Nearest kin: R. Kendall Soulen on Christians and Jews

by David Heim in the June 12, 2013 issue

PHOTO BY Allison Rutland Soulen

R. Kendall Soulen, who teaches theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., has focused much of his work on Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations. His book The God of Israel and Christian Theology *attempts to restate basic Christian convictions in a way that is not supersessionist or triumphalist in relation to Jews. His other books include* Abraham's Promise *(coedited with Michael Wyschogrod) and, most recently,* The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity.

Over the past few decades, many theologians and church leaders in mainline Protestant churches have sought to overturn Christian supersessionism—overturn, that is, the tradition of believing that God's covenant with the Jews has been superseded by the work of Christ, thereby rendering the faith of Jews either irrelevant or pernicious. How do you judge the importance of that movement for Christian theology?

It’s important because it’s about what we think redemption in Christ looks like. Does redemption mean that Christ gives us the favored place at God’s table while kicking some other poor wretch out into the street? Or does Christ’s table have room for old-timers and newcomers alike? The truth is Christians have mostly operated out of the first picture in our relationship with Jews. That’s done damage to Jews, of course, but it’s also distorted who we are as the church. Supersessionism is like a submerged resentment toward our nearest kin that infects all our social relationships. That’s why I think the work of overcoming supersessionism is so important. And by the way, it’s not only mainstream Protestants who have been doing it. It’s Catholics and evangelicals, too.

Many Christians—certainly many evangelical Christians—would say that confessing Christ as Lord is essential for salvation and for being at Christ’s table, and therefore Jews are excluded from the table. How would you respond?

It’s an objection that needs to be taken seriously. Paul himself raises it in Romans 9–11, where he discusses his kinfolk who have rejected the gospel. Paul concludes with a stern warning. The surprise is that the warning is not directed against Jews who reject the gospel, but against gentiles who presume to act as Jesus’ bouncers. That’s a bad idea, Paul thinks, because everyone who is now an “insider” was once an outsider saved by the grace of God. And even those who are presently “outsiders” to the gospel remain the objects of God’s love, not because they deserve it, but because God’s covenant faithfulness is stronger and more encompassing than human sin. It’s a warning the church still needs to pay attention to.

How do you judge the success of the antisupersessionist effort?

Substantial but incomplete. The church’s traditional theology of Judaism grew up over many generations, and I think it will take just as long to live into a more faithful alternative. Still, we have come a long way. In 1938, Pope Pius XI commissioned an encyclical letter to condemn racism in the wake of Hitler’s rise to power. It was never promulgated because of Pius’s death, but the unpublished draft gives us an idea of what many Christians believed at the time. The section on anti-Semitism charged “the Jewish nation” with collective responsibility for Jesus’ death, declared that Jews were doomed “to perpetually wander over the face of the earth” and advised the church to be on guard against “the spiritual dangers to which contact with the Jews can expose souls.” Compare that to the prayer that Pope John Paul II

left at the Western Wall in Jerusalem in 2000. It read: “God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer. And asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant.” That’s quite a difference.

Can you offer an example of a Christian reading of an Old Testament text that is supersessionist—and then give a nonsupersessionist reading?

Sure. In Jeremiah 31:31–34, the Lord promises to make a “new covenant” that “will not be like the covenant that I made” when he brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt. The Israelites broke the old covenant, but the Lord will write the “new covenant” on “the heart.” A supersessionist reading will interpret this as though it referred to two different peoples or communities. Jews are the people of the old covenant, Christians are the people of the new. A nonsupersessionist reading will notice that the new covenant is between the same two parties as the old: the Lord and “the house of Israel.” The new covenant is the renewal and expansion of an old relationship, not a divorce and a remarriage. In the letter to the Hebrews, the author says the new covenant is better than the old, which is passing away. But like Jeremiah, the author of Hebrews thinks of the new covenant as an expression of the Lord’s fidelity to an ancient relationship.

The Apostles’ Creed makes no mention of Israel, and in the Nicene Creed, Israel appears only via a reference to Israel’s prophets in the section on the Holy Spirit (“who has spoken by the prophets”). For the sake of argument, is there a line you would want to insert in the creeds to stress the proper place within Christian confession of God’s revelation to Israel? How would it read?

Well, I’m in favor of writing new creeds, not modifying old ones. But it is interesting that the first article of the Apostles’ Creed has just one clause, while the second and third each have several. So for the sake of argument I would add two clauses: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, whose image is borne by every child of Eve and Adam, and whose steadfast love for Israel and the nations is without end.”

In *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* you refer to God as the divine consummator—that is, one who works to bring human life to its consummation or fulfillment. Through creation and through God's covenants with Israel, God seeks to consummate a relationship with humanity. Why refer to consummation rather than redemption?

Because the importance of consummation is more frequently overlooked. Consummation is a way of talking about what God redeems *for*. It's God's overarching purpose for human life. Some biblical realities figure chiefly in God's work as redeemer, such as Noah's ark. Once the flood is over, the ark can disappear. Other biblical realities are intrinsic to God's original goal for creaturely life, such as life in friendship with God and one another. Such realities have no "expiration date." They are destined to be deepened and glorified forever. I think God's election of Israel as a blessing to the nations belongs in the latter category. It is not only or even chiefly a way of rescuing the human family from sin, although it is that. It is even more basically about God drawing the whole human family, Jew and gentile, into a deeper friendship with God and one another.

Does this emphasis make God's work of redemption a subcategory of consummation?

No, in the sense that God's decision to redeem remains free and gracious in its own right. But yes, in the sense that God redeems for the sake of God's desire for consummation. Consummation is the overarching plot of Christian faith, and redemption is the central subplot.

This way of putting things is not unique to me, by the way. Most Christian theologians would agree that the reality of evil and our need for redemption are not necessary ingredients in God's original purposes for creation. God forbid. The difference is that many theologians let God's work as consummator fade from view after Gen. 1–2, whereas I believe it remains important for interpreting the Bible as a whole.

The Christian doctrine of the atonement, at least in a traditional understanding, posits a breach between God and humanity that can be bridged only through Christ's work on the cross. Do your nonsupersessionist theology and your references to God as consummator modify that assertion in any way?

I think it would be more accurate to say that traditional views of the atonement (e.g., Athanasius, Anselm, Luther, Barth, etc.) posit a breach that God bridges via the totality of Christ's person and work, including Christ's incarnation, resurrection and ascension, and not just via his suffering and death on the cross. If you can accept that revision, then the answer to your question is no, I don't want to modify tradition. What I do want to modify is our understanding of what Christ's "at-one-ing" means for the relationship between Jew and gentile. I think it means that Christ rescues this relationship from mutually annihilating curse and re-creates it as a relationship of mutual blessing that is a foretaste of the kingdom of God. I don't think it means that Christ rescues us from the relationship itself by dissolving or rejecting Israel, as Christians have sometimes thought.

You have said that the Old Testament and God's history with Israel are constitutive of Christian faith and should not be construed as simply background elements to Christian faith or preludes to faith. Can you give an example of how this conviction might shape a particular sermon or teaching or church practice?

The New Testament is wonderful at portraying the human condition "up close and personal," as in the story of the woman with a hemorrhage, and again at a cosmic level, as with Paul's discourse about resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. But a lot of life takes place somewhere between these two extremes, at what we might call the "middle range" of life. I'm thinking about realities like interfamily relations, economics, politics, battles, victory, defeat, migration, drought, childlessness, jealousy, theft, lust, murder, childbirth, betrayal, reconciliation. The Old Testament won't let us forget that God wants to consummate and redeem this middle range, too.

A little story: At Pope John Paul II's funeral, during the passing of the peace, Israeli president Moshe Katsav shook hands with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and Iranian president Mohammad Khatami. Later Syria's state news agency issued a statement saying the handshake was a mere formality that had no political significance. But I think the gesture did have political significance, however unintentional. It was a sign of what the gospel aims to achieve at the middle range of human affairs, namely, reconciliation among earthly enemies. I think it's precisely the Old Testament that helps keep this dimension of the New Testament alive.

In a sense, the church was defined by the apostle Paul as that assembly where God has put Jews and gentiles together in Christ—without erasing their distinctive identities. Paul assumed that Jewish Christians would retain their distinct identity as followers of the Torah commandments. What does it mean for the church that it exists today—and has for centuries—with a near total absence of Torah-observing Jews in its midst?

Jesus was a Torah-observing Jew, and Christians believe that he still lives in our midst. The same goes for most of the apostles, and they belong to the great cloud of witnesses that accompanies the church on its pilgrimage through time. So in that sense the Christian community has always been and always will be a fellowship of gentile and Torah-observant Jew, whether it gathers on the Nebraska prairie or in Papua, New Guinea. You could say it's part of our ecclesiastical constitution.

But when the church lacks Torah-observant Jews besides Christ and the apostles, it becomes easier to forget this aspect of who we are. We think of ourselves as a homogenous community of Christians, a "third race" that goes beyond Israel and the nations and makes them obsolete. In reality, of course, the church remains gentile, but it falsely thinks of itself as generically human or generically Christian per se. And that can be a dangerous thing.

Would it be a good thing if there were more Jewish (Torah-observant) Christians? What would this mean for Jewish-Christian relations? Wouldn't it make those relations more contentious in many ways?

Let me start with your last question: yes, it would be make things more contentious, at least in the short term. Traditionally, church and synagogue were like two glaciers that met in an Alpine meadow. Nothing could grow in between them, because they completely monopolized the real estate. Now, the two communities have receded somewhat, and all sorts of things are sprouting where before there was just ice. Some of those seedlings will disappear, some will adapt and thrive. I think messianic Judaism is one of those seedlings, and time will tell what becomes of it. I myself think that if it does flourish (and I hope it will), it has the potential to strengthen and renew both church and synagogue. In the meantime, though, I think gentile Christians need to take a long time-out from trying to dictate the affairs of Jewish Christians, whether messianic or not.

What difference does the existence of the state of Israel as a homeland for the covenant people of God make for Christians as they relate to Jews? Put another way: What significance, if any, does the state of Israel have for Christians as they affirm God's ongoing covenant with Jews?

I think it's a mistake to invest the state of Israel with theological significance per se. What has theological significance is the presence or absence of peace, justice and mutual blessing between all the families of the earth, and that includes Israel and its neighbors, both near and far. For centuries, Jews have lived in a world that has many sovereign homelands for Christians and Muslims. Now, Christians and Muslims need to find a way to live peaceably in a world with one homeland for Jews. Can Christians and Muslims rise to that challenge? I think that's the theological test our communities face. Jews face a challenge, too, of course—of exercising national sovereignty in a way that makes possible a peaceable and flourishing Palestine. Might Christians, Jews and Muslims learn from each other, from our respective histories of successes and failures, about how this can be done in our age? I think we can, with God's help.

The reference to homeland raises a further question about the land. A specific bit of geography is important in Jews' understandings of their life with God more than any specific land is for Christians. How should a Christians understand this difference?

Is it really the case that Christians around the globe are less concerned with specific bits of geography than Jews are? Or is it just easier for us to take our relationship to "our" bits for granted in a way that Jews cannot? Judaism's relationship to the land is indeed unique, partly because the scriptures teach that the land belongs first not to the people, king or state but to God. But from a biblical point of view, the same is really true of all lands. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." Judaism forces Jews to reflect routinely on what it means to live faithfully in a land that belongs not to them but to God. I think Christians would benefit from more reflection along those lines.

Is there any possible theological downside to the antisupersessionist movement for Christians—or any caution lights you would post?

All theological movements have potential downsides. A danger that has faced many worthy theological initiatives of the past several decades—I'm thinking not only of postsupersessionism, but of feminist theology, liberation theology, postcolonialism,

and the like—is that their sense of spiritual and moral urgency has sometimes led them to give up too quickly on the historic commitments of creedal Christianity. But it’s also dangerous to confuse fidelity to the gospel with the repristination of tradition and a refusal to repent and rethink. There’s a lot of that on the scene today, too, I’m afraid. The theological sweet spot is when discerning the signs of the times leads toward a deeper and more robust comprehension of the christological and trinitarian heart of Christian faith. I think that theologians who heed Paul’s warning in Romans 11 that Israel remains God’s beloved, too, are more apt to hit that sweet spot than theologians who continue to ignore it.