



Israel & the Covenant #1

by Ronald L. Dart

Jews and Christians have been conflicted about one another for a very long time. After all, they worship the same God, and the Jewish Bible forms the largest part of the Christian Bible. But the difference runs deeper than it might be between, say, Protestants and Catholics. The dialogue is even *deeper* between Roman Catholics and Jews because they have a longer history of tension between them. A lot of progress has been made since World War II in relations between the two religions--a progress that, I think, would never have happened between either religion and Islam, for example. At the heart of it has been a rather lot of thought by Catholic theologians who've had to rethink, re-examine, and adjust historic positions of the church.

An interesting article appeared some months ago by Avery Cardinal Dulles. I overlooked it at first. It's entitled *The Covenant with Israel*. It appeared in the journal *First Things* in November of 2005. Here's what Cardinal Dulles said:

The question of the present status of God's covenant with Israel has been extensively discussed in Jewish-Christian dialogues since the Shoah. [*Shoah* being the Hebrew word for "Holocaust"]. Catholics look for an approach that fits in the framework of Catholic doctrine, much of which has been summarized by the Second Vatican Council.

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Now, *Shoah* [השואה, Strong's H7724b] is the Hebrew word for catastrophe, and it denotes the catastrophic destruction of European Jewry during World War II. What's strange about this is it took something like the Holocaust to create a turning point in the Christian-Jewish dialogue. There had been a standoff for many years, but once everyone got so *focused* as a result of that, things changed. Historically, the Catholic church has not been so benign toward Jews as it has since the mid-20th century. I guess when one sees the far outcome of antipathy toward a people, a religion, it has a way of focusing the mind on what needs to be done.

The problem is, the Catholics have their historic doctrines to cope with, and these were still there to be supported in the Second Vatican Council. Cardinal Dulles goes on to talk about this council. He says:

The Second Vatican Council taught with great emphasis that there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ. All salvation comes through Christ, and there is no salvation in any other name. In Christ, the incarnate Son of God, revelation reaches its unsurpassable fullness. Everyone is in principle [...]

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And that's an interesting expression by itself.

Everyone is in principle required to believe in Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, and in the Church he has established as an instrument for the salvation of all.

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You don't have to be particularly swift to realize, when you read this statement, that it poses a *huge* problem as to the Catholic attitude toward the Jews and the relationship between them. Cardinal Dulles continues:

Anyone who, being aware of this, refuses to enter the Church or remain in her cannot be saved. On the other hand, persons who "through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God, and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them" may attain to everlasting salvation in some manner known to God.

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Well, it's kind of stepping around the issue where you have made a statement that is *totally* exclusive. "If you're not in this church, you're not going to be saved." Yet, they have to realize that there is something in that statement that simply doesn't work all the way to the end. It has problems. This is a statement of more than passing interest. Up to a point, it's a fundamental belief of every Christian church. "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ. All salvation comes through Christ, and there is no salvation in any other name." My word, that's true of nearly every Christian church around. The point where things begin to diverge is in the middle of this sentence:

Everyone is in principle required to believe in Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, [...]

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So far, so good. But the sentence goes on:

[...] and in the Church he has established as an instrument for the salvation of all.

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Now, notice it says "*the church*"—not "churches", not "many churches", not "some churches"—"*the church*". For a Roman Catholic Christian, there's not much doubt about what that means. The last part of it, though, does keep the door open for the rest of the non-Catholic church, including Jews. Without it, the dialogue entered into by Cardinal Dulles would not be possible. If there isn't some way—some angle—that God might (by ways known only to him) work it out, we don't have anything to talk about. I might also quibble with the Council's statement that the church is established by Christ 'as an instrument for the salvation of all.' If by that the Council means, as an instrument of preaching the gospel, it's an instrument for saving people, then well. But if they mean that the church is somehow a *savior*, I have a problem. There is only *one* savior: the Lord Jesus Christ. But the language is ambivalent enough that we can pass over that."

Cardinal Dulles steps up and addresses one of the *longstanding* problems with the church, and one that has to be dealt with. You can't leave this one under the rug. He said:

In seeking to spread the faith, Christians should remember that faith is by its very nature a free response to the word of God. Moral or physical coercion must therefore be avoided. While teaching this, the council regretfully admits that at certain times and places the faith has been propagated in ways that were not in accord with"or were even opposed to"the spirit of the gospel.

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Now, he doesn't explain here (I don't know if the Second Vatican Council document explained it further than this, at all) but certainly through the Inquisition, through the Crusades, there have been times in the past when Christians have *violently* attempted to advance the faith. And it's interesting to me that he says "moral *or* physical coercion". Even moral coercion must be avoided. Faith is, by its very nature, a *free* response. Now, this had to be said. Otherwise, Muslims would draw a moral equivalence with Christians saying, "Well, yeah we kill people, but so have you." The Cardinal continues:"

[A]s the council's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, declares, declares. God "entered into a covenant with Abraham (cf. Gen 15:18) and, through Moses, with the people of Israel." "The principal purpose to which the plan of the Old Covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming both of Christ, the universal Redeemer, and of the messianic kingdom." One and the same God is the inspirer and author of both the Old and the New Testaments. He "wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and that the Old be made manifest by the New."

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Now, I think this is well-stated and I agree. Basically, what he is saying is that the Bible is *one book*, and that many of the things that we read in the New Testament actually are embedded in the Old Testament, and that the Old Testament is what is really being opened up to our understanding in the New Testament. Some Christian churches do themselves mortal harm when they decide they no longer need or want the Old Testament and don't read it any longer. Because without that much of the New Testament makes no sense at all. The Catholic church correctly (and I may add, they're not the only church that teaches this) concludes that the Bible is one book, not two and that a person should really look to integrate every thing he finds there—that there is an over-arching *unity* between the two. But Cardinal Dulles doesn't shy away from what, for him, is the central issue. He continues:

The Second Vatican Council, while providing a solid and traditional framework for discussing Jewish-Christian relations, did not attempt to settle all questions. In particular, it left open the question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today. Are there two covenants, one for Jews and one for Christians? If so, are the two related as phases of a single developing covenant, a single saving plan of God? May Jews who embrace Christianity continue to adhere to Jewish covenantal practices?

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Now, this is a major point under discussion, particularly among Roman Catholic theologians.

Cardinal Dulles thought a good place to start with this discussion was with the term “Old Covenant”. He notes that the term is solidly in place--and that is *really* true; everybody uses it and they think they know what they’re talking about. I don’t think the term is really well-understood. The *only* place in the entire Bible, front to back (you can run your computer word search and prove this to yourself), it is used is in one of Paul’s letters: 2 Corinthians, the third chapter. Beginning in verse 13, he says this:

2 Corinthians 3

NIV '84

¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away.

¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.

Now, what I think Paul is saying here is that their eyes are blinded, they just are simply not able to see it, and the only way that the Old Covenant ever becomes clear to people is in Christ. He said:

2 Corinthians 3

NIV '84

¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.

¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

So, there is a veil when they’re reading the Old Covenant. Now mind you, a word search--any translation you choose--of the *entire* Bible for “Old Covenant” yields this verse, and this verse only. Now, isn’t that curious for a term that is solidly in place? That said, if you speak of a “New” Covenant, you *imply* the Old, and *that* usage did start a long time ago. In fact, it started long before the New Testament was written, with a prophet named Jeremiah. You’ll find this in the 31st chapter. It’s easy to remember—Jeremiah 31:31:

Jeremiah 31

NIV '84

³¹ “The time is coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.”

So by merely by using the term “New Covenant”, he implies that the first covenant is Old. So, the term “Old Covenant” is valid. But an important item for understanding this broad subject lies right here in this verse. The new covenant he’s talking about is not made with the world. It’s not made with just anyone. It’s not made with Gentiles. It is made with “the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”

Now, this is where it is helpful to know the story that is told in the Books of Samuel and Kings. After the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided into two. Ever since that time, it was known as the house of Israel (with its capital in Samaria in the north) and the house of Judah (with its capital in Jerusalem in the south). Now, from the time of the death of Solomon, for about 250 years, these two kingdoms continued side by side—sometimes at war with each other, sometimes fighting alongside each other against somebody else. They did not get along well. And the northern tribes, having abandoned the worship of God—of Jehovah—particularly drifted off into idolatry and, finally, into captivity. They were carried away and, basically, lost.

Now here comes a prophet saying, “The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the House of Judah.” A recognition that sometime, way off in the future, these

two houses (and the word “house” is used in the sense of kingdom or of a government), the two political entities—the house of Israel, the house of Judah—will exist and, finally, at the end time, be brought back together again. He says:

Jeremiah 31

NIV '84

³² “It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD.

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Now, obviously, Jeremiah’s looking *way* off into the future—a time when the *whole earth* is full of the knowledge of the Lord. Also note that the Law is not discarded. It is now written—not in tables of stones—but in the hearts and the minds of the people of God. Jeremiah continues:

Jeremiah 31

NIV '84

³⁵ This is what the LORD says,

he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD Almighty is his name:

³⁶ “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,” [...]

What decrees? The sun shining by day, the moon and the stars shining by night.

Jeremiah 31

NIV '84

³⁶ “Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,” declares the LORD, “will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me.”

³⁷ This is what the LORD says:

“Only if the heavens above can be measured
and the foundations of the earth below be searched out
will I reject all the descendants of Israel
because of all they have done,”
declares the LORD.

Now, that’s *fascinating*. What he is saying here is that the descendants of Israel will *always* exist as a people, as a nation. The house of Israel, as distinct from the house of Judah, will be the recipient of a new covenant. Even the prophet Ezekiel looks forward to a time when the house of Israel and the house of Judah will be united once again. He’s given two sticks—one with the name of Judah, the other with the name of Israel. And God told him to put these sticks in his hand as though they were one [Ezekiel 37]. And he did, and they became one in his hand. And God says, “This is what I’m going to do in the future. I’m going to end this historic division between these two houses and they will be one before me again.”

It is statements like these that lead some people to believe that the lost ten tribes of the house of Israel still exist somewhere. The British-Israel Movement, in my opinion, attempts to explain too much. But we ought to keep an open mind to the existence of an Israel (that is not Judah) that is in existence at the end time.

The Book of Hebrews reaches back to this prophecy of Isaiah and offers a new interpretation of it. You’ll find this in the 8th chapter of Hebrews. Paul starts out...And I do think it was Paul who wrote Hebrews. I’ve looked into the arguments about authorship for a long time and came to that conclusion. He says:

Hebrews 8

NKJV

¹ Now *this is* the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,

² a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.

The image that we’re presented with is that there is a tabernacle—a dwelling place—of God, in heaven, and that one was created on earth to be a *model* of what exists in heaven. The one down here, temporary; the one up there, permanent.

Hebrews 8

NKJV

³ For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore *it is* necessary that this One also have something to offer.

“This One” is Jesus, who is the High Priest of all Christians. Paul says:

Hebrews 8

NKJV

⁴ For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law;

And that present-tense item has led some to think that the Book of Hebrews was written before AD 70, while the temple was still standing, because of the present tense. There “are” priests who “do” offer.

Hebrews 8

NKJV

⁵ who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, “See *that* you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”

⁶ But now He [*that is, Jesus*] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.

Oh, indeed, that is true.

Hebrews 8

NKJV

⁷ For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.

⁸ Because finding fault with them, He says: [*citing directly from Jeremiah*] “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah[.]”

Continuing with his exposition of the prophecy from Jeremiah, in Hebrews chapter 8:

Hebrews 8

NKJV

⁸ “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—

⁹ not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD.

¹⁰ For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

¹¹ None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.

¹² For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

Now, it’s important to remember that what we call the “Old Covenant” is a national covenant—a community covenant—not a personal covenant. And there’s a *very big* difference there. If you and I cut a private deal off here to one side—between you and I—that’s personal. If we make a personal agreement with God—if we make him a foxhole promise (You know, “If you get me out of the war alive, I’ll go to church every week for the rest of my life.”) you’ve made a *personal* covenant with God; you’ve cut a personal deal. The Old Covenant was not a personal covenant. It was *national*; it was community; it was tribal. And what may be surprising is that the New Covenant spoken of by Jeremiah, cited in Hebrews, was *also* national as opposed to personal. Did you notice it? The New Covenant is not made with just everybody. It’s made with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. He continues:

Hebrews 8

NKJV

¹³ In that He says, “A new *covenant*,” He has made the first [old]. Now what is becoming [old and geriatric] is ready to vanish away.

And the [root] word from the Greek there [géras, γῆρας, Strong’s G1094] is the word from which we get the word “geriatric”.

Now, it’s interesting. Here we are, late in the first century when Paul wrote this, and the Old Covenant is said to be *ready* to pass away, but has not yet. If it had been nailed to the cross, as some people think, that’s not the way this would have been written. I would expect the author of Hebrews to say so right here.

Cardinal Dulles recognizes the same thing, and this is what is at issue for not a few Christian people. He says this:

The term “covenant” is the usual translation of the Hebrew *b’rith* [בְּרִית, Strong’s H1285] and the Greek *diathéké* [διαθήκη, Strong’s G1242]. Scholars commonly distinguish between two types of covenant, the covenant grant and the covenant treaty. The covenant grant, modeled on the free royal decree, is an unconditional divine gift and is usually understood to be irrevocable.

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For example, in the covenant with Noah after the flood [**Genesis 9**] God said, “This is a grant. I will never do this again.” No conditions connected. However, Dulles thinks the Sinai Covenant is an example of a *conditional* covenant. I can see why he says that, but the passage I just read to you from Jeremiah would not seem to agree, because this says, “As long as you can look up in the sky and see the sun, as long as you go out at night and see the moon and the stars, I will always remember this. I will *always* hold to this covenant and promise to you.” Now, it is conditional and bilateral in some aspects, and Israel certainly broke covenant with God, but *prophet after prophet* has God, at the very last time, feeling sorry for Israel and visiting them again to take out of them for himself a people. The very making of a New Covenant with the same people is suggestive that the Old Covenant actually passes away *when the New Covenant is made*. What some people, I think, make a mistake on, is that they think that when Jesus said at the Last Supper:

"Take this, eat this, this is blood of the New Covenant,"

That he was talking about this New Covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah, *and he was not*. He was talking about the *personal* covenant between you and him—between us as individuals and God. All this has to be established—is necessary—to discuss the relationship between Jews and Christians.

In Second Corinthians Paul refers to the “old covenant” as the “dispensation of death,” which has “faded away.” In Romans he speaks of Christ as “the end of the Law,” apparently meaning its termination, its goal, or both. The Mosaic Law ceases to bind once its objective has been attained.

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Now, before we jump to any conclusions about what the Cardinal is saying here, we should bear in mind that he is giving us a discussion of what is on the one hand as opposed to what is on the other

hand. He goes on to say:

All these texts, which the Church accepts as teachings of canonical scripture, have to be reconciled with others, which seem to point in a different direction. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, teaches that he has come not to abolish the Law and the prophets but to fulfill them, even though he is here embarking on a series of antitheses, in which he both supplements and corrects certain provisions in the law of Moses.

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Now, it's worth commenting here that this is true, if one understands the Jewish view—that the Law of Moses *includes* the Oral Law and the traditions of the elders. Jesus did definitely correct, supplement, and even do away with certain aspects of the traditions of the elders.

There are some important points to be made here but, unfortunately, I'm out of time. Until next time.

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