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# The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on a Christian-Jewish Dialogue

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If you strive to be a competent reader of the Bible, you will want to get your hands on this volume. Gunn delivers a penetrating reading of the story of Lot at Sodom (Genesis 19; pp. 178—192). Surprise and delight await you with insights for teaching and preaching generated by the varied methods. Students in my seminary classes have found this book both stimulating and challenging, even though some chapters are not as helpful as others (e.g. Form Criticism).

Errors are few. "Son of my father" should read "Son of my people" (p. 186) and there is a typo on p. 178, (t)his daughter.

The act of reading and the reader's imagination are taking on a new prominence in biblical studies. Is reading the Bible like a picnic in which the biblical authors bring the words and you (the reader) bring the meaning?

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## **The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on a Christian-Jewish Dialogue**

Norbert Lohfink  
New York: Paulist Press, 1991  
96 pp.

Improvement in Jewish-Christian relations stands out as a bright spot in a century filled with unbelievable violence and suffering. But it was not until Christians acknowledged the full horror of the mass extermination of Jews during the Nazi period that representative bodies of Christians began to express strong and concrete interest in making amends for past wrongs and offering assurances of a better future.

Beginning with the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, dozens of ecumenical and denominational statements concerning Jewish-Christian relations have been issued. Among the most recent is *The Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community*, adopted 18 April 1994, which repudiates "Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews". It also deplors the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day. "Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred, moreover, we express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people," says the ELCA declaration.

This may seem like a long step for some Christians, but is it enough? Can one renounce the causes and forms of anti-Semitism on moral grounds without going on to a theological position which gives full recognition to the reality of Judaism as a living religion? Is it possible to declare respect

for Judaism and the Jewish people while at the same time maintaining a traditional theology of rejection and substitution which issues in a program of mission and conversion?

This question has in recent years led many Christian scholars to a re-assessment of biblical sources. Central to their probings has been the biblical concept of *covenant*. Several theories have emerged: "one covenant theories" in opposition to "two covenant theories", and recently even "several covenant theories". Lutherans may be most familiar with the "double covenant" views expressed by Krister Stendahl who believes "that we can now see how Paul was the forerunner of Maimonides and Rosenzweig in their recognition of Christianity as a way of God to and for the Gentiles" (Krister Stendahl, "Widening the Perspectives of Jewish Christian Relations," *Face to Face*, I [Winter/Spring 1976] p. 18, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, New York).

Stimulated by the emerging debate, Norbert Lohfink, a Roman Catholic biblical scholar in Old Testament Studies at the University of Frankfurt, Germany, argues that Christians and Jews are united in a single covenant that is acknowledged and accepted in two distinctly different manners. And if this is so, says Lohfink, Christians and Jews dare not speak in ways that deny each other's chosenness as God's instruments for the salvation (rescue) of a world which is not in order.

In support of his thesis, Lohfink provides fresh insights into a number of related scriptural "covenant texts". Among them is 2 Corinthians 3:14, the only direct mention of "old covenant" in the New Testament. Most readers, says Lohfink, assume that the old must yield to the new and so they read 2 Corinthians 3:14 in that light. But in this case Lohfink supports Luther's translation which does not assume that the old covenant is replaced, but that it is the veil covering it "which discontinues in Christ" so that the splendour of the "old covenant" is revealed anew.

In the case of Jeremiah (31:31-34), Lohfink asserts that the promise of a "new covenant" was "fulfilled with the return from exile and the rise of the new temple community around Jerusalem" and that the well known penitential Psalm (51:12), "Create a pure heart in me, O God" shows that "the new heart, loyal to the torah, as a new creation of God, was, at the time, available on request to the sinner who repented" (p. 52). In other words, Jeremiah's "new covenant" is not another "covenant" but "the fuller and more lasting actualization of what was given of old" (p. 48); yet which "at the same time remains open for an eschatological-christological fulfilment" (p. 52).

This little monograph is a gem. Biblical insights abound. But its greatest contribution lies in Lohfink's final challenge. In the future, Jewish-Christian dialogue ought to focus on torah rather than covenant, for it is torah that constitutes the "new covenant" ("I will set my torah within them and write it on their hearts", Jeremiah 31:33). This, he maintains, is all the more crucial in our times because of how Christians have often mistreated the Pauline teaching on law and gospel by pitting one against the other.

Torah is salvation in concrete form, its materialization, its penetration into the density of society with all that means. Because torah in the "new covenant" is the same as in the covenant of the exodus from Egypt, it can, so far as it is present in our world in two ways, ultimately be only one torah, God's world confronting the world societies structured out of sin... (p. 96).

This provocative paragraph alone is worth the cost of the book. One cannot read it without recognizing the question it poses for those who would make of Christianity something that concerns merely the individual, the interior life, and the beyond.

If there is any criticism, it is only that everything is presented in a nascent, almost naive manner without polemics. There are no footnotes, no supporting references, no complete developments. Throughout, the reader is left with a host of surprises that call for further investigation. But isn't this capacity to stimulate thought precisely what makes any theological book *good*?

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## **The Oracles Against Babylon in Jeremiah 50–51. A Horror Among the Nations**

David J. Reimer

San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993

This is a slightly revised version of Reimer's 1989 doctoral thesis at Oxford. It retains nagging features of the genre but is filled with interesting and provocative ideas.

The Preface (pp. iii–vii) summarizes the drift of the book and is worth reading. The Introduction (pp. 1–10) retraces some of the same ground to situate it in the history of research, but leaves the reader a little deflated by stressing the limitations imposed on the thesis. The thesis itself has four parts that are divided into chapters, not for any thematic reasons, but mainly, it seems, to produce segments of proportionate length.

The first part treats "Poetry and Structure in Jeremiah 50–51". The first chapter ("The Problem of Method in Hebrew Poetry", pp. 13–26) points out that, since the structure is not marked by formulaic introductions and conclusions, and since the text gives the impression of having grown by accretion, the analysis will be limited to lines and the minimal units composed of lines, where lines are defined by rhythm (sound patterns), syntax (word order) and semantics, and units by the coherence of lines. The second and third chapters are relatively detailed analyses of