His Body, Ourselves

Michael Wyschogrod
(R. Kendall Soulen, ed.)
Abraham's Promise:
Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations
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Reviewed by Benjamin Balint

Michael Wyschogrod, whom the editor of this book calls "perhaps modern Orthodoxy's most significant religious thinker since [Joseph B.] Soloveitchik," was born in Berlin in 1928, and settled in New York in 1939. There he studied at Yeshiva Tora Vodaath, Yeshiva University, and Columbia, where in 1954 he wrote a dissertation on Kierkegaard and Heidegger (among the first publications in America on that German philosopher). Thereafter, he taught at the City University of New York and the University of Houston and became active in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Although widely admired for his book *The Body of Faith* (1983), Wyschogrod has mainly expressed his ideas in his essays, eighteen of which, some previously unpublished, now appear in *Abraham's Promise*. The new anthology provides occasion to reflect on Wyschogrod's long career and, because he is one of its few serious contemporary practitioners, on the state of Jewish theology itself.

As its title suggests, this volume—like Wyschogrod's thinking generally—centers on God's election of and irrevocable love for the progeny of Abraham. Wyschogrod insists that this choosing of the people Israel is "an election of the flesh," a choice of "a biological family, rather than a community of faith."

But as Wyschogrod takes this premise in increasingly surprising directions, it seems that for him this is where the clear contrast between Judaism and Christianity ends. To begin with, he claims God loves not only the souls of his people, but their bodies, too. And he not only *loves* their bodies, but *dwells* in them:

> It is of course necessary to mumble a formula of philosophic correction. No space can contain God, he is above space, etc., etc. But this mumbled formula, while required, must not be overdone. It must not transform the God of Israel into a spatial and meta-temporal Absolute.... With all the philosophic difficulties duly noted, the God of Israel is a God who enters space and time…. God dwells not only in the spirit of Israel… he also dwells in their bodies.

Since in Genesis man is said to be fashioned in God's image, Wyschogrod thinks we ought not be startled by this notion. "Man is created by God as a physical being," he reminds us, "and if there is a human resemblance to God then his body also resembles God…. And if the human body can resemble God, then there must also be a physical aspect to God's being."

Wyschogrod emphasizes carnality in this way in order to prepare the ground for another unconventional claim, one it is best to let him put in his own words: The Christian doctrine of the incarnation, he says, represents "the intensification of the teaching of the in-dwelling of God in Israel by concentrating that in-dwelling in one Jew rather than leaving it diffused in the people of Jesus as a whole." Put differently, "the divinity of Jesus is not radically different—though perhaps more concentrated—than the holiness of the Jewish people." And then:

> The Christian proclamation that God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is but a development of the basic thrust of the Hebrew Bible, God's movement toward humankind…. At least in this respect, the difference between Judaism and Christianity is one of degree rather than kind.

This argument, and the adoption of a Christian vocabulary that accompanies it, carries over from *The Body of Faith*, where Wyschogrod uses it to explain the absence of Jewish analogues for certain Christian dogmas. "If there is no need for sacrament in Judaism," he says there, "it is

because the people of Israel in whose flesh the presence of God makes itself felt in the world becomes the sacrament."

Other Christian dogmas are similarly rendered more or less Jewishly unobjectionable under Wyschogrod's conciliatory touch. He endeavors, for example, to show that the Bible nowhere insists on the unity of God—that Deuteronomy 6:4 should be translated: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone"—and then calls the doctrine of the Trinity "a problem for rather than a complete break with Judaism."

The same attempt to soften the sharpest theological differences between Judaism and Christianity motivates another of this book's central ideas: Wyschogrod's rereading of Paul's well-known attack on Jewish law and legalism. Christian and Jewish readers alike may be surprised to discover that contrary to the standard interpretation, Paul did not claim that after Jesus the Tora, superseded by a new law, became no longer obligatory for Jews. Paul's critique, Wyschogrod says, was aimed not at the law *per se*, but only at the adoption of that law by Gentiles: Paul "is continuing the rabbinic tradition of discouraging Gentiles from conversion to Judaism and accepting and putting themselves under the judgment of a set of demands considerably more stringent than the Noachide laws."

If Paul's view of the law—so long mistaken as antinomian—does not represent much of a departure from the Jewish faith, neither, Wyschogrod continues, does his emphasis on mercy and grace:

> For Paul, Jesus means *midat harachamim*…. Judaism has always understood that if judged by the strict demands of the Law, no Jew can prevail. We are all sinners who must beg for the mercy of God; without it, we are lost…. When Paul says that humans are not justified by works of the Law, this is exactly what he means. He is saying nothing that is in any way different from common rabbinic opinion.

In striving toward rapprochement, Wyschogrod revises not only the Pauline view of the law, but the Jewish one too. He argues that the election of Israel precedes, chronologically and axiologically, the Tora, and is therefore in some sense more basic than Tora itself, which, though it is of course essential to Judaism, "is not the deepest layer of God's relationship with the Jewish people." Along these lines Wyschogrod—whose cast of mind turns out to be more biblical than rabbinic—assails what he calls "halachic deism," or the tendency to glorify Jewish law at the expense of cultivating a sensitivity to the

immediacy of the divine, "as if God had gone into retirement after he revealed the Law."

If, moreover, chosenness is more basic than the Tora, it is surely more basic than the land of Israel. Wyschogrod in fact identifies "a curious ambivalence to the land in Jewish consciousness." On the one hand, he knows that "the same act of election which binds Abraham and his descendants to God also binds the people to its land." On the other, the Jews—unique in this respect—become a "full-fledged" people before entering the land, and remain so after expulsion from it, a fact that demonstrates for Wyschogrod the dispensability of the bond between people and land.

This causes Wyschogrod to approach Zionism with trepidation, since "whenever the people of Israel have attempted to constitute a national life on this soil in disregard of its election, the soil has rejected them under the most catastrophic circumstances." He thus cannot share "the optimistic, self-reliant cheerfulness" with which many Jews view the establishment of the Jewish state, and he recoils still more from the violence committed in its name. "I simply cannot believe that the messianic era will be preceded by the reality of Jews becoming accustomed to killing," he writes.

Stepping back for a moment, we discern an arch-villain lurking in the background of Wyschogrod's views: Reason. Not surprisingly, its first embodiment is Maimonides, whom Wyschogrod accuses both of borrowing his rigid opposition to anthropomorphism and corporeality from "a metaphysical frame of mind that is completely foreign to the Bible" and of failing to consider "the danger of an overly rarefied God who is so beyond all conception that he cannot be distinguished from no god at all." Rationalist thinkers like Maimonides, he goes on to say, "have made it appear that Judaism resists incarnation on some *a priori* grounds, as if the Jewish philosopher can somehow determine ahead of time just what God can or cannot do."

Rational ethics, Wyschogrod maintains, partakes of a similar villainy, and he bristles just as much at the modern secular humanist able to think in moral but no longer in religious categories. In an essay with loud echoes of the maverick Israeli intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz, he turns the Garden of Eden tale into a lesson on moral self-sufficiency:

> [Man] is to obey God in order to obey God and for no other reason. And when he disobeys God, he has not violated a law that has an autonomous claim on his conscience

> and which therefore puts him in the wrong in an objective sense, but he has rebelled against God…. When man develops a morality not based on God's commandment—even if coincidentally much of it may coincide with those commandments—an act of expulsion of God has occurred…. Now reason or moral intuition or something else performs the function that the Bible can only envisage God as performing.

Along these lines, Wyschogrod devotes another essay to explaining Judaism's lack of either a doctrine or a vocabulary of conscience: "In conscience, it is not after all God who is being heard but man. The Jew, however, is required to listen to God and not to man." If Wyschogrod is willing to accept a conception of conscience at all, it is one wherein God speaks through a voice that seems to come from within, "heteronomy and autonomy blend[ing] into a dialectical unity." In conscience, as in reason-based ethics, Wyschogrod detects a whiff of idolatry.

What can we say of all this? We could contest Wyschogrod point by point. Even as we admire his strong affirmation of Jewish particularism, we could register discomfort with his anti-rationalist reliance on divine command. On encountering his somewhat anemic Zionism, we could dispute the proposition that full peoplehood can be achieved without sovereignty, or sovereignty achieved without force. We could question the degree to which Wyschogrod has subordinated the Tora—which, in rabbinic thought, is created before the world and for the sake of which the world is created—to election. (David Novak levels just this criticism in his philosophically more nuanced handling of the subject in *The Election of Israel*, 1995.) We could draw attention to the strangeness inherent in a claim by a twentieth-century Jew—especially one who writes as if there were no interpretative tradition on the subject—that he understands Paul more accurately than did Augustine or Luther or, for that matter, centuries of anti-Pauline polemicists. Or we could note that due perhaps to his biblicism, Wyschogrod adduces not a single rabbinic source for his unorthodox rendering of divine corporeality and in-dwelling.

But there is a more fundamental problem here. Wyschogrod himself points the way to it with his remark that "any interpretation of Judaism that aims to maximize its differences with Christianity imposes as much of a foreign agenda on Judaism as its reverse." Whatever the merits of such a claim, it is clear that in both the range and content of his thinking he is

guilty of the latter. That Wyschogrod neglects to develop accounts of problems that do not touch directly on Jewish-Christian dialogue—creation, providence, reward and punishment, free will, revelation, miracles, prayer, evil—reveals his theology to be drawn from a limited palette. And yet once entered into, we notice it is not really a dialogue at all, but an intricate ingratiation.

In opposing the spiritual and universalistic Church to the carnal and particularistic Synagogue (a "blood communion"); in straining to find a Jewish analogue to the doctrine of the Christ; in subordinating virtually all else to the election of Israel (after all, a Christian article of faith, too); in calling his project a "Jewish Barthianism" and reporting that "there is nothing more important that I have learned from [the leading twentieth-century Protestant theologian Karl] Barth than the sinfulness of Israel"; in deferentially accepting Jewish-born Cardinal Lustiger's explanation of his conversion to Catholicism ("I am not ceasing to be a Jew… I am discovering another way of being a Jew"); in considering Christianity to be not really a separate religion at all but—as he puts it in an essay not included here—"part of Greater Judaism"; and in maintaining that the birth and spread of Christianity is of decisive theological import for Judaism, Wyschogrod adopts a Christianized view of Judaism.

Like the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig—who also saw in chosenness "the truly central thought of Judaism" and whose *The Star of Redemption* gets an appreciation in this book—Wyschogrod's mistake is to approach Judaism from the point of view of Christianity, toward which he feels an admiration mixed, one can't help intuit, with a certain sense of inferiority. ("Dialogue with a theology as sophisticated as that of Christianity," he says, "advances Judaism theologically.") Is it any wonder that Wyschogrod has been so enthusiastically received by Christian readers, that his articles are lately more likely to appear in journals like *Evangelische Theologie* and *Pro Ecclesia* than in Jewish periodicals like *Tradition* and *Sh'ma*, or that both this book and *The Body of Faith* are published by Christian presses? (Here is the Rev. Paul M. van Buren reviewing the latter: "There it is, solid and mystical, moving and intelligent, totally Jewish and with each copy wrapped in its own prayer shawl!")

In sum, we find in *Abraham's Promise* a manner of theologizing that lies somewhere between baptized Rosenzweig and circumcised Barth. This manner, infused as it is with an air of spiritual dependence and derivative as it is of Christian tropes,

represents the newest chapter in the Jewish infatuation—born of the German Jewish moment of which Hermann Cohen, Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Leo Baeck are representative products—with Protestant theology. Sadly, because the language of Christian theology has long been almost identical with that of theology, to grasp how these great men thought about God it is first necessary to understand the respective stances they took vis-à-vis Christianity.

It need not be so. Even if we argue that Jews these days should respectfully rethink their attitude toward and become less estranged from Christians, we must see that a Christian understanding of Judaism is not at all the same as Judaism's understanding of itself. To say otherwise, as Wyschogrod does, is to conflate interfaith dialogue and theology, or at least to allow the exigencies of dialogue to steer theology.

Genuine dialogue will depend on Jews who respect both Jewish and Christian autonomy by firmly grasping their own tradition's distinctiveness and at the same time avoiding the temptation to see Christianity merely as an actor in a Jewish drama. The urgently needed revitalization of Jewish theology will begin, in turn, with the conviction that Christianity has for Jews no more *theological* import than any other antinomian heresy, though it possesses of course both immense historical significance and contemporary political consequence. Only then will Jews no longer feel compelled to see Judaism through the eyes of another faith.

Benjamin Balint is an Associate Editor of Azure.