Sinai (but not to exclude all of Sinai from the covenantal equation). As Rabbi Eugene Korn argues, from the Jewish point of view, this would be more plausible and also would be a better way for Jews to understand their relationship to Christians as different from other non-Jewish traditions.<sup>155</sup> It is clear that Catholic understanding of covenant must come through Abraham. As the “Gifts and Calling” reflection states, “it [is] evident how important is the awareness that the Christian faith is rooted in the faith of Abraham.”<sup>156</sup> To understand this in a non-supersessionist manner, however, requires the acknowledgement that the Jewish covenant is also valid, which the Church has indeed already acknowledged. However, this would exclude those elements of the Sinai covenant that the Church does consider important.

This could be the mechanism in which Jews and Christians share the covenant. Since Jews recognize that no covenant is replacing another (i.e. the Sinaitic covenant does not replace the Abrahamic covenant), then it could be a more acceptable Christian theology. Christians would still be covenantally bound via Abraham and share that covenant with Jews, but ultimately are saved through Christ. The Sinaitic covenant then, from the Christian standpoint, could be understood as the way in which Jews interpret the single covenant and are ultimately saved through Christ who validates the Jewish covenant via His “covenantal modeling” as previously discussed. In the “Gifts and Calling” reflection, the Church has indeed recognized that the people Israel are distinguished from other peoples.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Korn, “Covenantal Possibilities in a Post-Polemical Age: A Jewish View,” 10.

<sup>156</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” par. 32.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., par. 21.

## **Logos Theology and Non-Christomorphic Covenanting**

From the Catholic point of view, while Jesus' involvement in the covenant with all humanity is not to be questioned, how that involvement occurs is less obvious. The mechanism for Catholics might be different than that for Jews. Perhaps one of the more helpful modes of thinking about this issue is Dr. Phillip Cunningham's discussions of *Logos* theology. *Logos* is "the 'Word' of God [which is the] subsistent of the Triune God that the church knows as constantly revealing God and inviting people into a relationship with that One."<sup>158</sup> *Logos* could be understood as being the "subsistent" of the Triune God that does the covenanting.<sup>159</sup>

### **The Difference between the Catholic and Jewish *Logos***

"*Logos*" understood this way is a Christian concept, but as Daniel Boyarin has pointed out, the idea of *Logos* is actually of Jewish origin.<sup>160</sup> The idea of *Logos* theology, as proposed by Dr. Cunningham, opens a means for Catholics potentially to understand Jews (and other non-Christians) in terms of covenant. In his recent book *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship Between Catholics and Jews*, Cunningham proposes that "Christians experience the *Logos* as Christ, but others may experience the *Logos* in non-christomorphic ways even though the Church understands that Christ is always

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<sup>158</sup> Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews*, 213.

<sup>159</sup> This is not meant to say that the other subsistent parts of the Trinity do not engage in the covenant.

<sup>160</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 31.

involved.”<sup>161</sup> Jews experience God’s *Logos* via the Torah. The Jewish relationship with God, the way in which Jews covenant with God, is only complete with Torah, in the wholeness of the Sinaitic covenant. As Cunningham writes:

Therefore, Jews are “saved” by their ongoing covenantal participation in God’s unfolding plans for the created world, a covenanting that from a Christian point of view involves an intimate relationship – since the Holy One is Triune – with the eternal *Logos* unified with the son of Israel, Jesus. Therefore, it could be said from a Christian point of view that Jesus Christ “saves” Israel by virtue of his epitomizing and deepening of Israel’s life with God, although, since Israel does not covenant with God christomorphically, the Jewish people are correct not to perceive their covenanting in this Christian way.<sup>162</sup>

In other words, since Jews have never covenanted with God via a christomorphic mode, then they are right to continue to covenant with God specifically through the Torah, even though Catholics believe Christ to be salvifically involved nonetheless. A more complete definition of the covenant for the Church’s understanding might explicitly include Dr. Cunningham’s point.

### **Using *Logos* Theology to Redefine Covenant**

Explicitly pointing out that since Torah is how they covenant with God’s *Logos*, Oral Torah holds covenantal validity for Jews, would greatly improve Catholic understanding of the Jewish covenant. While some Catholic documents have implicitly validated the Oral Torah, none have stated that the Oral Torah is a necessary piece of the fullness of Jewish covenanting. The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 2001 document entitled “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scripture in the Christian Bible” cites a number of rabbinic sources, which one could understand as a means of validating Oral

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<sup>161</sup> Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews*, 213-214.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

Torah, but it does not state this.<sup>163</sup> Without such definition it could be argued from a conservative Christian standpoint that even though the Church has said the Jewish covenant remains valid and ongoing until the Age to Come,<sup>164</sup> the covenant that the Church is describing is in reality simply the biblical covenant from some 3000 years ago and rabbinic teachings have no validity.

A definition of covenant then, from a Catholic point of view, necessitates a description of how the Judaism of today is involved in the covenant. Any other explanation of covenant would be incomplete. This more inclusive Christian definition of covenant would state that covenanting with God takes place through His *Logos*, which is ultimately rooted in Christ. The irreducible definition of covenant, including both Jewish and Christian conceptions, would also name “*Logos*” because the basic expression of covenantal praxis via *Logos* remains non-supersessionist. *Logos* theology allows for a covenantal theology of inclusivism and not exclusivism; it helps to redefine our understanding of covenant in an appropriate manner without having to relinquish or compromise our fundamental beliefs. In a Christian *Logos* theology, Christ is still very much present; it simply allows for a more inclusive Christian theology of Judaism. Importantly, a *Logos* theology of covenant would state that not only does covenanting take place through the *Logos*, but also that *Logos* takes on a different form in its relationship to the Jews (namely, Torah). While the Church has implicitly voiced such

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<sup>163</sup> See for example: Pontifical Biblical Commission, “*The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*,” I, D, 3.

<sup>164</sup> As described in: Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).”



thinking,<sup>165</sup> it has never stated this explicitly. An explicit statement of the difference in Jewish relation to the *Logos* would allow for a more coherent theology of Judaism to develop in Christianity, allowing for a clearer definition of covenant and contributing to Christian self-understanding. It would also be helpful because it would allow Christianity to begin to understand Jews as saved via their own terms.

### ***The Problem of “Old” and “New” with Testament and Covenant***

An area still requiring clarification is the adjective describing the difference between the “testaments” or “covenants.” In our times, the problem the Church encounters with these two terms is that the Catholic world still clings to the notion of “Old” and “New.” With the acknowledgement of the ongoing validity of the covenant for Judaism (affirmed in “Gifts and Calling”), as well as *Logos* theology as proposed by Dr. Cunningham, the traditional names “Old” and “New” become highly problematic for Catholic thinking because they express supersessionist concepts. As one might easily perceive, suggesting something as “Old” versus “New” implies whatever is older is obsolete. Even the latest Church document on covenant, “Gifts and Calling,” not seeking to be anti-Jewish, still refers to both the “Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant” as well as the “Old Testament” and “New Testament.”<sup>166</sup> A step the Church could take to rid

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<sup>165</sup> For example, the use of “Word of God” throughout the document or specifically in part II, par. 19 of: Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible.”

<sup>166</sup> See: Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” sec. 4.

itself of supersessionist and anti-Semitic ideologies,<sup>167</sup> might be to abandon the traditional use of the terms “Old” and “New” in this context.

### **Redefining “Old” and “New”**

Perhaps rather than dubbing the testaments “Old Testament” and “New Testament” it would be more helpful to place the texts in an even broader context. What distinguishes the Jewish Bible from the Christian Bible is essentially the addition of the “New Testament” for Christians. Philip Cunningham prefers “Shared Testament” to “Old Testament.”<sup>168</sup> However, this still could imply a mildly supersessionist theology, because it implies that Christians share in the fullness in the Sinaitic covenant. This does not fit Jewish perception.

It is also exceedingly difficult to think of proper names for the separate texts that also do not imply supersessionist theologies and also could be used by both traditions. One possibility might instead refer to the texts as “Bible” and “Testament” respectively. Using this naming system not only reduces supersessionist implications, but it also minimizes the extent to which a particular tradition is distinguished from another in the names. For example, rather than saying something along the lines of “Hebrew Bible” or “Christian Testament”, the titles “Bible” and “Testament” focus on the content of the books as a whole.

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<sup>167</sup> As expressed in: Second Vatican Council, “*Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions],” sec. 4.

<sup>168</sup> See Cunningham, Phillip A. *Sharing the Scriptures*, (New York: Stimulus Foundation, 2003), 17.

Yet, what distinguishes the Old Testament texts from the New Testament texts is the explicit presence of Christ as the central figure, which changes how Christians and Jews interpret their shared texts. The Christian exegetical tradition has commonly interpreted the Old Testament texts as pointing to Christ, especially when messianic themes are mentioned. However, contemporary teachings explicitly allow biblical critical scholarship, which reads pre-Christian texts as historical documents in their original contexts, and allow that Jewish readings of them are possible ones.<sup>169</sup> Importantly, these Jewish readings include rabbinic interpretations that developed after the advent of Christianity. Therefore, contemporary Christians are wrong to utterly deny the legitimacy of the Jewish interpretation of these texts, though they are under no obligation to make these interpretations their own. In other words, the presence of Christ in the “Old Testament” is only one reading and Catholics may not deny the fact that the “Old Testament” is not explicitly talking about Christ. “Bible” and “Testament” remove the suggestion that either the Jewish reading or the Christian reading of Scripture is more correct than the other. “Bible” and “Testament” offer very neutral names that both communities could accept.

Modern methods of biblical exegesis, however, also suggest that a text has more than one interpretation. The names “Bible” and “Testament” highlight this fact. The Second Vatican Council made clear that the role of the exegete was to research what the original author meant at the time the specific text was written and to include this in the text’s interpretation. As the Council stated:

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<sup>169</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29),” sec. 31.

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.<sup>170</sup>

From the Catholic standpoint then, the biblical exegete who employs the historical-critical method aims to reach the original meaning of the text. Since, the original meaning of the text can never ultimately be proven, unless new sources are found that state otherwise, the Catholic reader must consider the Jewish reading as well as a possibility. This is not to deny the Church's tradition of interpretation though.

In removing the traditional names "Old" and "New" the Catholic world would also move forward in ridding itself of potential supersessionist theologies. To name the biblical testaments "Bible" and "Testament" simply aims at reaching a neutral wording, that highlights what exactly the texts are. The word "Bible" would be acceptable for both Jews and Christians because it simply means, on a very broad level, a collection of books. Using the term "Bible," however, in place of "Old Testament" would require the Christian redefinition to avoid confusion with the current conception of The Bible, which includes the New Testament. An explicit statement clearly defining this would be

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<sup>170</sup> Second Vatican Council, "*Dei Verbum* [the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation]," (1965), sec. 12, restated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec.110

required in order to reduce the understanding of “Bible” as only meaning the books included in the “Old Testament.”

These revised names address a different issue as well. Recall from chapter two that the word *diatheke* translates not only as covenant, but also as testament. Thus, when the term “testament” is used, it also frequently implies “covenant.” In the “New Testament,” of course, Jesus Christ is explicitly the main figure, through whom Christians perceive their covenant and universal salvation. If Christians, therefore, adopt the name “Testament” to refer to the “New Testament” then, theologically speaking, Christians could interpret this as highlighting the covenant through Christ, which expresses the core of Christianity and these books. From the Jewish perspective, “Bible” would not directly imply the obsolescence embedded in the name “Old” Testament. Simply removing the “Old” and the “New” from before “Testament,” automatically virtually eradicates supersessionist implications. “Testament” from the Jewish perspective could simply be understood as “Bible” would be understood correctly as a collection of revered texts.

“Old” and “New Covenant” also seems to imply multiple covenants, something theologically explicitly rejected since *Nostra Aetate*. Terms like “Jewish Covenant/Testament” or “Christian Covenant/Testament” has the additional problem of inviting Marcionism by Christians. Even to call the texts something based on their dating would be difficult. To call the “Old Testament” something along to lines of “Pre-Christian Testament” would not be a name acceptable to Jews. If we refer to “New Testament” as “Christian Testament,” it again implies that only Christians remain in

covenant with God, which is not what Catholic doctrine states, as pointed out recently in “Gifts and Calling.”<sup>171</sup>

Because the terms “testament” and “covenant” are ultimately so interrelated, naming these groupings of texts to reflect non-supersessionist theologies makes sense. To say “Bible” and “Testament” would simply be understood then as the light in which the original texts were written, in accordance with the ideas from the Second Vatican Council. In essence, removing the names “Old” and “New” would further prevent the ideas and arguments of Marcion, which the Church has already rejected centuries ago.<sup>172</sup>

### ***The Problem of the Sinaitic Covenant***

Removing supersessionism from Catholic thinking, however, is much more complex than simply changing language. In avoiding supersessionist theologies, one of the largest issues Catholicism has to address is how to understand the Sinaitic Covenant. Rabbi Eugene Korn has suggested that because Christianity is Judaism’s closest relative, and because Jews also consider some other religious traditions “Noahides,” Christianity must therefore share in a post-Noahide covenant with God. However, because Christianity does not adhere to all of the laws explicitly stated in the Sinaitic covenant, this cannot be included.<sup>173</sup> The initial Catholic reaction is bound to be defensive: “How else

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<sup>171</sup> i.e. the Jewish covenant is irrevocable and ongoing as the title of this document implies.

<sup>172</sup> Marcion was a second-century, early Christian thinker who ultimately wanted to remove the Old Testament texts from the canon and develop only the New Testament canon. The Church denied this line of thinking and recognizes the importance of divine revelation in the Old Testament. See: Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29), par. 28.

<sup>173</sup> See Eugene Korn, “Rethinking Christianity” in: Goshen-Gottstein and Korn, *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, 210-211.

could covenant possibly be conceived if Christianity is seen outside of Sinai? We, too, have a share in the fullness of the covenant.” However, Catholics claiming the Sinaitic covenant has problematic intonations of replacement theology. From the Catholic perspective though, if the Old Testament is a part of Scripture and thus a part of covenant, then Sinai is absolutely a part of the Christian notion of covenant. However, Christians and Jews understand the Sinaitic covenant in radically different ways. Naming and addressing this moves us towards a solution, and calls on the Church to define what it means by Sinai and its covenant.

A potential solution lies in Cunningham’s discussion of a *Logos* theology. The Sinaitic covenant as Jews understand it could be understood in Catholic theology as a means of Jewish non-christomorphic relating to God’s revealing *Logos* and therefore ultimately a means of salvation through Jesus. The Sinaitic covenant could be seen then as a “particular” of covenantal thought. In its details, it would no longer be a nonnegotiable factor of the Catholic covenant, although the history of covenanting through the *Logos* would. It is this relationship with the *Logos* that constitutes the single covenantal history. If the Church understands covenant as being carried on via “covenantal modes” instead of the full details of biblical history, such a theology could be permissible.

### **Covenantal Modes and a Single Covenant History**

“Covenantal modes” could be understood here as meaning different ways of relating to the *Logos* via the same covenant (Figure 1 presented at the end of this chapter is a helpful pictorial depiction of what I mean by this argument). Instead of thinking

about the “single covenantal history” as a typical storyline, which moves from covenant to covenant, we could instead think of them, yes as continuous, but not in a sequential sense. Rather, covenant could be understood as continuous more in the sense of the essence of the covenant. The continuation of the Covenant could instead be understood as via the core of the covenant, what makes the covenant what it is, in other words, its essence, rather than the particular means in which it is practiced.

The problem with my proposal, however, is that it leaves the question of where Catholics then understand themselves in relation to covenant if the Sinaitic covenant is no longer in the picture as a christomorphic mode of covenanting with God’s *Logos*. Where does the “essence” or “core” of the covenant lie? Rabbi Korn suggests, from the Jewish perspective that the covenant is potentially shared with Christianity in the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>174</sup> This is helpful because, without the Abrahamic covenant, then Catholicism would be threatening the ultimate most important nonnegotiable factor of covenant: the figure of Jesus Christ. Because if the Church saw itself only as a Noahide tradition (as Jews define it), outside of even the Abrahamic covenant, then Christ would not be within that definition. The Abrahamic covenant is an essential component because it brings Christ into the idea covenant for Christians, whereas Noahide tradition does not explicitly define such thinking. Thus, if the Catholic Church were to understand itself somehow as not a part of the Abrahamic covenant then it would deny Jesus as the Messiah and thus Christianity would no longer be Christianity. In Catholic understanding, the Abrahamic covenant is certainly a part of the covenant, but turning to it cannot be a means of denying Sinai, so Korn’s suggestion is not sufficient. From the Catholic perspective

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<sup>174</sup> Korn, "Rethinking Christianity" in Goshen-Gottstein and Korn, *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, 211.



though, perhaps the fullness of covenant, including Sinai, is reached via different modalities of relating to God's *Logos*. This is where Rahner's understanding is helpful, because it reminds us that for Catholic understanding, salvation ultimately must be through Christ, but it does not necessitate explicit understanding of Jesus as the universal savior and messiah for all religious traditions. We can extend this to say that Jews and Christians can thus also understand Sinai differently.

Relating to God's *Logos* via christomorphic or non-christomorphic modes then could be seen as the "proper" ways for both Christians and Jews to covenant respectively. It would be incorrect, for example, for Christians to relate via a non-christomorphic mode because then they would be denying Christ as *Logos*. Jews, however, while sharing the same covenant, are correct to relate via a non-christomorphic mode because for them, the *Logos* is Torah. Non-christomorphic modes in which Jews relate to the *Logos* could be called "modes of *berit*" using the biblical Hebrew word for covenant, and that similarly, the christomorphic modes in which Christians relate to the *Logos* could be dubbed "modes of *diatheke*" in light of the Greek word for covenant. The different "modes" are not separate means of covenanting, but rather different manners of linking oneself to the *Logos*, and thus ultimately, from the Christian perspective, to salvation through Christ. The "covenantal modes" could be understood as the "particulars" of covenant, which are important to respective traditions, but do not define the absolute essence of the singular covenantal history that is shared by Catholics and Jews.

## **Eretz Yisrael**

While, this thesis is not primarily about the importance of the Land of Israel, it would be irresponsible to complete it without having mentioned it. The Land of Israel holds a centrality in Jewish covenantal thought that is not equaled in Christianity. As Dr. Cunningham points out, while the Land of Israel is certainly an object of reverence and significance for Christians around the world, Christianity does not maintain a comparable understanding that would fully explain the extent of the meaning that *Eretz Yisrael* holds for Judaism.<sup>175</sup> Yet, the promise of land is central to both the Abrahamic and the Sinaitic covenants. The Vatican teaches that it is the Christian responsibility to “strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.”<sup>176</sup> While it may be difficult for Christians to understand the importance of the Land of Israel for the Jews, it is essential that Christians maintain a non-supersessionist theology in regards to the Land.

The Catholic Church, indeed, maintained for most of its history the supersessionist idea that Jews had given up their religious rights/claims to the Land because of their guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.<sup>177</sup> Such ideas are obviously no longer acceptable and are incongruent with post-Conciliar doctrine. The problem, however, is that Catholicism does not fully comprehend the covenantal nature of the

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<sup>175</sup> Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews*, 220-221. The discussion here is about the Land and will not address questions of the contemporary state, because that is less clearly a question of covenant.

<sup>176</sup> Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *"Nostra Aetate"* (no. 4)," Preamble. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_19741201\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19741201_nostra-aetate_en.html)

<sup>177</sup> Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews*, 221.

Land, nor is such a theology easily developed. This thesis does not attempt to answer this problem. However, in light of the Church's goal of ridding itself and the world of anti-Semitic and supersessionist claims, new theologies about this issue should be developed and considered. The idea of "covenantal modes" is potentially productive for this. Perhaps the Land could be understood as part of the covenantal "particulars" one of the "modes of *berit*" by which Jews relate to the *Logos*. Such a theology would allow Catholics to maintain their existing reverence for the Land, while also acknowledging the special covenantal status that the Land holds for Judaism. It also would be create an opening for understanding *Eretz Yisrael* in religious terms so as to better understand Judaism, without compromising current Catholic doctrine.

### ***Jeremiah's Covenant of the Age to Come***

The final element of this proposed non-supersessionist model seeks to understand the covenant in the future. While, the particularities of our respective religious traditions allow for distinctive relations to God, via a shared singular covenant, is this to be our final understanding of covenant? Is this how covenant will look into eternity? Perhaps the well-known covenant mentioned in the Book of Jeremiah can be used to understand the ultimate understanding of covenant that both Catholic and Jewish religious traditions share. Jeremiah states:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,  
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.<sup>178</sup>

This text presents “new covenant” in a messianic sense. The earlier portion of the passage especially seems to be referring to messianic times. While the Christian interpretation of this text, especially in relation to the Book of Hebrews, has traditionally been supersessionist, I propose that Jeremiah be read in a way to understand the Age to Come via a renewed shared covenant made universal. Perhaps Jews and Christians can together understand Jeremiah as referring to a shared covenant, which has yet to be made. From the Christian perspective, this would be the Age in which Christ’s Second Coming is made known, whereas from the Jewish point of view, Jeremiah could be talking about a new covenant to be made when the messiah does come.

The problem that Judaism would encounter with this text, however, is that it explicitly refers to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” which would exclude Christianity. This model then is really only a potential mode for Catholic non-

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<sup>178</sup> Jer. 31:27-34 NRSV

supersessionist understanding and would likely not be agreeable to the Jewish mind. However, perhaps in the spirit of Catholic-Jewish dialogue both faiths could strive to understand this passage as a means of relating to one another in terms of covenant. Catholics could also reinvent Jeremiah's covenant as a means of achieving a non-supersessionist understanding, instead of that which has traditionally been understood from this text.

The earlier portion of the text reads, "In those days they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes will be set on edge."<sup>179</sup> A new Catholic understanding could see this as a counter-understanding of Matthew's blood curse, which has been read in a supersessionist manner. The verse states, "Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'"<sup>180</sup> Jeremiah in contrast states that all will be responsible for their own sins. Therefore, even if the historical argument could be made that some Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, the entire punishment would not be upon corporate Judaism for eternity. *Nostra Aetate* affirms the impossibility of such claims in section four when it states, "[t]rue, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Jer. 31:29-30, see

<sup>180</sup> Matt. 27:25 (Exodus 20:5 has also been similarly interpreted supersessionally: "for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me.")

<sup>181</sup> Second Vatican Council, "*Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions]," sec. 4.

Importantly a more universal reading of Jeremiah's covenant would lend to our model the understanding and recognition from both religious traditions that no one can know for sure what will take place during the Age to Come except for God. While our individual theologies are different about this, we can relate to each other in the fact that covenant in the Age to Come is something yet to be fully determined. Indeed, Jeremiah states that the new covenant is something that God "*will make*." The new covenant has not yet occurred as Jeremiah is writing; perhaps it has yet to still happen. If both traditions can comprehend that Jeremiah's covenant is speaking of eschatological times then what are we to do until that time? The answer is exactly what the Catholic Church as well as Jewish scholars<sup>182</sup> have suggested in terms of joint projects involving social justice and working toward common goals in the world in a very practical and concrete sense. If we can come this close together and share a covenant, and we expect to continue to share covenant in the Age to Come, should we not collectively work toward a better society as a whole?

### ***Conclusion***

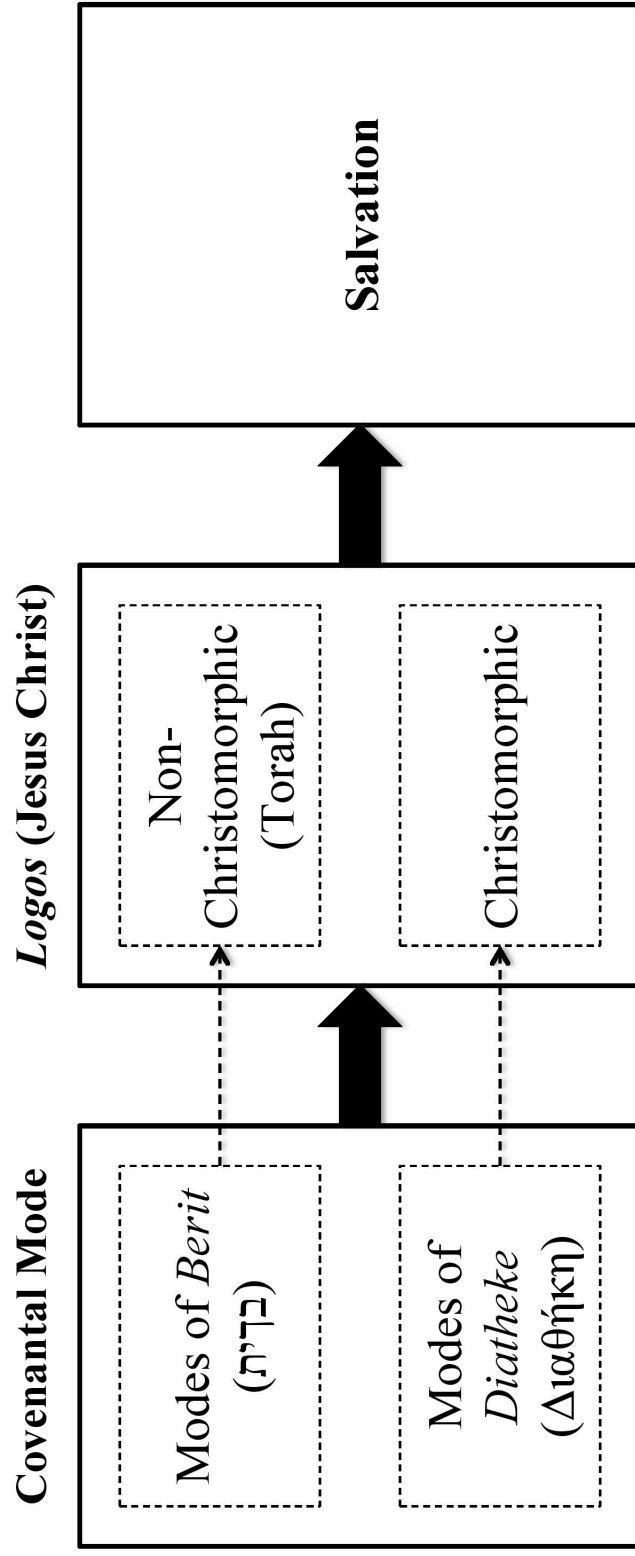
It is my sincere hope that in considering a non-supersessionist model for approaching covenant, Catholicism will continue to redefine the way in which it sees Judaism. By changing traditional language as well as rethinking the way in which covenantal practice/expression is conceptualized, we allow for a new understanding of Judaism and how Jews covenant with God without contradicting Catholic belief. While

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<sup>182</sup> i.e. In Catholicism the "mutual understanding mentioned in "Nostra Aetate" (no. 4) or for an example in Jewish scholarship see: Abraham Joshua Heschel, *On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations*, (1962), "Third Proposal."

large strides have been made since the time of the Second Vatican Council, and indeed the Church has recognized the ongoing validity of the Jewish covenant, there still remain some of the ingrown roots of supersessionist theologies and pitfalls that have yet to be removed from the fruitful garden of dialogue. If the Church is to more seriously address its claim toward non-supersessionism, then the Church has an obligation to figure out and redefine what exactly that means in stating the eternal status of the Jewish covenant. Therefore it also has an obligation to define how the faithful followers of the Church are to more fully understand that definition in praxis. This is all particularly important in light of the previously strictly exclusivist understanding the Church held of covenant and salvation.

The Church also assumes an obligation to redefine its own language where supersessionism may lie or hide within its teaching. It is not always obvious, and in seeking it out intentionally with the purpose of removing harmful theologies, the Church will greatly improve the way in which it understands Judaism and ultimately the way the in which both of our great religious traditions relate to and covenant with God.



**Figure 1.** Multiple modalities under a single covenant. Jews relate to the *Logos* non-christomorphically (Torah), while Catholics understand the *Logos* christomorphically via Jesus Christ. Ultimately though, Catholics understand universal salvation coming through Jesus.



# Closing Remarks:

## Moving Forward

It is my sincere hope that the suggestions made in this thesis will aide in continuing to help Catholics redefine the way in which they consider their Jewish brothers and sisters in relation to the covenant. Indeed, it is clear that the harmful supersessionist theologies of Christianity, which once were the predominant mode of thinking about Jews in relation to the covenant, led to a very troubled past. The only means to repairing the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is to continue to work toward a more proper understanding of the religious other. The solutions to such issues, however, are not easily conceived. More often than not, a potential solution that arises in considering the problems of this project will only prove itself to be problematic and essentially unusable in forming a redefined notion of covenant. Thus, I willingly admit the limitations of this project. While my heart leads me to many emotions in relation to this topic, these feelings do not fix the problem. Certainly one undergraduate

thesis will not solve the same issues many of the top thinkers in the Jewish-Christian dialogue have been considering for the past fifty years. My hope is that this project will simply act as a link in the chain. I hope my suggestions proposed here will simply help in identifying the issues and ultimately offering potential room for Catholic growth.

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