

August 14, 2011

The Prophet Micah

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In his more than twenty scholarly books, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has certainly demonstrated his credentials as a bright light in contemporary Judaism. I value him especially as a sensible and irenic spokesman for Jewish self-understanding.

In this respect, at least, his most recent work, *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-First Century*, does not disappoint. (Whoever devised this title, by the way is a genius. In the expression "future tense," which word is the noun and which the adjective? The content of the book makes it clear that the title can be read either way!)

In order to speculate usefully on Judaism's future, Sacks believes it important to begin with its past, especially the extraordinary phenomenon of its survival over the past twenty centuries. The key to this history, Sacks believes, lies in the concept of *berith*, "covenant." The Jews, he explains, "*were a society before they were a state*. They had laws before they had a land. They had a social covenant before they had a social contract. So, even if the contract failed, the covenant remained" (emphasis his). Whatever the value of Social Contract theory, he contends, it does not apply to the Jews.

What is the difference between a covenant and a contract? According to Sacks, "the logic of the covenant, unlike the social contract of the state, has nothing to do with rights, power, and self-interest." He explains: "A contract is a transaction. A covenant is a relationship. A contract is about interests. A covenant is about identity."

I am persuaded that Sacks is correct in this assessment. Whether or not anyone else regards the Jews as the Chosen People, *they* are convinced on the point, and this conviction not only explains Jewish survival down through history; it is also a fact that renders the Jews manifestly unique as a people.

This uniqueness does not mean, however, that redemption is for the Jews only. On the contrary, Sacks argues, it has been the vocation of the Jews to teach the world, not through a canon of correct propositions, but through *Halakha*, a particular law and way of life. All of humanity may share in the blessing of Abraham; it is to everyone's benefit that the Jews *be* the Jews.

Jewish particularity, as Sacks sees it, extends through history the goodness of particular things in Creation itself---what he calls "the dignity of difference." This is how he understands the universal hope conveyed in the awesome story of this particular people.

Not for a moment am I disposed to challenge these claims. Indeed, I regard them as deep insights into the history and identity of the Jews.

On the other hand, Sacks would scarcely be shocked to learn that a Christian--- myself, for instance--- finds his explanation of Jewish uniqueness insufficient. An adequate appreciation of Judaism, we Christians believe, should make some reference to a particular Galilean carpenter of our acquaintance.

While I think Sacks's assessment of Judaism is ultimately inadequate, his comments about us Christians are downright distressing---in particular his claim that we adhere to Plato by finding truth only in universal forms. Oh, dear. Unless Marsilio Ficino (a name unfamiliar, I think, to many Christians) is taken as the spokesman for Christianity, Sacks's claim is mind-bogglingly bogus.

The first article of the Christian Creed is not "I believe in the unity of the Demiurge," but "I believe in one God, almighty Father and *Creator* of all things." Plato, indeed---good heavens!

Christians do not look at the world through the eyes of Plato, but through the eyes of Moses. And Christians take Moses seriously for one reason only: Jesus took Moses seriously.

Christians see a connection between the particularity of the Jews and the particularity of Jesus. We believe in the uniqueness of the Jews, because we adhere to certain dogmatic positions with respect to Jesus. It was he who proclaimed, "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). It is Jesus who makes precious to us "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service, and the promises" (Romans 9:4).

Yes, it is true that Jews taught the world about the goodness of particular things, but it is also a fact that the Jews who did this were a particular group: the "Apostles." I am not sure how the irenic Rabbi Sacks missed this elementary fact: Jews mainly influenced mankind through the Christian Gospel.

If millions of people today believe in the "non-Platonic miracle of creation," it is because they believe in the Resurrection of Jesus. When he came forth from the grave, Jesus conducted all of us out of Plato's Cave. Truly, Rabbi, we decline to go back.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php