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Review: The Subversion of the Jews: Moses's Veil and the Hermeneutics of Supersession

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Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross by Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly

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Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka,  
Levinas by Jill Robbins

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# THE SUBVERSION OF THE JEWS: MOSES'S VEIL AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUPERSESSION

DANIEL BOYARIN

**Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly.** SACRED VIOLENCE: PAUL'S HERMENEUTIC OF THE CROSS. *Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.*

**Richard B. Hays.** ECHOES OF SCRIPTURE IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL. *New Haven: Yale UP, 1989.*

**Jill Robbins.** PRODIGAL SON/ELDER BROTHER: INTERPRETATION AND ALTERITY IN AUGUSTINE, PETRARCH, KAFKA, LEVINAS. *Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.*

*Right to the present day, the same veil remains at the public reading of the Old Covenant unlifted, because it is in Christ that it is being annulled.*

*Indeed, to the present, whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.*

*Whenever anyone turns to the Lord the veil is removed.*

—2 Corinthians 3.14–16

Much of the cultural politics of “the West” is founded on hermeneutical issues. The question of the relation of “Judaism” to “Christianity” is a question of literary theory. Christianity is for Paul and all his followers simply the correct understanding of the Torah. Read properly, the Torah signified Christ; what was “annulled in Christ” is not the Old Covenant but the veil, which prevents those hearing it from understanding that in it is concealed the New Covenant, as in Augustine’s well-known formulation: “In the Old Testament there is a concealment of the New, in the New Testament there is a revelation of the Old” [qtd. in Robbins 2]. This should be read, I submit, as a gloss on Moses’s veil. In 2 Corinthians 3, perhaps more than any other text, lies whatever Pauline basis there is for a theology of supersession. The doctrine that the Christian Church (Greek Bible) is the new Israel (New Testament), which replaces and renders superfluous (or worse) the old (Testament) Israel (Hebrew Bible), has had frightening consequences in the history of Christian Europe. It is here that perhaps the best known of all of Paul’s hermeneutical maxims is found: “The Letter kills but the Spirit gives life”:

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*I wish to thank Shuli Barzilai, Jonathan Boyarin, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, Elissa Sampson, and Shira Wolosky for reading earlier versions of this essay and commenting on them. I have stiff-neckedly not taken much of their advice and probably will regret it. Some of the discussion in this essay is recycled from my book on Paul, A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity, forthcoming from the University of California Press.*

*Are we beginning once more to recommend ourselves? Surely, we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, inscribed on our [var. your] hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ's letter cared for by us, inscribed not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on stone tablets but on tablets that are fleshy hearts. Such confidence before God as this we have through Christ. Not that we are of ourselves adequate, so that we evaluate anything as originating with ourselves. Rather, our adequacy is from God, who has enabled us to be adequate as ministers of a new covenant, not written but spiritual. For the letter kills but the Spirit gives life [os kai hikanōsen hēmas diakonous kainēs diathēkēs ou grammatos alla pneumatōs to gar gramma apoktennei to de pneuma zōopoiei]. [2 Cor. 3.1–6]*

## 1

In *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*—a book that all interested in the history of Western hermeneutics and its importance for literary theory will want to read—Richard Hays unsettles the opposition between two modes of interpreting the 2 Corinthians passage, which until now have been considered mutually exclusive. In the tradition of the Church, this verse has been understood from nearly the very beginning as denoting an opposition between literal and allegorical interpretation, with the literal that of the Jews and the figurative that of the Christians. Paul's point would be, then, that the Jews, who read literally, miss the point entirely—the point, that is, that their Bible is only the Old Testament in which the New one is concealed.

This reading has in recent years been called into question by Pauline scholars, who argue that the opposition is rather between a written text of any kind and the fleshy embodiment of Christian covenant in the actual community of the faithful. Hays refers to this embodiment as an Incarnation and remarks, “The traditional English translation of *gramma* as ‘letter,’ based in turn on the Vulgate’s *littera*, is an unfortunate one, . . . because it suggests that Paul is distinguishing between literal and spiritual modes of exegesis. This is the construal against which the advocates of a nonhermeneutical interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3 rightly object.” Hays goes on strikingly to remark,

*Thus, the Christian tradition's reading of the letter-spirit dichotomy as an antithesis between the outward and the inward, the manifest and the latent, the body and the soul, turns out to be a dramatic misreading, indeed a complete inversion. For Paul, the Spirit is—scandalously—identified precisely with the outward and palpable, the particular human community of the new covenant, putatively transformed by God's power so as to make Christ's message visible to all. The script, however, remains abstract and dead because it is not embodied. [130]*

Hays balances this revisionary reading of Paul, however, by arguing very persuasively that whether or not the letter-Spirit opposition is in itself the index of a dichotomy of hermeneutical practices, Paul posits a hermeneutical shift from the reading of Moses to the experience of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> There has, after all, been a change in the status of Scripture. In other words, the hermeneutical and ethical moments are homologous to each other. I would further claim that the very notion of language as abstract and disembodied, that is,

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1. “According to 2 Cor. 3.7–18, when God's Spirit-inscribed people encounter Scripture, a transformation occurs that is fundamentally hermeneutical in character” [131].

the very notion of the necessity for the word to become flesh, as it were, is already in itself an allegorical conception of language, paralleling the Platonic notions of a noncorporeal Godhead, which the Incarnation presupposes.<sup>2</sup>

Analysis of the continuation of the Pauline text will bring out this point more clearly:

*Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letter on stone, took place with such glory that the Israelites could not bear to gaze at Moses's face, even though it was being annulled, will not the ministry of the Spirit be with greater glory? For if there is glory with the ministry of condemnation, how much more does the ministry of righteousness abound with glory. Indeed, what has had glory has not had glory, in this case, because of the glory which so far surpasses it. For if what was being annulled [to katargoumenon] was with such glory, how much more the glory of that which endures!*

*Having, therefore, such a hope, we act with much boldness, and not like Moses when he used to put a veil over his face so the Israelites could not gaze at the end [= true meaning] of what was being annulled [katargoumenon]. But their minds were hardened. Right up to the present day the same veil remains at the public reading of the old covenant—unlifted, because it is in Christ that it is being annulled [katargetitai]. Indeed, to the present, whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. Whenever anyone turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now "the Lord" is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, as from the Lord, the Spirit. [2 Cor. 3.7-18]*

Paul, in fact, enacts the kind of reading that the Jews do *not* do at the same time that he talks about it. Whatever this passage is, it is not midrash, because it does not involve a close contact with the language of the verses of Exodus with which it deals; midrash is precisely characterized by its attention to the physical, material details of the actual language [Hays 132]. This is symbolic reading, whereby the events of the "Old Testament" signify realities in the present life of the Christian community.<sup>3</sup> The metaphor of the veil is exact. Midrash, the way the Jews read Moses, is a hermeneutics of opacity, while Paul's allegorical/typological reading is a hermeneutics of transparency. Paul can boldly go where no Jew has gone before and reveal the true telos of the text because of the spiritual condition of his listeners, who, protected by the Spirit, need not fear death. Paul thus asserts that the veil that Moses put over his face symbolizes a veil that the Jews put over their hearts at the reading of the Law until the present day, because they do not expound it spiritually, which prevents them from perceiving the glory of the truth. Paul identifies the new readers of the Bible as "we all," thus asserting the universalism of the Christian dispensation over-against the particularities of the Jewish reading of Moses.

Among the other virtues of Hays's interpretation, it does not require that Paul depart from the obvious concrete sense of the veil in the Torah's narrative in order to build his allegory. By contrast, Stephen Westerholm's reading of this passage, in an otherwise generally convincing article, is weak. Westerholm resolutely denies any hermeneutical significance at all to the letter-spirit opposition in Paul and argues that the opposition refers *only* to two modes of serving God: one that was appropriate in the past and one that has replaced it in the Christian present. For him, then, the only function of the veil is that

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2. In my article "The Eye in the Torah: Ocular Desire in Midrashic Hermeneutic," I argue that the Rabbis of the talmudic period generally did not believe in a wholly noncorporeal Godhead, so God could be present in the world without an Incarnation.

3. In A Radical Jew, I argue that the typology/allegory opposition is not a valid one, thus my somewhat slippery language here.

it prevents the Jews from seeing that the situation has changed. This, however, leaves the original veil on Moses's face without significance, thereby explicitly contradicting or emptying of significance the typological relationship implied by the words "Right up to the present day *the same veil* remains at the public reading of the old covenant. . . . Indeed, to the present, whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts." The only way that Westerholm's reading makes sense, then, is if we revive a theory whereby the veil on Moses's face was a fading glory, which signified the fading glory of the Old Covenant. There is, however, no textual or other warrant for reading the veil in this way, and it fails to explain the continued existence of the "same veil."

Where Westerholm's reading fails, Hays's succeeds in making sense of the veil that was on Moses's face, as well as the veil that now covers the "reading of Moses." The veil, for Paul as in the Torah itself, was to prevent those who were unable to stand it from seeing the glory of Moses's transformation. Paul's allegorical reading is that until this day the Jews show themselves unable to stand the true meaning of the text in Christ and so still read it with a veil. Because their minds were hardened, they are prevented from perceiving the true meaning of the text, which is the glory, the spirit that transfigured Moses. That is, the reading of "Moses" prevents the Jews from seeing the glory of the Lord, and this is typologically/allegorically signified by the covering of Moses's face when he gave the Law. The word is meant to point to the Spirit, which lies behind it (and always did), but the Jews remain at the level of the literal—literally—at the level of the letter, the concrete language, which of course epitomizes midrash, and this is the *gramma* that kills. Once more, in Hays's excellent formulation,

*For those who are fixated on the text as an end in itself, however, the text remains veiled. But those who turn to the Lord are enabled to see through the text to its telos, its true aim. For them, the veil is removed, so that they, like Moses, are transfigured by the glory of God into the image of Jesus Christ, to whom Moses and the Law had always, in veiled fashion pointed. . . . This means, ultimately, that Scripture becomes—in Paul's reading—a metaphor, a vast trope that signifies and illuminates the gospel of Jesus Christ. And, since the character of this gospel is such that it must be written on human hearts rather than in texts, the community of the church becomes the place where the meaning of Israel's Scripture is enlashed. [137]<sup>4</sup>*

This passage is thus typological and allegorical in its structure: that is, like the Spirit, which must be incarnated in the Corinthian community and which Paul calls a writing, language always consists of a spiritual meaning that is embodied in the material:

*The telos of Moses' transitory covenant (which remained hidden from Israel in the wilderness) was the same thing as the true significance of Moses/Torah (which remained hidden from Paul's contemporaries in the synagogue). . . . The veiled telos is, if we must express it in a discursive proposition, the glory of God*

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4. I think that Hays loses his way a bit on pages 142–43, where he needlessly complicates the discussion by arguing that Paul is suggesting a dissimile between himself (and other Christians) and Moses, because "Moses' unveiled encounters with the Lord were intermittent, punctuated by times of withdrawal and veiling." I see nothing in the passage which qualifies or discredits Moses's experience even with respect to Paul; rather, it is that of the Israelites to whom Moses turned and who would/could not see his glory which is being deprecated. Further, there is no difficulty occasioned by the veil being moved from over Moses's face to the hearts of the Israelites [pace Hays 145], because the veil always and only existed to prevent the Israelites from seeing that which they could not stand, and never to prevent Moses from seeing anything. I therefore find the turn in verse 16 less dramatic than Hays does [147].

*in Jesus Christ that makes itself visible in fleshy communities conformed to God's image. . . . All the elements are necessary to express the hermeneutical and ethical significations that are packed into his metaphor. [Hays 146]<sup>5</sup>*

I think that Paul's argument is even more complex than this, however, for there are in fact four terms here, not two: Old Testament, its Jewish readers, Spirit, and "we all." The lesser glory, the Old Testament, is both revealed and annulled by the greater glory of the Spirit. As the sun reveals the moon during the night and conceals it by day, so the Spirit was reflected indirectly in the Old Testament which is now completely obscured by the greater light of the Spirit directly shining from the New. Even that lesser glory, Paul argues, lesser *because* it is transitory, was too much for the Jews to stand, and they had to be protected by a veil. Even more so is it the case that the glory that will not be annulled is too much for them to see, and they remain blinded to it by a veil. The very ministry chiseled in stone signifies and is replaced in history by the ministry of the Spirit, which has been revealed in the New Testament. When Paul refers to the Old Covenant, he means both the historical covenant with the Jews and also their text. He thus implies *avant la lettre*, as it were, predicts or enacts, the coming into being of the New Testament, and the relation of these two is figured as that of letter which kills to the Spirit which gives life. Thus, the move of the modern readers of Paul, such as Hays, who deny the allegorical and supersessionist movement of Paul's text is ultimately not convincing. The supersessionism cannot be denied, because an enfleshed community was already and still living out the "Old" Covenant. It certainly had not remained an affair of mere words on stone. Since the glory of the spirit hidden within the text is what Moses's veil conceals and that hidden glory is the life of the Christian community, the Pauline structure is profoundly allegorical after all. The "letter" is not only the written word but certainly, as Paul says almost explicitly, the literal reading of "Moses" by the Jews. Augustine read Paul well: "In the Old Testament there is a concealment of the New, in the New Testament there is a revelation of the Old."

Paul explicitly foregrounds the spiritual method of study of the Torah, in implicit contrast to the veiled, carnal method of "the Jews," in a passage of 1 Corinthians:

*I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things are warnings to us, not to desire evil as they did. . . . Consider Israel according to the flesh; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? [1 Cor. 10.1–5, 18]*

The key to my understanding of this passage is the last verse, almost precisely because it is so understated in its form. "Consider Israel according to the flesh," I think, must be understood here as a hermeneutical term and nothing else. That is to say, while the phrase certainly includes all of the overtones that it does elsewhere—to wit, physical descent and overliteral understanding (and perhaps even "carnality" as a moral judgment)—Paul is

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5. *I should, to be honest, emphasize that Hays himself understands his interpretation to be one that contradicts the interpretation of "allegorical" for "spiritual" here. I remain convinced, however, that whatever the particular and spectacular nuances of Pauline thought and especially the brilliant concatenation of the hermeneutical and ethical levels, a "reader who turns to the Lord and finds the veil taken away" and thus "will return to the reading of Moses to discover that all of Scripture is a vast metaphorical witness to the lived reality of the new community in Christ" [151] is an allegorical reader, a reader for whom the meaning lies behind and enclosed in the text.*



here appealing to the Corinthians to consider the verse/practice in its literal sense, not to concern themselves with axiological judgments of the Jews! The Revised Standard Version translates here simply, “Consider the practice of Israel,” which is really what Paul means. I thus disagree with Hays’s implied interpretation [96] that Paul refers here to “Israel according to the flesh” because he is discussing the Golden Calf episode. In 10.18, Paul is no longer referring explicitly to that story but rather to Israelite sacrifice in general. He wishes here to draw an analogy for his argument from that concrete, historical fact. Just as the literal Israelites—according to the flesh—are partners in the altar when they eat the sacrifices, so also are the figurative Israelites—according to the Spirit—when they eat the Eucharist, and they should behave accordingly. If, at this point, the text is understood allegorically the point of the analogy is lost. Paul calls to his Corinthian readers to take a look for the moment at the literal, concrete, and historical meaning of a particular textual moment.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, he insists on the literal meaning, *kata sarka*, of the verse, at least momentarily.

I think we learn much from this utterance. First of all, as earlier commentators have pointed out, the very positing of an “Israel according to the flesh” implies *necessarily* the existence of an “Israel according to the Spirit” as well. In the light of the resonance created by the reference to “Israel in the flesh” in verse 18, I think if we go back and interpret the references to spiritual food and drink in the previous verses, we understand them as hermeneutical utterances as well. Thus, the food and drink may literally have been spiritual in nature but they are also to be *understood* spiritually (that is typologically/allegorically) as signifying the food and drink of the present Christian ritual. The Israel of that story signifies the present Israel which is the church—not, I emphasize, an institutional church of, say, Hebrews, but the present Christian congregations characterized and defined by the inclusion of ethnic Gentiles into the Israel of God [Hays 86].<sup>7</sup> This interpretation is further dramatically strengthened by Paul’s explicitly hermeneutic statement that “the rock was Christ.” Once again, there has been much discussion of the exact mode of figurative interpretation that Paul is supposing here, but in any case, it is very telling that he uses the past tense: The rock was always Christ. Paul’s “in-the-spirit” interpretation, whether typological or allegorical (or, as I claim, both at once), represents a dehistoricization of the text as well as an implicit claim that Christ is the always-existent Christ in heaven and not his temporary historical avatar on earth. Paul certainly held that the literal, historical meaning of the text was true—Consider Israel according to the flesh—but just as unquestionably that its significance was not to be located in its concrete historical moment but in that which it signified and which one way or another stops time and exits from history.

The Platonic preference for the immovable supersedes temporality, and this is the essence of allegory as I understand it. It is here that I part company from Hays. Having demonstrated that Paul interweaves his discourse here with a series of allusions to Deuteronomy 8 and 32, as well as Psalms 106, Hays reads the discourse as essentially midrash and even explicitly argues that “There is nothing distinctively Christian in the lessons that Paul draws from the Scripture that he cites here. Deuteronomy has already performed the imaginative act of turning the exodus into a paradigm for Israel’s future experience; consequently, Paul’s typological reading of the story is nothing other than a fresh performance within Israel’s long-established poetic-theological tradition” [94].

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6. Cf. also Schweizer in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [7.127]: “This expression carries with it an evaluation; this is the Israel which understands itself only in terms of descent. In the context, however, this is not the point at issue, and it is no accident that we do not find the antithesis ο Israel kata pneuma.”

7. Hays’s reading of this entire passage [91–102] is, as usual, impressively astute. Later I will discuss my explicit points of disagreement with it.



Yes—and no. On the one hand, Hays is undoubtedly correct, Paul draws a lesson here from the concrete historical events that is not entirely dissimilar from the lesson that Deuteronomy wishes Jews to learn from the same story, “And you shall remember. . . .” Paul, however, supplements that hermeneutic of memory of historical events with claims that the historical events *already* figured the current situation; the food and drink were spiritual and the rock was Christ. As in so much of my reading of Paul, I see here a brilliant conflation of hermeneutical, cultural traditions, such that the “Platonic” moment of his spirituality is made wholly one with the biblical sensibility. Paul produces here, I suggest, as in much of his thought, an extraordinary synthesis between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaisms. On the one hand, Paul is not denying significance to the concrete, historical Israel, neither now nor a fortiori in the past. On the other hand, however, there is a strong implication that this Israel finds its true meaning and always did as a signifier of the community of faith which would include all humanity and not only the ethnic Israel. The story of Israel exists for two purposes: to prefigure and figure the Israel of God and to teach that Israel of God how it should behave. Both of these moments are uncovered together in 1 Corinthians 10.

Which brings us again to the question of supersession. Hays denies that Pauline theology is supersessionist [98–102]. For Paul the Christian community stands in continuity with and not against the historical Israel. There has been, moreover, no rejection of Israel owing to their faults or flaws, as in some other New Testament theologies. Nor, finally, are the Christian believers free of either ethical or moral requirements or unsusceptible to sin (as the Corinthians apparently thought). Hays’s reading then defangs Paul of his “anti-Semitism” without, however, as in the case of some modern liberal apologists for Paul, removing the teeth of Paul’s critique.<sup>8</sup> I would argue, however (and here, I think, the different hermeneutical perspectives of a self-identified Jew and a self-identified Christian show up): If there has been no rejection of Israel, there has indeed been a supersession of the historical Israel’s hermeneutic of self-understanding as a community constituted by physical genealogy and observances and the covenantal exclusiveness that such a self-understanding entails. The call to human Oneness constitutes a threat to Jewish (or any other) difference.

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Paul’s text, then, is certainly to be understood as a challenge to, if not an attack on, the understandings of the meaning of Torah in Pharisaic Judaism.<sup>9</sup> There one finds God in the letter itself, not in a turning away from or a looking behind the letter. Jews cannot, of course, be expected to assent to their self-understanding being annulled. Jill Robbins has produced what I think is the most eloquent modern Jewish response to the Christian hermeneutic of supersession of the “Old Testament”:

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8. I am referring to the work of Lloyd Gaston in particular, who argued that for Paul the Old Testament continued to be valid and soteriological for Jews, and the only function of Christ was to add the Gentiles to the picture. Gaston produced a spirited effort to argue for this “experimental” hermeneutic (his term) but ultimately fails to convince.

9. The Pharisees were one group or sect of first-century Judaism. The later rabbinic Judaism traces its ancestry back to this group, and we have no reason to doubt that connection. It is, nevertheless, a serious mistake to read back from later rabbinic texts into the first century. Since Paul identifies himself as a former Pharisee, however, when we find congruence between Pauline and later rabbinic ideas, the Pauline evidence may be significant for establishing the Pharisaic provenance of the ideas, even if we may be somewhat skeptical of the report in Acts of his having been a student of the leading Pharisee—Rabban Gamliel.

*The Jews are related to the Old Testament book physically or carnally: they carry it; the Christians are related to it spiritually: they believe from it. This polemic against the “dead letter” (i.e., Jewish literalism), indeed the entire figural discourse, depends above all on suppressing the self-understanding of Judaic exegesis.*

*For the self-understanding of Jewish exegesis would give the lie to the figural assertion that the Old Testament discredits its own authority and transfers it to the New. It would disrupt the dyadic and hierarchical oppositions such as carnal and spiritual, literal and figurative, that structure every figural claim. It would make it possible to understand this religion of the book and its relation to the letter of language—otherwise. For if the book the Jews carry is not an Old Testament but a Hebrew Bible, then the figural discourse would collapse. But it cannot, as it were, suppress it enough. It cannot suppress the Judaic without leaving a trace, as when it inscribes it as outside. Christian hermeneutics is “itself” at every point traced by the self-understanding of Judaic exegesis, namely midrash. [12]*

Robbins is thus (as I am) a postmodern Jewish respondent to the Christian hermeneutic of supersession. In Robbins’s book, the Jew as speaking subject writes back.

Jews have, of course, had access to public discourse in Europe since the early modern period, but generally only insofar as they were willing to speak as universal Europeans and not as Jews. (Take Spinoza as a paradigm for this.) This was, then, the modern equivalent of conversion to Christianity. (Interestingly enough, one of the ways that Jews have entered the cultural conversation in modernity has been to write about Paul, reclaiming him, as it were, as a heterodox Jew and thus repatriating the Jew into the heart of Christian culture. This project has been pursued in various political venues of modern Jewish culture from right-wing Zionism to left-wing anti-Zionism and reform Judaism. My own book on Paul, *A Radical Jew*, provides yet another version of that discourse.) Even now, the common liberal expression “too Jewish” continues that form of oppression, somewhat less obvious but just as obnoxious as the oppression of other subaltern groups.

Just as the ancient Rabbis simply refused to allow the letter to be purloined from them, so also we can refuse. We can refuse, however, in discourse shared with others and not only in the private discourse of the Jews.<sup>10</sup> I am suggesting that the postmodern era has returned to us the option of refusing out loud, as it were, as equal cultural partners in a certain domain of discourse: the hermeneutical, precisely where Christian doctrine has, for two thousand years, most delegitimized us. I do not downgrade the achievement of predecessors from Abravanel to Rosenzweig if I argue that changed cultural conditions outside of them and partly caused by them have made it possible for the Jewish subaltern to speak.<sup>11</sup> Robbins’s book is an enactment of the recovery of midrash in the contemporary critical tradition, that is, precisely of the revoicing of a silenced Jewish subject in the West.<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva has remarked on analogies between the marginality of women’s

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10. *Maria Damon has recently remarked to me how a modernist Gertrude Stein hides references to Jewishness in puns: Yet dish = Yiddish [personal communication].*

11. *Our reluctance, nurtured by Benjamin, to see human history as progress, should not blind us to the occasional (and perhaps temporary) positive developments in the present as well, particularly insofar as those positive developments may have been generated partially in horrified response to Nazi genocide. The present has little enough for which to congratulate itself.*

12. *Robbins’s book was partly prefigured, as it were, by Susan Handelman’s *The Slayers of Moses*, a book that reads curiously in some ways more like the defensive discourse of Jews engaged in a disputation than like the autonomous Jewish speaking subject of Robbins’s discourse. Handelman’s book has, however, empowered all of us and as a pioneer effort should not be simply*

discourse in our post-Enlightenment society and that of Jews:

*Consequently, the specific character of women could only appear as non-essential or even non-existent to the totalizing and even totalitarian spirit of this ideology. We begin to see that this same egalitarian and in fact censoring treatment has been imposed, from Enlightenment Humanism through socialism, on religious specificities, and in particular, on Jews. [196]*

In other words, in the best case, Jews could get on in enlightened society and culture only via a denial of the specificity of their Jewishness. Of course, actual conversion is only the most extreme form of that denial. I am suggesting that for some Jewish academicians the “recovery” of midrash is equivalent to what the emergence of feminist criticism has been for women in the academic world—a refusal to be simply swallowed up in a “humanism” and “universalism” that universalistically encompass only the literature and culture of white, male Christian humans. That very living community, which Paul occludes by referring to the literal “Old Testament” as merely written on stone and not on the hearts of anyone, enters once more into the general cultural conversation, that is to say, as a subject of speech of contemporary *secular* culture. Accordingly, Robbins’s book moves from “Jewish” readings of Christian writers like Augustine and Petrarch to appropriations of Judaic culture in Jewish writers like Kafka and Levinas. Her work, then, attempts to undo the erasure of Jewish self-understanding that Christian supersessionism, even at its most benign, has done. It undoes the erasure of Jewish self-understanding while at the same time systematically putting into question the concepts of “self,” “understanding,” and “voice.” Thus the undoing of the erasure of Jewish self-understanding does not lead to a restoration of full presence (which would, in fact, have paradoxically replayed the very erasure that it sought to undo); rather, it respects the trace.

In her chapter on Levinas, Robbins most explicitly evokes a reversal of supersession, for Levinas is probably the most prominent “Western” philosopher to have explicitly and openly maintained an allegiance to rabbinic Judaism. I cannot even begin to summarize the brilliant argument of the chapter. I wish merely to cite its bottom line here. Pauline Christianity has been founded on a privileging of inner dispositions of the psyche over outer dispositions of the body. A behavior that is not completely informed by and generated by faith is dismissed in this tradition as mere “works” righteousness and in some Protestant traditions identified with sin itself. Levinas, by revoicing Jewish texts of themselves and from themselves, reverses this hierarchy [Robbins 102–13]. Doing before hearing becomes now the very ground of an ethics, a demand of a certain behavior toward the other that may otherwise be escaped:

*Levinas writes that if doing the law before understanding is conceived as pure praxis as opposed to contemplation, it is “a movement in the night” (QLT, 78). But Levinas, attentive to the hierarchical oppositions—inside and outside, presence and absence, seeing and blindness—that organize the opposition Greek/Hebrew (and Christian/Hebrew as well), does not merely reverse the dyadic hierarchy (i.e., privilege the outside, nonseeing, absence). He reinscribes it so that the subordinated term is no longer the (dialectical) opposite of the first. Perhaps the adherence to the law that precedes understanding is not merely external (i.e. a blind or infantile naiveté) but an adherence which is anterior to*

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*dismissed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick’s edited volume, Midrash and Literature, in which Robbins’s essay on Kafka first appeared, was also a marker of this cultural shift.*

*the internal adhesion that operates in the light of evidence (QLT, 82). [Robbins 113–14]*<sup>13</sup>

A Jewish self-understanding of praxis, one that is informed by the Paulinian critique, thus takes its place as an answer/response to the Pauline challenge. As Robbins cites Derrida, in Levinas's work we find, "Not a community without light, not a blindfolded synagogue, but a community anterior to Platonic light" [Robbins 114]: "Here Derrida, following Levinas (who follows Rosenzweig), not only rereads but unreads an entire medieval iconography of the synagogue with its broken staff and its blindfold. That iconography is exegetical; it is based on the typological relationship between the two testaments" [114]. The blindfolded synagogue, however, not only harkens back to medieval iconography; it is also obviously an allusion to Moses's veil in 2 Corinthians, to the veil that to this day prevents the Jews from perceiving the true figurative glory of their text in Christ. By unreading that veil, Jews take their place on the stage of discourse and proclaim the Letter which gives us life. Praxis is not works-righteousness but good works, and "boasting" is not self-satisfied arrogance but confidence in the justness of a just God.

The Rabbis had not remained insensible to the threat to Jewish difference which Paul's allegorical/typological hermeneutics implied, although their response was not explicit. Almost as a direct counter to Paul's charge that Jewish commitment to the flesh, to the literal observance of circumcision in the flesh, constituted a veil that kept their eyes from the sight of God, the Rabbis developed a discourse by which it was *only* through the flesh that the sight of God could be achieved. Although this notion is found in many texts of the third centuries and later, when Pauline Christianity was inexorably becoming the hegemonic discourse of the Roman Empire in which most Jews lived, it perhaps finds its most striking expression in the following text:

*It is written, "This, after my skin will have been peeled off, but from my flesh, I will see God" [Job 19.26]. Abraham said, after I circumcised myself many converts came to cleave to this sign. "But from my flesh, I will see God," for had I not done this [circumcised myself], on what account would the Holy Blessed One, have appeared to me? "And the Lord appeared to him." [Genesis Rabbah 48.1 (Theodor and Albeck 479)]*

This text can be adduced as an emblem of the difference between Paul's spiritual reading as exemplified above from 1 Corinthians 10 and the "literal" reading of midrash. As Elliot Wolfson correctly observes, there are two hermeneutic moves being made simultaneously in this midrash [192–93]. The first involves interpretation of the sequence in Genesis 17.1–14, which is the description of Abraham's circumcision, and Genesis 17.23 ff., which begins, "And The Lord appeared to Abraham in Elone Mamre." The midrash, following its usual canons of interpretation, attributes strong causal nexus to these events following on one another. Had Abraham not circumcised himself, then God would not have appeared to him. This interpretation is splendidly confirmed by the Job verse. The Book of Job, together with the other Holy Writings, was considered by the Rabbis an exegetical text that has the function of interpreting (or guiding interpretation of) the Torah. In this case, the verse of Job, which refers to the peeling off of skin, is taken by a brilliant appropriation to refer to the peeling off of skin of circumcision, and the continuation of the verse that speaks of seeing God from one's flesh is taken as a reference to the theophany at Elone Mamre. The reading of sequence of the Torah's text is confirmed by the explicit causality that the Job text inscribes. Circumcision of the flesh—peeling of the skin—provides the vision of God.

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13. "QLT" refers to Levinas's *Quatre lectures talmudiques* [Paris: Minuit, 1968].

As Elliot Wolfson remarks, this midrash constitutes an interpretation of circumcision which directly counters the Pauline one: “The emphasis on Abraham’s circumcision . . . can only be seen as a tacit rejection of the Christian position that circumcision of the flesh had been replaced by circumcision of the spirit (enacted in baptism)” [194]. It is, of course, this very moment of the refusal of allegorization on the part of the Rabbis, their explicit resistance to being allegorized, that so provoked the Fathers and Augustine in particular. Yet, from this passage, we see that the characterization of Rabbinic Judaism as being unconcerned with spiritual experience is unwarranted. Rather the body is seen as the vehicle of encounter with God. The physical act of circumcision *in the flesh*, which prepares the (male) Jew for sexual intercourse, is also that which prepares him for Divine intercourse—for mystical vision of God.<sup>14</sup> The Rabbis countered Paul’s charge that the literal is a veil that prevents vision by asserting that the literal is that which removes the veil and enables the vision of God.

### 3

For Paul, descent according to the flesh and circumcision in the flesh have been superseded by their spiritual signified, baptism in the spirit.<sup>15</sup> The flaw in the Jews who reject Christianity is that they refuse to accept the true meaning of their own Law and history, not that that Law and history are themselves rejected. “Supersession” can thus itself be understood in two ways. It means either that Israel has been contradicted and replaced by the church or that Israel has been “continued” and fulfilled in the church. What is common to the two is that after Christ there is no further positive role for Israel in the flesh. A hermeneutic theory such as Paul’s, by which the literal Israel, literal history, literal circumcision, and literal genealogy are superseded by their allegorical, spiritual signifieds is not necessarily anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic. From the perspective of the first century, the contest between a Pauline allegorical Israel and a rabbinic hermeneutics of the concrete Israel is simply a legitimate cultural, hermeneutical, and political contestation. To put this in Hays’s own words, “This astonishing event, completely unpredictable on the basis of the story’s plot development, is nonetheless now seen as the supremely fitting narrative culmination, providing unforeseen closure to dangling narrative themes and demanding a reconfiguration of the *dianoia*, the reader’s grasp of ‘what the story is all about’” [100]. It must be seen as well, however, that those “readers” who hang onto the old configuration of the *dianoia* have indeed been superseded. From the point of view

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14. In my paper “‘This we know to be the carnal Israel’: Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel” [493–97] I have discussed the gender politics of this issue.

15. Incidentally, I think that Hays is too harsh with Erich Auerbach. Although Auerbach’s view is overstated, there is, in my humble opinion, something to be said for the view that in Paul the “Old Testament” is a shadow of things to come. Hays remarks, “The telling detail in this extraordinary caricature of Paul is that Auerbach’s key image of the Old Testament as ‘shadow of things to come’ is derived not from Paul but from Hebrews (Heb. 10:1), which he apparently regards as a Pauline Epistle!” [98]. Auerbach could certainly have derived this idea rather from Colossians 2.16–17, of which it might be much more legitimately claimed that it is either of Pauline origin or from very near disciples: *Mē oun tis humas krinetō en Brōsei kai en posei ē en merei heortēs ē neomēnias ē sabbatōn a estin skia tōn mellontōn to de sōma tou Khristou. Therefore, let no one judge you as to eating or drinking or with regard to the feasts, or the New Moons or the Sabbaths, which are but a shadow of the coming things, but the body is of Christ. The reason, I suspect, that Hays, like Homer, nodded is that in his zeal to overturn a certain version of Paul as a supersessionist he went too far and thus inadvertently suppressed the fairly clear evidence for a different sort of supersessionism explicit in the deutero-Pauline school and, I think, adumbrated in Paul himself.*

of a Jew the distinction becomes harder to make.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, I agree completely with Hays that Pauline typology does not allow for “one pole of the typological correlation [to] annihilate the other.” To capture the subtleties of this point, another quotation from Hays will help:

*Paul, for his part, is laboring to refute the charge—whether rhetorical or historical—that he, as a promulgator of a startling new teaching incorporating uncircumcised Gentiles into the people of God, has abandoned the ways of the God of Israel. . . . With such issues in the air, the citation of Ps. 44:22 whispers another disclaimer, this time sotto voce: by identifying himself and his Christian readers with the suffering Israel of the psalm, Paul evokes (metaleptically) the psalmist’s denial of any charge of idolatrous defection. Fundamental to Paul’s whole theological project is the claim that his gospel represents the authentic fulfillment of God’s revelation to Israel. [60]*

All true, but the ethnic Jew may still feel that her personal sufferings in past and present for being specifically Jewish and God’s promise that they will be vindicated have nevertheless been abandoned. This is an elegant example, I think, of a perspective that can lead us to understand that even a Paul who bore no malice toward the Jews qua Jews could nevertheless produce a doctrine that would be experienced as inimical to them and by them/us.

It can be fairly said, moreover, that Hays’s book leaves room for such a contestation to continue and to be both irenic and mutually fructifying for Jews and Christians, religious and secular. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly’s *Sacred Violence: Paul’s Hermeneutic of the Cross*, on the other hand, a “Girardian” reading of Paul, restores the interpretation of Paul as maligner of Judaism with a vengeance. It does not do so critically, moreover, but in full collaboration with such a project. A sequel in pseudo (post)modern terms of the most violent aspects of Christian discourse about Judaism, Hamerton-Kelly’s book reads like a medieval *Tractatus adversus judaeos*, not only in content but in form as well. His explicit intent is to delegitimize Jewish—or any culture but Christian—as independent cultural alterities in favor of a Christian exceptionalism by which Paul represents the end to religion and the end to “cultural embeddedness.” The term is his and used by him as a pejorative. His book seeks to make a book like Jill Robbins’s a theoretical impossibility, an expression ultimately of the same stiff-neckedness of the Jews of Paul’s time that led them as well to refuse to see that Christian revelation supersedes and subsumes all other cultural practice.<sup>17</sup> Hamerton-Kelly ostensibly interprets Paul in such a way that his discourse does not constitute a delegitimation of Jews or Judaism:

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16. Auerbach becomes, then, much less caricaturelike.

17. Girard himself also falls into supersessionist patterns of thought and expression. The following quotation is exemplary:

I think it is possible to show that only the texts of the Gospels manage to achieve what the Old Testament leaves incomplete [in the transumption of Sacred Violence into harmonious community]. These texts therefore serve as an extension of the Judaic bible, bringing to completion an enterprise that the Judaic bible did not take far enough, as Christian tradition has always maintained. [158]

*This is supersessionist because it refuses to recognize that there was/is another “extension of the Judaic bible,” which has also continued historical cultural processes that began within the biblical period. Insofar as Girard will refer to Christianity as “the religion which comes from God,” while Judaism (and everything else) is relegated to being “religion which comes from man,” he can hardly expect non-Christians to be very interested in his work [166], which is ultimately theologically based Christian apologetic triumphalism. However, nothing in Girard’s writings, to*

*For Paul the church is not another sect, but the community of the new creation. It is ontologically beyond the world of opposites, and so is not a rival religion to Judaism, but a new and inclusive community. It is possible to construe this claim as just another ploy in the game of sectarian rivalry. Unfortunately, Christians down through the ages have certainly read it as such and used it to justify themselves and delegitimize the Jews. Paul left himself open to such an interpretation, but he did not intend it. He would have been appalled to see the community of the end of time becoming another sect in time, subject to the delusions of sacred violence. [146]*

Paul's discourse is on this account a discourse of inclusion, an attempt to break down the hierarchical barriers that exist between people. When Paul says, "our fathers were all under the cloud" [1 Cor. 1.1], precisely the import of this is the fathers of all of us, both gentile and Jewish. To the extent, however, that the new and inclusive community demands conformity to certain practices that contradict the practices of the historical Jews, even if those practices be only the confession of certain beliefs, then it is inevitably a rival religion and a delegitimization of the Jews and indeed all non-Christians. Hamerton-Kelly is wholly oblivious, however, to the fundamental contradiction built into the notion of such a community, namely the presumption that anyone who does not wish to join the new community of faith is under a cloud of a different sort. The very claim to be "ontologically beyond" itself constitutes rivalry.

It is not so much that Paul left himself open to misinterpretation here; the "misinterpretation" is almost a necessary consequence of such an idea. It is clear that this coercive "new and inclusive community" still excludes (and often violently) those who do not have faith in Christ. Hamerton-Kelly, moreover, reads Paul according to the best possible construal of the "intentions" of his discourse and not even its virtually ineluctable effects (how precisely Hamerton-Kelly claims to know the intention of Paul better than, for example, Justin Martyr did is itself fascinating!), while Judaism is read by him according to its alleged "actual" practice of killing dissenters. Thus Judaism is simply "the impulse to fulfill the Mosaic Law [that] made him [Paul] a persecutor and had killed Christ" [141].

Hamerton-Kelly is willing to grant that Paul's putative experience does "not take the whole range of the religion into account," but not apparently to consider that the doctrines of Jews that other Jews referred to as "Zealots" or "Knifers" were marginal and vigorously opposed subcultures of Greco-Roman Judaism.<sup>18</sup> For Hamerton-Kelly, despite occa-

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*the extent that I know them, prepares one for the virulence of Hamerton-Kelly's anti-Judaism, which is all his own. Just comparing Girard's account of the crucifixion as having been given "explicit or implicit assent" by "the crowd in Jerusalem, the Jewish religious authorities, the Roman political authorities, and even the disciples" [167] with Hamerton-Kelly's "the impulse to fulfill the Mosaic Law [that] made him [Paul] a persecutor and had killed Christ" [141] makes the disparity apparent.*

*On the other hand, Girard's text is sufficiently problematic on its own, at least in part because of the dialogical way (literally as a dialogue) that it is presented. Girard speaks of a founding murder that lies behind all culture—that is, it is constitutive of hominization, something hidden since the foundation of the world, while his interlocutor (Oughourlian) transmutes this into "cultural differentiation develops on the basis of the founding murder" [165; my emphasis], and Girard does not protest. It is thus easy to see how a personality dedicated to the erasure of difference and imposition of Christianity on all could find his (mistaken) point of origin in Girard. Girard's text hovers over the pit of a Christian triumphalism (and implicit anti-Semitism) but avoids it, while Hamerton-Kelly jumps right in.*

*18. That is, the sort of violence that Hamerton-Kelly seems to wish to essentialize as "Jewish" per se did exist in certain extreme groups in the first century, but those very groups were marginalized by the terms of opprobrium assigned to them by other groups, including notably the Pharisees.*

sional pro forma disclaimers, these groups represent the true essence of Judaism. For as he says, “I have endorsed Paul’s attack on *Judaism*” [183; my emphasis]. To this should be contrasted Hays’s sober and balanced judgments:

*Only a narrowly ethnocentric form of Judaism, Paul insists, would claim that God is the God of the Jews only or that Abraham is the progenitor of God’s people “according to the flesh,” that is by virtue of natural physical descent. For the purposes of his argument, Paul associates these (evidently false) notions with the (disputed) claim that Gentile Christians must come under the Law. Paul, speaking from within the Jewish tradition, contends that the Torah itself provides the warrant for a more inclusive theology that affirms that the one God is God of Gentiles as well as Jews and that Abraham is the forefather of more than those who happen to be his physical descendants. [55]*

Paul, in this view, as in the view that I have promulgated in *A Radical Jew*, is indeed a Jewish cultural critic, calling Jews to ally themselves with the progressive understandings contained within their own tradition and to reject the practices of certain ethnocentric zealots. In fact, the notion that Gentiles are saved without conversion to Judaism is a doctrine held by many *within* ancient Judaism; indeed, what is new in Paul is rather the idea that all—Jews and Gentiles—must be justified in the *same* way, through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul dreamed of a day in which all distinctions between human beings productive of hierarchy would be erased and not one in which there was merely a place in God’s saving plan for all. These are the grounds of his critique of—not “attack on”—Judaism.

Hamerton-Kelly’s account of Judaism, as well as his account of Paul, thus teach us more about him and his ideology than about anything else. For the certainty of faith, we find here substituted a certainty borne of “the preunderstanding we [Hamerton-Kelly] bring to the text,” which is “well founded on the evidence not only of the texts it interprets but also on other evidence from the human sciences” [61]. For Hamerton-Kelly it is simply a fact that the Jews killed Christ, that their religion was a religion of Sacred Violence, and that God/Paul rejected the Jews because of the essential evil of their “way of life”: “The Law had created a way of life founded on sacred violence and the crucifixion of Christ is the logical outcome of such a way of life” [66, 71]. Hamerton-Kelly does not even present this characterization as Paul’s in order to criticize it but rather produces a discourse supported by “the evidence from the human sciences” [that is, Girard] which asserts its authority as a description of Judaism. He interprets Philippians 3.8, in which Paul refers to his former achievement as *skybala* [shit], as Paul’s characterization of “the Jewish way of life.” Hamerton-Kelly somewhat softens the translation to “refuse” and then asserts that this is “what the Law really is” [68]. He thus relies ultimately on the authority of both Paul and Girard (science) in support of his own political/theological agenda. When we read the Pauline passage in question, however, we find that Hamerton-Kelly’s interpretation of it is far from ineluctable. The passage reads:

*Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ [alla menounge kai hegoumai panta zemian einai dia to hyperechon tes gnōseōs Khristou Iesou tou kyrion mou di hon ta panta ezemiōthen kai hegoumai skybala hina Khriston kerdesō].*

I think that a much more likely reading of this verse than Hamerton-Kelly’s is that Paul is precisely not referring to what his former life “really is,” but rather emphasizing that even though it was of value, he counts it now as dung in comparison to the excellency of the knowledge of Christ and in order that he may win such knowledge. In fact, the figure



works only if that of which he is speaking is not “really dung.” It is not Paul here who is anti-Judaic, unless any disagreement or cultural critique is to be defined as anti-Judaic.

In fact I give Hamerton-Kelly much more credit than he does himself. He claims to have endorsed Paul’s attack on Judaism; I think he has created it. For example, Hamerton-Kelly writes: “The agent of my action in this situation is the sin ‘that dwells in me’; namely ‘in my flesh’ (*tout estin en to sarki mou*) (Rom. 7:18). In the light of my argument this might be paraphrased, ‘no good thing dwells in me, that is, in my culturally embedded (Jewish) self’” [147]. Even granting the undecidability of texts, the multivariate nature of hermeneutics, my own personal investments that lead me to read one way and not another, I find it hard to imagine that anyone who is not already inclined toward his hatred of Judaism will find Hamerton-Kelly’s paraphrase in Paul’s language, and I think it unnecessary even to produce an alternative reading in this case. Hamerton-Kelly’s affirmation of this proposition, whether or not it is Paul’s, reveals that he still somehow manages to imagine that there is a self that is not culturally embedded. Paul says nothing so nefarious, but certainly does hold out the positive hope of a humanity which will not be differentiated by cultural specificities. Paul can be forgiven his naïveté. Hamerton-Kelly’s ignorance of the critique of Universalism mounted in recent criticism is, however, intellectually and morally unforgivable. (His appropriation of “theory” seems to be limited to Girard and Girard alone.) In the wake of the horrors that have been perpetrated in the name of such visions of a humanity “not culturally embedded,” Hamerton-Kelly’s remark is simply inexcusable. If for Hamerton-Kelly “cultural embeddedness” is the sin that dwells in our flesh, then his politics will be a politics of the eradication of cultural embeddedness, which *we* know, by now, means the assimilation of all, willy-nilly, to the culture defined as *not* specific—that of White Christian European males.

The obvious charge that suggests itself is that Hamerton-Kelly is engaging in sacred violence and scapegoating of his own. He is certainly aware, although contemptuously dismissive, of this accusation. Indeed, he devotes an entire section of his book to “refuting” it:

*If the solution to sacred violence is the renunciation of rivalry, and if faith can take different forms, each of them valid as long as they can be classified under the heading of agape, why have I endorsed Paul’s attack on Judaism? Have I not been engaged in precisely the rivalrous behavior that I have been criticizing, rivalrously condemning rivalry?* [183]

Hamerton-Kelly’s answer is that, “Clearly, a religious system that kills innocent people ‘righteously’ has less rational and moral justification than one that cherishes all in love” [183], and it therefore follows, as the night follows the day, that “The sophistic taunt that Paul scapegoats Judaism is, therefore, unworthy of serious consideration” [184].<sup>19</sup> Indeed, such a “taunt” would be inappropriately directed at Paul, because Paul does not mount his critique of Judaism on such false grounds; it can well be directed, however, at Hamerton-Kelly, and it is more than a “sophistic taunt,” a formal contradiction. It is a damning charge that discredits entirely any pretense he has to a hermeneutic that claims to “escape mimetic violence into a new community of agapaic cooperation” [184].<sup>20</sup> The

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19. His rhetorical move reminds me of that of John Chrysostom, who in his violent attacks on Judaism pauses to remark, “I know that some will condemn me for daring to say that the synagogue is no better than a theater,” but “I will not be deterred” [qtd. in Gager 119]. Such also is Hamerton-Kelly’s “courage,” vaunted in the blurbs on the dust jacket.

20. Girard and Oughourlian have tried to guard against the sort of misreading that Hamerton-Kelly engages in on pages 174–75, where they explicitly refer to the transformation “of the universal revelation of the founding murder into a polemical denunciation of the Jewish religion”—precisely that which Hamerton-Kelly engages in and which Girard refers to as “a new form of



burden of Hamerton-Kelly's book is that the Jews *really are* Christ-killers.<sup>21</sup> Now we do not know if "historically" there were *any* Jews involved in the killing of Christ, nor is there any reason to suppose that, even if there were, they represented the whole People or its religion. What we do know, however, is that millions of Jews have been killed in Europe, owing partly to this scapegoating slander.

Rabbinic Jews insisted: We will continue to exist corporeally, in our bodily practices, the practices that are our legacy from our carnal filiation and bodily history, and not be interpreted out of fleshly, historical existence, what Levinas refers to as "integral adherence"—the adherence of meaning within concrete action. And it worked. It is only owing to that resistance that the Jews still exist. Rather than the negatively loaded term "particularism," we can easily rename this Jewish resistance with the positively marked "difference," and, as such, it has indeed functioned as a model for the politics of difference of repressed people of color, women, and gays. However, as Foucault has made us only too aware, virtually any discursive practice can be liberatory or repressive, or worse. Colonizing almost his last words, "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous" [Afterword 232].<sup>22</sup> Only specific analysis of specific historical situations reveals when a specific practice is which.

My thesis is that Judaism and Christianity as two different hermeneutic systems for reading the Bible generate two diametrically opposed forms of racism—and two diametrically opposed possibilities of antiracism.<sup>23</sup> The genius of Christianity is its concern for all of the Peoples of the world; the genius of Judaism is its ability to leave other people alone [see Shell]. This is grounded theologically in rabbinic Judaism in the notion that in order to achieve salvation, Jews are required to perform (or, better, to attempt to perform) the entire 613 commandments, while non-Jews are required to perform only seven commandments given to Noah which form a sort of natural, moral Law. Hamerton-Kelly is so bound up in Christian modes of thinking that he is unable to even imagine an alternative. Thus he writes, "These Jews would have understood that to refute the necessity for Mosaic observance in the case of gentiles undermines the authority of that observance across the board. If it is not necessary for some, it is not necessary for any" [187]. Wrong! Jewish theology understands the Jewish People to be priests performing a set of ritual acts on behalf of the entire world. While clearly the temptation to a certain arrogance is built into such a system, precisely the temptation to "Sacred Violence" that leads to forced conversion, whether by the sword, ridicule, or the Pound or deculturation in the name of the new human community, is not. Christianity is the system that proposes that there is something that is necessary for all: faith in Jesus Christ. The evils of the two systems are the precise obverse of these geniuses. These geni all too easily become demons. The insistence on difference can produce as well an indifference (or worse) toward Others. Jewish difference can indeed be dangerous, as the Palestinians know only too well, but Christian universalism has been even more dangerous, as Jews have been forced to demonstrate with their bodies.

Hamerton-Kelly's reading of Paul and mine converge in one important way. We both describe Paul as a critic of Jewish culture. Otherwise the politics of our two projects could not be more opposed. I see Paul's critique of Jewish culture as motivated and generated by distress about Jewish emphasis on the significance of being a member of the tribe with

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*violence, directed against a new scapegoat—the Jew." Not only a bad reader of Paul, therefore, Hamerton-Kelly is also, owing to his anti-Semitic passion, a highly selective and superficial reader of Girard as well.*

21. *He dismisses the challenge of modern Christian New Testament scholars to the simple veracity of the gospel accounts.*

22. *See also the more expansive articulation of this principle in Foucault, An Introduction, The History of Sexuality [101–02].*

23. *This argument is one of the major themes of my book A Radical Jew and will, accordingly, be repeated and of course much expanded there.*

all that entailed, and there is no doubt that this factor is central to biblical, postbiblical, and ultimately rabbinic Judaism, for good and/or for ill.<sup>24</sup> Hamerton-Kelly sees Paul as rejecting the inherent violence of a Judaism that killed an innocent man (Christ), which is simply a theologically based slander, since virtually everything we know about Jewish Law would have prevented Jews from killing Jesus.<sup>25</sup> There is, moreover, precious little even in Paul to support such a construction beyond one contested passage in 1 Thessalonians 2.15.<sup>26</sup> Hamerton-Kelly's understanding of 2 Corinthians 3.6 that the "Letter kills" means that the Law killed Christ is special pleading at its most spectacular [159]. Perhaps the most egregious moment in this book, however, is the following:

*Paul's understanding of the link between the Jewish way of life, his own activity as a persecutor, and the death of Christ, also explains the culminating affirmation, "[God] made him who knew no sin to be a sin for us, in order that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). The "sin" that God made him is Jewishness, elsewhere called "the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3; cf. Gal 4: 4-5). [126; my emphasis]*

Such an interpretation is an affront even more to Christianity than to Judaism. It is not difficult to expose the egregiousness of Hamerton-Kelly's reading. The "sin" that God made Jesus is almost certainly a sin offering (in Hebrew the two words are identical), and Paul's thought is perfectly coherent.<sup>27</sup>

My version of Paul commands that Jews pay attention: How do we wish to understand and address the apparent ethnocentric elements of our Judaism? Hamerton-Kelly's account of Paul could be safely ignored as critique and indeed must be combated as a traditional libel of Jews and Judaism. Indeed, "one should not distort the interpretation of Christian origins in order to combat anti-Semitism" [Hamerton-Kelly 188], but neither should one use anti-Semitism to distort the interpretation of Christian origins.

When Hamerton-Kelly says: "Deception by sin, which is really self-deception, is, therefore, the hallmark of the Jewish religious life in its role as the paradigm of sacred

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24. *W. D. Davies's Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology is a model of a cultural criticism that is not anti-Judaic. He does not apologize for Jewish "particularism" or condemn it as an essentialized exclusiveness or innate sense of superiority but explains it historically and marks both its "positive" and "negative" effects [61-68]. Davies anticipates as well my thesis that Paul's critique arose in an environment in which many Jews were increasingly feeling an "uneasy conscience." He well understands that Jewish isolation was a fence that preserved Jewish difference, and also that "a fence, while it preserves, also excludes. The Torah, which differentiated the Jew from others, also separated him from them." Criticism of Jewish culture, by Jews or non-Jews, is not anti-Semitic. Slander is. Some Jews and liberal Christians do not see this difference and regard all critique of Judaism as somehow causally contiguous with holocaust.*

25. *Of course, I am not arguing for Jewish exceptionalism here. There have undoubtedly been as many Jewish murderers as anyone else. The Gospel claims, which are, of course, significantly later than Paul, that the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus to death are, however, simply implausible from the perspective of Jewish Law, as is the account of the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. In order for the Sanhedrin to actually execute someone, so many implausible conditions had to be met that a Sanhedrin which condemned one person to death in seventy years was called derisively, "The Bloody Sanhedrin!"*

26. *While I think that it is too easy an escape to suggest that this verse is not Pauline, its highly uncharacteristic nature suggests that it is not by any means a cornerstone of Paul's thought. Moreover, the fact that it seems to allude to the Destruction of the Temple, which certainly took place after the date of the letter, supports here the argument that at least some of the verse has been tampered with in the light of post-Pauline Christian thought.*

27. *Although Paul's christology is not generally expiatory, there certainly are several traces of such a theology of the cross in his writings.*

violence that is the primitive essence of all religion” [148], his book roughly reminds us that we are not yet safely past the exceptionalism that has generated colonialist and imperialist Christianity, whereby all religions but Christianity are condemned as primitive, and Christianity is excepted from being a “religion” (a view that Hamerton-Kelly’s mentor, Girard, also apparently holds). This book will, I think, be most appropriately contextualized when we realize that it was published in the year that David Duke and Pat Buchanan became credible political figures.

Hamerton-Kelly defines the achievement of a hermeneutical endeavor by its “success in interpreting the signs of the tradition and the times,” and continues, “I have asked my questions in the light of my intuition of the answer, and I can point to the traces of violence on our common horizon to justify asking the questions I have asked. We can also invite the accuser to join the conversation” [184]. Richard Hays’s conversation is one that I wish to join. It is one that reopens the possibility for Jews (like Jill Robbins—and me) and Christians (as well as others) to enter into Paul’s conversation, without falsifying or blunting the critical force of Paul’s discourse. Hamerton-Kelly’s “conversation” is one that should be rejected as ignorant prejudice and ratification of an appalling history of the violent misreading of Paul and the violence directed against Jews and all of the other “primitive” peoples of the world.

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