

An Original Theological Wound: Testamental Supercessionism and its Modern Challenge
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One of the original wounds inflicted by the Gentile Church against Jewish Israel was theological, though it certainly had a role to play in later practical violence. Simply put, that wound was constituted by first the obscuring and then the erasure of the Old Testament (Tanach) as an essential informing element of the Christian Scriptures themselves.¹ One of the earliest temptations and inexorable tendencies of the Gentile Church, that is, has been its “Marcionite” default. It stands behind the complex developments and forms of Christian rejection of Jews, but also of Jewish followers of Jesus in particular. But Christian Marcionitism (using the term allusively, not technically) took a new turn in early modernity, driven by an impulse that derived not from antisemitism itself initially. Rather it emerged from intra-Christian division in the wake of the 16th-century conflict tied up with the Reformation, that only later fueled some of those most bitter modern forms of antisemitism.

I want to reflect on this modern theological wound – a modern type of Marcionitism – and on some contemporary non-Western outlooks that bring it into relief. But, finally, I want to underline that Jewish followers of Jesus today are a witness to a divine alternative to the wound itself, perhaps not a simple means of healing, but an alternative in the form of a truthful challenge. For a Jew to come to believe in Jesus as Messiah and to follow him – which may or may not be rightly described as “conversion” – stands as just this challenge, and it does so by the way it accusingly unveils the modern constriction within the Christian Church of full two-testament Scripture. Jewish-Christianity is greeted today in most Western churches with a palpable distaste. The causes of this distaste are multiple and debatable. But whatever they are, their consequence is linked, within these same Western churches (and increasingly among non-Western churches perhaps), to a functional withering of the Old Testament.

Consider the following prayer:

“**O**GOD, the God of Abraham, look upon thine ever-lasting covenant, and cause the captivity of Judah and Israel to return. They are thy people; O be thou their Saviour, that all who love Jerusalem and mourn for her may rejoice with her; for Jesus Christ's sake, their Saviour and ours. *Amen.*”

This prayer, by the saintly 18th c. Anglican bishop of Sodor and Man Thomas Wilson (from his posthumously published *Sacra Privata*, 1781), was long part of the Scottish Episcopal Prayer Book. It has now been excised. As a prayer for the conversion of the Jews to the Christian faith, it was judged by latter 20th -century Scots to be insensitive to Jewish integrity, identity, and experience. It's removal from the Scottish Prayer Book was in line with a long list of revisions and excisions within Anglicanism, and around the Christian world more widely. But I want to

¹ I will use here the phrase “Old Testament”, despite its problematic connotations for Jewish followers of Yeshua (and thus also for the Church!). What is important to stress in the Old-New pairing, understood in terms of establishing and renewing rather than chronological replacement, is the essential coupling it constitutes, the “two-testamental” nature of the Scriptures as an integral Word.

note, up front, the tremendously rich scriptural texture that is packed into this collect, drawn from the Old Testament: Abraham, covenant, Judah and Israel's captivity, Jerusalem and those who mourn for her, as well as those who might yet rejoice. One must in fact, *know* something of the Old Testament to grasp these allusions; and having grasped them, to see how they inform, expand, and re-configure the more common petitionary name uttered, that of "Saviour". Conversion and the Old Testament's living word are intimately linked here. And the prayer's disappearance marks the culmination of a long process of severing that linkage.

I want to engage in a rather general religious-cultural rumination over Jewish conversions to the Christian faith. Such conversions are, as I imagine we all know, fraught in many ways and on many levels. My interest in these reflections is not on the complexity side of this matter (which is real), but more narrowly on the place of the Old Testament in specifically Christian thinking in relationship to Jewish conversions. We live in a world where the Old Testament has functionally disappeared for many, maybe most, Christians. And this disappearance is bound, it seems to me, with the sometimes negative incomprehension many contemporary Christians feel in the face of Jewish conversion. For the relation of Old and New Testaments is centrally located in issues of recognition, repentance, and faith, which form a continuous dynamic within which the Incarnation is located. Without this context of continuity, the whole notion of Jewish conversion – understood as those who believe in and follow Jesus as Messiah -- is difficult to make sense of.

a. The exhaustive reach of the *novum*: losing conversion and the Old Testament together

That Jewish conversion to the Christian faith is an object of modern distaste is, by and large, a fairly straightforward claim. The recent statement from the Vatican's Commission For Religious Relations With The Jews, "The Gifts And The Calling Of God Are Irrevocable" (Rom 11:29): A Reflection On Theological Questions Pertaining To Catholic–Jewish Relations On The Occasion Of The 50th Anniversary Of "Nostra Aetate" (2015), is a sophisticated and morally commendable expression of this distaste, articulated in a responsible and compelling fashion.² "While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God's Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah." (40). I am not questioning the logic of such a statement in itself. But the clear stepping back from a proselytizing or conversionary relationship by the Christian Church to Jews is not simply a post-Shoah phenomenon. It is, at least logically, part of a dynamic that was set in motion several centuries before, in early modernity

1700 was, more or less, a hinge moment in the West in this area. We see around then for the first time a coherent vision of Christianity shorn of the Old Testament altogether. To read the Old

² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html. I need to emphasize, furthermore, that the stated theological commitments of those behind these changes, like Pope Benedict XVI, were quite explicitly ordered to the maintenance of the Two-Testament continuity I am advocating. I doubt, however, that these commitments have been well understood more broadly. Cf. Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times* (Ignatius, 2010), pp. 39, 48 on the "intrinsic unity" and continuity of the two testaments, and the meaning this bears on a Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism.

Testament in intimate and essential relationship with the New is a practice given a novel, and perjorative name: rabbinism (a world invented, it seems in the mid 17th-century), or “cabbalism”, a word borrowed obviously from a more technical vocabulary, but now applied to all attempts to integrating Old and New together. To repeat: this is an invention of around 1700.

The sceptical deist Anthony Collins (cf. his 1737 *Discourse on the Grounds of Reasons of the Christian Religion*) famously argued that linking Jesus with the Old Testament, as even Paul had done, was a practice seeped in the “cabalistic” “mysticism” of the “rabbins”, and hence was itself a form of debased superstition.³ The central chapters of Frank Manuel’s *The Broken Staff: Judaism Through Christian Eyes*⁴ is still very useful in showing the movement from 16th to 18th century, from engagement to scientizing and then historicizing of the Old Testament, and its relationship to perceptions of Jews and Judaism. Manuel also shows that, even in a time when proselytizing Jews received a new impetus for various reasons, Jewish converts remained – as they had been in many places for centuries – objects of profound suspicion and concern on the part of the Church. By contrast, and as we know in the standard histories of intellectual life for the period, the pressure to articulate forms of “universal” religion – whether soteriological (e.g. a rationalist *philosophia perennis*) or naturalistic (Spinoza) – also fed into what later became *Haskalah*, the movement of enlightenment Judaism. This was a context in which the very notion of conversion was either eviscerated of any great meaning, or repudiated as a vestigial superstition in itself.

Many of the strands of this history were in fact marginal in themselves; but taken as a whole, and retrospectively, they ended up by placing enormous pressure on the ability to maintain a unified two-Testament Scripture, at least in a living and authoritative way. The late 17th-century and certainly the 18th century was one in which, with little support, small groups of theologians, like the British Hutchinsonians, felt the need to pursue a “quest to save the Old Testament”, as the title to the dissertation of one of my students put it: save it from the de-particularizing claims of the new philosophies (like Newton’s and Clarke’s), as well as from what would become the implicit marcionitism of both more evangelical and catholic Christian traditions, where the Gospel stood against all distinct realities, as a kind of eternal *novum*.⁵

There were, to be sure, Evangelical Protestant and Catholic alternatives to this drift into de-particularized marcionitism – Jansenists, millenarian Jesuits, Puritan exiles and more -- but these were mostly marginalized by their contemporaries. Their variously millenarian currents were mostly swallowed up, in any case, by the late 19th century, in a dispensationalist movement which side-lined Judaism (Israel) entirely, while maintaining a key place historically for Jewish Israel as an instrument for a non-Jewish heavenly soteriology. I will come back to this. That is to say, the developing dispensationalist movement, as it then become systematized in someone like Dallas Theological Seminary’s Lewis Chafer, proposed to order the world in such a way that Jews – as a distinct nation -- could remain Jews and still ultimately benefit from God’s favor

³ Cf. Jeremy Worthen, *The Internal Foe*, ch. 3; David B. Ruderman, “The Study Of The *Mishnah* And The Quest For Christian Identity In Early Eighteenth-Century England: Completing A Narrative Initiated By Richard Popkin” Ch. 8 of Jeremy Popkin (ed.), *The Legacies of Richard Popkin*, Springer, 2008.

⁴ Harvard, 1992.

⁵ David P. A. Ney, *Scripture and Providence: The Hutchinsonian Quest to Save the Old Testament*, Ph.D Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2016O

through their special role in the end-times; but they could never actually be partakers of the “heavenly” Church, which was reserved specifically for Christian believers as a distinct “people”.⁶

None of us is surprised that various prayers for the conversion of the Jews, that had long been part of Christian liturgical life, especially on Good Friday, have been notably revised or more frequently simply removed from worship books since World War II. Pope John XXIII famously intervened in mid-sentence to excise certain phrases regarding the Jews’ “perfidy”.⁷ In Anglicanism, most revised versions of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) have removed the famous “3rd Collect” for Good Friday, that first appeared in the original 1549 edition. Attempts were made, for instance, in Canada to remove it in 1965, and by 1992 it was gone; another prayer, that avoids negative characterizations of the Jews, and prays “humbly” only for their eventual conversion, narrowly escaped removal this past summer.

The issue, we can now see, is “conversion” itself, of any kind. The original 1549 prayer, after all, was about “jews, turks, infidels, and hereticks” ---its author, Cranmer never having dealt with Jews, at least in England; let alone a Turk. No one, if you will, was singled out. Indeed, by the 19th century there were added prayers for the conversion of the “Mohametans”, then for the “heathen” or even finally for “all people” *tout court* -- each of these have been dropped one by one. But this has also gone along with the evisceration of prayers involving Old Testament figures, like those in the service of matrimony, which had been replete with such allusions (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca) – ostensibly victims of today’s battles over sexuality, but probably suspect long before. The result only shows how a number of elements, including Jewish conversion, have come together now to make appeals beyond the present-tense experience of Christian congregants – that is, appeals to the Old Testament itself and “on its own terms” -- incomprehensible.

b. A non-Western missionary alternative

This trajectory is not logically inevitable, even if it seems to have been socially so. It was surprising to me, as a newly ordained Anglican deacon who had gone to work in the Anglican church of Burundi in 1981, to observe the fascination my bishop had with Jews and Judaism. Samuel Sindamuka, the bishop in question, was a saintly man who did some remarkably courageous things during the 1972 Burundi civil war and genocide. There were, in Burundi when I arrived, perhaps 5 or 6 Jews who had lived there for some decades. Bp. Sindamuka knew each of them personally, and spent time in conversation with them over the years. I never quite understood his passion here. After a year teaching theology in several villages, I was ordained priest. Bp. Sindamuka gave the sermon, a long and rambling affair in Kirundi which I only grasped partially. But I caught enough to get a window onto his interests. The main point, which he rehearsed at great length, was this: his astonishment that a Jewish Savior (Jesus), born from a line that stretched back beyond Abraham, beyond Egypt even, should welcome into his fold after almost 2000 years a Gentile nation (the Barundi) on the shores of Lake Tanganyika,

⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer’s *Systematic Theology* (1947) is the fullest serious presentation of this vision.

⁷ cf. Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust: 1930-1965*, Michael Phayer (Indiana University Press, 2000) p. 209.

and finally, this Gentile Christian church joined to the Jew Jesus, should then in turn anoint a half-Jew pilgrim – that’s me -- from the New World. Bp. Sindamuka asked the congregation to marvel at this strange and awesome divine ordering of history, that had wrapped itself around 3 continents at least, over several millennia, and drawn us together in God’s life. He was voicing a deep search for continuity, in what was, after all, his own fractured world. He found this in a kind of embracive atavism: Africa and Judaism brought together in Christ. For him, the issue of providence was that of a grand inclusion that founds the world. In a way, the movement of Jew to Gentile in Christ, embodied in the Christian Jew (as he saw it), was a window onto, as St. Paul would put it, that great “dispensation of the fulness of times” in which God “might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; [even] in him” [Eph 1:10 KJV]. It perhaps not so strange that some of the first books of the bible to receive vernacular commentaries in Africa were Leviticus and Hebrews. Their relationship was clear, but so was their inclusive reach with respect to divine concern.

Sindamuka’s outlook might seem a bit odd, and we can wonder about the motives stirring up such thoughts among non-Western, especially sub-Saharan African converts trying to establish their place in a world now wildly turned upside down in their experience. But consider a recent talk I had with John Chew, retired Bishop of Singapore and Archbishop of South-East Asia. Since his retirement, Abp. Chew, who has a doctorate in Old Testament from the UK, has devoted himself to evangelism in mainland China. But he has approached this from a very unusual direction, searching to find an entrée into Chinese secular – and officially Communist -- frameworks. Chew is also a deeply committed evangelical. What is interesting is how he has now accepted evangelicalism’s limitations, at least in China on this front: Protestant Evangelicals, he explains, appear to Chinese intellectuals as recent European interlopers, blips on the time-scale. (The recent surge of Christian conversions in China, in the tens of millions, Chew nonetheless puts in temporal and demographic perspective, as a kind of spume on the waves of Chinese history.) China itself, by contrast, is of the “longue durée”. It has no use for a bunch of squabbling British and American late-comers whose culture, in any case, is fast fading. How gain a hearing for Christianity, then?

Chew, the Old Testament scholar, explained how he is – successfully, in his mind – working to link Christianity to something *ancient*: to Moses; and Moses must then be linked even more deeply, in their, minds, to something yet more distant, that is, to Egypt. In fact, Chew explains, the Chinese see Egypt as their great primal civilizational rival – though of course, it has lost its lustre of late. Still, the issue is “axial civilization”. And Chew has been lecturing to academic and political societies in Beijing and elsewhere on this issue, focusing on the geographical symbol that is Sinai. The key to persuading the Chinese, he says, is to show how Christianity and Sinai are fundamentally linked. *Egyptian* Christians, he says, must become China’s evangelists. Bizarre though this may seem, Chew has brought groups of Chinese academics over to Egypt, to meet Christians there, as a special location of persuasion. And he is bringing Egyptians Christians to China.

I don’t want to get into the details here of this particular project. It has all kinds of unexpected resonances with earlier attempts, as in the 17th century, to link China to Moses and the Old Testament, in a kind of grand universalizing mission (a project that included the likes of the great

philosopher Leibniz).⁸ The whole thing has a certain early Enlightenment feel. There is also a certain resonance with Martin Bernal's controversial work from the late 1980's and early '90, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*,⁹ which argued for a prior and fundamental Egyptian, Semitic and perhaps Chinese influence on ancient Greek thinking. What is interesting is that Chew's work represents an independent apologetic strategy, and comes from outside the Western world, just as did Sindamuka's own intuition. Sindamuka and Chew are not Enlightenment figures at all, but something else that, in a way, presses back against these earlier views of Leibniz and others. (And these earlier views themselves may not really be all that "enlightenment" anyway, as the Enlightenment scholar Jonathan Israel would likely agree¹⁰; they have more to do with a revived early church platonistic view of history, where Christ hovers over all the people integrated and ordered wisdom.)

Chew is, in any case, pressing back against central *contemporary* Western Christian ideas, and in this way his outlook reveals something of the ambivalence of Jewish Christian belief. Let me mention again his surprising acceptance of the Chinese dismissal of Anglo-American Protestant evangelicalism, which is his own personal faith patrimony. "They have no sense of history, of stability, of the slow changes of the world", Chew says of modern-day Evangelicals. Instead – and this is Chew's judgment -- contemporary evangelical theology is all about historical novelty, about personal change, change in a moment, change in the contingent container of time. Since the very notion of development implies complexity and temporal extension, evangelicals have little interest in genealogy. Everything more or less "shows up" within individualist religious experience, an experience from which history drops out. If this is true, it is hardly a surprise that, in our day and in North America and Western Europe, we are seeing a fairly strong convergence of evangelical and liberal individualism and social change together – e.g. on a host of matters like sexuality and life-ordering (e.g. birth and death issues). The popularity of dispensationalist views, that separate out Judaism, the Nations, and the Church is – again without claiming simple causal intention – convenient to this development: we are all separate, and God deals with us according to our separate identities.

The views of Bps. Sindamuka and Chew are different from this wider trend: they are, on the one hand, distinctly lodged in a conversionary paradigm. But on the other hand, that paradigm is structured by a narrational continuity founded on the Two-Testament canon of the Scripture as its basis. They want Christians to be accountable to the Old Testament as the means of being accountable, as it were, *for* the world. This is, in fact, a traditional perspectival structure that, arguably, is built into the early Church's attitudes and is, at any rate, utterly Scriptural itself. I should also say, however, that Bps Sindamuka and Chew's views are themselves today probably marginal within many or most non-Western settings. The primarily political alignments that were set up in the 1970s and since, have placed many Global South nations in an antagonism towards Israel, and a simple lack of encounters with Jews – Sindamuka worked hard to get to know the handful still in Burundi – has meant that a *historical* vision like Chew's has little

⁸For an overview, see D. E. Mungello's *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, Univ. of Hawaii, 1985.

⁹ 3 vols., Rutgers, 1987-2006.

¹⁰ See various works, but especially the extended treatment of Spinoza vs. Leibniz in *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford 2000) and the last chapter of his *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, 2009), on Spinoza vs. Voltaire.

traction. Amongst most non-Western Christians I know – evangelical and Catholic – they still read the Old Testament, but they read an Old Testament in a world that is effectively without Jews, and thus engage an Israel that is Jewishless. The Old Testament has truly become at best a prop for the New, so that even in these areas of the younger churches, it is fading.

c. An intuition

Maimonides, in his famous Responsum 149 had this to say about Jewish engagement with Muslims and Christians respectively:

“It is permissible to teach the commandments to Christians and to draw them close to our religion. This is prohibited regarding Muslims, because, as you know they reject the divine origin of Torah and if they are taught scripture it would contradict the version of events that they have either invented or confused... Christians, on the other hand, believe the text of the Torah is immutable although they interpret it improperly in their commentaries. If they were presented with the correct interpretation, however, it is conceivable that they would recant; and even if they don’t recant, it will cause us no harm since their scriptures are the same as our own”. (transl. Moshe Sokolow)

We can no longer say this. Christians increasingly do not practically have “the same Scriptures” as the Jews. Hence, “conversion” has taken on a decidedly modern notion of novelty. Conversion is a theologically problematic word to apply to Jewish followers of Jesus. But it may also be a reasonable word to use if it is meant to translate the *metanoia* of, say, Act 2:38. Repentance has to do with recognition, as I hinted at earlier; and recognition has to do with continuities, something prepared, something “promised”, something growing or waiting. Hence, it is enough to “read Moses” to know Him (cf. Jn. 5:46). Most Christian churches have assumed that conversion, however, means affirming something true that is, as it were, a new truth, a *novum*, but also a *novum externum*, that reaches a person from outside the “already” work of God in their lives or in their world. The Gentile Christian is the Christian who stands only in front of the Gospel, addressed for the first time by the otherwise unknown God. For the early Church, this was not how the gentile mission proceeded. I teach a course on the history of catechetics, and in fact, until the early 5th century at least, some form of Augustine’s “narrative” method was fairly entrenched: teaching “the faith” by teaching the biblical narrative from creation to Noah to Babel, to Abraham to Moses to David and so on. That was the context for repentance, recognition, and faith itself. At the end of the 20th century, it took a Jewish convert to Christianity, Hans Frei, to expose the essential power of this method, with his seminal volume *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*: .. In this case, the conjunction of scholarly insight and personal religious identity was no accident.

The Jewish Christian rankles the Christian churches today -- perhaps even reopens a wound -- for perhaps a reason that is itself historically “novel”: to be confronted with a Jew who reads the Scriptures and believes in and follows Yeshua as Messiah, is to be confronted with one’s own profound and disturbing forgetfulness.

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Comment [1]:

