

The following book reviews have appeared in *Mishkan*, the *LCJE Bulletin*, and the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.

Michael J. Cook. *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-Being in a Christian Environment*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2008. xxiv, 374 pp., cloth.

Cook teaches at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. Specifically, his area is Judaeo-Christian Studies, and his affiliation is Reform Judaism. HUC-JIR, Reform's rabbinical seminary, is according to Cook the first such seminary to require training in the New Testament. It is high time, Cook believes, that Jews stop being intentionally ignorant of the New Testament and come to learn what it's all about. In contrast to the high value Jews place on knowledge in other areas of study, we are woefully ignorant of the New Testament and therefore cannot formulate a proper response when confronted with questions from or about Christians. New Testament study will enable Jews to feel empowered rather than tongue-tied in dealing with texts that have contributed to anti-Semitism and ill feeling towards Jews.

What Cook attempts to teach is not so much the content of the New Testament as what he calls "Gospel Dynamics." This is Cook's phrase to explain how the New Testament gospels came to be in their present form. And specifically, to explain why the New Testament is anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish.

To those versed in gospel criticism, what Cook does is nothing new. He follows the precepts of modern form- and tradition-criticism, though in fact he ends up with a much more minimalist view than many. The gospels, he tells us, are not really interested in history but in theology—the by-now-old false antithesis that has become a hallmark of much—too much!—biblical criticism. The real, historical, Jewish Jesus is basically unrecoverable; the gospels rework the story of his life to meet the needs of a community several decades, even generations, removed from the original. For instance, though Christianity had been considered a Jewish sect early on, by the time the gospel writers wrote Christians were afraid of Rome and afraid of being associated with the Jewish people—who had just unsuccessfully waged a failed rebellion against Rome. So what did the gospel writers do? They switched the blame for Jesus' death from Rome to the Jews, thereby in effect pacifying any Romans who would hear or read the Christian message.

Cook is a minimalist regarding the historicity of the New Testament and a maximalist regarding the presence of anti-Judaism in its pages. It is not

clear how teaching Jews to read the New Testament in his way will “enhance Jewish well-being.” When confronted with claims that Jesus is the Messiah, are Jews to respond that we can’t know much about Jesus because the gospels are anti-Judaic after-the-fact productions? This is as much head-in-the-sand as the willful ignorance of the New Testament that Cook decries, for it seems to say that Cook’s view settles the question of New Testament historicity once and for all. Or when confronted by anti-Semitic canards that Cook finds derive from the New Testament, are Jews to say that it was all invented after Jesus’ time? Will it lessen the problem of anti-Semitism for Jews to realize that it doesn’t go back to Jesus?

Interestingly, the chapter on “Neutralizing Missionary Encroachment” draws little on Cook’s handling of the gospels, other than to state that Jewish believers in Jesus are really following what he calls “Configuration B” (his term for Pauline Christianity vs. “Configuration A” which is the original Jesus movement).

Sprinkled with somewhat difficult-to-follow charts throughout, the book self-consciously has broad audience in mind, so that Cook includes a chart on which chapters would be best for which groups and situations. Whether the book will spark the revolution that he hopes for is doubtful. It is too tendentious, too extreme in its minimalism. And its “enhancement” of “Jewish well-being” comes at the expense of *isolating* Jews from the New Testament—for the gospels can be written off as unhistorical, anti-Jewish, and in their present form unconnected with the Jewish people—rather than *engaging* Jews with it as both history and sacred scripture for Christians. In this regard, Cook is to be contrasted with Michael Kogan’s *Opening the Covenant*, which is far more sympathetic to Christian theology and Scripture, even if he also downplays the importance of historicity and truth claims.

A companion booklet bringing the various charts together under one cover, *Companion Figures: A Visual Aid for Teaching*, is available from the publisher (42 pp.).

Review of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Rich Robinson

The main significance of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament (JANT)* is that it exists at all. There have been other books by Jewish writers about Jesus and the New Testament, but this is the first time the entire New

Testament has been presented by mainstream Jewish scholars to Jews and Christians as something that both communities need to read and understand. Its reception by the Jewish community has been both welcoming and critical, even sometimes hostile, as the two editors shared at last fall's meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco.

The introduction highlights what makes this a "Jewish" compilation: it is designed to enrich understanding of the NT; to compare the NT and its ideas with other Jewish literature; and to address for Jewish and Christian readers the problematic NT passages that have been used in anti-Jewish ways. The intentions of the volume vis-à-vis Jewish readers are spelled out in this way:

"Many Jews are unfamiliar with, or even afraid of reading, the New Testament. Its content and genres are foreign, and they need notes to guide their reading. Other Jews may think that the New Testament writings are irrelevant to their lives, or that any annotated New Testament is aimed at persuasion, if not conversion. This volume, edited and written by Jewish scholars, should not raise that suspicion. Our intention is not to convert, whether to convert Jews to Christianity, or to convert Christians away from their own churches. Rather, this book is designed to allow all readers to understand what the texts of the New Testament meant within their own social, historical, and religious context; some of the essays then describe the impact that the New Testament has had on Jewish-Christian relations."

To accomplish this, some 50 contributors have been assembled from the top tiers of Jewish scholars: Daniel Boyarin, Shaye J. D. Cohen, and Geza Vermes, to name just three. Besides the annotations to the NRSV, numerous sidebars are scattered throughout. At the end comes over 80 pages of background essays in small type, which could well have been its own book under a title such as, *What are Contemporary Jewish Scholars Saying About the New Testament?*

Each annotator introduces his or her book with matters of authorship, date, setting, relationship to Judaism, and so on. The conclusions are generally from a moderate-critical standpoint, though there is no uniformity of agreement among the contributors or editors, and *m. Avot* 5:20 is quoted in regard to "disputes for the sake of divine service."

To pick a few examples: the section on "Matthew and Judaism" highlights the commonalities with rabbinic methods of scriptural exegesis, but also interprets various Matthean passages to "suggest a strained if not broken relationship between Matthew's intended readers and the synagogue." The introduction to Mark notes that "the 'Gentile focus' of Mark is not as certain as it was once held to be." John's Gospel "reflects deep and broad

knowledge of Jerusalem, Jewish practice, and methods of biblical interpretation.” Discussing the usage of the phrase “the Jews” in John, although its meaning “varies according to its literary context,” that is not enough, since “more important than the referent of each usage is the overall rhetorical effect of the relentless repetition of the words *hoi Ioudaioi*. The Gospel’s use of the term serves two important functions: it blurs the boundaries among various Jewish groups, and it employs the term to designate the forces that are hostile to Jesus.” Importantly, though, “the Gospel is not anti-Semitic in a racial sense, as it is not one’s origins that are decisive but one’s beliefs. Nevertheless, it has been used to promote anti-Semitism.”

To take an example from the Pauline corpus, namely Galatians, “negative assessment of the Torah and those who follow it is striking; he [Paul] insists that the Torah does not come from God (3.19–20); no longer has a salvific role, and perhaps never did (3.21–22); and its observance is akin to the worship of the Greek gods (4.9–10).” Nevertheless, many today recognize that the audience is Gentile, and “nowhere in his letters, either in Galatians or elsewhere, does Paul attempt to convince Jews to abandon the Torah.”

The annotations themselves are brief, usually highlighting the Jewish background through citing OT, intertestamental, and rabbinic literature or noting similar ideas/practices in Judaism. The average Jewish reader, unless he or she has some familiarity with Jewish texts, may well be lost in the annotations without the aid of a teacher. Christian readers who come from a tradition emphasizing Bible study will not be quite as much at sea with the biblical references in the annotations but again will need guidance for much else.

The general level of the essays too will be rather sophisticated for many lay readers without further guidance, depending on their familiarity with the topic at hand. Of great value are the introductory essays by the editors: Amy-Jill Levine’s “Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism” and Marc Zvi Brettler’s “The New Testament between the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and Rabbinic Literature.” Other essays cover historical and social backgrounds, literature, and theological ideas. Mark Nanos covers “Paul and Judaism,” Joshua Garroway handles the term “*Ioudaios*,” and five essays cover “Jewish Responses to the New Testament.” Several tables, a glossary and index round out the volume.

JANT is indeed a landmark work, one that would have been unthinkable a hundred years ago. Yes, Jewish scholars wrote about Jesus and portions of the New Testament, but never this comprehensively and with such intention to speak with clearly delineated goals to two faith communities.

If *JANT* can acquaint Christians and Jews with the Jewishness of the New Testament, it will have served its purpose. The editors and contributors undoubtedly hope that Jews will become better Jews as a result; readers of this *Bulletin* will hope for the recognition, among some at least, that becoming better Jews involves no less than faith in Yeshua.

Geza Vermes. *The Nativity: History and Legend*. New York, Doubleday, 2006. xv, 172 pp., cloth.

Geza Vermes. *The Resurrection: History and Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. xix, 171 pp., cloth.

Geza Vermes is a well-known British Jewish scholar of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and known too for his three volumes on Jesus (*Jesus the Jew; The Religion of Jesus the Jew; Jesus in His Jewish Context*). The present volumes are part of a trilogy that also comprises *The Passion* (not reviewed).

Both volumes are useful primarily to acquaint readers with the views of a leading Jewish scholar. Some would consider the viewpoint of *The Nativity* a bit antiquated by now, as Vermes' thesis is that Matthew and Luke had theological motives for the gospel infancy narratives and that historicity is *thereby* ruled out. The two gospels stand in contradiction to one another. The book is replete with words like "obviously" (unhistorical, invented). There is no literary approach offered: the infancy narratives are tacked on, and if they were missing, no one would notice. Arguments for historicity are special pleading.

But Vermes is not only Jewish. To escape anti-Semitism, he was baptized as a non-practicing Catholic with his parents at a young age, subsequently serving as a priest in order to continue his education, and finally identifying again as Jewish. A desire to be a freethinker rather than someone who bows to ecclesiastical authority appears to run as a subtext throughout the book. Catholic scholars are in tension between the need to be scholarly and the need to maintain their beliefs. Catholic scholars are forced to equivocate so as to have their cake and eat it too (p. 15), or to abandon certain views in light of Catholic peer pressure (p. 68).

The Nativity is nevertheless not polemical in tone. It begins with a personal overview of his and his Catholic wife's experiences, then moves on to the gospels, disposed to see "obvious" contradictions where others do not. There is a great deal of interesting and useful background information (including such matters as the presence of *two* kinds of virginity in ancient Judaism).

The Resurrection is not much different. The first section gives a historical overview of the development of the concept of the afterlife and of resurrection from the Old Testament onwards. The second section focuses on the gospels and Acts and particularly on their discrepancies. In the end, Jesus lives on “in the hearts of men”—making Vermes sound very much like a 1960s liberal Protestant pastor!

Skeptics will nod their head in agreement; believers will find alternative explanations. What Vermes brings to the table is the Jewish background and concise summaries of a position held by many, and of course, a window into his own personal views.

Matthew Hoffman. *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture (Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture)*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007. x, 292 pp., cloth.

As I pen this review, a somewhat controversial exhibition is underway at the London Jewish Museum of Art’s Ben Uri Gallery. The exhibition is entitled “Cross Purposes: Shock and Contemplation in Images of the Crucifixion” and, running through September 19, 2010, includes works by both Jewish and non-Jewish painters. One critic, Benjamin Perl, complained that they should just call it a Christian museum. “From all the subjects from our heritage, why choose this?” he said in an interview. However, the *Jewish Chronicle* took an online poll, finding more supporters than naysayers. Co-chair of the gallery, David Glasser, remarked that “what was considered as the most sacred and holy of images—the Crucifixion—has evolved into a universal and generic motif.”

But why indeed? And why in a Jewish museum?

In his recent and timely book, Matthew Hoffman—assistant professor of Judaic Studies and History at Franklin & Marshall College—focuses specifically on the Jewish use of images of the crucified Jesus (the exhibition in London, on the other hand, includes works by non-Jews). Though the first chapter deals with the rather well-known story of the Jewish “reclamation” of Jesus as a Jew in Western Europe and America, the rest of the book covers territory less familiar to many. There, Hoffman focuses on modernist Yiddish literature of Eastern Europe, much of which is inaccessible to the non-Yiddish-reader but some of which is translated in this volume. It is this part of the story that engaged me the most.

It indeed takes a book to describe the currents of Jewish life about which Hoffman writes. Especially in Eastern Europe, Jews embraced Jesus as a

fellow-Jew, not in any Christian sense, but as a way to re-appropriate him from what Jews understood to be a Christian misinterpretation. Not a god, but a martyr. “Jesus,” stated Chaim Zhitlovsky, founder of the early 20th-century Yiddish socialist magazine *Dos naye leben* (*The New Life*), “was martyred as the first Jewish socialist revolutionary.” On the other hand, embracing the Jewish Jesus was at the same time a way to share in the wider non-Jewish world, for adding Jesus to the “canon” of Jewish personalities meant sharing in some aspect of European/Christian culture. Hoffman captures the dual nature of what was taking place: “Did establishing Jesus as a figure within the modernist Yiddish literary canon serve as a way for modern Jewish writers to *subvert* Christian cultural claims on the figure of Jesus? Or was it merely a way to *share* in these claims as part of a broader cosmopolitan culture?” (p. 119; emphasis mine).

Either way, “for almost all modern Jewish writers Jesus’ death is understood more within the Jewish tradition of martyrdom than the Christian tradition of vicarious atonement and sacrifice” (p. 125). He is “not ... a redeemer, but ... the archetypal victim of the world’s cruelty” (p. 152).

And particularly of the world’s cruelty toward the Jewish people. In fact, in some poems it is the Jewish people as a whole who are forever crucified, forever a nation of “Christs.”

The blood that runs from the cross,
Will run and run and cry in you,
As it did a thousand years ago. (p. 151)
— Moyshe Leyb Halpern, “A nakht”

Emma Lazarus, whose famous “New Colossus” poem emblazons the Statue of Liberty, also wrote “The Crowing of the Red Cock,” a vista of Jewish history read through Christ-like imagery:

Where is the Hebrew fatherland?
The folk of Christ is sore bestead;
The Son of Man is bruised and banned,
Nor finds whereon to lay his head.
His cup is gall, his meat is tears,
His Passion lasts a thousand years. (p. 177)

For yet other writers, there was another option for the “Jewish Jesus” besides being a martyr or an archetype of Jewish suffering and martyrdom:

For writers like Kvitko, Grinberg, and Shneour (and they were by no means alone), when confronted with the calamities of Jewish history, the Jewish Jesus had two options: he could remain on the cross and let “skin-and-bone Jews” assume his mantle as supreme

martyr, or he could come down from his cross to join his fellow Jews as a witness and partner in their pain and suffering. In both cases, these poets make clear that the passion of Jesus is an appropriate paradigm for understanding Jewish history. (p. 192)

This kind of “re-appropriation” of Jesus was, as Hoffman points out, often polemical: You Christians are the persecutors, and you use Jesus to justify your persecutions. But we Jews know Jesus was a Jew like us, and we know he was not Messiah or Son of God but Martyr, Sufferer, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, suffering as we did. We take him back as he really is, and subvert your Christianity! Yet in the midst of the polemics, there was the desire to connect with the larger European/Christian social world, a desire which could be realized by at once embracing the Christian symbols and simultaneously de-baptizing them, as it were, back into the Jewish fold.

At once social commentary and “review of the arts,” Hoffman’s book opens a window onto a particular corner of Yiddish literature and painting. The output of these artists creates a figure in their own image (as is true of many other treatments of Jesus) but also conveys a muscular, in-your-face approach to the world, to suffering, to the meaning of Jewishness. It indeed raises the question, what then *is* a martyr? Someone who dies for a cause, the cause of their beliefs? Or perhaps someone who dies simply for being who they are, because the world cannot stand who they are. Messianic Jews and the Church at large, believe Jesus to be Messiah, Atoner, Suffering Servant, Son of Man, Son of God. “Martyr” on the other hand is typically considered the mislabeling of those who see him (merely) as not outlasting his political moment. But can we not step back and see if there is not some truth to what these writers and painters had to say—even though they were quite often secular! Jesus was, of course Jewish. He died for a cause, and his cause was that of bringing atoning healing to the world. He died too, because the world could not stand him just as for much of its history it could not stand the Jewish people. Moreover, Jesus is part and parcel of his people, the Jews. When people suffer, does not God suffer too? When Jewish people have suffered, has not the Jewish Jesus suffered too? Jesus *was* Martyr, but he was not Victim. The modernist Yiddish writers may have been, in some ways, closer to the truth than they knew. At any rate, the material Hoffman provides stands on its own as a portrait of a moment in Jewish cultural history.

Benjamin D. Sommer. *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xv, 334 pp.

Benjamin Sommer is professor in Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. His exploration in *The Bodies of God* is described on the back cover as “innovative,” “illuminating,” “audacious,” “original.” Translation: Sommer has a stimulating and controversial proposal to bring to the table. “What I propose to show in this book is that the startling or bizarre idea in the Hebrew Bible is . . . not that God has a body — that is the standard notion of ancient Israelite theology — but rather that God has many bodies located in sundry places in the world that God created” (p. 1). The bulk of the book is devoted to unpacking this thesis, with the final chapter devoted to implications relating to Christianity and kabbalah, among other things.

Readers not familiar with discussion of rabbinic thinking may be equally startled to note that the basic idea of God’s corporeality is not new in Jewish thinking. Marc Shapiro elsewhere cited a recollection of Adin Steinsaltz, of *The Steinsaltz Talmud* fame. This story, if true (Shapiro wonders), would testify to a belief in God’s corporeality (that is, his bodily form) even in the 20th century. Steinsaltz relates:

When I was a young man I met someone in Israel who was at the time a very important political personality. We were talking, and he asked me, ‘Where does God put his legs?’ For a moment I didn’t understand. I thought he was joking, but he was asking this question seriously. When I tried to tell him that, as far as I knew, God has no legs, he told me that I did not know what I was talking about as a religious person, because his father truly believed that God has legs! I tried to remonstrate. I opened the Siddur and showed him that not only do we not believe that, but we should not: it is forbidden. He ended the conversation by telling me that he was very friendly with the *rosh yeshivah* of Mir and that he would warn him that there was a person in Jerusalem who should be destroyed!¹

The reason for the modern reader’s surprise is that the idea that God is *non*-corporeal began to reign supreme in Jewish thinking beginning with the medieval Jewish philosophers. Their objections to God’s embodiment had more to do with a philosophical outlook than with the text of the Hebrew Bible. “For Maimonides and other medieval Jewish philosophers (starting with Saadia Gaon), the denial of God’s corporeality was a crucial

¹ Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised*. Oxford: Littmann Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004, p. 67.

aspect of monotheism; a God with a body was a God who could be divided, and for these philosophers the belief in a divisible God constituted what one might call internal polytheism” (p. 8).

However, what Sommer is suggesting is something more: that God’s embodiment could be construed as *fluid* in the Hebrew Bible. What this means is gradually clarified beginning in Chapter 1 (“Fluidity of Divine Embodiment and Selfhood: Mesopotamia and Canaan”) through an examination of Ancient Near Eastern documents. This chapter will be the most heavy-going for the general reader, laden as it is with references to Canaanite and Babylonian gods and texts. But it is the foundation for what follows. And, to let the cat out of the bag, if you want to figure out what is going on in Genesis 18 with Abraham’s three visitors, you will want to start with Sommer’s first chapter.

In that chapter, he discusses two types of “fluidity” of the “divine selfhood” of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic gods. The first he calls “fragmentation,” whereby “there are several divinities with a single name who somehow are and are not the same deity” (p. 13). In the second type we have “overlap of identity between gods who are usually discrete selves” (p. 16).

Following the discussion of fluidity, we hear about the “multiplicity of divine embodiment” among the same deities whereby “a deity’s presence was not limited to a single body; it could emerge simultaneously in several objects” (p. 19).

Finally, still in the foundational chapter, Sommer shows that similar conceptions did *not* prevail in classical Greece, though it was as polytheistic as Mesopotamia and Canaan. It is the project of the rest of the book to show that concepts of divine fluidity are to be found in monotheism as well, specifically within the Hebrew Bible. In other words, the phenomena we see in such biblical passages as Genesis 18 is not a by-product of polytheism, but cuts across poly- and monotheistic societies, nor is it found in all of them.

Having laid the foundation, chapter 2 addresses “The Fluidity Model in Ancient Israel” and chapter 3, “The Rejection of the Fluidity Model in Ancient Israel.” Here Sommer talks about what some would variously call “divergent theologies,” “different emphases,” or “conflicting traditions” within the Hebrew Bible, depending on where one stands on the critical-conservative spectrum. For his part, Sommer draws on the documentary approach to the Bible whereby strands of the text originated from various quarters traditionally labeled J, E, P (for priestly), and Deut/Dtr (Deuteronomy/Deuteronomistic writings respectively). Sommer finds that J and E preserve the concepts of fluidity, as seen in such passages as the mysterious Genesis 18 story (hardly the only example, but one familiar to

many readers of this review). However, P and Deut/Dtr reject that model, and their conception became the prevailing one until later rabbinic times when the earlier model re-emerged. Whether one accepts the documentary hypothesis in any of its many variations or not really does not impinge on Sommer's point, which is that one can find various approaches to the fluidity concepts in the pages of the Hebrew Scripture, whether one wants to attribute that variety to particular emphases or to divergent authors. At any event, Sommer has drawn our attention to distinctions in the fluidity concept in various parts of the Hebrew Bible; it is for the exegete and biblical theologian to compile the data into a coherent whole. (Interestingly, Sommer's answer to the question as to *why* a final redactor would let contradictory traditions stand is not because the redactor was incompetent, but in order to spark a discussion on the subject!)

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on "God's Bodies and Sacred Space," and how the competing conceptions of God's divine embodiment — God's presence in particular locations — plays out in the tent, the ark, the temple, and beyond. It is fascinating material, but let me move on to Chapter 6 which explores the implications of what Sommer calls the "persistence" of the fluidity conceptions. This persistence is found in rabbinic literature, exemplified here by (1) rabbinic ideas of the *shekhinah*, (2) in kabbalah and its ten *sefirot*, and finally (3) in Christianity. Here is where Sommer shows the congruence of the ideas of the Trinity and Incarnation with ancient biblical ideas. I want to quote one paragraph in full from Sommer because here is yet another opportunity for the reader, by now already startled by the ideas of God's embodiment and fluidity, to register surprise yet once again (emphasis is mine):

This study forces a reevaluation of a common Jewish attitude toward Christianity. Some Jews regard Christianity's claim to be a monotheistic religion with grave suspicion, both because of the doctrine of the trinity (how can three equal one?) and because of Christianity's core belief that God took bodily form. What I have attempted to point out here is that *biblical Israel knew very similar doctrines*, and these doctrines did not disappear from Judaism after the biblical period. To be sure, Jews must repudiate many beliefs central to most forms of Christianity; these include a commitment to a person whom Judaism regards as a false messiah; the repudiation of the Sinai covenant to which God committed Godself and Israel eternally; the veto on the binding force of Jewish law; those aspects of Christian ethics that subjugate justice to victimhood; and the rejection of God's baffling but sovereign choice of a particular family and that family's descendants. No Jew sensitive to Judaism's own classical sources, however, can fault the theological model Christianity employs when it avows belief in a God who has an earthly body as well as a Holy Spirit and a

heavenly manifestation, for that model, we have seen, is a perfectly Jewish one. A religion whose scripture contains the fluidity traditions, whose teachings emphasize the multiplicity of the *shekhinah*, and whose thinkers speak of the *sephirot* does not differ in its theological essentials from a religion that adores the triune God. Note that the Christian beliefs that Judaism rejects are not specifically theological in nature. The only significant theological difference between Judaism and Christianity lies not in the trinity or in the incarnation but in Christianity's revival of the notion of a dying and rising God, a category ancient Israel clearly rejects (pp. 135-36).

According to this view, the main differences between Judaism and Christianity, where the paths diverge, is *not* in the theological sphere of a triune God or a God who is incarnated, but in other areas, including the idea of a dying and rising god. It is, by the way, strange that Sommer makes this the dividing line, as the notion that Christianity borrowed from pagan dying-and-rising-gods is rather out of date; why does he not rather connect the conceptions of the Messiah's death and rising to Jewish ideas of atonement and resurrection? (Interestingly, Jewish author Michael Kogan in his recent book *Opening the Covenant* locates the dividing line between Judaism and Christianity somewhere else, namely, in the area of anthropology, that is, the doctrine of man, his innate goodness or lack of it, and ideas of original sin.)

This is a stimulating book. It is a heavily *textual* book, that is, it relies on a close reading of Ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts to marshal its points. It draws too on general theories of religion such as those of Mircea Eliade. It is not specifically theological, and some questions remain unaddressed. For example, Sommer defines a "body" as "*something located in a particular place at a particular time, whatever its shape or substance*" (p. 2; italics his). How does this relate to a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, whereby God presumably created space and time? Does God therefore "have" a body? Or would it be more correct to say that he rather "reveals himself" in bodily form(s)? Also missing from the discussion, but very relevant, is the conception of the "one and the many" in Israel, as classically elaborated in H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*. That doctrine, with the fluid back-and-forth between individuals and the group, would appear to have affinities at the level of human beings with the idea of the fluidity of God/gods — and has been an important element of some evangelical understandings of the Old Testament and of messianic prophecy, especially in the work of Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

The Bodies of God is not bedtime reading, but neither is it "up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us?'" (Deuteronomy 30:12). It will greatly repay study.

Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity. By Michael S. Kogan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, xiv + 284 pp., \$29.95.

In an age of dialogue and pluralism, Michael Kogan wants to take things one step forward, as he sees it. With a survey of selected Jewish views of Christianity from medieval times to the present as his background, along with Christian views of Judaism, Kogan proposes that the time has come for each faith to fully recognize the other as a legitimate revelation from God. Specifically, Kogan wishes for Jews to view Christianity as the revelation of the God of Israel to Gentiles, thereby incorporating Christians into Israel itself. Similarly, he wants Christians to affirm the full validity of Judaism as a revealed faith and particularly to give up theological exclusivism even as Jews must abandon humanistic exclusivism (pp. xii-xiii). It is time for both sides to make a move.

Though at first sight this may sound like an updated version of Franz Rosenzweig (well-known as the originator of the dual-covenant theology so prominent in Jewish Christian dialogue of recent years), it goes further than Rosenzweig did. It is a bold project that, once the details are understood, will not sit well with many Jews for what it grants Christianity, nor with Christians who believe in the validity of truth claims.

Let me say that this is a book of tremendous value, in general for giving one Jewish scholar's take on Christianity and the dialogue movement, and specifically for clearly summarizing, and evaluating, a dozen theologians Jewish and Christian who have had something to say on the subject, along with several important official statements from the Jewish-Christian dialogue. The downside for those coming from a conservative or evangelical viewpoint, or for that matter for many coming from a modernist mindset, is that Kogan can only maintain his theological construction at the price of denying that religious truth claims intersect in a meaningful way with historical truth claims, and by simultaneously insisting that even if Christian claims were true, they would have no relevance for Jewish people—for the Christian revelation is for Gentiles only. In the last chapter, in fact, Kogan will advocate for a full-blown pluralism that finds God's revelation in all religions. At the end of the day, Kogan does not exactly offer reasons for believing that his construction is true; he presupposes both the election of Israel that requires no further revelation, and the validity of a pluralistic approach to religion, then builds his edifice in order to practically further Jewish-Christian relations. It is his pluralism that allows him to attribute value and "truth" to Christianity; it is his commitment to Israel's election-*sans*-Christianity that causes him to rule out anyone holding to exclusive claims from being valid dialogue participants. As I will comment later, Kogan appears to confuse claims to

truth with attitude problems, and also claims to any (exclusive) truth as claims to *all* truth.

Let me explore the book more closely to unpack Kogan's unique formulation.

Michael Kogan is Professor of Religious Studies at Montclair State University, where he also serves as Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Religion. By way of notice, his mentor, Gabriel Vahanian of Syracuse University, was a pioneer of the "death of God" theology.

Already in the introduction, Kogan writes that "interreligious dialogue requires that those engaged in it give up long-standing convictions of their own exclusive possession of truth" (p. xii). This is not, however, a call merely for Christians to make a move; he also asks, "are Jews ready and willing to affirm that God, the God of Israel and of all humanity, was involved in the life of Jesus, in the founding of the Christian faith, in its growth and spread across much of the world, and in its central place in the hearts of hundreds of millions of their fellow beings?" (p. xiii). Christianity needs to give up its theological exclusivism, while Judaism's move is to abandon what he calls its "humanistic" exclusivism. To his credit, he is evenhanded; he wants both sides to abandon their own particular brands of exclusivism.

In Chapter One, "Defining Our Terms," Kogan summarizes his understanding of the teachings of Judaism and Christianity. The summary of the former will be invaluable to Christian readers to hear the self-understanding of his faith from a contemporary Jewish scholar. In the latter case, it is equally valuable to see a précis of Christianity through Jewish eyes. Interestingly, Kogan locates the key theological difference between Jews and Christians not in Christology but in anthropology—the starting point being the disagreement over the nature of sin, which for Christianity is a more "radical" problem requiring a more radical solution. It is also worth noting that Kogan finds more rather than less divergence in theology among the gospel writers, and outright contradiction in Paul—perhaps less a problem for him than for evangelical Christians, given that in Judaism, *midrash* traditionally celebrates diversity of interpretations.

The final section of the first chapter lays the "foundations" for a Jewish theology of Christianity. Of key note here is Kogan's observation that the roles of Israel the people and of Jesus himself run on parallel tracks in Judaism and Christianity, and that in fact, the NT presents the life of Jesus as the recapitulation of Israel's experience. That really means they are more than parallel, as Kogan says, but certainly in the NT, fully intertwined. This insight offers promise as a heuristic grid through which to view the NT, with the payoff of exegetical insights. It is not a new observation, but it is well worth repeating.

A second emphasis of Kogan's is that Christianity may indeed be true, a revelation of God for the Gentiles, but however not of the same relevance for Jews. He will expand on this later. But Jews need to accept that God may well have acted in Christ to expand the covenant, thereby including Gentiles in Israel. Similarly, an "enlightened" kind of

Christianity—that is, a non-“exclusive” kind—will recognize the reality of God’s ongoing covenant with Israel.

“The Question of the Messiah” forms Chapter Two, and is a survey of royal and priestly messianic ideas in the Hebrew Bible, along with the concepts of the suffering servant and the “son of man.” He follows the trajectory into the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature, Qumran, and later rabbinic texts. Of note here is his observation that other Jewish groups besides the early Christians had notions of a dying Messiah; his comparison of Judaism’s “two Messiah” theology with Christianity’s single Messiah in two appearances is quite helpful. Here is one place where Kogan seeks to find common ground—the idea of a suffering, dying Messiah should be a “shared treasure,” one example of his willingness to find more commonality than many would, as long as the playing field is non-exclusivistic.

Throughout the book, and one of the really great benefits of reading it, is Kogan’s summaries of past and contemporary theologians both Jewish and Christian, who have explored the relationship of Judaism to Christianity. The first such summary comprises Chapter Three, “Three Jewish Theologians of Christianity,” which surveys 13th c. Menachem Ha Me’iri, 18th c. Moses Mendelssohn, and 19th c. Elijah Benamozegh. Two of these will doubtlessly be unfamiliar to many readers. It can be startling to learn, for instance, that Ha Me’iri not only did not view Christians as idolaters (as many Orthodox Jews would do even today) but also included both Christians and Muslims as part of Israel. The point of the chapter is that the project of a Jewish theology of Christianity has important and even surprising antecedents.

Chapter Four gets into the heart of Kogan’s project: “Affirming the Other’s Theology: How Far Can Jews and Christians Go?” Essentially, says Kogan, further than anyone has yet gone. Here he begins by surveying Franz Rosenzweig, the well known originator of modern “dual-covenant” theology. And here we discover that not all dual-covenant theologies are created equal. Kogan takes issue with Rosenzweig on two grounds: first, that Rosenzweig relegates Judaism to a kind of background position, leaving Christianity as the exclusive witness to God in the world. Kogan will want to find much more equality and partnership. Second, he rejects Rosenzweig’s leaving the door open for Jews to be “proselytized” on an individual basis. “Proselytization”—read evangelism—equates to exclusivism and a stance of superiority as well as failure to allow God’s covenant with the Jewish people to stand on its own.

Following Rosenzweig is a summary of Martin Buber’s thought, and essentially Kogan’s point in all these evaluations is to see not only antecedents but where previous thinkers have not in his opinion gone far enough. For instance, as to Buber, Kogan disagrees that religious claims can only be evaluated from within the group which holds those claims. He also finds Buber did not go far enough in granting a positive role to Christianity, accepting as he did that only by denying Israel’s claim to “validity” could the church be itself.

Next comes Abraham Joshua Heschel, who unfortunately cannot find anything positive to say regarding Christian claims about Jesus. In contrast, Kogan wishes to affirm Christian doctrines such as the incarnation and resurrection as valid revelation from God for non-Jews.

Then we head over to the side of the Christian theologians with surveys of Paul Van Buren, A. Roy Eckhardt, and Clark M. Williamson, which for space I will not comment on but which afford excellent entrees into the thought of each. Finally comes Kogan's viewpoint: and here he mistakes truth claims for attitudes. "Negative attitudes" are equated with "holding that all who do not [affirm Jesus's person and resurrection] are damned."

So others have not gone far enough; now comes Kogan's proposal to go further. He wishes to affirm the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection as "religious events" which do not equate to historical events. Here his philosophy comes clear: "while we [i.e. Jews] cannot affirm the truth of these propositions, we need no longer insist on their falsity." (p. 114). *Cannot affirm*, because only those who share Christian faith can do so. *Need not deny*, because the doctrines are no longer being used by mainstream Christians to "undermine" Judaism. Kogan here hedges on any need to investigate history or make any judgment on whether events such as the incarnation "actually" happened, because "whatever we make of the Christian claim, it can have no impact on our belief or practice. If it happened, it happened for the sake of the gentile mission of the church" (p. 116). In the end then, it doesn't matter if the events are merely "religious" or equate to Francis Schaeffer's "true truth"—it makes no difference for Jews anyway! Though skirting the historical relevance for Jews, Kogan goes beyond many Jewish writers in showing that key Christian doctrines are not as foreign to Jewish thought as many would think; again there is much that evangelicals can take away from Kogan without buying into his larger framework.

Chapter Five "The Forty Years' Peace: Christian Churches Reevaluate Judaism," is a commentary on various mainstream dialogal church statements, showing either where they too do not go far enough or where they fall short in maintaining a position of Christian superiority. But he is also prepared to give more from the Jewish side too; already in the previous chapter, Kogan had written that "Several church statements have affirmed that while Christianity needs Judaism for its self-understanding, Judaism can fully define itself without reference to Christianity. Not true!" (p. 118). After all, for Kogan Christianity is the inbreaking of the God of Israel into the gentile world.

Having covered various thinkers of the past and present, Chapter Six is specifically concerned with "Engaging Two Contemporary Theologians of the Dialogue." The two are on the Jewish side Irving Greenberg, whose key idea that Jesus was a failed rather than false Messiah itself fails to take Christianity seriously enough, and on the Christian side John Pawlikowski, who has been much involved in the dialogue movement.

“Into Another Intensity: Christian-Jewish Dialogue Moves Forward” is the title of Chapter Seven, in which Kogan makes moves towards a full-blown pluralism, adopting Paul Knitter’s view that other religions are revelations from God, in preference to John Hicks’ formulation. He suggests reading NT texts such as John 14:6 in “pluralist” ways, and in this chapter also covers the important document *Dabru Emet*, a response on the Jewish side to the newer Christian attitudes towards Judaism.

Chapter Eight explores “Truth and Fact in Religious Narrative” in which Kogan explicitly rejects the “correspondence theory” of truth, and “religious” facts as indemonstrable. He issues the call for a “grown-up” existential conception of religions truth based on the lived experience of the believer” (p. 188). In this way interfaith dialogue can advance beyond “mutual respect” to “mutual influence” (p. 183), for every religion now has received a finite part of truth which can be shared with others.

Then the rubber meets the road in Chapter Nine, “Bringing the Dialogue Home,” which includes a fascinating chronicle of some of Kogan’s experiences teaching the NT and Paul in synagogue classes. One group was composed of Jewish physicians who tried to study Paul on their own without much success, and brought in Kogan as their teacher. As Kogan reports it, the doctors “were deeply impressed with the brilliance of Paul’s original formulations” (p. 201) though ultimately taking issue with Paul on key points. The time may not be far off when we can no longer assume that most Jews have no knowledge of the NT, including Paul, but need rather to interact with contemporary Jewish views—and not just fully negative ones, but views that accord respect to and find commonality in the NT, but which nevertheless reject it for various reasons (including misunderstanding its teaching).

Chapter Ten is “Does Politics Trump Theology? The Israeli-Palestinian Dispute Invades the Jewish-Christian Dialogue.” Given the current ferment among mainstream and evangelical Christians over Christian Zionism, divestment from Israel, and similar topics, I can do no better than to quote Kogan’s paragraph on page 227, a view which would resonate with a great many Jews:

Without the rebirth of Israel, Jews would be left with the Holocaust. For Jews everywhere, if Israel loses, Auschwitz wins. We do not make the distinction Christians do, in this case at least, between religion and politics. We tend to see Christian attacks on Israeli policy as assaults on our family. And when many Jews experience such attacks, they are led to reflect that, if it had not been for Christian persecution of Jews in Europe, there might not have been the need to gather the Jews in a tiny country that, while being a beloved ancient homeland, is also located in what is perhaps the most dangerous neighborhood in the world. Given Christian conduct toward Jews for 2,000 years, Jews feel that the descendants of the persecutors should have the grace now to avoid criticizing their longtime victims.

Finally, Chapter Eleven moves “Towards a Pluralist Theology of Judaism.” Says Kogan: “Thus the *underlying assumptions* of the Jewish-Christian dialogue must open the participants to a full multifaith pluralism” (p. 231; italics added). Here also Kogan says something interesting with implications for evangelical theology and praxis: “All Jews are Jews religiously even if they do not practice their religion. They are Jews religiously because they have been chosen and commissioned by Israel’s God to be among God’s witnesses on this earth” (p. 235).

Here in fact is what I believe to be the crux in the development of what is being called “messianic Jewish theology,” i.e. an indigenous, evangelical, Jewish Christian theology. There is good reason to believe that the future point of debate dividing Christians from Jews will not be in Christology, nor in anthropology. It will be in ecclesiology. Some Jewish thinkers have sought to divide Jewish believers in Jesus from one another by expressing a willingness to accept as Jews those who claim to believe in Jesus but deny his divinity. I believe that will be the lesser issue, especially if Jewish theologians like Kogan are willing to explore the Jewish commonality of doctrines such as the incarnation (even if they are motivated to do so as long as their dialogue partners are not exclusivists). Rather, the point of contention will be how Jewish believers in Jesus relate to the Jewish community, to the Gentile world, and to the Church. Already messianic Jewish writer Mark Kinzer has proposed, in his recent *PostMissionary Messianic Judaism*, a “bilateral ecclesiology” whereby Jews who profess faith in Jesus should find their primary social community in the larger Jewish world, separate from Gentile Christians. It is a solution born more of Karl Barth and postliberal thinking than evangelical theology, but it indicates the nature of the upcoming debates. To reiterate Kogan: “All Jews are Jews religiously even if they do not practice their religion. They are Jews religiously because they have been chosen and commissioned by Israel’s God to be among God’s witnesses on this earth.” Future evangelical theologies will need to say something on this topic in new ways that address these contemporary trends of thought.

At the end of the day, Kogan’s starting point is that, “Only one claim must be surrendered [for there to be successful dialogue]; the single negative claim that there is truth to be found in no faith save our own” (p. 237). That, of course, is a false starting point, for it confuses a claim to *any* truth with a claim to *all* truth. Meantime, we must not allow the affirmation of exclusive truth claims to be written off as bad attitudes. Evangelicals and others who believe in respect and dialogue must continue to pursue those goals while affirming the validity of truth claims about Jesus which bind Jew and Gentile alike. Simultaneously they will also need to explore what Jewish thinkers are calling the “validity” (an ambiguous term susceptible of several meanings) of Judaism and of the covenant God made with Israel—without neglecting the evangelization of both Israel and the world.

In the end, we have here one of those must-read books for anyone interested in Christianity and the Jewish people.

