

Our Jewish problem: Genesis 32:22-30; Romans 9:1-5

The first covenant holds forever.

by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#) in the [July 17, 2002](#) issue

The relationship of the church to Israel and of Christians to Jews has the character of a sibling rivalry gone disastrously awry. The belief that Christians have “superseded” Israel as the chosen of God—that we have replaced the Jews as the apple of God’s eye, that we are the singular recipients of God’s election—has led, in the extreme, to the Holocaust. It has also kept the church from an honest examination of its flawed relationship with God.

To be fair, supersessionism has come by its story line honestly. “That the God of Israel tends to favor the late-born over the first-born sons is a point of venerable antiquity among Christian theologians,” writes Jewish theologian Jon Levenson. Paul believed that “the grace of the choosing God still attached itself in some measure to Israel according to the flesh.” Yet he was able to bring about an astonishing reversal of the Jew and gentile situation. “Without such precedents as the partial dispossession of Ishmael by Isaac and of Esau by Jacob . . . Paul and the church’s partial dispossession of the Jews could hardly have been conceived,” says Levenson. Christian supersessionism is indebted to the Jewish foundational story even as it claims to supersede that story.

As a well-educated Jew, Paul knew that God chooses leaders who will carry God’s promise into the future. Before the birth of Christ and in the history of Israel, God surprised human expectations and conventions in God’s choices. For Israel, this had to do with which branch of the bloodline received the nod. Often a younger sibling was chosen instead of an older one. As a Christian, Paul believed that although Jesus had come from Israel, he had to be rejected by Israel as Messiah so that God’s new covenant of grace could be for gentiles as well as Jews. After all, if the religious leaders of the day had seen the coming of Israel’s Messiah in the birth, life and teachings of Jesus, there would have been no gospel to the gentiles. The story of God’s covenant with Israel would have remained a covenant with the people who claimed Abraham as their father.

But then comes a question: In choosing to be in relationship with the likes of us, has God rejected Israel? Does our covenant with God make the first covenant null and void? Paul responds, “By no means!” He argues that the Jews’ rejection of Jesus was God’s will for the sake of the reconciliation of the world. God has hardened the heart of Israel “until the full number of gentiles come in” to the covenant. God has made Israel “enemies of God for [our] sake,” he writes, “but as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their ancestors, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” In other words, God does not go back on God’s promises. The first covenant holds forever, giving us the common hope that in the fullness of God’s time we will all be branches growing out of the one root of faith—gentiles as the wild olive shoot grafted on through Christ, and Israel as a natural branch.

In the meantime, we are left to sort out our relationship with the firstborn sibling of this God—the same God we know in Jesus Christ—who keeps covenants. If Paul’s take on salvation history bears any relation to God’s purposes, and if Christians are really intent upon hastening the day of the Lord, then we had better get to work—not on converting the Jewish people, but on reaching the gentiles out there who are religiously having coffee at Starbucks on Sunday morning. We should leave God’s relationship with Israel to God.

I have loved the church all of my life, but I am saddened and sickened when the church cannot seem to understand this part of its mission. We say we believe the gospel ought not be kept from anyone, but what we really believe is that we Christians have been given the corner on true religion and that we alone can mediate the relationship between God and humanity. I have bet my life on the truth that in Jesus Christ the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, but I can no longer quietly accept the conviction of many of my fellow Christians that God’s revelation in Christ gives us a reason to judge Israel’s relationship with God as inadequate. So with Paul, I say of my community of faith: I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

Perhaps that is why Karl Barth’s commentary on the Book of Romans speaks to me in a way Barth most likely would not have intended as I have struggled to make sense of my presbytery’s decision to establish a new Presbyterian church for “completed Jews” in a Jewish neighborhood of Philadelphia. Of the church’s failures, Barth says:

Only one thing can cause us *great sorrow and unceasing pain*, and that is whether the theme of the Church does anything more than disclose the deceitfulness of men. Does it also disclose the Truth of God? . . . Must we . . . whisper stammeringly that the Church of Jacob is established in eternity? Assuredly not: our duty is to take seriously to heart the known tribulation of the Church, and to wrestle with God, the God of Jacob: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."

I realize, when I see our failure to give a theologically thoughtful witness, that God's purposes are especially revealed in the events that uncover the church's brokenness and unfaithfulness.