

Jesus the Jew

The Congregational Summer Assembly, Frankfort, Michigan

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Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

Theme: Jews are our older brothers and sisters in faith.

David Noel Freedman was one of the great Old Testament scholars of our time. He was the kind of guy who could rattle off entire Psalms - long ones - from memory... in Hebrew. Freedman was exceptional in many ways, but none more than this. He was born a Jew; he converted to Christianity as a young man and became a Presbyterian minister. Later in his life, he found himself rediscovering his Jewish roots, though he would always remain a Christian. This confused people. Somebody once asked him, "Dr. Freedman, are you a Jew or a Christian?" He smiled and said, "Yes."

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Jesus was also a Jew who was steeped in Scripture. In the passage from Mark's Gospel I just read, a scribe, a Jewish religious scholar, asks Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Tradition held that there were a total of 613 commandments in the Torah, so Jesus had a lot to pick from. You know his answer, though Mark's version is a bit different from the ones in Matthew and Luke. In Mark, Jesus begins with what Jews call "the shema," "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." It's called that because "shema" is Hebrew for "hear." The shema is considered the basic Jewish confession of faith. Then come the two parts we all know. First part: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Second part: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus did not make up those two answers. Both are straight out of the Old Testament. The first is from the Deuteronomy passage we just heard, the second from the Book of Leviticus. Then the scribe says, "You're right, Jesus. Loving God and neighbor is way more important than all the sacrificial rituals that go on in the Temple."

We know that Jesus had a hot and cold relationship with the scribes and Pharisees. Scribes were religious scholars, experts in the Jewish law. Unlike most people at the time they could read and write. If you had an issue with somebody, they helped you sort out the legalities. Like some of the Pharisees, Jesus often critiqued them for literalism and hypocrisy, but not always. But unlike some other encounters with scribes, this was a happy one. Jesus calls the man "wise" and says that he's "close to the Kingdom of God."

The point I'm aiming at is that everybody in this story is a Jew. Not just the scribe; all the disciples are Jews; and of course, Jesus is a Jew. Mark and the other Gospel writers are all Jews. But of course they're also Christians. So, the question is, "Are they Jews or are they Christians?" The answer? Same as Professor Freedman's. "Yes."

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A few years ago when we lived in New York, I went to hear Elie Wiesel speak at the 92nd Street Y. That's the YMHA, by the way, "Young Men's Hebrew Association. Wiesel was perhaps the greatest scholar of

the holocaust. His topic that night was the relationship between Jews and Christians. There was a Q and A time after his talk and somebody asked him about Jesus. I'll never forget his answer. It went something like this, "Jesus was a remarkable Jewish teacher. He was born a Jew, lived and taught as a Jew, died as a Jew. I have the highest regard for Jesus. But what his *followers* have done to Jews over the last 2,000 years..., that's a different story."

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So, here's the haunting question. If Jesus and all the disciples were Jews, and if Jesus' teaching is rooted in Judaism, why has the relationship between Christians and Jews been so troubled? Why the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492? Why the Cossack pogroms in Russia? Why the Holocaust? Why the Southern Baptist official who declared that God does not listen to the prayers of Jews? Why the murder of eleven worshippers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg five years ago? Why the antisemitism that's still lurking under the surface in so much of the Christian world?

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The answer is complex. This morning I want to unravel only one thread. Early in the history of the church, an idea took hold among a lot of Christians that's sometimes called "replacement theology." A fancier name is "supersessionism." It goes like this. Both Jews and Christians affirm that God made a covenant - a mutual commitment - with ancient Israel. In this covenant, the people of Israel - later the Jewish people - are called to faithful obedience to the Torah. In return, God offers them divine presence and unique purpose. But Christians also believe that God later entered into a covenant with them, a *new* covenant in Jesus Christ.

Here's where it gets sticky. If God has entered into this *new* covenant with us Christians in Jesus Christ, what happens to the *old* one between God and Israel? Replacement theology says it's been replaced - no good anymore. Supersessionism says the old covenant has been superseded - cancelled.

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Back in the 1980's, the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly appointed a study committee to wrestle with this exact question. They produced a remarkable document entitled *"A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews."* The 199th General Assembly, meeting in 1987, though never adopting it as policy, commended it to congregations for study. Here's a few quotes:

"Jews are in a covenant relationship with God."

"The living God whom Christians worship is the same God who is worshipped and served by Jews."

The *"theory of supersessionism or replacement is harmful..."*

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Brave as this document was, the folks on that committee were not the first Christians to call replacement theology a bad idea. During World War II, as the holocaust unfolded across Europe, a little Protestant village in south-central France saved hundreds of Jewish lives. The name of the village was Le Chambon. Nearly all of its residents were Huguenots, French Protestants. In their understanding, the old covenant between God and the Jews had *not* been replaced or superseded. Like

them, Jews were also a people in covenant with God. When a family of Jewish refugees knocked on a door in Le Chambon in the middle of the night, the villagers had a code to let each other know that somebody needing shelter had arrived. They would say, for example, "Five Old Testaments are at my door. Do you have room for them."? Later the villagers would sneak them over the mountains into Switzerland.

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So, if we *re*-consider replacement theology, just as the Presbyterian report commends, just as the villagers of Le Chambon did, how *do* we think about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity? Well, the Bible has a response. Paul's long and often labyrinthine Letter to the Romans tackles the question. In its eleventh chapter, Paul uses an image that the General Assembly report would pick up two thousand years later. Paul said - and the Presbyterian report echoes him - that Christianity has been *engrafted* into Judaism. This is an agricultural metaphor, of course. The image suggests that Judaism is a living tree and that Christianity is an grafted branch. Paul begins that eleventh chapter with a rhetorical question, "*...has God rejected his people.*" He

means Jews like himself. His quick answer, "*By no means.*" Then, later in the chapter, he tells the Roman Christians, most of them probably Gentiles, that they are "*a wild olive shoot,*" engrafted into the trunk that is Judaism, so that they can, in his words, "*share the rich root of the olive tree.*" The General Assembly report uses this very image when it declares, "*The church has not replaced the Jewish people. Quite the contrary! The church... has been engrafted into the people of God...*"

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I'm going to end this sermon by pushing the point further. To do so, I have to tell you one last story. Some years back, I served a church on the edge of the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. We had three next-door neighbors - a sorority, a fraternity, and the Jewish student center called Hillel. Hillel was by far the best neighbor. Now, this Hillel had a very small parking lot; First Presbyterian had a big parking lot, actually two lots, one of which was right next to Hillel. We worked out a wonderful arrangement. The Jews used our parking lot anytime except Sunday morning, and we used their extra classrooms on Sundays. As you might imagine, sharing a parking lot in a Big Ten

College town with limited parking was a diplomatic feat. I figured if we could manage it, maybe we could take on peace in the Middle East.

But the parking lot is just background to my story. The director of the Hillel was a guy named Michael Brooks. We became friends, took turns taking each other out to lunch, and talked about more than parking lots. Over a lunch at the Michigan Union, Michael said something to me that I've carried around for two decades. Now, before I tell you what he said, there's something you have to understand about Michael Brooks. He's wicked smart and he's given to these koan-like utterances that you have to keep thinking about, and then think about some more. So over that lunch, we got to talking about today's topic, the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Here's what he said to me, "*Michael*," he said, "*if Christianity hadn't come along, it would have been necessary for us Jews to invent it. If Christianity hadn't come along, it would had been necessary for us Jews to invent it.*"

Now, the first twist in that enigmatic line is obvious - Jews *did* invent it. But it's the second edge of his sentence that has long intrigued me even more. What did he mean when he said that would have been *necessary* to invent it? Why necessary?

I didn't ask him that day, but I've been thinking about it for twenty-five years. Here's what I've decided he meant. Christianity was necessary because Judaism is not a religion that proselytizes. Jews don't much try to make non-Jews into Jews. You're mostly born into it. Christianity is the opposite. We invite everybody in - doesn't matter what family or tribe you were born into. Christianity is a faith that has always worked to grow, to expand across all the lines of nation and class, breaking across all the boundaries of race and language. Christianity *was* necessary for a lot of reasons, One of them is that it is God's way of expanding faith in the one God to all of humanity.

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So, what does this matter on a summer morning in northern Michigan?

What's the take home from all this theoretical stuff from the guest preacher? Two take-homes, at least.

First, if we understand Jews to be our older brothers and sisters in faith in the one God rather than people God kicked out of the covenant, it will surely dampen the antisemitism that still hides in the dark corners, even the polite dark corners, of the Christian world. A branch dare not hate the tree. A younger sister is less likely to despise her older brother.

Second, understanding ourselves as having been grafted into a tree that is even older than our two Christian centuries reminds us of just how deep our roots go - how very, very deep they reach into the wondrous depths of God's long walk with humanity. They reach back to Jesus of course, but then they reach even farther back, to Isaiah and Moses, and then they reach all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. They reach way, way back, so far back - deep into the roots of the one tree. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.