For the Sake of Heaven and Earth

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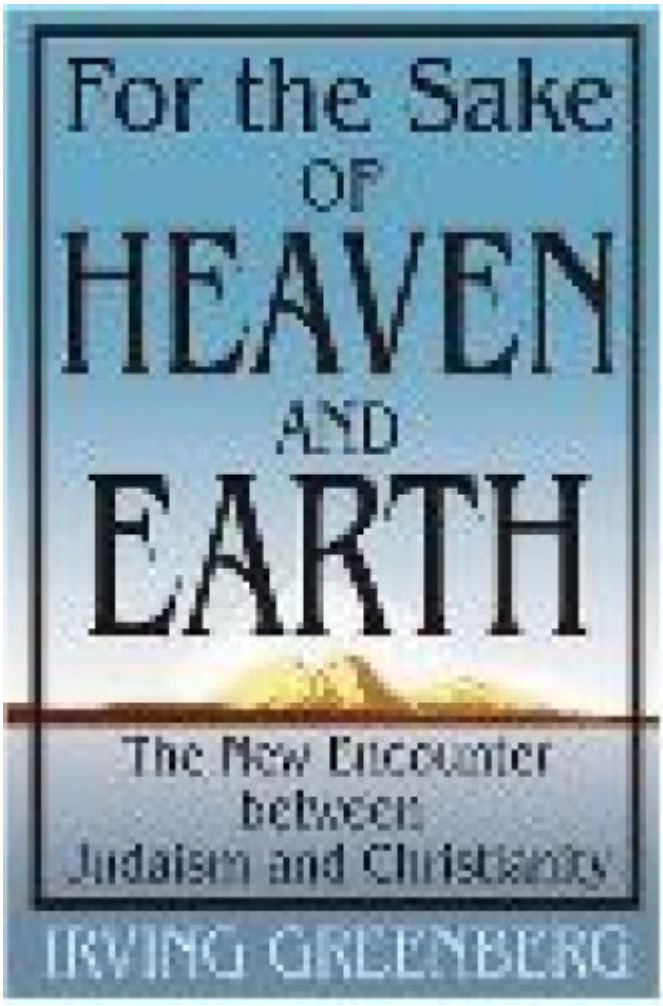
In Review



For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity

Irving Greenberg
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Most Christians and Jews remain settled in separate enclaves. They rarely step outside of their familiar domains and risk the confusion that comes from a searching encounter with the stranger next door. Given his upbringing within a tight-knit Jewish Orthodox community and his subsequent study of the ethical and theological failures of Christians that culminated in the Holocaust, Rabbi Irving Greenberg had ample reason to bolt his door and avoid contact with a tradition whose bankruptcy is reflected in the fires of Auschwitz.

The odyssey that led Greenberg to venture into alien territory, where he engaged Christians in a rigorous examination of their core affirmations, is chronicled in the first chapter of this remarkable book. Greenberg traces his discoveries of the Christian tradition and its glories and failings, and he charts his own dramatic reassessment of the dangers and promises of the Christian-Jewish encounter, which resulted from his transformative friendships with Christian scholars such as Roy and Alice Eckardt, Paul van Buren, Sister Rose Thering and Eva Fleishner.

These individuals embodied an uncommon spiritual courage and intellectual daring as they uncovered the seeds of anti-Judaism scattered across the Christian tradition and sought to cultivate theological ground that would be far more hospitable to creative partnerships. Their aptitude for self-critical engagement inspired Greenberg to excavate his own tradition in search of resources with which to advance new understandings of religious pluralism, and especially of the interplay of Judaism and Christianity.

The fruit of Greenberg’s labors are here collected in nine essays that are brimming with insights that ripened between 1967 and 2004. In fluid prose that is accessible to a diverse readership, Greenberg not only challenges Christians to scrutinize and reassess their theological assumptions but also presses the Jewish community to break out of its own insularity. The Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies has used many of these essays to spark spirited exchanges among religious professionals from a broad cross-section of the Jewish and Christian communities, but some of Greenberg’s Orthodox colleagues have reacted with hostility to his pioneering efforts, providing a chilling, if understated, portrait of the personal cost of this theological project.

Christians have heralded Jesus as the Messiah, and their reading of the Hebrew Bible leads many of them to wonder why the Jewish people are unable or unwilling to

make that affirmation. Jews, on the other hand, have marveled at the credulity of Christians, who are unable or unwilling to acknowledge that Jesus does not fit the messianic job description. Despite Jesus' coming, the world is still drenched in suffering. Global peace and justice remain an elusive prospect. Many Jews live in exile, and their return home hinges on the renewal of a world in which Israel serves as a beacon of covenantal freedom and responsibility.

As the protagonist in the Paul Newman film *Cool Hand Luke* remarks, "What we have here is a failure to communicate." Jews and Christians use the same words but give them utterly different meanings, and the linguistic disconnection is symptomatic of a more toxic confusion. In response, Greenberg surveyed the landscape of both traditions and proposed that Jesus be acknowledged as "a failed messiah"—or, as he more diplomatically formulates the idea in later writings, "an unfinished messiah."

This suggestion may initially rub against the grain of Christian thought and practice. Yet the most incisive learning often occurs at those dangerous intersections where diverse religious perceptions and sensibilities collide. Greenberg notes that the Jewish tradition has often identified Jesus as a false messiah, and he counters this dismissive judgment by claiming that Jesus did not teach the wrong values or turn sin into holiness. Furthermore, Greenberg contends, failure is not a badge of dishonor, for many of Israel's greatest religious leaders never made it to the promised land or completed their prophetic missions. He accurately describes the way Christians avoid the excesses of a realized eschatology by interpreting the crucified messiah as "a spur to believers to confront the fact that the world is not yet perfect and that their task is unfinished."

Greenberg does not offer a theological fix to an ancient and enduring impasse. But he does clear the ground of misconceptions and thereby makes space for robust and creative disagreements between Christians and Jews. As they discern what they each mean when they deploy the term *messiah*, and as they reassess the centrality of this category within their respective traditions, there are significant discoveries to be made by adherents of both faiths. Jews challenge Christians to consider how Jesus actually fulfills messianic expectations, and they contest the spiritualization of a concept that has classically carried profound implications for the work of mending this world. Christians press against the prevailing currents of some expressions of Judaism, especially within its more progressive strands, and question what is lost and what is gained when the category of messiah is so downgraded that it no longer commands serious attention, so democraticized that the messianic role becomes the

responsibility of the entire community or so abstracted that expectations for the future no longer revolve around an individual but are directed toward the arrival of a “messianic era.” When Jews and Christians pursue the conversation that Greenberg initiates, they discover that tensions within Judaism illuminate ongoing frictions within Christianity and vice versa.

Perhaps Greenberg’s most daring proposal is that the boundaries that delimit the people Israel be reassessed. Christians have often understood themselves as the New Israel, and the logic of this assertion reinforces the conclusion that the church makes the synagogue obsolete. Jews have insisted that they have not abandoned the commitments that constitute their identity as the people Israel, and they have regarded Christians as gentiles whose claim to the title “Israel” is illegitimate.

Greenberg maintains that recent developments among Christians who affirm the ongoing validity of Judaism make an alternative formulation possible. Given the covenantal commitments that bind both Christians and Jews to the God of Israel, Greenberg suggests that “the members of two faith communities remain part of one people, the people of Israel, the people that wrestle with God and humans to bring them closer to each other.” A growing number of New Testament scholars might read this reformulation as an echo of theological arguments made by Paul in his letter to the Romans. No matter where the origins of the argument reside, the question of Israel’s boundaries poses momentous challenges for both Jewish and Christian communities.

Without resolving the complexities, Greenberg invites Christians and Jews to engage each other and to think through how they are related to each other and to God. There are approximately 2 billion Christians in the world and 14 million Jews, a demographic reality that underscores the high stakes of this theological project. We should consider what becomes of the particular claims that define and sustain the Jewish people when Christians unabashedly appropriate the category of Israel as a fitting tool for self-definition.

Christians will have tremendous difficulty confronting the larger reality of religious pluralism until they think through their relationship with the Jewish people. Greenberg sets the stage for a searching encounter in which the arguments are conducted for the sake of heaven and earth. We can only hope that he can escape some of the multiple demands that currently consume so much of his time and energy so he can pursue the conversations he has launched and write the next chapters in this unfinished story.