

REVIEW

Darrell Jodock, Ed.

*Covenantal Conversations:
Christians in Dialogue with Jews and Judaism*

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), softcover, x+222 pp.

Reviewed by Adam Gregerman, Institute for Christian-Jewish Studies

This book, a study of topics in Jewish-Christian relations by Lutheran scholars, is not strictly speaking a scholarly contribution to the field, but rather a distillation of the work of scholars of Bible, rabbinics, Jewish thought, and religious history. By design, it is not meant as a presentation of new interpretations of texts or issues, though these are occasionally found. Rather, it is for educated lay persons, seminarians, and clergy who have a basic familiarity with the Bible and theology and seek to learn about the main issues in Jewish-Christian relations. With this limited goal in mind, it is a useful, often insightful, if sometimes uneven work that lives up to the editor's own standard: to provide a "concise background that equips Christians to deal with questions about Judaism" (4).

The book is structured around "Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations," eight statements, each a few paragraphs long, issued in 2002 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ECLA). Each Point is dealt with in a separate chapter: "Judaism Then and Now"; "Covenants Old and New"; "Law and Gospel"; "Promise and Fulfillment"; "Difficult Texts: Interpreting New Testament Images of Jews and Judaism"; "Jewish Concern for the Land of Israel"; "Healing the World and Mending the Soul: Understanding *Tikkun Olam*"; and "Christians and Jews in the Context of World Religions." Because the Points are so succinct and the topics so complex, it is difficult to imagine that one could organize a discussion around them alone, and this book is therefore a welcome complement to the original text.

The chapters are written by Lutheran scholars with long involvement in Jewish-Christian relations and present elaborations of the ideas in each Point. They are followed by brief responses by other scholars, usually Jewish, but, oddly, sometimes by Christians. However, these responses are very short, and the respondents seem strangely hesitant to offer substantive criticism; one imagines this chapter-and-response structure sounded better in theory than it works in practice.

While it can be difficult to generalize about a collection of essays, it is possible to offer broad observations. The authors' gracious, learned discussions of Judaism and their optimism about improvements in Jewish-Christian relations are major strengths of this book. In a sharp break with centuries of Christian (mis)representations of Judaism, all recognize that Judaism continued to develop after the biblical period, and, importantly, all agree that the Jews' covenantal relationship with God is ongoing. Breaking with supersessionism, authors devote attention to this topic, seeking to affirm, in different ways, a new Christian covenant alongside an older Jewish covenant. Their analyses, building on the work of earlier scholars, are rich and sure to provoke discussion, as they survey interpretations of complex texts, such as Hebrews

and Paul's letters. I imagine one could organize a lively study group comparing their different alternatives to supersessionism, for example.

Not only do all the authors strive to interpret Judaism on its own terms by relying on Jewish sources, they have also chosen topics of importance to Jews. They avoid an overemphasis on topics such as messianism or eschatology (historically less central to Jews) in favor of topics such as covenant, land, and Law. At the same time, they write for a Christian audience, also including, for example, discussions of Jesus and Jewish messianism (e.g. 66-70), Christian views of sacred space/land (e.g. 102, 111-12, 156), and Christian involvement in the Middle East (e.g. 148-53, 162-64). Treatment of the controversial issue of Israel, addressed in both a two-part chapter and a case study, is especially well done. All readers, regardless of their own sympathies, should applaud the self-consciously cautious efforts by Karla Suomala, John Stendahl, and Peter Pettit to describe fairly and fully Jewish attachment to the land, the rights and concerns of the Palestinians, and possible roles for American Christians. They discuss the need for precise language on all sides (with examples); the strengths and weaknesses of Christian theological approaches (especially liberation theology); and the reasons why Christians should be supportive of Israel, though not uncritical. Jewish discomfort with Christian involvement in Middle East politics is mentioned, but, to my mind, too quickly dismissed in the case study, in favor of an ideal presentation of the church as simply "a concerned advocate for peace" (153).

There are some weaknesses, such as repetition, that could have been eliminated with further editing. Certain topics, such as the Pharisees and later the rabbis, naturally arise in different chapters, but nearly identical points are repeatedly made (e.g. 12, 18, 52, 86, 95-96). A related weakness is a lack of coherence in some essays. Authors sometimes jump from topic to topic, leaving the reader disoriented. For example, in "Judaism Then and Now," Darrell Jodock does a fine job illuminating the ancient rabbis' goal of creating "vibrant" communities based on their reinterpretations of biblical Law. However, he then moves immediately from this period to modern Judaism without any discussion of the intervening dozen or so centuries (14-20). Suomala, in "Healing the World and Mending the Soul," builds her discussion of Jewish views of social justice from a sampling of sources (e.g., a medieval Kabbalist, some Hasidic rabbis, a modern Orthodox leader, web sites of a few contemporary synagogues) without elaborating the criteria she used to select them or how they fit into the larger Jewish tradition (114-27). Furthermore, there are surprisingly few quotations from Jewish sources, an odd omission in a book geared to group study. Finally, I should mention that frequent references to the ELCA Points and the occasional inclusion of a distinctly Lutheran perspective – such as asides about Luther's views of Law (47-49, 56) or vocation (124-26) – may, on the one hand, limit readership. However, these seldom affect the broader argument (and are often insightful comparisons) and should not discourage others from using this book.

In keeping with the practical, community-focused purpose of this book, the authors sometimes leave their scholarly perches and address their fellow Christians directly. They offer guidance to preachers of difficult texts. They survey various biblical interpretations and judge the adequacy of them. And most importantly, they make demands of readers for better understandings of Judaism and provide them with some of the tools and information to do that. All of this demonstrates the work's usefulness as a resource for Christian congregations involved in interreligious affairs.