

Holiness and humanity

God's enduring covenant

Audrey Doetzel

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.
(Romans 11:29)

*The call to holiness*¹

IN LEVITICUS 19:2 WE HEAR GOD'S DIRECTIVE TO MOSES: 'Speak to the whole community of the sons of Israel and say to them: "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy"'. Previously, from the midst of a burning bush on the mountain of God, Moses had heard the words: 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob' (Exod 3:5-6a). There had followed a promise and a call: 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain' (Exod 3:12). Moses had been called to a *holy place* to be entrusted with a task: to lead the people out of Egypt. Now, these people are called to *be holy* because they, Israel, are also to be entrusted with a task: to be a sign unto the nations (cf Isai 55:4-5; Deut 26:19).

In these profoundly personal encounters an intimate transcendence addresses the lives of Moses and his people, transforming their perception of reality. Moses' experience of a *holy place* and Israel's call to be a *holy people* transforms their self-understanding and purpose. *Kedushah* (holiness), the quality of being separated for the name of the Lord, now becomes the regulative principle in their life. Called to be apart or distinct from, and so ever in the context of, all the other nations of the earth, they become a sign for all the others of the faithful saving love of God.

This call to be holy also connotes 'belonging to God', a relationship not won by their achievements or merits but offered as a free gift, a grace (from the Latin *gratia*): 'It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you . . .' (Deut 6:7, 8a). This gift of inestimable largesse

implies a consecration of their very being – a consecration with the responsibility to bear witness and to serve the nations and the earth which their God also calls ‘mine’ (cf Exod 19:5b).

In view of this call God enters into a Covenant with Israel, a Covenant which God proposes by recalling the ‘good news’ (*gospel*) of his great unconditional saving act: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did with the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself’ (Exod 19:4). This ‘good news’ of the power and tenderness of a God who saves and whose love is intimate and unconditional will continue to be told forth, to Israel and to us, through such words as: ‘Wondrously show your steadfast love . . . hide me in the shadow of your wings’ (Ps 17:7a, 8b). Rooted in this ‘gospel of grace’, God’s covenanting words with Israel continue: ‘Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a holy nation’ (Exod 19:5–6).

‘The Way’ of holiness

Israel’s call to holiness renews the ‘good news’ of God’s unconditional redeeming love which had promised to extend the blessing of Abraham throughout the entire world: ‘. . . in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed’ (Gen 12:3; cf Gen 18:18). But how is Israel to live this call? How is it to know *the Way*?

God responds to this implicit need by defining Israel’s *Way* to holiness. Through *Torah* (instruction, teaching, guidance),² God’s Word will instruct and guide the people in living this distinctive call. Given as a constitution to regulate what is and what is not to be done in the life of the nation, *Torah* is Israel’s delight and joy, for it marks out the *Way* to live every moment and each situation in its special love relationship with God. Following from the Covenant – which developments in rabbinic Judaism frequently designate as a *kettubah* (marriage contract) – *Torah*’s living Word is both ‘gospel’ and ‘law’.

When the people have assured Moses: ‘Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do’ (Exod 19:8b), God responds through the Words of the tablets of the Covenant.³ These Words, which serve as a seal of the love relationship initiated by God, begin not with ‘law’ but with the ‘good news’ of what God had already done for them long before they came to Sinai: ‘*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*’ (Exod 20:2). The first Word, the first foundation of the Covenant, is not what Israel must do, but what God has already done! The commandments which follow rest

within this proclamation of *hesed*, this faithful 'ontological love of the Creator for his work', this 'undeserved love' which may also go by the name of 'grace'.⁴ *Hesed* is the precious frame within which the 'laws' of the tablets are presented, so that ever after Israel will hear the words *I am the Lord your God* as God's signature on the Covenant of love.⁵

Moses later recalls to the people this giving of the Words of the tablets, in the context of an appeal that the nation not forget what they had personally witnessed and that they be faithful to God's laws. In the *Shema Yisrael* he declares to them the second foundation of the Covenant, the Oneness of God and Israel's undivided love and loyalty to God.⁶ These words of the *Shema* – which will eventually be regarded as the Jewish 'confession of faith' and become part of the prayer of every faithful Jew in Temple, synagogue and home – call on the people to return God's faithful, unconditional love with a love that involves the totality of their being and their life:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4–10)⁷

The directives of the *Shema* intimate two ways for Israel to express its love for God: to do and to hear. Later developments in Judaism will refer to these ways as 'duties of the limbs' and 'duties of the heart',⁸ the 'duties of the limbs' implying what the rabbis of post-Second Temple Judaism came to call *halakhah* (the way). Derived from the causative form of the verb *halak* (to walk, i.e., to make someone else walk, to lead, to guide), *halakhah* is that component of *Torah* which provides guidance through definitive rulings or commandments (*mitzvot*). It answers the questions 'what', 'when', and 'how' in Israel's call to holiness. *Aggadah* (to narrate) – the stories, hymns and explanations in *Torah* – provides the motivation and answers the heart's question 'why'.⁹ Thus, in rabbinic teaching, *Torah* eventually comes to designate the Pentateuch, the first section of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the entire corpus of sacred literature – the full and ongoing revelation of God to Israel.

These 'duties of the limbs and heart' are Israel's response to God's love for them, God's *ahavah*. *Ahavah*, the equivalent of the Greek *agape*, encompasses *tsedek* – the love Israel deserves as a function of the Covenant, *hesed* – the unconditional faithful love of the Creator for his work, and *rahamim* (derived from *rehem*, womb) – the unconditional, compassionate love of a parent for a child. *Hesed* and *rahamim* are gifts freely given, gifts of grace. This astounding love evokes in the people *yirat ha-romemut* – the awe or fear in the presence of the holy which is a necessary condition for a strong, sustaining love of God (cf Isai 6:1–5).¹⁰

Jesus and 'the Way'

Jesus, through whom the nations (Gentiles) came into the service of God, was a first-century Jew, a member of the people Israel. He was shaped by Israel's experience of God and he lived and taught from within its call to holiness, its Covenant and its *Way of Torah*. 'Jesus was and always remained a Jew . . . Jesus is fully a man of his time and environment – the Jewish Palestinian environment of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared.'¹¹

As a faithful Jew Jesus responded with personal intimacy to the God of *hesed* and *rahamim* by addressing God as *abba*. As a faithful Jew he was wholly devoted to God and God's *Way* of the Covenant, calling himself and all who would listen to him to be obedient from the heart to *Torah* as the express will of God.¹² His words 'Do this and you shall live' (Lk 10:28b), and 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Mt 11:29–30), indicate that Jesus apart from *Torah* is incomprehensible. As 'a man of his time and environment', Jesus understood *Torah* as the *yoke* God has provided for Israel, not as a burden, but as a means to make pulling the load (i.e., living the Covenant) more comfortable and efficient.¹³

When the apostolic witness to Jesus later tells his story, it does so in a manner which recapitulates the story of Israel. It uses language, persons and events of the Scripture of his people to tell the story of his life, his teaching and his purpose. God's *kavod* (glory) and indwelling among his people¹⁴ – 'The cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle' (Exod 40:34) – shapes the telling of the 'good news' imparted to Mary: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow' (Lk 1:35).¹⁵ Matthew's account of Jesus' family's flight into and return from Egypt reflects the Exodus, the very heart of Israel's 'good news'

of redemption. Jesus, the Torah-faithful Jew, 'comes wrapped in and inseparable from the Scriptures of his people'.¹⁶

The Judaism of Jesus' time and place tolerated great diversity. It was a complex reality in which Jesus and his followers were only one group among many engaged in vigorous disputes and polemics, each contending for the legitimacy of their interpretation of *Torah*, Judaism's central rallying point. Jesus' words about Law must therefore be understood in this complex and contentious context of an 'in-house' Jewish debate, in a milieu with which Jesus had a positive relationship, whose world-view and values he appropriated and to which he at times offered a passionate, prophetic critique.¹⁷

Paul, like Jesus, affirmed the 'good news' of God's covenantal promise to Israel. Paul remembered as well God's promise to Abraham about his descendants outside of Israel (the nations) who are also meant to share in God's righteousness:

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised? We say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.' . . . For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations.' (Rom 4:9, 16, 17a)

Serving the God of Israel (and of Jesus), Paul has received the special call to bring to the Gentiles the 'good news' that they are included in God's redeeming love, and that Christ crucified and resurrected is the event that reveals this love of God to the nations.

Paul speaks of 'the gospel of God', 'the gospel of Christ', and 'my gospel' – always with the assumption that the 'good news' already belongs to the Jewish people. His 'gospel', which is always God-centred, is primarily the 'good news' of God's inclusion of the Gentiles which was promised through Abraham and which is made manifest through Christ. The foundation stone of Paul's argument is that God keeps his promises (cf Rom 4:16). He asserts that Jews and Gentiles experience God's righteousness quite differently – Jews by God's faithfulness grounded in *Torah*, Gentiles by God's faithfulness through Christ (cf Rom 3:30). He asks that his fellow Jews who are made righteous through the Law accept that Gentiles are blessed with full access to the promise of God's boundless love through Christ.¹⁸

The way of supersession, replacement and contempt

The history of Christianity, however, witnesses to the sad reality that Jesus and Paul have not been understood and presented in *continuity* with the 'good news' of their people. For centuries Jesus has been presented as *outside* or set *over against* his people and his faith.¹⁹ In similar manner Christianity has misrepresented Paul's 'good news', interpreting his message of fulfilment to mean that the 'good news' for Gentiles through Christ has nullified God's covenant with those Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Christ.

These misrepresentations go back to various New Testament texts which emerged at different times as the followers of Jesus gradually separated themselves from Judaism. The newly emerging Church – which had been one Jewish movement in competition with other Jewish groups – in its process of self-definition, boundary delineation and membership was expressing its sentiments about this competition and about rival authority figures according to the convention of first-century polemic. Opinions about fidelity to *Torah* and standards for Gentile admission ranged widely in this complex amalgam of social forces which accompanied the birth, growth and separation of the new group. With time these negative, disjointed remarks, which were part of an in-house dynamic, were interpreted as referring to *outsiders*, to *them* in opposition to *us*. Included in these polemical misrepresentations were the following motifs: the Law enslaves people and is not meant for Christians; Jesus fulfilled what the prophets had said about him; the New Covenant has rendered the Old Covenant obsolete. With the patristic period (c. 150–600 CE) a very different social context resulted in the combination, transmutation and systematization of these negative themes into a comprehensive anti-Jewish theology. This consolidation occurred while foundational beliefs regarding Christology, biblical interpretation and Christian self-identity were being defined. The earlier anti-Jewish motifs were now amplified into: the strict Law of Moses, which was always intended to be temporary, was given to the Jews by God in an effort to control Jewish sinfulness; God revealed to the prophets – who chastised the Jews for their sinfulness and hardheartedness – the divine plan to send Jesus who would bring the new Law of love and mercy; the true meaning of the Hebrew Bible lies in reading it in reference to Christ and the Church. Further elaboration of this in the social context of the Middle Ages engendered lasting contempt and eventually resulted in such negative decrees as those of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) which signalled the institution of such dubious measures as the creation of ghettos.²⁰

Next to the charge of deicide, this Christian theology of supersession and replacement has been expressed most frequently and forcefully in relation to Israel's infidelity in the desert where, just as Moses was receiving the Covenant *kettubah*, the people were reverting to infidelity before the molten calf (cf Exod 32:1–4ff). Beginning with the early second-century *Epistle of Barnabas* which stated, 'And their covenant was broken, until the covenant with the beloved Jesus was sealed in our hearts in the hope of faith in him' (4:7–8), one of the most 'graceful' texts in the Bible became the most tragically distorted and abused. For centuries Christianity failed to see Moses approaching God on behalf of the people, appealing for mercy and refusing to agree to a 'replacement theology' in response to God's remonstrance: 'Now, let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation' (Exod 30:10). Standing firm on what God has already done for his people in bringing them out of Egypt and on God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses refuses to become the progenitor of a 'new Israel' which would replace the old apostate Israel. He staunchly defends the credibility and faithfulness of God, risking his own destiny and that of the people (cf Exod 32:31–32), though not without reprimanding the people and calling them to *teshuvah* (turning, repentance). God then commands Moses to hew new tablets with the *same* words as the old, renewing the *same* Covenant and presenting the *same* Way to a people who had fallen but who have returned.²¹ This demonstration of God's *ahavah* – God's faithfulness, compassion, mercy, love and grace – is a profound expression of the 'law as gospel'. It illustrates as well the role of *teshuvah* (the equivalent of the Greek *metanoia*) in the Way of holiness.

The way of the enduring covenant

After the terrible Holocaust of European Jewry, perpetrated by the Nazis in the midst of universal indifference, the relevance for the Church of repentance is not to be demonstrated. Were it not for such contrition, one could say that the extermination camps have not only cremated six million Jews but also Christianity itself . . . The Holocaust has ushered in a new era. Its initial act which is also its 'setting in life' and its *raison d'être* has been the most daring attempt ever to kill God in the person of his representatives . . . Christianity has since been compelled to proceed to a painful soul searching, indeed to an excruciating search for identity . . . Christianity is only authentic

when repenting, when becoming a living act of contrition for the crimes of humanity against humanity, ultimately against God.²²

This awareness compelled conscientious Christian leaders in 1947 to convoke a conference in Seelisberg, Switzerland and motivated Pope John XXIII to insist that Vatican Council II address Christianity's relationship with the people and faith of Judaism. They sought a path of *metanoia*, a return of Christianity to a God whose 'good news' expresses faithful unconditional love through both *Torah* and Jesus. They sought a new Christian self-understanding and self-definition in relation to that good olive tree on to which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles (cf Rom 11:17–24).

Already in 1947 the Ten Points of Seelisberg urged the Christian world to:

- remember that One God speaks to us all through the Old and New Testament (no 1);
- remember that the fundamental commandment of Christianity, to love God and one's neighbour, proclaimed already in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, is binding upon both Christians and Jews in all human relations, without any exception (no 4);
- avoid distorting or misrepresenting biblical or postbiblical Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity (no 5).

Vatican II's *Nostra aetate*, documents from the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, papal letters, exhortations and teachings call for the promotion of serious theological research and reflection and urge the practical implementation of such teachings and guidelines as:

[The Church] professes that all who believe in Christ, Abraham's sons according to faith (cf Gal 3:7), are included in the same patriarch's call . . . [She] cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the ancient covenant . . . [A]ccording to the apostle, the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for He does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues (cf Rom 11:28–29).²³

The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition founded upon it must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no

appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf Deut 6:5; Lv 19:18; Mt 22:34–40).²⁴

The past, however, does not loosen its grip easily. The personal and collective Christian memory and understanding has been permeated, for centuries, with concepts, images and vocabulary which portray the 'God of the Old Testament' (and, hence, of the Jews) as a God of wrath and anger moved by justice and inspiring fear, and the 'God of Jesus' (and, hence, of Christians) as a God of tenderness and mercy moved by love and inspiring trust. That the transformation initiated by courageous post-Holocaust Christian leaders is in process but still incomplete is vividly illustrated in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which makes serious efforts to break with traditional teachings of contempt and to affirm the 'spiritual bonds' linking Jews and Christians and the 'great spiritual patrimony' common to both. However, it still retains, especially in its presentation of Law, expressions and theological concepts deeply at variance with this reshaping of Christian self-understanding. In nos 1961 to 1983 the effect of sharp contrasts, intensified by the retention of the term 'Old Law' which is all too easily used and understood in a pejorative manner, serves to perpetuate supersessionism and a polarized, exclusivist understanding of Law and Love. Referring to the 'Old Law' as *the first stage, imperfect, working through fear of punishment, external, temporal, ritual and juridical, suited for the condition of a servant*, the Catechism presents the 'New Law' as that which *fulfils, refines, surpasses and leads the Old Law to its perfection*, as *the interior law of charity which makes us act out of . . . love . . . rather than from fear*, as *a law of freedom which sets us free to pass from the condition of a servant . . . to that of a friend*.²⁵

The way of *metanoia* and conversion in Christianity's effort to return and to seek a new self-understanding in relation to the people and faith of Judaism, only recently begun, takes effort, grace and time. May Christianity through its call to holiness and its trust in the God who does not revoke the Covenant – with Israel or with the followers of Jesus – help to show the way and proclaim, to a world in dire need, the 'good news' of God's faithful, unconditional, redeeming love already so marvellously manifest at Sinai and in the desert.

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NOTES

1 This presentation draws on several strands of tradition in the Pentateuch. Though these sources issued at different times and places and reflect changes in the national and religious life of Israel, they all attest to this motif.

2 The Hebrew word *Torah* is considered to be derived from *arah* (to teach; to throw [lots for divine guidance by oracle]).

3 Cf Gören Larssen, *Bound for freedom: the Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999), p 138. Larssen notes: 'Neither the Bible nor later Jewish tradition speaks of the tablets of "the law" or of ten "commandments". Instead, the terms "the tablets of the covenant" or "the tablets of the testimony" and "the ten words" are used.'

4 Cf David Blumenthal, 'Love: Jewish view' in *A dictionary of the Jewish–Christian dialogue*, ed Leon Klenicki and Geoffrey Wigoder (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), pp 119–121.

5 Cf Larssen, *op. cit.*, p 140.

6 Cf *Shema Yisrael: the three portions of the Shema* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1982), p 14.

7 The entire *Shema* is a set of three biblical citations: Deut 6:4–8; Deut 11:13–21; Num 15:37–41, frequently referred to as: 'Accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of heaven', 'Accepting the yoke of the Commandments' and 'The section on tassels'. Cf *My people's prayer book: traditional prayers, modern commentaries*, vol 1, The Sh'ma and its blessings, ed Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997).

8 Cf Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish theology* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1973), pp 154–155.

9 Cf Larssen, *op. cit.*, pp 191–193.

10 Cf Blumenthal, *op. cit.*, pp 119–121; cf Jacobs, *op. cit.*, pp 181–182.

11 Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, 24 June 1985, III, 12.

12 Cf Paul M. van Buren, *A theology of the Jewish–Christian reality*, Part 2: *A Christian theology of the people Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), pp 230–231, and Part 3: *Christ in context* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), pp 140–144.

13 Cf *Christ in context*, p 141.

14 In the Talmud the rabbis derive the term *Shekhinah* (divine presence) from such biblical verses as Exod 25:8 – 'Build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them' – and Exod 40:34. It is used to speak of God's 'dwelling' in the midst of Israel in the sense of the manifestation of the divine presence in the life of the people, the divine immanence in creation, and the joy experienced by individuals through fulfilling divine commandments. Cf R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (eds), *The Oxford dictionary of the Jewish religion* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p 629.

15 Cf Bertold Klapper, 'Fellow heirs and partakers of the promise: an alternative for Christian substitution-theology and -Christology' in *Jews and Christians: rivals or partners for the Kingdom of God: in search of an alternative for the theology of substitution*, ed Didier Pollefeyt (Louvain: Peeters Press; W. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p 60.

16 Paul M. van Buren, 'Torah, Israel, Jesus, Church – today', paper presented at the Christian-Jewish Fall Dialogue at the Synagogue of the Beth Tzedec Congregation, Calgary, Canada, 21 November 1993. <http://www.jcrelations.com/article11/vburen.htm>.

17 Cf Audrey Doetzel, 'Law and love in Judaism and Christianity: the teaching ministries and Christian conversion' in *Removing the anti-Judaism from the New Testament*, ed Howard Clark Kee and Irvin J. Borowsky (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute/World Alliance, 1998), pp 109–111.

18 Cf Sidney G. Hall III, *Christian anti-Semitism and Paul's theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), Ch 5, 'Romans: the inclusive promise of God', pp 85–130. (Paul, who was not a systematic theologian and who wrote with great passion as he responded to questions and crises of the day, left some gaps in the expression of his thought. Scholars today agree that classical interpretations of Paul need re-evaluation and revision. Though this work is still in its early stages and clear consensus has not yet emerged, it is abundantly clear that interpretations of Paul which simplistically contrast Judaism with Christianity and Law with gospel, love and grace are erroneous and must be avoided. Cf John T. Pawlikowski, 'A revolution in understanding', *New Theology Review* vol 7, no 2 (1994), pp 3–5.)

19 Cf James P. Scullion, 'Pastoral implications of a Jewish Jesus and a Jewish Paul', *New Theology Review* vol 7, no 2 (1994), pp 21–22. Scullion presents a clear and succinct synthesis of three ways of correlating Jesus and early Judaism: Jesus *versus*, Jesus *outside*, and Jesus *within*.

20 Cf Philip A. Cunningham, *Education for Shalom: religion textbooks and the enhancement of the Catholic and Jewish relationship* (Philadelphia: The American Interfaith Institute, 1995), Ch 1: 'The New Testament origins of anti-Judaic themes'; Ch 2: 'The patristic systematization of anti-Judaic themes', pp 3–32.

21 Cf Larssen, *op. cit.*, Ch 13: 'The Fall and the New Covenant', pp 245–267.

22 André Lacocque, 'Repentance: Christian view' in *A dictionary of the Jewish-Christian dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), pp 162–163.

23 Ecumenical Council Vatican II, *Nostra aetate* 4, 28 October 1965.

24 Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and suggestions for implementing the Conciliar declaration Nostra aetate* (4), 1 December 1974, III.

25 Cf Doetzel, *op. cit.*, pp 104–105.