“In Every Generation”: Judaism as a Living Faith

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RECENTLY, in a Sunday morning adult forum that one of us was teaching in a local Christian congregation, a man described the trajectory of God’s people through history. “The Jews before Jesus were on the track, but when God presented a major leap forward through the teaching of Jesus, they didn’t leap with it and were simply left behind.” Acknowledging that they certainly had continued on historically as a community, he asserted that the Jews nevertheless had been dropped from covenantal life with God. They remained “stuck” while the people of God—those who followed and ultimately those who worshiped Jesus—carried it forward. No one in the forum challenged his view.

This picture of Jews as anachronistic remnants of a time and religion long surpassed unfortunately retains its currency. Yet Judaism is not simply the religion of what Christians call the “Old Testament.” Just as we Christians have built our religion upon the basis of this collection of books,
so have our Jewish neighbors. Just as Christians have developed a religion from this root that stresses love, so have Jews. The daily prayers for every Jew stress that the primary command is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Indeed, the Gospel of Mark (12:28–29) has Jesus, when asked which commandment is most important, cite this prayer.1

Because Judaism and Christianity today both claim the heritage of biblical Israel, many mistakenly assume that they compete for that heritage.2 They work from the logic of "zero-sum": only one can be legitimate and the other must be a pretender, whether deluded and mistaken or deliberately and perversely misleading. In such a view, the true faith (whichever it is) has nothing to learn from the other, except perhaps by the negative example of mistakes to be avoided. In fact, this has been the prevailing view of Judaism for a majority of the Christian church since the age of Augustine (ca. 400 C.E.), who portrayed the Jews as "stranded in useless antiquity."

Paul, a Jewish apostle of Jesus in the first century C.E., wrestled with the coexistence of unbelievers and believers—Jews who rejected any messianic or divine claims about Jesus, on the one hand, and those, on the other hand, both Jew and Gentile, who accepted them. In his letter to the Romans, he made it clear that he thought everyone should see in Jesus what he saw: the power of God's righteousness bringing redemption and salvation to the whole world.

Many of his fellow Jews did not see it this way, however, and Paul wondered, "Has God rejected God's own people?" Most assuredly not" (or, "No way"), came the reply just as quickly, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." This response goes against what has long been the conventional understanding: Paul affirmed that God has chosen both those who believe in Jesus and those who do not. He calls it a mystery, but confesses that "all Israel will be saved," that God will "be merciful to all" (see Rom 11 for all these quotations).

Until that day, God continues to work in both communities with the powers of creation, redemption, and sanctification, to use the classical Christian language of the Trinity. Of course, the Jews of the last two thousand years have not associated these terms with three persons in the God whom they daily acclaim as One. But Jews affirm these same powers of God in the liturgy of the synagogue and whenever they study scripture and its interpretation.

Other aspects of God have become important, too, because of the Jews' distinctive experience, both within and apart from Christendom. If Paul is right—and we believe he is—God has been at work in these developments in Judaism as much as in the growth of the church. So Christians ignore the life and insight of Judaism over these two millennia at the risk of missing something true and meaningful about God. More directly, we do so at the risk of misunderstanding those who, Paul said, are beloved of God. Learning more about both the record and how Jews have experienced it offers Christians new insights into God's ways among us. Here we will offer a broad overview of Jewish history, highlighting five periods and reflecting on what Christians might learn from it.

Crisis and Canon

Whenever the people of God underwent a major crisis in ancient times, they sorted through their inherited traditions (scriptures), examined their lives and their world, and began to tell the story of God's work among them in new ways that made sense of the crisis. In the sixth century B.C.E., the Jerusalem Temple that Solomon had built was destroyed and the people were sent into exile in Babylon for two generations.

The Torah story that emerged from that crisis begins with God's ordering of the whole creation and ends (in Deuteronomy) with the people of Israel still outside the promised land. In the exilic context of its writing, the Torah affirms that the whole earth and all creation are God's, and that Israel could live and thrive without the promised land and without the Temple. Surely both land and Temple remained hopes and dreams for Israel—the land was still the focus of the people's journeying, and the plans for the Temple were described in great detail in God's word from Mt. Sinai. But the powerful Torah message is that Jews could be Jews even when sovereignty and Temple are only hopes.4

Later in the sixth century B.C.E., a new ruler, King Cyrus, sent the Jews back to Jerusalem from Babylonia, and in the century that followed they were permitted to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. For the period that followed, up until 70 C.E., Jews lived in a world of both Torah and Temple. As Joseph Tyson's chapter "Jesus—A Faithful Jew" shows, by the first century C.E. there were many ways in which different Jewish groups taught their followers to orbit around those two poles of their religious identity. In suppressing the revolt of Jewish Zealots, Roman forces destroyed the Temple and burned Jerusalem in 70 C.E., triggering another crisis.

Once again the tradition proved resilient, and Judaism emerged from the catastrophe of 70 C.E. with a newly reshaped focus. Synagogues had
Judaism did not become normative within Judaism for some time. Most Jews were far too acculturated to Greco-Roman culture, as the remains of their Temple sacrifices. Temple sacrifice became particularly necessary after a second revolt—the Bar Cochba rebellion of 132–135 C.E. After the Romans crushed this revolt, the emperor barred Jews from living in Jerusalem and prohibited worship at the Temple site. During this period two major Jewish groups came to the fore. The first was the Christian church, which became less Jewish as more Gentiles became Christians.

The second included the Pharisees, who formed the basis of what later became Rabbinic Judaism (the titles “rabban” and “rabbī” were most likely introduced only after the fall of the Temple and were limited to those in the land of Israel). It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that Rabbinic Judaism did not become normative within Judaism for some time. Most Jews were far too acculturated to Greco-Roman culture, as the remains of their synagogues and other artifacts indicate. Rabbinic Judaism achieved its full eminence only after the empire became Christian in the fourth century.

The Mishnah is the first compilation of rabbinic teaching; the name reflects both its character as “second Torah” and the imperative that it be “repeated” from generation to generation. Edited around the year 200 C.E. by Rabbi Judah from materials attributed to teachers from the previous two centuries, the Mishnah consists primarily of legislation on how Jews ought to live. Divided by subjects into tractates, this legislation could even supersede what we might regard as the literal meaning of the Hebrew Bible. For example, the Mishnah interprets “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21) to mean that one should pay compensation for injury rather than undergo matching bodily harm. The Mishnah also includes considerable legislation about running the Jerusalem Temple, an indication of a continuing hope that the Temple would be rebuilt.

During the centuries that followed, commentators expanded the Mishnah to meet changing needs. These expansions are called gemara or “completion,” and developed separately in the main centers of Judaism, Israel and Babylonia. The Mishnah with its respective gemara became the Babylonian and the Jerusalem talmuds. The Jerusalem Talmud was redacted rather abruptly, probably about 375 C.E. The Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli), however, continued to grow into the early sixth century, with a few additions coming later. The Babylonian Talmud remains the central religious and legal authority in Rabbinic Judaism.

Like the Pharisees who were their forerunners during Temple times, the authorities of the Mishnah (known as Tannaim) emphasized the practice of a life pattern (halakhot) that would mark God’s people as distinctively as the Temple had marked the horizon of the Judean hills. According to Shimon the Righteous, this pattern would sustain not only Jewish life after the Temple’s destruction, but the whole world: “On three things does the world rest: on Torah, on worship, and on acts of mercy.”

This formulation shifted the focus from the Temple to daily life, and the rabbinic tradition that would gradually achieve dominance over the next five centuries emphasized the importance of Jewish perseverance, whether God seemed near or far, ready to act or mysteriously distracted. Such an emphasis made good sense for a people who watched the power of imperial Rome destroy their Temple and sack their capital city, and who witnessed a nascent imperial Christianity relegate them to second-class citizenship and legislate against the practice of their religion. If God was not taking the initiative to stop such indignities, could it be God who would best decide how Jews were to respond?

In Deuteronomy 30:12, the Torah states that God’s commandment is “not in heaven.” The rabbis of the talmudic period (known as Amoraim) understood this to mean that interpretation of scripture would come through human scrutiny of the Torah text and debate about its application to life. They tell the story of a rabbi who was debating others; one day, when asked for proof of his position, he invoked God’s own voice from heaven. Immediately, all in the room heard that divine endorsement, yet the other rabbis still rejected his position, saying, “It is not in heaven.” The story goes on to say that at that same moment in heaven God chuckled approvingly at the skillfulness and insight of the rabbis.

In another mishnaic passage, Ben Zoma asks his students several questions. “Who is wise? Who is strong? Who is wealthy? Who is honored?” In each case, the conventional answer focuses on the recognition and deference of others. But Ben Zoma turns the answers around and grounds these virtues in individual, even internal, qualities. He says that one is wise who learns from all people; that one is strong who masters the inclination to do evil; that one is wealthy who is satisfied with whatever is available; that one is honored who honors all things in creation. As Western Jews learned to live under the power of the Christian church and Christian rulers in the years leading up to the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire, their canon led them...
into wisdom that afforded personal dignity and human virtue from sources that were unassailable by any external social or political power.

The Christian church can learn from this era in Jewish life. The shameful treatment that a Christian state and church doled out to the Jewish people proffers a sobering lesson. The insight that God was at work among those Jews offers a positive lesson as well. Jews showed that even in circumstances that promise little comfort and few advantages for our lives, we can live the life of God's people faithfully. Even when it is difficult to see that God is present and acting on our behalf, we can grab hold of the scriptures that are God's Word and find in them, for ourselves and by ourselves, the way to respond as God's people in this world. Rather than despair at the loss of the Temple and power, and even the respect of those in power, Rabbinic Judaism drew a new kind of strength from the confidence that what God had once given would be sufficient for all times, and that what is most important in life cannot be taken away by anyone from the outside.

Maximizing Life on the Margins

Father Edward Flannery has described Jewish life in Christian lands during the Middle Ages as "the vale of tears."1 There were devastating chapters, to be sure, beginning with the First Crusade in 1096 and extending throughout the world of Jewish life. The long and terrible—and sinful—history of Christian denigration of Jews, which in too many eras resulted in persecution and death, must never be ignored. In the political realm, social relations, economic development, and religious teaching, the Jews were made to serve the purposes of Christian society in terms dictated by both lords and bishops. In the Christian view, Judaism was a "necessary other," the negative through which Christianity shone its positive light. This view was largely a projection of Christian ignorance; there was much more to Jewish life and experience than the "wandering Jew" and the moneylender. Still, too few Christians know of the richness of postbiblical Judaism.

Eleventh-century France was the setting in which Judaism gained its most widely acclaimed Torah and Talmud commentaries. Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak of Troyes (1040–1105), best known by the acronym "Rashi," wrote the standard commentary on the Babylonian Talmud, which had already become "the" Talmud. In fact, Rashi's commentary is essential for understanding the Talmud and is printed in every edition beside the text on the inside margins—the inner margins so that wear and tear on the edges of the books will not jeopardize his insights. Rashi also wrote works explaining the plain meaning (peshat) of biblical texts. A key element of his method was to interpret unfamiliar Hebrew and Aramaic terms by referring to the everyday French equivalents that his community would know. His biblical explanations can be found in the works of subsequent Christian Bible commentators, including Martin Luther, who also is well known for translating the Bible into the language of the day (in his case, German).

Even under the best of circumstances, Jews were rarely safe under Christian rulers. Jews generally tried to avoid open confrontation, but at times they were forced into debate. A notable case was that of the Spanish philosopher and exegete Nachmanides (also called "Rambam," an acronym for "Rabbi Moses ben Nahman"); 1194–1270). With the support of the Dominicans and the Franciscans, a Jewish convert to Christianity, Pablo Christiani, proposed to King James I of Aragon that a public debate take place with Nachmanides. With a promise of immunity from punishment, Nachmanides accepted the offer. The debate took place in July of 1263 with a clear victory on the part of Nachmanides.12 At first the king kept his word and even paid Nachmanides 300 solids, but, succumbing to pressure from the Dominicans, Pope Clement IV forced the king to abandon his promise. Nachmanides was put on trial in 1265, condemned, and forced to leave Spain. Another result of Nachmanides' victory was that Jews were forced to attend sermons by Dominican friars.

The greatest Jewish philosopher of all time, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon ("Rambam," or "Maimonides"; 1135–1204) also came from Spain. A physician by profession, the Rambam fled Muslim Spain in a period of anti-Jewish persecution and settled in Egypt, where his medical skills were recognized and employed by the famous Muslim ruler Saladin. His two greatest works are testimony to Jewish achievements of the Middle Ages. The Guide of the Perplexed sets forth the Jewish religion in philosophical terms drawn from Aristotle. Though Judaism was well known as ancient and distinctive, this presentation made clear that it was neither esoteric nor accessible only by an intellectual elite. With Maimonides' Guide, Judaism could be grasped in the framework of a widely accepted classical philosophical system. In Latin translation, the Guide influenced Christian medieval thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas.

Maimonides' second great work, the Mishneh Torah, organized the Jewish life pattern (hadashkah) into a clear topical arrangement from the more freely associative sequences of the Talmud. As literacy and learning spread throughout succeeding centuries, a person could locate all the pertinent Jewish law on a given topic much more easily in the Mishneh Torah than in the Bavli.
While Maimonides may have been the best-known Jewish medieval scholar, for later Jewish orthodoxy the most influential sage was Joseph ben Ephraim Caro (1488-1575). Caro built upon an earlier compilation of public and private law by Jacob ben Asher (ca. 1270-1340), and developed a commentary into a code entitled Shulhan Arukh (Prepared Table). For the most part, this code is the basis for Jewish law. While Jewish life has its roots in the Babylonian Talmud, it is the Shulhan Arukh, along with post-sixteenth-century additions, that has become the standard for Jewish jurisprudence.

The ordering of Jewish life into a defined and delimited halakhic system carried a particular significance in the late Middle Ages. Whether on the margins of medieval Christian society or in the second-class dhimmi status afforded by Islam, Judaism found a place in its host cultures for only a fragmentary expression of its self-understanding. Lacking the dignity of full respect from its political patrons, it took a measure of fulfillment from the thoroughness with which the Torah addressed and shaped Jewish life.

The halakhic system identified 613 commandments (mitzvoth) in the text of the biblical Torah. Of these, 365 are positive commands and 248 are prohibitions. They encompass symbolically all one’s time and all one’s being, as the commandments equal the number of days in a year and the prohibitions equal the number of organs in the body (by the medieval count). Moreover, on one day each week, the wholeness of the creation could be celebrated and indulged in the distinctive Jewish observance of the Sabbath (Shabbat).

The twenty-five hours of Shabbat that begin on Friday sundown became a sanctuary in time for a people with little security in the surrounding culture. The two central themes of Shabbat are creation and freedom. Shabbat itself is modeled on God’s rest at the completion of creation, while the Jewish observance of Shabbat depends on the freedom that came with the Exodus and the end of slavery. Like God at the end of creation, on Shabbat the Jew is entitled to step back from the hard work of industry and creating that press on people throughout the week. Only the rescue of human life in imminent danger can take precedence over this weeklyimi­tatio Dei. So food is prepared in advance, lights are not kindled, no burden is carried outside the home, no writing is undertaken—all to honor creation and recall that humans finally are fully dependent on God’s provision for every moment of life.

The church has much to learn from such a practice of reflection and celebration. Shabbat is not a restricted time, hedged in by a host of prohibitions and beset with burdensome requirements. To the contrary, it is a dedicated time, pushing aside lesser concerns, nourishing the body and soul of those who observe it. Despite the fragmentation and uncertainty of life on the margins of a culture defined by others, Shabbat held a precious balance of creation’s original integrity. Just as Christians speak of Eucharist as the “foretaste of the feast to come,” so do Jews in celebrating Shabbat anticipate the fullness of life that awaits us in the fulfillment of new creation.

**A Calling to Restore Wholeness**

Hope and anticipation often drive a passion for action, and the idealism of Shabbat provided the lens through which one particular Jewish tradition focused that passion. Many of the Shabbat customs that are most symbolic and endearing were initiated among mystics in the hill town of Tsefat (Safed) in the northern Galilee during the sixteenth century. Wearing the white of wedding celebrations to greet the “Shabbat bride,” the mystics would sing Shabbat’s entrance with hymns that echo the Song of Solomon, “Come, my beloved” (Lecha dodi) and “Come, oh bride” (Be’er kalla). They, too, initiated the practice of studying Torah through the whole night as the festival of Shavuot (Weeks) begins.

Why Tsefat? And why the sixteenth century? And what does mysticism have to do with a passion for action? The sixteenth century brought turmoil to Europe in the Protestant Reformation and the drive of nationalisms against the centralized Roman Empire. It also found Jews displaced from Spain and Portugal after their expulsion in 1492. Tsefat was a preferred destination for the exiles, who brought with them the memory and habits of Jewish life in what has been called “the Golden Age,” though many had been forced to continue the practices under cover after having been forcibly converted to Christianity by the Inquisition. In Tsefat, with the charismatic leadership of several rabbis, they reconstituted their joyous community.

Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572) was the greatest of the Tsefat figures, although he lived there for only the last three of his brief thirty-eight years. Born in Jerusalem and raised in Cairo after his father’s death, he became first a talmudic expert and then a student and teacher of Jewish mysticism, which came to be known as Qabbala (received [wisdom]). Its roots can be found in the Bible, then elaborated during the last days of the Jerusalem Temple and the beginnings of Rabbinic Judaism as commentary on the “throne vision” of Ezekiel (1:4-28; 10:1-22). Its essential text is the thirteenth-century Zohar (Splendor), compiled by the Castillian Moses de Leon (1240-1305), and it flourished in Tsefat as in few other places.
An essential image of Luria's Qabbala portrays the shattering of creation in its first moments—a “big bang” image very different from the one that twentieth-century science offers. From the oneness of God's being, ten “emanations” (sefirot) went forth to constitute the creation, each one more distant from the essence of God, and therefore less spiritual and refined. When God sent the pure light of the divine presence through the emanations to fill creation, the most distant sefirot were unable to contain it, and shattered. Bits of the light were trapped in the shattered pieces of the created order, without an open pathway to their source in the Eternal. Only when all the sparks of light are freed from the broken vessels of creation where they are trapped will God's will for creation finally be realized.

The process of freeing the sparks and bringing creation closer to its spiritual ideal is called tikkun olam (“repair of the universe”), and it requires the participation of God's people. Every good deed that fulfills a commandment, every righteous moment spent in Shabbat joy or Torah study, every compassionate touch and generous gift, not only has its immediate effect in the world, but it frees a divine spark and contributes to tikkun olam.

This is where the juncture of action and mysticism, of halakhic codes and esoteric speculation about divine emanations, finds its meaning. In spite of all the chaos that surrounded them, in spite of their exile from Europe, in spite of the upheaval of society, in spite of their relative impotence to affect the grand social equations of their time, the Lurianic Qabbalists poured their passion for action into faithful living and joyous ritual. They did so believing that these are inherently vital to the ultimate redemption of a broken world.

In the rational approach of the modern world, Qabbala and other forms of mysticism may seem out of touch and marginal to our mainstream religious communities. Indeed, it was quite a surprise when Gershom Scholem, the twentieth century's greatest scholar of Jewish mysticism, demonstrated how widespread was the acceptance and practice of Qabbala in the centuries after Luria. Most communities adopted at least some of its Shabbat practices and many Jews read the Zohar and studied Luria's teachings.

Yet it makes sense. We also live in a time when there seems to be little we can do to steer the course of history or to influence the larger realities of our world, like countries and multinational corporations and the forces behind the “culture wars.” However, if we understand these to result from the world's fundamental inability to receive God's fullness and shine with it, then every bit of repair that we can do, whether in our daily walk or in our regular worship, has its impact, however unnoticed.

Identity and Allegiance

As the modern world dawned, the marginalized life of Jews that had given such impetus to halakhic codification and mystical motivation was transformed. The “self-evident truths” of American humanism and the anticlerical populism of the French Revolution are symbols of a new social order. In the modern world, Jews can participate freely as individuals, claiming national citizenship side-by-side with Christians and all others, and exercising their God-given freedom of religion as they choose. But the path out of the ghetto (emancipation) was not always smooth and straight. In France, Jewish citizenship was alternately granted and revoked throughout the nineteenth century. But the opportunities of social equality were never far away, and the Jewish community was challenged to respond to them.

“We will grant nothing to the Jews as a nation, but everything to the Jew as an individual.” With this principle, Comte Stanislaus de Clermont-Tonnerre in 1789 signaled the tension that enlivened the question of Jewish identity in the modern era. Is being Jewish a religious category that merely fills in one line on a person's demographic inventory? What of its ethnic aspects, its cultural dimensions, and even the national character of the religious identity? Becoming a Jew through the covenant of circumcision means as the essence of the Jewish religion. Reform Judaism holds very few absolutes about lifestyle and none in ritual that attach to this essence out of necessity; true to its name, the movement allows Judaism to be reformed in every generation to express its essential genius.

In contrast and response, the Orthodox movement has asserted the priority of halakhic practice and communal participation as the hallmarks of Jewish life. Though varied and nuanced in their respective communities, the
many branches of Orthodoxy concur in rejecting the blandishments of modernity and the possibility of assimilating to non-Jewish culture. The Conservative movement, an American development that consolidated around the turn of the twentieth century, centers its Jewish identity in the historical expression of Jewish communities through the ages. It is grounded more concretely than Reform in the practices and expressions of the past, refusing to abstract the essence of Judaism into a principle or concept as does Reform. At the same time, it recognizes the reality of historical change and development in a way that Orthodoxy does not.

The Reconstructionist movement reflects the internationalism of its early twentieth-century origins by emphasizing the distinctiveness, but not the uniqueness, of Jewish culture. Respecting the cultural creativity and integrity of every human clan, this movement sees in the particularity of Jewish election a universal notion of vocation that each people and nation can discover for itself. Jews are elected—to be Jews—just as other peoples are elected to be what they are, most distinctively.

Each of these movements is modern in the sense that it responds to the contemporary challenge of balancing religious identity with humanistic individualism and political citizenship. One of the greatest tests that modern Judaism faces is in shaping the State of Israel simultaneously as a Jewish national homeland and a modern democratic nation. The course of nation-states in the modern world has been primarily to renounce any meaningful religious identification and allow their citizens to express their religious beliefs freely in the private sector. Fascinating contrasts have thereby developed, as in the comparatively intense religiosity of the United States, with its official "wall of separation" between church and state, and the deeply secular character of European society, even in countries that have an official state religion. How Israel will fare in its efforts to hold together the twin sources of national identity will remain for the twenty-first century to see.

The challenges of modernity came home to Jews more directly than to Christians, perhaps, because in the modern era Western culture largely remained de facto Christian in its character. It is in the more recent "post-modern" era that the church has begun to confront its real divorce from the dominant culture. Prayer, Christian religious symbols, and traditional "Judeo-Christian moral standards" are no longer taken for granted as foundational to Western society; as in a radical social contract theory, society seems able to take on any shape at all, as long as those who participate agree to the terms.

Does the individual then simply take religious convictions into the privacy of the home? Can there be a place in the public arena for arguments grounded in religious belief? Should each religious community, and ethnic group, and nationalist movement be granted its own equal place based on its distinctive contribution to human diversity? We recognize the urgency of these questions in our own time, and we can look to the last two hundred years of Jewish history to learn important lessons as we seek to work out our own answers.

Blessing Born of Silence

None of the Jewish responses to modernity prepared the Jewish people—or the world—to confront the atrocities of National Socialism in Germany during 1933–1945. Working systematically under an ideology that combined racial profiling, belief in evolutionary progress, and romantic German nationalism, the Nazis dehumanized the Jews categorically and undertook to annihilate them. Neither the modernist Reform Jews who had assimilated thoroughly into German and European society for more than two generations, nor the antimodernist Orthodox in the comparative isolation of their Eastern European villages (shtetls), escaped the poison that the Nazis spewed across Europe. Two-thirds of European Jews—one-third of worldwide Jewry—was slaughtered in less than half a decade.

For any religious person, the overriding question that must be faced after such a horror is, "Where was God?" It is a question that has fundamentally reshaped both Jewish and Christian self-understanding. Some have argued that the more pertinent—perhaps the only pertinent—question is "Where were good and decent people?" Extensive research and theory have been devoted to the attempt to understand the human participants, whether they be the Nazi perpetrators, the many European collaborators, the bystanders around the globe, the victims, the rescuers, the leaders, or the common crowd. One of the clearest benefits of this exploration has been a profound understanding of the role that centuries of Christian anti-Judaism played in cultivating the cultural soil where Nazi ideology could take root and thrive, as Eva Fleischner discusses in her chapter in this volume. We have yet to plum the depth of the implications of that understanding.

Still, it is the question of God and such monstrous, outright evil that confronts us most insistently. In the works of Jewish thinkers over the past two generations, that question has begun to yield some insights, albeit without any consensus. One of the earliest responses asserted that the Jewish
people had been wrong about God all along. It wasn't so much that "God is dead," as that God had never been there. Judaism was a cultural artifact with a long and venerable history worthy of continuing, but not because of any divine election or covenant, since no recognizable God in any understanding of Judaism could have allowed the destruction of so many of the covenant people.

Others argued that this made it too easy. It let God off the hook, so to speak, by allowing God to slip out the back door. Rather, these thinkers asked, should we not hold this silent God accountable and learn how to live with a God who will not always rescue, who will not always respond? Still others disagreed that God was silent, or absent, or unresponsive. Some even went as far as to say that God was complicit in the carnage, since the Jewish people of the early twentieth century had strayed far from traditional practice and needed to fulfill their obligations as God's people. Without suggesting that they could answer why God would choose the Nazi scourge as the means, they argued that the purpose of this tragedy is clear: to renew Jewish identity, faithfulness, and practice.

Still others argued that God was irrelevant to the question. What is important then is not where God was or how to relate to God now, but only to take the new terms of Jewish existence and build on them. If a Jew in the Nazi era was a person destined by evil for annihilation, then the holy Jewish calling in this new epoch is to live and to bring new Jewish life into the world. Procreation, promulgation of Judaism, and perpetuation of Jewish identity become the new pillars on which perhaps even the whole Jewish calling in this new epoch is to live and to bring new Jewish life into the world. Procreation, promulgation of Judaism, and perpetuation of Jewish identity become the new pillars on which perhaps even the whole world is sustained.

This broad range of responses has emerged in writings as diverse as poetry, drama, theology, philosophy, historical analysis, fiction, political theory, and more. It has helped to shape the debate about what the State of Israel is and means, and has informed the development of international standards of human rights and antiracism. It has also provided a broad foundation on which Christian ethicists and theologians have again confronted the question of God and evil in their own terms.

What seems inherent in the search for meaning after God's profound silence in Nazi times is a conviction that some blessing can be wrested from that silence. Surely there are those who simply despaired—even some who first wrote of their experiences in a search for meaning ended with despair, including suicide. Yet for those who continue to search, even if they find an absent God, a chimerical God, a perverse God, or an irrelevant God, there is a common conviction that something constructive can be drawn from even so bleak and devastating an experience.

Can Christians not learn from this something of what the first disciples must have experienced in the days after Jesus' death? Is not the question of God and evil also the first question of Good Friday, before anyone knew it was good? Even if any direct connection to the formative days of Christian faith seems strained, there is much to gain by attending to our Jewish brothers and sisters in their wrestling with God. It has been a long time in the "Christian West" since any evil touched the Christian community with the ferocity of the Nazi attack on God's people. Surely their responses to it can sharpen our own meditations and reanimate our responses when God seems silent.

Why It All Matters

In the five eras we have highlighted here, the Jewish people have responded to their experience in the faith that God is at work among them. Their experience and the meaning they have drawn from it are of more than passing interest to the Christian community.

First, the people who bear this witness to their experience are our neighbors. In the global village of the twenty-first century, they are more our neighbors today than ever, even if we have no Jews living on our street or in our town. Just as the spread of Islam has brought us to realize that Muslims everywhere are our neighbors in more important ways than we previously imagined, so with our Jewish neighbors, wherever they may be. Their experience and their understanding of it make a difference.

With a lessening of the cultural dominance that white, Christian, Western European norms once exerted, all our neighbors from other cultural traditions become more real in their differences, and we benefit from understanding those differences. This is especially true for those others who are closely related to us. Cardinal Walter Kasper has suggested that the Jewish people may be considered "a sacrament of otherness" for the church, both embodying and symbolizing God's blessing as it comes to us in everything that is not as we are.13

Second, the church has learned to affirm that God is faithful to the covenant with Israel throughout its generations. We no longer restrict that faithfulness to the fulfillment of biblical promise that Christians know in Jesus Christ, though that is also a part of God's faithfulness. What good
would it be, however, to affirm God's faithfulness to Gentiles in Jesus Christ if God were shown to be capricious in regard to the Jews? So if God is faithful to the Jews even to the present day, then God's handiwork and covenantal love must be evident in the experience of the Jewish community even to the present day.

Third, the awakening of the church to its anti-Jewish heritage and habits is a cautionary note that demands greater awareness of our Jewish brothers and sisters and a more truthful accounting of their experience. Our ancestors' willingness to replace the real Jews of their communities with a projected image of "the Jew" who served as a foil for Christian truth and virtue brought tragic effects time and again. We dare not risk similar tragedy by averting our eyes or dismissing what we hear from those who yet have, as Paul says, "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Rom 9:4).

Finally, our identity as God's people is dependent on the relationships we have with all of God's creation, and not least with those who also know themselves to be God's people. Theologian Catherine Keller has described contemporary life as one that is lived "from a broken web." 14 We are not autonomous individuals in the model of the classic hero, but relational selves who draw strength and learn selfhood and accept limits from all those others who live with us, whose lives and experience interpenetrate our own. Like spiders on a web, we are affected by every touch, every tremor, every action that takes place anywhere in the web of our relationships.

Christians have long misunderstood and misjudged the place of Jews in our web of existence. Christian theologians who have assessed the role of anti-Judaism in the success of Nazi antisemitism note that Christianity was undermined, even deformed, by its special animus toward Jews. A clearer, more appreciative understanding of Jews and their experience as the people of God is essential to understanding Christian identity more fully. The Third, the awakening of the church to its anti-Jewish heritage and habits is a cautionary note that demands greater awareness of our Jewish brothers and sisters and a more truthful accounting of their experience. Our ancestors' willingness to replace the real Jews of their communities with a projected image of "the Jew" who served as a foil for Christian truth and virtue brought tragic effects time and again. We dare not risk similar tragedy by averting our eyes or dismissing what we hear from those who yet have, as Paul says, "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Rom 9:4).

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A Final Image and an Invitation

In a particularly memorable conversation, an observant Orthodox Jew said, "I have come to God through Torah and you through Jesus Christ, but we both seem to have arrived at the same place." Some might argue whether it is we who are on the journey toward God, or God who reaches out to us.

Yet in either case there is room for both Jews and Christians to acknowledge that the differences between our experiences can embody the strength of diversity rather than the weakness of division.

Whether our Jewish neighbors choose to join us in the exploration or not, Christians—by the logic of affirming the Jewish covenant—have opened a new chapter in the story of God's work in the world. With a good deal of homework on which to catch up, the excitement lies ahead—living and learning the ways of God in that new openness to what God is doing in and with and through God's people, the Jews.

Notes
3. Augustine, Against the Jews 6:8.
7. For this dating, see Yaakov Elman, "Marriage and Marital Property in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law," in Catherine Heyzer, ed., Rabbinic Law in Its Roman and Near Eastern Context (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 227-76.
11. Nachmanides wrote a summary of the arguments in the still extant Sefer Vikkahah, that is, Book of Debates.
13. Cardinal Kasper used this phrase in an address on the thirty-seventh anniversary of Nostra Aetate, at www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=2189.

Further Reading

VI

PART

The Bible Both Connects and Separates Jews and Christians