

Theological Trends

Covenant in Judaism and Christianity

Dan Cohn-Sherbok

THE CONCEPT OF ISRAEL AS GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE has been a constant feature of Jewish thought from biblical times to the present. In the Bible the Hebrew root 'bhr' (to choose) denotes the belief that God selected the Jewish nation from all other peoples. As the Book of Deuteronomy declares: 'For you are a people holy to the Lord your God: the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth' (Deut 7:6). According to Scripture, this act was motivated by divine love:

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you. (Deut 7:7-8)

Such love for Israel was later echoed in the synagogue liturgy, especially in the prayer for holy days, which begins:

Thou hast chosen us from all peoples; thou hast loved us and found pleasure in us and hast exalted us above all tongues; thou hast sanctified us by thy commandments and brought us near unto thy service, O king, and hast called us by thy great and holy name.

Through its election Israel has been given an historic mission to bear divine truth to humanity. Thus, before God proclaimed the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, he admonished the people to carry out this appointed task:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice, and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:4-6)

read more at www.theway.org.uk

God's choice of Israel thus carries with it numerous responsibilities. As Genesis proclaims: 'For I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice' (Gen 18:19).

Divine election demands reciprocal response. Israel is obliged to keep God's statutes and observe his laws. In doing so, Jewry will be able to persuade the nations of the world that there is only one universal God. Israel is to be a prophet to the nations, in that it will bring them to salvation. Yet despite this obligation, the Bible asserts that God will not abandon his chosen people even if they violate the covenant. The wayward nation will be punished, but God will not reject them:

Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God.
(Lev 26:44)

The chosen people in rabbinic literature

In rabbinic sources the biblical doctrine of the chosen people is a constant theme. While upholding the belief that God chose the Jews from all peoples, the rabbis argued that their election was due to an acceptance of the Torah. This conviction was based on Scripture: 'If you will hearken to my voice, indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own treasure from among all the peoples' (Exod 19:5). According to the rabbis, the Torah was offered first to other nations of the world, but they all rejected it because its precepts conflicted with their way of life. Only Israel accepted it. According to one tradition, this occurred only because God suspended a mountain over the Jewish people, threatening to destroy the nation if they refused. The dominant view, however, was that the Israelites accepted God's law enthusiastically. For this reason Scripture states that the Jewish people declared: 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do' (Exod 24:7), showing a willingness to obey God's decrees without knowledge of their contents.

Rabbinic Judaism asserts that there is a special relationship between the children of Israel and God based on love – this is the basis of the allegorical interpretations in rabbinic sources of the Song of Songs, and is also expressed in the Talmud by such sayings as: 'How beloved is Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He; for wherever they were exiled the *Shekhinah* (divine presence) was with them.' Rabbinic

literature also emphasizes that God's election of the Jewish people is due to the character of the nation and of the patriarchs in particular. According to the Talmud, mercy and forgiveness are characteristic of Abraham and his descendants.

In the Middle Ages, the Jewish claim to be God's chosen people was disputed by the Church which saw itself as the true Israel. In response, medieval philosophers such as Judah Halevi maintained that the entire Jewish people was endowed with a special religious sense. According to Halevi, this faculty was first given to Adam, and then passed on through a line of representatives to all the Jewish people. In consequence, the Jewish people was able to enter into communion with God. Further, because of this divine influence, the election of Israel implies dependence on special providence which sustains the people of Israel, while the remainder of the human race is subject to the general workings of the laws of nature and general providence.

Like Halevi, other Jewish philosophers of the period emphasize Israel's special role in God's plan of salvation. In *Book of beliefs and opinions*, Saadiah Gaon discusses God's promise that the Jewish nation would continue to exist as long as the heavens and earth. Only Israel, Saadiah insists, is assured of redemption and will be included in the resurrection of the dead. According to Abraham ibn Daud, only Israel is privileged to receive prophecy. For Maimonides, the Jewish faith is the one true revelation which will never be superseded by another divine encounter. Among these Jewish thinkers the doctrine of election was stressed largely as a reaction to oppression by the non-Jewish world. Forced to withdraw into the imposed confines of the ghetto, Jews sought consolation from the belief that despite their sufferings they are God's special people whom he loves above all others.

God's revelation to Israel

According to tradition the entire Bible was communicated by God to the Jewish people. Hence the medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides viewed the belief in God's revelation on Mount Sinai as a fundamental tenet of the Jewish faith. In rabbinic literature a distinction is drawn between the revelation of the Pentateuch (Torah in the narrow sense) and the prophetic writings. This is frequently expressed by saying that the Torah was given directly by God, whereas the prophetic books were given by means of prophecy. The remaining books of the Bible were conveyed by means of the holy spirit rather than through

prophecy. None the less all these writings constitute the canon of Scripture.

For the rabbis, the expositions and elaborations of the Written Law were also revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai; subsequently they were passed from generation to generation, and through this process additional legislation was incorporated. This process is referred to as 'The Oral Torah'. Thus traditional Judaism affirms that God's revelation to his chosen people is twofold and binding for all time. Committed to this belief, Jews pray in the synagogue that God will guide them to do his will as recorded in their sacred literature:

O our Father, merciful Father, ever compassionate, have mercy upon us: O put it into our hearts to understand and to discern, to mark, learn and teach, to heed, to do and to fulfil in love all the words of instruction in thy Torah. Enlighten our eyes in thy Torah, and let our hearts cling to thy commandments, and make us single-hearted to love and fear thy name so that we be never put to shame.

In the Middle Ages this traditional belief was continually affirmed. Like Maimonides, Nahmanides in his *Commentary to the Pentateuch* argued that Moses wrote the Five Books of Moses at God's dictation. It is likely, he observed, that Moses wrote Genesis and part of Exodus when he descended from Mount Sinai. At the end of the forty years in the wilderness he completed the rest of the Pentateuch. Nahmanides observes that this view follows the rabbinic tradition that the Torah was given scroll by scroll. For Nahmanides, Moses was like a scribe who copied an older work. Underlying this conception is the mystical idea of a primordial Torah which contains the words describing events long before they happened. This entire record was in heaven before the creation of the world. In addition, Nahmanides maintains that the secrets of the Torah were revealed to Moses and are referred to in the Torah by the use of special letters, the numerical values of words and letters, and the adornment of Hebrew characters.

According to tradition, God revealed the 613 commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai: they are recorded in the Five Books of Moses. These prescriptions, which are to be observed as part of God's covenant with Israel, are classified in two major categories: statutes concerned with ritual performances characterized as obligations between human beings and God; and judgements consisting of ritual laws that would have been adopted by society even if they had not been decreed by God.

These 613 commandments consist of 365 negative (prohibited) and 248 positive (duties to be performed) prescriptions.

Traditional Judaism maintains that Moses received the Oral Torah in addition to the Written Law. This was passed down from generation to generation and was the subject of rabbinic debate. The first authoritative compilation of the Oral Law was the Mishnah composed by Judah Ha-Nasi in the second century CE. This work is the most important book of law after the Bible; its purpose is to supply teachers and judges with an authoritative guide to the Jewish legal tradition. In subsequent centuries sages continued to discuss the content of Jewish law; their deliberations are recorded in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. Both Talmuds incorporate the Mishnah and later rabbinic discussions known as the *Gamara*. The *Gamara* text preserves the proceedings of the academics in both Palestine and Babylonia, where scholars assembled to study the Mishnah.

After the compilation of the Talmuds (sixth century CE), outstanding rabbinic authorities continued the development of Jewish law by issuing answers to specific questions. These responses (known as 'responsa') touch on all aspects of Jewish law and ensure a standardization of practice. In time, various scholars felt the need to produce codes of Jewish law so that all members of the community would have access to the legal tradition.

In the eleventh century, Isaac Alfasi produced a work that became the standard code for Sephardic Jewry. Two centuries later, Asher ben Jehiel wrote a code that became the code for Ashkenazi Jews. Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century also wrote an important code that had a wide influence, as did the code by Jacob ben Asher, the son of Asher ben Jehiel (thirteenth to fourteenth century). In the sixteenth century Joseph Caro published the *Shulhan Arukh*, which together with the glosses by Moses Isserles has served as the standard code of Jewish law for Orthodox Jewry until the present day.

The true Israel

In Acts 7 Stephen declared that from the time of Moses, the people of Israel had turned from worshipping God; for this reason the covenant originally designed for the nation had been withheld until Jesus' coming. Mosaic law thus never represented God's true intention, since what God had wished to give the people had been nullified by their disobedience. The true covenant was now made available through a new Mosaic prophet. Further, Stephen argued that God does not dwell

in the Jerusalem Temple, but rather fills the cosmos: 'Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands; as the prophet says, "Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?"' (Acts 7:48-49).

Although the early Church did contain a number of conservative Jews who insisted that all converts be fully observant proselytes to Judaism, Hellenizers in sympathy with Stephen maintained that salvation was no longer dependent on the observance of Jewish ritual and moral commandments – rather, it is found solely through faith in Jesus Christ, the Prophet-King-Son of Man. Only his followers constitute God's chosen people: all others are outside the true covenant. The Church alone possesses the correct interpretation of Scripture. According to this view, salvation now exists as the fulfilment of Scripture – as was predicted by the prophets. Christianity is thus not a new patch put on an old garment, nor a new wine poured into old bottles, but needs a new garment and a new wineskin (Lk 5:36-39).

On the basis of this understanding of law and salvation, the Church endeavoured to spread the gospel beyond the Jewish community – the Christian message was for all who had ears to hear. By the second decade of the Church's mission, it was accepted that God was carving out a new people from among the gentiles. Since the Jews steadfastly continued to remain faithful to the old covenant, God had rejected them and had created a new Israel. This idea seems to be expressed in the New Testament by frequent contrasts between unbelieving Jews and believing gentiles. Thus the Jewish leaders are depicted as rejecting and killing Jesus, whereas the first believer was a Roman centurion (Mk 15:39). The Good Samaritan is contrasted with the faithless Jew (Lk 10:33). The gentiles will come from all places to sit at the Messianic banquet while the sons of the kingdom will be cast into utter darkness: 'I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness' (Mt 8:11-12).

The parable of the wedding feast (Mt 22:1-14; Lk 14:16-24) has often been read as indicating God's rejection of the Jewish people. When the guests who were invited (the observant Jews) refuse to come, the king's (God's) messengers go out a second and third time to gather the rabble (the unrighteous and the gentiles). This parable has been interpreted to mean that unrepentant Israel is rejected, whereas the gentiles who were originally outside the covenant are now the true Israel. For Matthew, those who were initially invited were not simply

too busy as in Luke; they 'seized the servants, treated them shamefully and killed them' (Mt 22:6). In response the king was angry, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city (Mt 22:7). In addition, once the wedding hall was filled with guests, the king threw out a man who had no wedding garment (Mt 22:11). Seen through the eyes of an anti-Jewish Christianity, Matthew in this parable emphasizes that God will punish the Jewish people for their lack of repentance and draw gentiles into the covenant as long as they are faithful.

Paul's mission to the new Israel

Paul's epistles contain similar accusations against the Jewish faith. According to Paul, since Jews and gentiles belong to fallen humanity as represented by the Old Adam, salvation can only come through a new covenant based on Christ. Through the coming of the Messiah human beings can attain a transformed nature that provides for spiritual authenticity. This transformation brings to an end all presumptions of special rights and privileges. Thus confidence in such practices as the food laws, festivals, new moons and Sabbaths must be set aside:

Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col 2:16–17)

For Paul, what is required instead is the circumcision of the heart. This is possible, he believed, only through the power of Christ which does away with the Old Adam. Obedience is not possible under the Mosaic covenant, only through a new covenant involving baptism. Through baptism it is possible to put off the body of flesh, and be raised with Christ (Col 2:11–12). Only this new covenant can provide the power to become a living law when God's commands are written on tablets of the human heart (2 Cor 3:3).

For Paul, all who take on the yoke of the Law put themselves under the power of the curse. Christ, however, has freed his followers from such a state through his crucifixion. By hanging on a tree, he took the curse of the Law upon himself, in accordance with the spiritual dictum, 'For a hanged man is accursed by God' (Deut 21:23).

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree' – that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the

gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.
(Gal 3:13–14)

In his teaching Paul sometimes appears to maintain that the reign of the Torah is synonymous with the domination of demonic powers. Under Jewish law, people were subject to the elemental spirits of the universe, but through Jesus' death and resurrection they are free sons of God in Christ. Thus in Galatians Paul urges the community not to return to their former state:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more? (Gal 4:8–10)

In his presentation of the two covenants in Galatians, Paul offers an allegorical interpretation of the two wives of Abraham. Hagar and her offspring symbolize the era of slavery, whereas Sarah and her children belong to the period of freedom. The followers of Christ are the children of Sarah, but those who adhere to the Mosaic covenant are seen as sons and daughters of Hagar. For Paul, Hagar and her children represent Mount Sinai while those who believe in Christ are part of the spiritual Jerusalem. Judaism belongs to the realm of fallen Adam, but Christianity fulfils the divine promises recorded in Scripture. Those who are part of the Mosaic covenant will be cast out, but the children of the new covenant will find salvation in Christ. Paul's polemic against the Jews can thus be interpreted as a rejection of the Jewish tradition. The Mosaic covenant belongs to an apostate people – but God's true covenant was given before the revelation on Mount Sinai and is fulfilled with the advent of the Messianic age.

In Romans 9–11 Paul contends that the true Israel is this spiritual community; it is the Israel of the promise as opposed to the Israel based on lineal descent. Only a remnant from among the Jews are intended for salvation (these individuals are represented by the Jewish Christians), and there is a divine purpose to be found in the reluctance of the Jewish community to accept Jesus as Christ. They have been hardened by God so that the gentiles can be gathered in. But as soon as the ingathering occurs, God will turn their hearts and Christ will return to complete the work of salvation. The eventual conversion of the Jews is thus envisaged by Paul as the final event in the eschatological unfolding of God's

plan for humankind. Again, this scriptural message of supersessionism serves as a fundamental obstacle to positive Jewish–Christian dialogue.

The Church Fathers and divine election

In explaining the election of the gentiles, the early Church argued that the Christian community had taken the place of the Jews. This was not conceived simply as a substitution; rather the new Israel was understood as implicit in Scripture. The prophets had insisted that the election of the Jewish nation was only provisional – the covenant has been inherited and fulfilled by those who accept Jesus as the Messiah. In the past, biblical heroes and prophets prepared the way for this event, but from the beginning the Jewish people continually refused to accept God. Christians, on the other hand, constituted a believing community.

In presenting this view, the Church Fathers appealed to the Pauline doctrine that the true sons of Abraham are those who are justified by faith. The descendants of Abraham are thus not the Jews, but the gentiles. In the words of Isaac of Antioch in *Homilies against the Jews*, the uncircumcised gentiles have taken the place of Israel. Circumcision has ceased to be the mark of election. Instead, figuratively speaking, circumcision was a ‘seal’ on the bag which has been kept for the true inheritors of this treasure. Neither the seal nor the bag now serves any purpose, and the Jews have become the possessors of an empty container.

Following the New Testament, the Fathers maintained that the election of the gentiles is the culmination of the messianic vision of the ingathering of the nations to Zion. And once the Church became the religion of the Roman Empire, the concept of divine election was understood in political terms. The Roman Empire came to be identified with reign of the Davidic Messiah. Thus John Chrysostom identified Christendom with Christ’s dominion over the world. Everywhere paganism was overcome by the Church, and this victory was envisaged as Christ’s defeat of the demons. With all humanity united in Christ, brotherhood and peace held sway.

In contrast with this vision of the universal Church, the Jewish dispersion was seen as the result of divine wrath. Jewish suffering in the diaspora was due to God’s anger against the Jews. Persecuted Christians, however, were viewed as God’s beloved servants. They were to be loved because they suffered for Christ, but Christians were to despise those who rejected Christ and brought about his death. The only hope for this reprobate people is to recognize that the Christian

community constitutes the true Israel and become members of the Church.

In this light the Church Fathers argued that Jewish law and the Temple cult are intrinsically unworthy and have become obsolete in the light of Christ's redemption. Christians are thus under no obligation to keep the biblical prescriptions. Legislation in the Pentateuch was viewed as designed for an intermediate period – from Moses to Christ – and is of an inferior status to patriarchal faith. Its purpose is punitive rather than redemptive, and was intended to elevate the Jews from the state of moral decay into which they had fallen in Egypt; Jewish law has thus been superseded by a new dispensation. Christians are the true keepers of God's law of inward obedience.

In places of Moses, Christ is the new lawgiver. By following scriptural legislation the Jewish community misconstrued God's intention, acted against his will, and has become a lawless nation. Christians, on the other hand, are liberated from the law's outward practices and are able to interpret its inner meaning. Through their repentance, they have circumcised the heart. Christian spiritual worship thus supersedes cultic observance. The true faith is the spiritual temple of the Holy Spirit found in each believer and also within the body of the Church.

A new vision of covenant

As we have seen, the Jewish people regard themselves as the true inheritor of God's promises as recorded in Scripture. As God's chosen people, they are obliged to keep the law. Christians have traditionally maintained, however, that God's covenant with the Jews has been superseded by his covenant with the New Israel: through the centuries Christians believed that with Jesus' resurrection the Christian community had become the heir to the promises made to Abraham and the patriarchs. By rejecting Jesus, Israel had shown itself unfaithful and had abandoned its covenantal obligations. As a punishment, God destroyed Jerusalem, and banished the Jewish nation from its ancestral home.

Today, however, many Church bodies have rejected this view, affirming instead the continuing validity of God's covenant with his chosen people. The Second Vatican Council, for example, implies such a view in *Nostra aetate*: 'God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; he does not repent of the gifts he makes or of the call he issues – such is the witness of the Apostle'.¹ In 1970 the Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio, quoting this passage, preceded it with an affirmation of respect for the Jewish faith: 'Our respect and regard for Judaism,

therefore, is not for an ancient relic of the distant past. It is God himself who made the Jewish people his own and gave them a divine and irrevocable vocation.²

Again, the Churches in the Netherlands stated in 1981:

The promises which the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has made to the Jewish people have never been revoked by their God, who is our God, too. Nor did God ever recall the covenant which he, through Moses, had made with them. We Christians call this covenant – by a term which has occasioned much misunderstanding – the ‘old covenant’. This covenant was not abolished or replaced by the ‘new covenant’ in and through the coming of Jesus Christ.³

Likewise the 1982 statement of the Texas Conference of Christians decreed:

We acknowledge with both respect and reverence that Judaism is a living faith and that Israel’s call and covenant are valid and operative today. We reject the position that the covenant between the Jews and God was dissolved with the coming of Christ.⁴

According to some contemporary scholars, there is only one covenant into which gentiles are admitted through Jesus Christ. Such writers assert that Judaism and Christianity are complementary aspects of the same divine purpose. Thus the eschatological significance of Jesus’ salvific work must be understood as a future event – even for Christians Jesus is not yet the Messiah. Messianic fulfilment is not a present reality, but rather a mission. God’s single covenant is new after the Christ event only in that it embraces both Jews and gentiles. In this light, the Church can be seen as a community of gentiles who have been drawn to worship God and bring knowledge of him to the nations.

Such writers as Paul van Buren stress that this does not imply a dilution of the Christian conviction that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God. According to van Buren, for those committed to Jesus, what took place in Christ ‘marked a genuinely new beginning, a step out and beyond the circles of God’s covenant with his people, the Jews. But it surely cannot and does not detract from, much less annul, that covenant.’⁵ Other writers point out that Christianity has not replaced Israel in the divine drama of salvation – Israel’s vocation still continues in the modern world. Thus the Church and the Synagogue are bound together within one covenant. As Jacobus Schoneveld explains:

When we look at the Church's life and teaching, has anything been added to the Torah? I have searched for a long time for anything new. In fact nothing new is there, which goes beyond a certain change of emphasis or a certain different nuance in comparison with Jewish teachings of the first century, except that through Jesus the gentiles have been admitted and the range of the teaching of the Torah has become much wider.⁶

An alternative approach to this issue has been proposed by Christian writers who have formulated a two-covenant theory. James Parkes, for example, writes regarding the Sinaitic revelation and Calvary:

The highest purpose of God which Sinai reveals to man as community, Calvary reveals to man as an end in himself. The difference between the two events, both of which from the metaphysical standpoint arise identical as expressions of the infinite in time, lies in the fact that the first could not be fulfilled but by a brief demonstration of divine community in action; but the second could not be fulfilled except by a life lived under human conditions from birth to death. Thus Jesus' death on the cross did not replace Sinai: Judaism and Christianity are different but equally valid responses to the Divine initiative.⁷

Whichever direction is taken, these single and double covenant theories offer a means of reconciliation between Christians and Jews: no longer is the Jewish community being condemned for refusing to accept Jesus as 'God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God'.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok is Professor of Judaism at the University of Wales, Lampeter and Visiting Professor of Interfaith Theology at Middlesex University. He is the author and editor of over fifty books including *Jews, Christians and religious pluralism* and *The future of Jewish-Christian dialogue*.

NOTES

1 *Nostra Aetate* quoted in Marcus Braybrooke, *Time to Meet* (London: SCM, 1990), p 72.

2 Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, p 72.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Paul van Buren, 'Christ of the Church' in Braybrooke, *op. cit.*, p 80.

6 J. Coos Schoneveld, 'Israel and the Church in the face of God', *Immanuel* 3 Winter (1973), pp 80-83.

7 James Parkes, *Judaism and Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p 30.