Israel and the Nations--a Book Review

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Eugene Korn, Israel and the Nations: The Bible, the Rabbis and Jewish-Gentile Relations, Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2023.

Reviewed by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

It isn't easy being a "chosen people." The history of the people of Israel has been replete with challenges of all kinds.

The Bible informs us of a covenant between God and our ancestors. God informed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their descendants would be a blessing to humanity. The prophet Isaiah (42:6) relates God's wondrous promise to the people of Israel: "I God, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light unto the nations."

Yes, the heirs of God's covenant with Israel have brought great blessings to humanity. Our Bible has had massive positive impact on Western civilization. Our people have produced an incredible civilization based on righteousness and spirituality. Jewish individuals have made landmark contributions to humanity in so many fields of endeavor. That such a tiny people could have done so much for so many is one of the wonders of the world.

Yet, we have paid a high price. We have been maligned, persecuted, ghettoized and murdered in many lands over many centuries. We have been victims of inhumane treatment by Christians and Muslims who have claimed to have superseded us in the eyes of God.

We have the ideals of Torah and the prophets fostering respect for all human beings created in the image of God. But we have the reality of suffering at the hands of the very human beings we are supposed to respect.

So what is the role of Israel in its relation to the nations? How has the creation of the State of Israel established a new way of viewing old problems?

Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn addresses these and other issues in his book Israel and the Nations: The Bible, the Rabbis and Jewish-Gentile Relations (Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2023). Dr. Korn has devoted many years to interfaith work and is one of the most thoughtful Orthodox Jewish workers in this field.

Part One of his book deals with God's covenant with the People of Israel, and how this has been understood—and misunderstood—by various Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers. If Jews are to be a blessing to the nations, how is this to be accomplished?

Some argue for a pro-active stance. Jews should seek to spread knowledge of ethical monotheism by interacting with non-Jews. Others think Jews need not interact with non-Jews directly, but rather serve as models of religious/human excellence. Yet others do not seek interaction with non-Jews at all! Based on kabbalistic notions, they believe that the entire world depends on Jews fulfilling the Torah. So if we simply devote ourselves to Torah, that's our contribution to humanity.

Dr. Korn examines each of these approaches and clearly favors the pro-active option. As Jews relate directly to non-Jews, we establish warm lines of communication. Jewish ideas and values are shared so that non-Jews can get a clear understanding of what our tradition teaches for the benefit of all humanity.

Part Two of the book deals specifically with Jewish relationships with Christians. While reviewing the historic hostility of Christianity to Jews and Judaism, Dr. Korn believes that the situation has improved vastly since the 1960s. Pope John XXIII and the *Nostra Aetate* represented a sea change in Catholic teachings about Jews. Subsequent Papal words and deeds have fostered a respect for Judaism and a declaration that anti-Semitism is a sin against God. Dr. Korn suggests that Catholic revisions of ancient anti-Jewish teachings stemmed from guilt as a result of the Holocaust. How horrifying to confront the fact that so many Christians actively participated in the murder of millions of innocent Jews.

Dr. Korn discusses the influential essay of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontations," in which the Rav opposed interfaith dialogue that involves theological issues. The Rav believed it was proper to work with Christians on common issues such as social justice, but the dialogues should not delve into the actual beliefs of each religion. Dr. Korn argues that the Rav's views in "Confrontations" preceded the *Nostra Aetate* and was based on age-old fears that Catholics used "dialogue" as a means of

converting Jews. But since *Nostra Aetate,* the Catholic church has specifically recognized that God's covenant with Jews continues; that conversion of Jews is not a goal of Catholicism; that the State of Israel is recognized as the homeland of the Jewish People. As the Catholic church reviewed and revised its teachings on Judaism and Jews, much of the Protestant world also became more receptive to respectful dialogue with Jews.

The establishment of the State of Israel has given Jews greater confidence in defending ourselves and our teachings. While Israel faces so much anti-Zionist/anti-Semitic ugliness from many non-Jews, Israel continues to thrive and to be a source of strength to Jews everywhere. But the more non-Jews know about Israel and Judaism, the warmer their attitudes become.

Dr. Korn has presented a thoughtful volume that challenges us to think and re-think the Jewish views on interfaith relations. As an Orthodox rabbi as well as a PhD in philosophy, he offers deep intellectual knowledge along with insights gained from many years of personal experience with interfaith dialogue. If we are to be a "light unto the nations" it would be well to ponder the ideas Dr. Korn presents in this book.