

The Covenant With Israel

by Avery Cardinal Dulles

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Boldfaced and highlighted by Laurence Gonzaga

Additional comments by Robert Sungenis

The question of the present status of God's covenant with Israel has been extensively discussed in Jewish-Christian dialogues since the Shoah. Catholics look for an approach that fits in the framework of Catholic doctrine, much of which has been summarized by the Second Vatican Council. **According to post-conciliar documents, in interpreting the council, priority should be given to the four great constitutions, then to the decrees, and finally to the declarations.** The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, though excellent, is not exhaustive or sufficient. It needs to be understood in the broader context of the full teaching of the council.

The Second Vatican Council taught with great emphasis that there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ. All salvation comes through Christ, and there is no salvation in any other name. In Christ, the incarnate Son of God, revelation reaches its unsurpassable fullness. Everyone is in principle required to believe in Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, and in the Church he has established as an instrument for the salvation of all. Anyone who, being aware of this, refuses to enter the Church or remain in her cannot be saved. On the other hand, persons who "through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God, and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them" may attain to everlasting salvation in some manner known to God.

Christ gave the apostles, and through them the Church, the solemn commission to preach the saving truth of the gospel even to the ends of the earth: **"The obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his ability,"** as *Lumen Gentium* puts it. The Church "prays and labors in order that the entire world may become the People of God, the Body of the Lord, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and that in Christ, the Head of all, there may be rendered to the Creator and Author of the Universe all honor and glory."

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

Christian revelation did not come into the world without a long preparation, beginning with our first parents, Adam and Eve. Through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, God taught Israel "to acknowledge him as the one living and true God, provident Father and just judge, and to wait for the Savior promised by him," as the council's dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, declares. God "entered into a covenant with Abraham (cf. Gen 15:18) and, through Moses, with the people of Israel." **"The principal purpose to which the plan of the Old Covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming both of Christ, the universal Redeemer, and of the messianic kingdom."** One and the same God is the inspirer and author of both the Old and the New Testaments. He **"wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and that the Old be made manifest by the New."**

The people of the new covenant have a special spiritual bond with Abraham's stock, the council's *Nostra Aetate* insists. The Church gratefully recalls that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people of Israel. She is aware that, even though Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, and **the Jews in large numbers have failed to accept the gospel**, still, according to Paul, **the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers.** **The Second Vatican Council**, while providing a solid and traditional framework for discussing Jewish-Christian relations, **did not attempt to settle all questions.** In particular, **it left open the question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today. Are there two covenants, one for Jews and one for Christians? If so, are the two related as phases of**

a single developing covenant, a single saving plan of God? May Jews who embrace Christianity continue to adhere to Jewish covenantal practices?

R. Sungenis: Here Dulles is reading into Vatican II. Unless Vatican II directly said it was “leaving open the question of whether the Old Covenant remains in force today,” one cannot assume that the absence of a discussion on the Old Covenant means it was left open. Dulles is acting as though the Church hadn’t already decided this very question at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The Fathers, the Scripture, and our Magisterium have all stated that the Old Covenant has been revoked. We have documented this fact in many articles.

In the half-century since Vatican II major contributions to Catholic covenant theology have been made by Pope John Paul II, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), Walter Cardinal Kasper, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the Pontifical Biblical Commission. With these contributions, together with some less authoritative writings, we may find a path through the thickets of controversy.

A place to start is the term “Old Covenant,” which is sometimes criticized on the ground that the adjective “old” suggests the idea of being antiquated, even obsolete. Perhaps because I am no longer young, I find it difficult to share this criticism. When people speak of the “old country,” for example, they do not imply that the old no longer exists or is close to dissolution. In any case the term “Old Covenant” is solidly in place. It appears in writings of Paul and in much official teaching, including the documents of Vatican II. Some writers, following the Letter to the Hebrews, may prefer to speak of the “first” or “prior” covenant. **All of these terms, considered in themselves, leave open the question whether or not the earlier covenant is still in force.**

To judge from the Scriptures, the Old Covenant itself is multiple. In the Hebrew Bible we read of a whole series of covenants being established before the coming of Christ, notably those made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. In Romans, Paul speaks of the Jews having been given “covenants” in the plural. The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer in the *Roman Missal* praises God for having offered covenants to his people “many times” (*foedera pluries hominibus obtulisti*). The term “Old Covenant” could be used to refer to the whole series, but when Paul uses the term in 2 Corinthians 3:14 (compare Galatians 4:24-25), he is evidently **referring to the Mosaic Law. And this, I believe, is the normal practice of Christians. The Old Covenant par excellence is that of Sinai.**

The term “covenant” is the usual translation of the Hebrew *b’rith* and the Greek *diatheke*. **Scholars commonly distinguish between two types of covenant, the covenant grant and the covenant treaty.** The **covenant grant**, modeled on the free royal decree, is an unconditional divine gift and is usually understood to be **irrevocable**. An example would be the **covenant of God with Noah and his descendants** in Genesis 9:8-17. God makes an everlasting promise not to destroy all living creatures by another flood such as the one that has just subsided. The covenant to make Abraham the Father of many nations in Genesis 15:5-6 and 17:4-8 and the promise to David to give an everlasting kingship to his son in 2 Samuel 7:8-16 are gratuitous and unilateral. **They are also unconditional and irrevocable**, though only in their deepest meaning.

The prime example of a **conditional covenant is that of Sinai**, as interpreted in the Deuteronomic tradition. **It promises blessings on those who observe its conditions and curses on those who violate them** (see, for example, Deuteronomy 30:15-20). The Israelites almost immediately broke the covenant by worshiping the golden calf, but after the people’s repentance, **God in his mercy reestablished the covenant.** Jeremiah teaches that **Israel has broken the Sinai covenant, but that God will give them a “new covenant,”** placing his law upon their hearts and making them his people (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The term *b’rith* is usually translated “covenant,” but this translation tends to emphasize the bilateral and conditional character of the engagement. The same word can also be translated “testament” and was so translated in the Old Latin version before Jerome composed his Vulgate. The term “testament” better conveys the idea that **God is acting freely, out of sheer generosity, and that his gift is unconditional. The paradoxical intertwining of the unilateral and the**

bilateral, the conditional and the unconditional, is one of the elements that complicates the question whether the so-called “Old Covenant” still perdures.

The term “New Covenant” raises an additional set of questions. The New Testament authors, borrowing the term from Jeremiah 31:31, interpret it as a prediction of the new dispensation that would come about with Christ and the Church (Hebrews 8:8-13, 10:16; see also 2 Corinthians 3:3). According to the accounts of the Last Supper in the Gospel of Luke and in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, Jesus referred to the chalice as **“the new covenant in my blood”** (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). The Gospels of Matthew and Mark record only that Jesus spoke of his **“blood of the covenant”** (Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24).

In both versions the mention of blood **points back to the solemnization of the Sinai Covenant, at which Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of sacrificed animals and poured the remainder on the altar** (Exodus 24:5-8). The Eucharist therefore is the covenant sacrifice that binds God and his Church to one another. **The “New Covenant” is constitutive of the “New People of God,” or the “New Israel”** — terms that Vatican II uses as designations of the Church of Christ.

In the Roman canon of the Mass, the Covenant established by the shedding of Christ’s blood is described as “new and eternal.” The word “eternal” comes from the Letter to the Hebrews, which speaks of “the blood of the eternal covenant” by which Jesus equips the sheep to do God’s will. **Vatican II speaks in *Dei Verbum* of the Christian dispensation as “the new and definitive covenant.” The suggestion seems to be that the prior covenant or covenants were not eternal or definitive, but temporary or preparatory.**

The New Testament, in certain passages, indicates that the Old Law or the Old Covenant has come to an end and been replaced. Paul in Second Corinthians draws a contrast between the Old Covenant, carved on stone, which has lost its previous splendor, and the New Covenant, written on human hearts by the Spirit, which is permanent and shines brightly. In the third and fourth chapters of Galatians he draws a sharp contrast between the covenant promises given to Abraham and the law subsequently given through Moses. The two covenants, in this passage, are represented by the two sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac. **The law, he says, was our custodian until Christ came, but it was incapable of giving justification, and loses its force once Christ has come.** Fulfilling the promises given to Abraham, **Christ brings an end to the Old Law.**

In Second Corinthians Paul refers to the “old covenant” as the “dispensation of death,” which has **“faded away.”** In Romans he speaks of Christ as **“the end of the Law,”** apparently meaning its **termination, its goal, or both.** **The Mosaic Law ceases to bind once its objective has been attained.** The new dispensation may be called the “law of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2) or the “law of the Spirit” (Romans 8:2). The Letter to the Hebrews contains in chapters seven to ten a lengthy discussion of the two covenants based on the two priesthoods, that of Levi and that of Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant. **The Old Law, with its priesthood and Temple sacrifices, has been superseded and abolished by the coming of the New.**

R. Sungenis: But Dulles fails to incorporate the whole Mosaic Law as the “dispensation of death.” The context of 2 Corinthians 3 speaks about the “commandments” as the “minister of death,” as does Romans 7:8-11. It was not just the ceremonies that were superseded, but the moral and civil laws as well. It was not just part of the Old Covenant that was superseded. The whole thing was superseded. Later, the good parts of the ceremonies, and the civil and moral laws, were incorporated into the New Covenant.

All these texts, which the Church accepts as teachings of canonical scripture, have to be reconciled with others, which seem to point in a different direction. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, teaches that **he has come not to abolish the Law and the prophets but to fulfill them,** even though he is here embarking on a series of antitheses, in which he both supplements and corrects certain provisions in the law of Moses. In a passage of great importance, Paul asserts in Romans that **the Jews have only stumbled. They are branches broken off from the good olive tree, but are capable of being grafted on again,** since they are still beloved by God for the sake of their forefathers, whose gifts

and call are irrevocable. **This seems to imply that the Jewish people, notwithstanding their failure as a group to accept Christ as the Messiah, still remain in some sort of covenant relationship with God.**

R. Sungenis: Here is where we get into a quandary. Statements like, “this seems to imply” or “in some sort of covenant relationship” do a disservice to this discussion. Either the Jewish people have a covenant relationship with God or they do not. It cannot be a halfway covenant or a semi-covenant.

Such is the Church’s respect for Holy Scripture that Catholic interpreters are not free to reject any of these New Testament passages as if one contradicted another. **Systematic theology has to seek a way of reconciling and synthesizing them.** The task, I believe, is feasible if we make certain necessary distinctions. **Thomas Aquinas, gathering up a host of patristic and medieval authorities, distinguished the moral, ceremonial, and judicial precepts of the Old Law.** Inspired in part by his reflections, I find it useful to distinguish three aspects of the Old Covenant: as law, as promise, and as interpersonal relation with God. **The law, in turn, may be subdivided into the moral and the ceremonial.**

The moral law of the Old Testament is in its essentials permanent. The Decalogue, given on Sinai, is at its core a republication of the law of nature, written on all human hearts even prior to any positive divine legislation. The commandments reflecting the natural law, reaffirmed in the New Testament, are binding on Christians. But, as St. Thomas explains in the *Summa* (I-II.98.5), the Mosaic Law contains additions in view of the special vocation and situation of the Jewish people. **The Decalogue itself, as given in Exodus and Deuteronomy, contains some ceremonial prescriptions together with the moral.**

Injunctions that were over and above the natural law could be modified. The Church, adapting the law to a new stage in salvation history, was able to transfer the Sabbath observance from the last day of the week to the first and to cancel the Mosaic prohibition against images. The New Law, in its moral prescriptions, is much more than a republication of the Old. The law is broadened insofar as it is extended to all peoples and all ages, inviting them to enter into a covenant relationship with God. It is deepened insofar as Christ interiorizes and radicalizes it, enjoining attitudes and intentions that were not previously matters of legislation.

Most important, Christ bestows the Holy Spirit, who writes the New Law upon the hearts of all who receive him. The Law of the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2) deserves to be called a law, according to St. Thomas, because the Holy Spirit, poured forth in the human heart, both enlightens the mind and stably inclines the affections toward acts of virtue. Although the law of the Spirit is especially characteristic of those who have entered the Church, **St. Thomas adds the qualification that at all times some have belonged to the New Covenant.** It would be a mistake to imagine that the commandment of love arose only with the coming of Jesus. Even in the Old Testament, the love of God and neighbor is seen as a fundamental obligation.

Those who treat the Old Covenant as dead and superseded are generally thinking of its legal prescriptions, especially those connected with worship, as treated in the Letters of Paul and the Letter to the Hebrews. Paul’s strictures on the Mosaic Law are found especially in Second Corinthians and Galatians, where he vehemently rejects the position of some Judeo-Christians who were seeking to impose circumcision on members of the Church. Christians, Paul insists, are not obliged to observe the rites of the Old Law. **The Letter to the Hebrews, which is essentially a treatise on priesthood, teaches that with the cessation of the Levitical priesthood and the Temple sacrifices, the Old Covenant is to that extent superseded:** “For where there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change of law as well.” The former commandment is set aside, since a “better hope” and a “better covenant” have been introduced. **Christ therefore “abolishes the first in order to establish the second.”**

R. Sungenis: Here again, Dulles is limiting the supersession of the Mosaic Covenant to the ceremonies. But Romans 7; 2 Corinthians 3; and Gal 3, include the moral and civil laws of Moses as part of the Mosaic covenant that was superseded. The moral laws are reestablished, but under the New Covenant (minus the seventh day Sabbath law).

The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, presents a thorough discussion of the Covenant and **concludes that Paul regards the covenant-law of Sinai as provisional and insufficient.** Hebrews, it declares, proclaims that **the cultic institutions of the “first covenant” are now “abrogated to make way for the sacrifice and priesthood of Christ.”**

[Laurence edit: I am inserting some texts from the PBC document:

The New Testament attests that Jesus, far from being in opposition to the Israelite Scriptures, revoking them as provisional, brings them instead to fulfilment in his person, in his mission, and especially in his paschal mystery. In fact, none of the great Old Testament themes escapes the new radiation of Christological light. (par. 65)

To that the New Testament adds that these Scriptures are indeed fulfilled in the life of Jesus, his Passion and resurrection, as well as in the foundation of the Church that is open to all the nations. All of these bind Christians and Jews closely together, for the foremost aspect of scriptural fulfilment is that of accord and continuity. This is fundamental. Inevitably, fulfilment brings discontinuity on certain points, because without it there can be no progress. This discontinuity is a source of disagreements between Christians and Jews, no purpose is served by hiding the fact. But it was wrong, in times past, to unilaterally insist on it to the extent of taking no account of the fundamental continuity. (par. 84)

R. Sungenis: I don't know where Church dogma of the past failed to see the “continuity” of the Old and New Testaments.

Israel's election is made concrete and specific in the Sinai covenant and by the institutions based on it, especially the Law and the Temple. The New Testament is in continuity with this covenant and its institutions. The new covenant foretold by Jeremiah and established in the blood of Jesus has come through the covenant between God and Israel, **surpassing the Sinai covenant by a new gift of the Lord that completes and carries forward the original gift.** Likewise, “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rm 8:2), which gives an interior dynamism, remedies the weakness (8:3) of the Sinai Law and renders believers capable of living a disinterested love that is the “fulfilment of the Law” (Rm 13:10). As regards the earthly Temple, the New Testament, borrowing terms prepared by the Old Testament, relativises the adequacy of a material edifice as a dwelling place of God (Ac 7:48), and points to a relationship with God where the emphasis is on interiority. In this point, as in many others, it is obvious that the continuity is based on the prophetic movement of the Old Testament. (par. 85)

END]

It took several decades of heated controversy for the Church to reach a consensus that Christians, especially those of Gentile origin, were not bound by circumcision and Jewish dietary laws. Jesus himself, of course, had been circumcised and had kept the Law in what the Catechism calls “its all-embracing detail,” even though the Pharisees did not consider him sufficiently observant. With the help of further revelation, the leaders of the Church decided that Gentile converts are not bound by Jewish dietary laws (Acts 15). But even after that decision Paul allowed Timothy to be circumcised, because he was of Jewish parentage (Acts 16:1-3).

R. Sungenis: But Paul circumcised Timothy because of the Jews who were present. Apparently he didn't want to cause any unnecessary problems with the Jews while preaching to them. That was his decision. Whether it was the best thing to do is debatable. But the remaining fact is, Paul did not circumcise Timothy because Paul wanted to reestablish the ceremonial law of Israel. If that had been the case, Paul would have circumcised all Christian converts. Paul's circumcision of Timothy was a one-time incident that has no bearing on the discussion of whether the Old Covenant is still valid.

Even with respect to the ceremonial laws and institutions, **the New Covenant is not a simple abolition of the Old, but rather its fulfillment. According to Christian theology, Christ is the new Moses, the new Aaron, the new David, and the new Temple. Thomas Aquinas explains in detail how the sacraments of the New Law fulfill what is foreshadowed in those of the Old Law.** Baptism, as the sacrament of faith, succeeds circumcision. The Eucharist, he says, is prefigured under different aspects by different institutions of the Old Law: the offering of Melchizedek, the day of atonement, the manna, and especially the paschal Lamb. In another passage St. Thomas lists the various solemnities of the Old Law and their antitypes in the New. **The Passover, for example, becomes the Paschal triduum.** The Jewish Pentecost, which celebrated the giving of the Old Law, gives way to the Christian Pentecost, which recalls the gift of the Holy Spirit. The festivals of the new moons prefigure, and give way to, feasts of the Blessed Virgin, who reflects the light of the Sun that is Christ.

With respect to the ceremonial law, therefore, we may say that the Old Covenant is in a sense abolished while being at the same time fulfilled. The law of Christ gives a definitive interpretation to the Torah of Moses. Yet the ancient rites retain their value as signs of what was to come. **The priesthood, the temple, and the sacrifices are not extinct; they survive in a super-eminent way in Christ and the Church.**

St. Augustine, followed by Thomas Aquinas and many medieval doctors, denied that Jewish rites had any saving efficacy, even for Jews. The Council of Florence, in its Decree for the Copts, taught that the legal statutes of ancient Israel, including circumcision and the Sabbath, ought no longer to be observed after the promulgation of the gospel, and that converts from Judaism must give up Jewish ritual practices.

In a letter to Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, then archbishop of Paris, Michael Wyschogrod pointedly asked what the cardinal meant when he wrote that in becoming a Christian he had not ceased to be a Jew and had not run away from the Jewish tradition. For Wyschogrod, it seems, Jewish identity would require observance of the Torah and Jewish tradition. **By forbidding converted Jews to observe the Torah, he holds, the Church fell into a supersessionism from which it is today seeking to extricate itself.** If Lustiger had responded he might have pointed out that **according to the teaching of Paul, which is normative for Christians, circumcision and the Mosaic law have lost their salvific value, at least for Christians, and in that sense been “superseded.” But I do not wish to deny that the observance of some of these prescriptions by Jews who have become Christians could be permissible or even praiseworthy as a way of recalling the rootedness of Christianity in the Old Covenant.** [His opinion, but I disagree]

R. Sungenis: We don’t need to practice them in order to understand their “rootedness.” Shall we stone people for adultery because we want to recall the “rootedness” of Christianity to the Old Covenant? The ceremonies and civil ordinances of Israel were made obsolete for a good reason. Resurrecting them will only create the very ethnic distinctions in religion that Paul and the New Testament were trying to curtail (Romans 2:9-10, 28-29; Gal 3:28-29).

Under its second aspect, the Old Covenant is promise. In itself, this is a point of commonality between Christians and Jews, since both groups are conscious of awaiting the historical fulfillment of the messianic age. While Jews still hope for the arrival of that age, Christians understand it to be already underway, though awaiting completion at the end-time. The promise of the land to Abraham refers literally to the territory of Canaan, where he and his descendants were to settle, and was historically fulfilled in later centuries. The kingship promised to the Son of David in 2 Samuel is partially fulfilled in the reign of Solomon but, in its conditional aspects, was abrogated because of the sins of the king and the people.

R. Sungenis: The Jews may still “hope for the arrival of that age” but that doesn’t make their hope legitimate. They are not waiting for Jesus Christ to return, for they don’t believe in him. They are waiting for another Messiah to return and start their age of prosperity. But any other Messiah than Jesus Christ is a false Messiah.

The promises, however, have a deeper, spiritual meaning that remains intact. In the beatitudes Jesus reinterprets the “land” promised to Abraham in a spiritual sense to mean the kingdom of heaven, that is to say, the new earth to be

inhabited by the saints in eternal life. Paul understands the “progeny of Abraham” to mean all who share the faith of Abraham. The Davidic kingship becomes, in the New Testament, the glorious reign of the risen Christ, the son of David. And the New Testament authors see the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church as the realization of the “New Covenant” predicted by Jeremiah.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission draws the correct conclusion: “The early Christians were conscious of being in profound continuity with the covenant plan manifested and realized by the God of Israel in the Old Testament. **Israel continues to be in a covenant relationship with God, because the covenant-promise is definitive and cannot be abolished.** But the early Christians were also conscious of living in a new phase of that plan, announced by the prophets and inaugurated by the blood of Jesus, ‘blood of the covenant,’ because it was shed out of love.”

R. Sungenis: The assertion that “Israel continues to be in a covenant relationship with God because the covenant-promise is definitive and cannot be abolished” is false. Dulles has already agreed that some covenants are irrevocable while others are revocable. As such, Dulles has told us that the Mosaic covenant falls into the category of a revocable covenant, and he said that it was revoked. So, the only covenant that Israel can have today is the Abrahamic covenant, but that covenant, as the New Testament teaches, is for both Gentiles and Jews, for it is now the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

It could be asked whether there are any promises to Israel that are not fulfilled in Christ and are waiting to be fulfilled in some other way. **Is Judaism still needed to point to these further possibilities? Paul replies:** “All the promises of God find their Yes in Him” (2 Corinthians 1:20). There is nothing incomplete in Christ’s fulfillment of what is promised and foreshadowed in the Old Testament. It is true, of course, that human beings still have to enter fully into that fulfillment. God is still leading the elect toward the fullness of truth and life in Christ. Christians themselves are still growing into him who is the head of the body (Ephesians 4:15) and becoming incorporated into God’s holy temple (Ephesians 2:21-22).

Judaism, in this view, does not point to possibilities Christ failed to fulfill. But the witness of Jews to their tradition helps Christians understand the foundations of their own faith. By providing a living testimony to the hope of Israel and to the ancient promises, faithful Jews can inspire and strengthen Christians, who share the same hope and promises, though in a new modality.

R. Sungenis: Here again Dulles resorts to vague and ambiguous language. It is not merely a “new modality” that is the difference between Christianity and Judaism. The very core of their respective religions are antithetical to each other, for one believes that Jesus Christ is God while the other believes he is a deceptive fraud, an anti-Christ. Before they convert, the Jews are our spiritual enemies, not our spiritual friends. To make them our spiritual friends when they believe that Jesus Christ is a devilish fraud, is an abomination.

The Old Covenant has been understood predominantly in terms of the Law and the promises it contains. But in the light of modern personalism, another dimension is becoming more evident: the covenant as an interpersonal relationship between God and his elect people. In his **Many Religions — One Covenant, Cardinal Ratzinger** remarked: “In asking about the covenant, we are asking whether there can be a relationship between God and man, and what kind of relationship it might be.” At the heart of all the laws and promises is a loving relationship that the Scriptures do not hesitate to describe quite simply as a “marriage” (Hosea 2 and 11; Ezekiel 16). **In this marriage God remains faithful to his partner even in the face of human infidelity.**

R. Sungenis: But Scripture also says that God divorced Israel (Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:8), which refers to his rejection of the nation at large. The Israel he remains married to is the remnant of believers (Romans 11:5), those with the faith of Abraham, and those that now become members of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

At the heart of the covenant lies the promise: “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:28, Leviticus 26:12, Jeremiah 7:23, etc.). Under Christianity, the Church understands herself to be the New People of God (1

Peter 2:9-10, Revelation 21:3). But this claim does not settle the status of the Old Israel, the People of the First Covenant.
Does Israel cease to be the People of God?

For an answer to this question the key text would seem to be, for Christians, chapters nine through eleven of Romans. Paul's thought in these chapters is exceedingly complex and has given rise to a variety of interpretations. Perhaps Paul himself intended to leave some questions open. He ends the section with an exclamation of awe-filled humility before the incomprehensible ways of God: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!"

Without any pretense of giving a final solution I shall try to indicate some elements of a tenable Catholic position. Paul in this passage clearly teaches that God has not rejected His People, for His gifts and call are irrevocable. As regards election, they are unceasingly beloved for the sake of their forefathers. "If they do not persist in their unbelief," he says, the children of Israel "will be grafted in" to the olive tree from which they have been cut off. He predicts that in the end "all Israel will be saved" and that their reconciliation and full inclusion will mean life from the dead. God's continuing love and fidelity to his promises indicate that the Old Covenant is still in force in one of its most important aspects — God's gracious predilection for His Chosen People.

R. Sungenis: It is a false statement to say: "God's continuing love and fidelity to his promises indicate that the Old Covenant is still in force..." Romans 11 says does not mention the "Old Covenant" as the basis for God's continued love for Israel. It says God loves Israel because of his commitment to "the Fathers" (Rom. 11:28). In actuality, God's love for Israel is for the purpose of taking them away from the Old Covenant and bringing them to the New Covenant. He does so by making them aware that the Old Covenant is no longer in force and that their only hope is in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

[Laurence comment: A branch "cut off" from the tree will die, if not grafted back onto the tree... So, the question is, can the Old Covenant save?]

Pope John Paul II, whose theology was deeply affected by personalism, spoke of the Jews as a covenant people. In an address in Rome on October 31, 1997, he discussed the act of divine election that brought this people into existence: "This people is assembled and led by Yahweh, creator of heaven and of earth. Its existence is therefore not purely a fact of nature or of culture in the sense that the resourcefulness proper to one's nature is expressed in culture. It is a supernatural fact. **This people perseveres despite everything because it is the people of the covenant, and despite human infidelities, Yahweh is faithful to his covenant.** To ignore this most basic principle is to adopt a Marcionism against which the church immediately and vigorously reacted, conscious of a vital link with the Old Testament, without which the New Testament itself is emptied of meaning."

R. Sungenis: Yes, there is a vital link with the Old Testament in the New Testament, but this doesn't mean that the Old Covenant still has legal force. It has a spiritual connection with the New Testament, since the New Testament fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament and also incorporates many of the Old Testament's ethical principles and worship principles. Marcion said the Old Testament was obsolete, even on a principal basis.

Vatican II brought out the profound truth that the mystery of Israel and the mystery of the Church are permanently intertwined: "As this sacred people searches into the mystery of the Church, it recalls the spiritual bond linking the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock." **The Church is conscious that she is a branch grafted onto the olive tree of Israel.** Pope John Paul II was deeply conscious of this affinity. Speaking at the synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986, he made the point: "The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."

In continuity with Vatican II and earlier Catholic tradition, **John Paul II saw the two covenants as intrinsically related. The Old is a preview and promise of the New; the New is the unveiling and fulfillment of the Old.** "The New

Covenant,” he declared, “serves to fulfill all that is rooted in the vocation of Abraham, in God’s covenant with Israel at Sinai, and in the whole rich heritage of the inspired Prophets who, hundreds of years before that fulfillment, pointed in the Sacred Scriptures to the One whom God would send in the ‘fullness of time.’”

Some Christians, in their eagerness to reject a crude supersessionism, give independent validity to the Old Covenant. They depict the Old and New Covenants as two ‘separate but equal’ parallel paths to salvation, the one intended for Jews, the other for gentiles. The commentator **Roy H. Schoeman** correctly remarks this thesis “has been presented as though it were the only logical alternative to supersessionism, despite the fact that it is utterly irreconcilable with both the core beliefs of Christianity and with the words of Jesus himself in the New Testament.” Joseph Fitzmyer, in his scholarly commentary on Romans, likewise **opposes the theory of two separate ways of salvation: “It is difficult to see how Paul would envisage two different kinds of salvation, one brought about by God apart from Christ for Jews, and one by Christ for Gentiles and believing Jews.** That would seem to militate against his whole thesis of justification and salvation by grace for *all* who believe in the gospel of Christ Jesus (1:16). For Paul the only basis for membership in the new people of God is faith in Christ Jesus.”

It is unthinkable that in these chapters of Romans Paul would be proposing salvation for Jews apart from Christ. He spent much of his ministry seeking to evangelize his fellow Jews. In the very passage in which he speaks of God’s abiding love for Israel, **he confesses his great sorrow and anguish at Israel’s unbelief.** He would be ready, he says, to be accused and cut off from Christ for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen by race, who have not accepted Jesus as Messiah.

The Catholic Church clearly teaches that no one will be condemned for unbelief, or for incomplete belief, without having sinned against the light. Those who with good will follow the movements of God’s grace in their own lives are on the road to salvation. **They are not required to profess belief in Christ unless or until they are in a position to recognize him as Messiah and Lord.** The fact that Jews and Christians have honest differences about this point is a powerful incentive for dialogue between them.

John Paul II was not content to let Judaism and Christianity go their separate ways. Speaking at Mainz in 1980, he called for ongoing dialogue “**between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God, and that of the New Covenant.**” He expressed hope for an eventual reconciliation in the fullness of truth. In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994) he wrote of Judaism: “**This extraordinary people continues to bear signs of its divine election.** . . . The insights which inspired the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* are finding concrete expression in various ways. Thus the two great moments of divine election — the Old and New Covenants — are drawing closer together. . . . The time when the people of the Old Covenant will be able to see themselves as part of the New is, naturally, a question left to the Holy Spirit. We, as human beings, try only not to put obstacles in the way.”

R. Sungenis: As I demonstrated from John Paul II’s 1986 speech in Sydney, he understood the “Old Covenant” that was “never revoked by God” as referring to the Abrahamic covenant, not the Mosaic covenant, and he is absolutely correct. The Abrahamic covenant continues because it is now the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. So it is not a matter of waiting for the “people of the Old Covenant...to see themselves as part of the New,” rather, it is waiting for the people who once had the Old Covenant (but do no longer) to fully immerse themselves into the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

The last word should perhaps be left to Pope Benedict XVI. In a set of interviews from the late 1990s, published under the title *God and the World*, he recognizes that there is “an enormous variety of theories” about the extent to which Judaism remains a valid way of life since the coming of Christ. As Christians, he says, we are convinced that the Old Testament is directed toward Christ, and that Christianity, instead of being a new religion, is simply the Old Testament read anew in Christ. **We can be certain that Israel has a special place in God’s plans and a special mission to accomplish today. The Jews “still stand within the faithful covenant of God,” and, we believe, “they will in the end be together with us in Christ.**” “We are waiting for the moment when Israel, too, will say Yes to Christ,” but until that moment comes all of us, Jews and Christians, “stand within the patience of God,” of whose faithfulness we can rest assured.

R. Sungenis: With all due respect to Cardinal Ratzinger, the Jews cannot “stand within the faithful covenant of God” if they have not accepted the New Covenant. Ratzinger’s language is another instance in which the word “covenant” is used without a modifier, that is, he does not say what precise covenant he has in view. There are only two choices in this discussion, the Old Covenant or the New Covenant. The Jews cannot “stand” in the Old Covenant because it is no longer valid for them. But they cannot “stand” in the New Covenant either, because they have not accepted Jesus Christ as God. So what covenant can they be “standing” in? Moreover, the “special place” they have is not in a “covenant” but because God had a special relationship with their forefathers, as Romans 11:28 teaches.

Now, this next assertion is my opinion. As I have said in the past, although I realize it is a popular, the idea that there will be some mass conversion of Jews to Christianity is not taught in the New Testament. The “all Israel” of Romans 11:26 does not refer to some future mass group of Jews, but to all the Jews from Abraham to the end of the world who will be saved. As such, Christ can return at any time. He does not have to wait for a future group of Jews to be converted.

Believing that the Son of God has lived among us, Christians will wish to make him known, loved, praised, confessed, and obeyed by as many people as possible. They will want the whole world to profit from Christ’s teaching and to enjoy the fullness of sacramental life. But they will also strive to be patient in awaiting the appointed time. **All of us, Jews and Christians alike, depend on God’s patience as we strive to be faithful to the covenant and enter into its deepest meaning.**

AVERY CARDINAL DULLES, S.J., *holds the Laurence J. McGinley Chair in Religion and Society at Fordham University.*

R. Sungenis: Again, we must deal with the ambiguity of using “covenant” without the appropriate modifier. The only covenant to which we “strive to be faithful” is the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. At present, the Jews don’t recognize that covenant, so in no sense can they “strive to be faithful” to it. The only way they can enter into that covenant and strive to be faithful to it is by repenting of their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as God. Barring instances of invincible ignorance, if they refuse to do so, they will be condemned. That is the Gospel. It would behoove us to follow it to the letter, otherwise we will be judged along with the Jews.