JEWS AND CHRISTIANS: PEOPLE OF GOD

Reflections on the book of that title, edited by Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson (Eerdmans/03)

1 Surprise! I'd intended a quick read but couldn't resist close-&-thorough, with growing appreciation of the goodwill & competence of the authors, none of whom (however) supports the historic Scripture-&-Tradition "mind of the Church" on the Church as the synagogue's successor. With gross exaggeration, Jensen (p5) says "There are now few Christian theologians willing to be called supersessionist. There are doubtless several reasons for this. Guilt is surely one" (from Shoah/Holocaust & prior anti-Judaism, exacerbated by the historical-critical "desire to distance Christianity from a despised Judaism"). The only other reason he mentions is that cultural studies have been making "Judaism look less and less alien" to us Christians.

Of the 14 essayists, four are Jews--Jews happy to be in conversation with Christians who deny that the gospel fulfils/completes//transcends the law (Torah as Written [Scriptures] & Oral [Talmud]): such Christians provide their religion with some protection against Christian polemic & their coreligionists with some protection against evangelism (& some ammo against "Messianic Judaism," "Jews for Jesus," & similar penetrations of Judaism's wall against Christianity).

2 Jenson, a Christian, joins the Jews in believing it wasn't God's will that the synagogue welcome Jesus-Messiah &, by welcoming gentiles, widen itself from tribal to universal (p.8: "Had God willed...."). This, in contrast to "the mind of the Church" that it was **not** God's will that the synagogue eject Jesus & his followers. Instead, he promulgates this deviant doctrine: "The church is very decidedly [!] a detour on God's way." Again: "We cannot think that events at this point ["two parallel detours," synagogue & church] escaped God's providence." A complacent unbiblical view of history: what is must be according to God's providence. Jewish rejection of Jesus & his followers? No problem: no guilt: God's will. I believe we Christians should make Jews happy (& I have tried to do so), but not at the cost of truth & honor & faithfulness to the Christian heritage & hope.

3 Apparently it's eagerness to be kind to Jews that leads Jenson (p.9) into an astonishingly naive-literal racial-tribal biologism: "if God is to have a people identified by descent from Abraham and Sarah, the church as it is will not provide it. I propose to my fellow Christians that God wills the Judaism of Torah-obedience as that which alone can and does hold the lineage of Abraham and Sarah together during the time of detour. And that lineage must continue, until the time of lineages shall end." Against such literalism of *peshat* stands the NT's *derash* of radical, christocentric reading of the OT--a reading quite specifically transforming tribalism into universalism, a faith-universalism denying blood descent (by bloody circumcision: Ro.2.29).

In light of the NT's tenor, antisupersessionist literalism is atavistic. Look at Luke: in his Gospel, he tells us to read the OT christologically, to see "the whole of scripture" as "referring to himself" (whereas non-Christians find *no* OT reference to him, & the Jews see this anti-literal reading as a rip-off) (24.27); and in Acts, he has Jesus flipping literalism (the political atavism of "restore sovereignty to Israel") aside & diverting the disciples' attention to a near-eschaton of spiritual power (1.6-8). The other Gospels are no less supersessionist. But the antisupersessionists preach atavistic hermeneneutics, giving normative status to one NT text, viz. Ro.11. E.g., the Am.Interfaith Institute at the National Liberty Museum, in the vol.16,no.2, 2003 issue of its EXPLORATIONS (p.1) says "God can[not] be unfaithful to the eternal covenant with the Jewish people." Unfaithful? God himself came to them (e.g., Jn.1.11; Heb.1.2)! Unfaithful? God privileged them to give human birth to himself, the people appearing in the Person! The Law appearing in the Gospel! The land (though literalism sees Jerusalem as the future center of the world-empire) appearing in the Lamb (Rev.22.1,3)! "We believe that revising Christian teaching about...the Jewish people is a central and indispensable obligation of theology in our time." The "ten statements" spell out just how radical this revisionism is. E.g., despite Ro.1.16, the gospel is no longer to be seen as "the saving power of God for everyone who has faith--the Jew first" (REB): drop that Jew, who's on a non-gospel salvation-track: "we renounce missionary efforts directed at converting Jews." And drop "OT" (&, implicitly, the Ep. to the Hebrews, the source of "OT" & the NT's most explicit super-

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sessionist book). And this unhistorical literalism: "The land of Israel has always been of central significance to the Jewish people." News to Rabbinic Judaism; news to my Jewish friends who think the 1949 establishing of a Jewish state was the greatest calamity to Judaism since the birth of Rabbinic Judaism (ca.AD/CE 90).

Sad that antisupersessionists can't figure out how to be kind to Jews without being unkind to Scripture/Tradition/history.

4 Let's look at the **spectrum of options**:

A The gospel is for everybody.

Christian exceptionalism, the Church as "hē genē hē tritē" (the Third Race, canceling the Jew/Gentile distinction). Early Christian literature (including Romans 1.16, unweakened by 11). The Great Tradition, "the mind of the Church," supersessionist. The primary reference of "the people of God" is "the true Israel," the Church--though both expressions can be used as retronymns (throw-back names) for Hebrews/Israelites/Jews. ("Jesus is [the only] Lord": Jn.14.6; Ac.4.12;10.36; Ro.10.9; Phil.2.11; 1Tim.6.15.)

The gospel is for everybody except Jews.

B NEGATIVE Jewish exceptionalism. Anti-Semitism/Judaism. To trope what Abba Eban said of Arafat, the Jews have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity, & their rejection of God when he came personally to them was their last opportunity as a people (though of course Option "A" is open to them, even them "first" [Ro.1.16]). Supersessionist. (Jew-hate/contempt, the virulent form of this Option, excludes individual Jews from Option "A".)

C POSITIVE Jewish exceptionalism. Antisupersessionism: Jews are on a non-Christian salvation-track, their "old" corporate covenant/testament/will being still in effect (Ro.11.29--despite 10.41 ["Christ is the end of the law"]). Despite the overwhelming NT evidence, Jenson (p.13) says live Jews are essential to "the present availability to the world of the risen Jesus Christ." (Contrast 1Thes.1.14-16.)

Options "B" & "C" so far fail the canonical test as to justify their being called as **antibiblical** as radfem's bowdlerizing of the Bible's all-masculine titles-&-pronouns for God & the gay movement's sophistic neutralizing of both Testaments' strictures against homosexuality. Added to the historicistic use of historical-critical hermeneutics, these three attacks enfeeble the Bible's authority--leaving the church-&-general public with the ignorant, cynical opinion that "You can make the Bible prove anything you want it to." With "friends" like these four sets, the Bible needs no non-Christian enemies to undo its influence in the liberal churches & in the public square.

5 A product of a 6.10-12.01 conference on "rethinking the relation between their two covenant communities," the stimuli to the rethinking are listed as the Shoah & the emergence of the State of Israel. Add Jewish $ giving Judaism-professorships to college/university/seminary faculties that hitherto had only adjunct positions for non-Christian scholars. (P.190, Notre Dame's theology-chair David Burrell mentions the influence on him of "the gift of a faculty position in Judaica.") Throw one Jew into a Christian faculty & it's no longer a Christian community; or one Muslim (Arab oil $ has been gifting American Christian/religion faculties with Muslim professorships, which are further diluting the Christian element, polluting the Christian mind, enriching [from a humanistic POV] the religious mentality & widening the offerings-spread). Civil & scholarly habits will make an Abrahamic (i.e., non-Jewish, non-Christian, non-Muslim) faculty out of one that was Christian, with the effect Karen Armstrong states from her three-religions exposure: "I believe in all three of the Abrahamic religions, though I don't practice any one of them." Antisupersessionism is one form this flattening, distinctives-erosion takes. I've been exposed to the saints in non-Christian religions (incl. Heschel), & I taught the non-Christian religions (U. of Hawaii), & I know the intellectual tugs toward post-Christian pluralism. Now we have JEWS AND CHRISTIANS: People of God; soon we'll have MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS: People of God. Only exclusively Christian faculties can be Christian communities; & faculties not Christian communities cannot engage in mutual Christian nurture & in wholehearted promotion of the Christian faith & mind among the students.

6 I didn't expect this promotional tract to be fair, & it isn't: (1) No supersessionist scholar is among the 14 essayists, & (2) Nobody refers to anti-Christianism (Jewish persecution of Christians, e.g. in 1Thes.1.14-16), an absence* making anti-Judaism look like action instead of, as it was/is, **re**-action. The baleful double effect is that both the Jewish & the Christian essayists play the guilt card against Christianity, & the result is maudlin exercises in bathos rather than models of honest encounter. A related unfairness: Jews attack Christianity, no Christian attacks Judaism.

7 I'd planned this Thinksheet as a four-page (so many notes I'm leaving unused!), but I must resist the temptation. I think/hope I've not been unfair to the book.

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*The one flaw in the otherwise best article I've ever seen on the causes of antiSemitism: WSJ 11.17.03.