
The Specter of Marcion: Decanonizing the Old Testament in Twenty-First-Century Germany*

Yaniv Feller / University of Florida

In 2013, Notger Slenczka, a professor for systematic theology at Humboldt University Berlin, published an essay titled “The Church and The Old Testament.” Despite its innocuous title, Slenczka’s article is a well-thought-of provocation: the Old Testament belongs to the “prehistory” of the Christian community, but it does not, and should not, stand at the core of contemporary Christian faith. The church is “not spoken to” in the Old Testament, “a document of a religious community with which the Church is no longer identical.”¹ It is time, concludes Slenczka, to realize once and for all that the Old Testament does not share the same canonical status in Christianity as the New Testament. The former should therefore be treated by Christians as an apocryphal text.

Slenczka’s argument received very little attention in the English-speaking world, but it provoked a heated theological and public discussion in Germany, because it challenged the post-Holocaust attempts of Christians to rethink their anti-Jewish theological heritage.² The debate unfolded in social media and daily newspapers, where Slenczka was accused of anti-Judaism

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¹ Notger Slenczka, “Die Kirche und das Alte Testament,” *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* 25 (2013): 118, and *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen: Beiträge zur Vermessung ihres Verhältnisses* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 83. This book contains numerous articles and speeches by Slenczka in which he expounds his position in the controversy. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

² Two exceptions are Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Marcion on the Elbe: A Defense of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture,” *First Things*, December 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/12/marcion-on-the-elbe>; Samuel Loncar, “Christianity’s Shadow Founder: Marcion, Anti-Judaism, and the Birth of Liberal Protestantism,” *Marginalia Review of Books*, November 2021, <https://themarginaliareview.com/christianitys-shadow-founder-marcion-anti-judaism-and-the-birth-of-liberal-protestantism/>.

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and compared to Nazi theologians. “Professor Promotes the Abolition of the Old Testament,” declared a headline in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; “Anti-Judaism in New Cloth?,” asked the *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung* rhetorically.³ Slenczka’s colleagues called on him to retract his statements. The most vocal of them was Christoph Marksches, a professor of church history and the vice president of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. In 2019, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, a German right-wing antisemite attacked a synagogue in Halle. On the front page of *Die Kirche* following the attack, Marksches wrote that the “unholy tradition of anti-Judaism” still lives among those who “explain the entire first half of the Holy Scripture as a document of a foreign religious community.”⁴ Slenczka is not named, but he rightly understood himself as the implied addressee for Marksches’s harsh accusation, which draws a connection between violent antisemitism and the question of canon.⁵

Other critics have compared Slenczka to Marcion, the second-century arch-heretic.⁶ In a 1984 essay titled “The Iron Cage and the Exodus from It, or the Dispute over Marcion, Then and Now,” Jacob Taubes argued that modern debates about Gnosticism, a category with which Marcion is often associated, can be read “in the fashion of a palimpsest, as the indicator of the present intellectual climate.”⁷ The same can be said of the current debate surrounding Slenczka’s position. I therefore begin with a brief primer on the image of the historical Marcion and the challenge Slenczka’s thesis poses to contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue in Germany. Marcion is a potent cipher for an attempt to decanonize the Old Testament by implying that it is a heretic and dualistic position. Given these associations, it is no wonder Slenczka rejects the label.⁸

³ Reinhard Bingener, “Professor fordert Abschaffung des Alten Testaments,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 21, 2015, sec. Politik: Inland, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/berlin-professor-fordert-abschaffung-des-alten-testaments-13549027.html>; Micha Brumlik, “Antijudaismus im neuen Gewand?,” *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 23, 2015, sec. TENACH, <http://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/article/view/id/22056>; Claudius Prößer, “Bibel-Streit an der Humboldt-Uni: Das Alte, das Neue und das Fremde,” *Die Tageszeitung*, April 23, 2015, sec. Berlin, <https://taz.de/Bibel-Streit-an-der-Humboldt-Uni/!5011093/>.

⁴ Christoph Marksches, “Wir stehen an Eurer Seite!,” *Die Kirche*, October 20, 2019, 1.

⁵ Notger Slenczka, “Zu neuesten Äußerungen von Christoph Marksches,” December 20, 2019, <https://www.theologie.hu-berlin.de/de/professuren/stellen/st/AT/neueste-entwicklungen>.

⁶ Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Marcion on the Elbe”; Loncar, “Christianity’s Shadow Founder”; Barbara Meyer, “Markion und die Wissenschaft der Dogmatik,” *BlickPunkt.e4* (2015), <http://www.indialog.org/bp2015/04/01.html>; Christoph Dohmen, “Zwischen Markionismus und Markion: Auf der Suche nach der christlichen Bibel. Aktualität einer scheinbar zeitlosen Frage,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 61, no. 2 (2017): 182–202.

⁷ Jacob Taubes, “The Iron Cage and the Exodus from It, or the Dispute over Marcion, Then and Now,” in *From Cult to Culture: Fragments toward a Critique of Historical Reason*, ed. Charlotte Fonrobert and Amir Engel, trans. Mara Benjamin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 137. See also Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination between the World Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁸ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 7, 22, 274–75.

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This article sets out to achieve three tasks, which determine its structure: The first task is to introduce the current debate in Germany by unpacking Slenczka's argument. I expand it in some length to show its deep ambiguity and divergence from contemporary mainstream attempts to rethink the Protestant position about Jews and Judaism. The second task is to trace the origins of Slenczka's thinking about canon. A genealogy helps expose the deep-seated anti-Jewish claims of some of the Protestant thinkers on whom Slenczka relies. I pay particular attention to the work of Adolf von Harnack, as well as the role Marcion played in contemporary debates about the canon. The final task is to examine three types of Jewish responses to Slenczka's position, drawing among others on previous Jewish responses to the Marcionite challenge. The three categories of response are rejection, disengagement, and acceptance. At least in one qualified reading, I contend, Slenczka's argument opens a different space for Jewish-Christian dialogue among scholars and thinkers committed to these religious traditions. This dialogue is predicated on stressing difference rather than commonality.

Before delving into the analysis, a personal note. As the tone of the controversy suggests—antisemitism and anti-Judaism are not words that should be used lightly—Slenczka's position can be unsettling for Jewish and Christian thinkers who have dedicated their life to Jewish-Christian dialogue in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Writing about his work in a way that takes his argument seriously rather than offering an immediate and utter condemnation is an approach, I realize, that comes with a certain risk, especially when the writer is working from within Jewish thought. Let me be clear from the outset, therefore, that engagement does not equate with endorsement. As I show below, Slenczka's argument draws in critical junctures on an anti-Jewish tradition, while attempting to disavow these elements. Yet in order to see how Slenczka, today an outlier, is deeply rooted in a certain Protestant tradition in Germany, one needs to engage his work seriously. Such a reading also points to the limits and potential of his ideas for Jewish-Christian dialogue in the twenty-first century.

MARCION AND THE CONTEMPORARY DIALOGUE

The picture we have of Marcion is always polemical because the available information comes from his opponents, the church fathers of the second and third century CE. Justin Martyr, for example, decried "Marcion of Pontus, who is even now teaching those he can persuade to consider some other, greater than the creator God."⁹ Justin's texts point to main tropes concerning Marcion. First, there is a certain idea of dualism that detaches the creator from the world or places a higher being that is not the creator. The second trope is the notion that such an idea is to be rejected by the emerging church.

⁹ Justin's *Apology* 26.5, in *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*, ed. Dennis Minns and Paul Parvis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149–51.

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In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus connects Marcion to a succession of heretics—a category that Irenaeus himself helps to shape—and repeats similar motifs of dualism and blasphemy, while raising further charges, such as that Marcion did not believe in bodily resurrection.¹⁰ Of special importance for the following discussion is Irenaeus's accusation that Marcion offered a canon that challenged apostolic and Pauline teachings:

[Marcion] circumcised the Gospel according to Luke, taking out everything written about the birth of the Lord and removing many passages from his teaching, those in which he plainly acknowledged the Creator of this world as his Father. Thus Marcion persuaded his disciples that he was more truthful than the apostles who transmitted the gospel, and handed over to them not the gospel but a modest portion of the gospel. He also cut away the letters of the apostle Paul, suppressing all the texts in which the apostle plainly spoke of the God who made the world as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as all those in which the apostle mentions the prophecies predicting the coming of the Lord.¹¹

Tertullian's *Against Marcion*, which despite its clear polemical tone is still the best source we have for Marcion's life and work, similarly sets out to show that Marcion's gospel is "adulterated" because of Marcion's "heretical blindness" to the truth.¹²

Marcion likely believed that Paul was the only true apostle of Christ, and therefore it is Pauline teachings that should be used to interpret texts referring to Christ. Put differently, Marcion's dualism is an attempt to solve the polarities in Pauline thinking.¹³ Based on his dualistic worldview, or perhaps deriving this worldview from his reading of scripture, Marcion proposed a canon (for there was no fixed canon at the time) that was likely comprised of some version of the Gospel of Luke alongside some Pauline Epistles. Crucially, the Old Testament was associated with the creator god and therefore not part of it.¹⁴

The church came to define itself vis-à-vis Marcion and other heresies, rejecting his proposed canon and adopting the Old Testament. Marcion was not the only adversary. The orthodoxy that emerged was separating itself twofold: on

¹⁰ For a summary and typology of the accusations, see Gerhard May, "Markion in seiner Zeit," in *Markion: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Katharina Greschat and Martin Meiser (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2005), 3; Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 35.

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27, in *Irenaeus of Lyons*, ed. Robert McQueen Grant (New York: Routledge, 1997), 72. See also 3.12.12.

¹² Tertullian's *Against Marcion*, 4.2, 4.6, in *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. Ernest Evans (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 261, 275; on the centrality of Tertullian for our understanding of Marcion, see Eginhard Meijering, *Tertullian Contra Marcion: Gotteslehre in der Polemik* (Leiden: Brill, 1977); Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹³ Joseph Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 36–38; John Marshall, "Misunderstanding the New Paul: Marcion's Transformation of the Sonderzeit Paul," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2012): 1–29.

¹⁴ Dieter Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). For the claim that Luke—and potentially the other synoptic gospels—is based on Marcion's gospel and not the other way around: Matthias Klinghardt, *Das älteste Evangelium und die Entstehung der kanonischen Evangelien*,

the one hand, from Marcion and others defined as heretics; on the other, from the emerging Judaism of the time.¹⁵ At times, the two adversaries were brought together. Tertullian, author not only of *Against Marcion* but also of *Against the Jews*, argued that both opponents claim that “Christ was a phantasm”; the heretic is “borrowing poison from the Jew,—the asp, as they say, from the viper.”¹⁶ Discussions about Marcion are therefore about Christian identity and can be laden with anti-Jewish motifs. At the same time, Marcion’s thought itself, by insisting on a canon without the Old Testament, and by assigning a lesser and negative place to the Creator that is identified in this text, reflects anti-Jewish sentiments.¹⁷

The Christian canon, dualism, and heresy are tropes in subsequent discussions of Marcion and Marcionism. By the fourth century he was already deemed the prime example of heresy. Indeed, as Judith Lieu writes, it is only as a heretic that Marcion survives, “if he had not been so constructed his name would have long been forgotten.”¹⁸ The rise of biblical-historical scholarship in the nineteenth century marked an important shift, because it turned the figure of Marcion into a source for thinking about the history of early Christianity.¹⁹ As I show below, Slenczka builds on insights provided by Harnack in his work on Marcion.

2 vols. (Tübingen: Francke, 2015); and the critical discussions in Matthias Klinghardt, Jason BeDuhn, and Judith Lieu, “Marcion’s Gospel and the New Testament: Catalyst or Consequence?,” *New Testament Studies* 63, no. 2 (2017): 318–34. See also Markus Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2014).

¹⁵ On the notion of self-definition through developing a “heresy” and the parting of the ways, see Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). On the parting of the ways, see also Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018); Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019); Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹⁶ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.8, in Evans, *Adversus Marcionem*, 191.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Bienert, “Marcion und der Antijudaismus,” in *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung*, ed. Gerhard May, Katharina Greschat, and Martin Meiser (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), esp. 200–202. Barbara Aland argues that Marcion’s understanding of sin shows that the two gods are not as strictly separated as most interpretations have suggested, because the good, unknown God depends on the presupposition that the Creator God exists and created humanity. See Barbara Aland, “Sünde und Erlösung bei Marcion und die Konsequenz für die sogenannten beiden Götter Marcions,” in *Was ist Gnosis?: Studien zum frühen Christentum, zu Marcion und zur kaiserzeitlichen Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 341–52.

¹⁸ Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 433.

¹⁹ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Das Markusevangelium nach seinem Ursprung und Charakter, nebst einem Anhang über das Evangelium Marcion’s* (Tübingen: Ludw. Friedr. Fuer, 1851); Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, trans. Neil Buchanan (New York: Dover, 1961), 267. See also Gedaliahu Stroumsa, “Gnosis and Judaism in Nineteenth Century Christian Thought,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (1993): 45–62; Michael Brenner, “Gnosis and History: Polemics of German-Jewish Identity from Graetz to Scholem,” *New German Critique* 77 (1999): 45–46.

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Slenczka's work is motivated not by dualism but by an attempt to think about the meaning of Christian identity by turning to the place of the Old Testament in the Christian canon. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, many Christian theologians in Germany and elsewhere went through a long process of introspection as they tried to come to terms with the role of Christians, the churches, and Christianity in the genocide of the Jews. This point should not be overlooked, as it gives this twenty-first-century German debate about Slenczka's claims its urgency and vitriolic tone.

In the Protestant churches in West Germany, and after reunification in all of Germany, the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* [EKD]) undertook a long process beginning in 1945 to reconsider its theology and relation to Jews and Judaism.²⁰ A major result of this self-reflection has been a series of synodal decisions, most notably the Rhineland Synodal Decision of 1980, which rejected earlier supersessionist claims and insisted on the continued covenant of God with the Jewish people alongside the new covenant that is Christianity. Furthermore, three publications titled *Christen und Juden* (1975, 1991, 2000), offered a rethinking of theological ideas such as election and covenant, as well as pragmatic suggestions about how to avoid and combat anti-Jewish stereotypes in preaching and teaching, for example by highlighting Jesus's Jewishness. The highly contested subject of missionizing was also a point of deliberation, with some synods publishing declarations explicitly rejecting it. They have done so among others by including the voices of Jewish participants through the Jews and Christians Working Group.²¹

The idea of a shared scripture—the Old Testament or the Tanakh—recurs as a theme in these discussions. The 1975 text recognizes that there were recurring attempts to “devalue certain books of the Old Testament or to deny it as a whole recognition as part of the Holy Scripture,” while quickly adding that such attempts were refused.²² By 2000, the consensus is described as the “continuous bond of the Church with Israel,” in which “the Holy Scripture” serves as a keyword. An entire section is devoted to the role of the

²⁰ I focus below on the Protestant reaction in Germany, as this is the more immediate context for Slenczka's work as a Protestant theologian. In the Catholic Church, this change in attitude culminated in the 1965 Declaration on the Relation of the Church with non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*). Among the vast literature on it, see John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Norman Tobias, *Jewish Conscience of the Church: Jules Isaac and the Second Vatican Council* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and Karma Ben Johanan, *A Pottage of Lentils: Mutual Perceptions of Christians and Jews in the Age of Reconciliation* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2020).

²¹ “Synodalbeschluss zur Erneuerung des Verhältnisses von Christen und Juden (1980),” *AG Juden und Christen*, January 11, 1980, <https://www.ag-juden-christen.de/synodalbeschluss-zur-erneuerung-des-verhaeltnisses-von-christen-und-juden/>; *Christen und Juden: Die Studien der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland 1975–2000* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002), on election, see, e.g., 2.81–100; pragmatic suggestions: 2.103–110, 3.122; missionizing: 3.121.

²² *Christen und Juden*, 1.21.

Old Testament as a “Scripture of Christians,” and another to the “Unity of the Bible.”²³ *Christen und Juden*—representing the official view of the EKD—rejects attempts to downplay the importance of the Old Testament and states unequivocally that “The Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be understood without the Old Testament.”²⁴

Slenczka’s argument for the decanonization of the Old Testament disturbs this post-Holocaust consensus. The challenge to Christian identity that the canon question should solve, according to him, is a result of the collapse of older supersessionist claims and the embrace of a Jewish-Christian dialogue. In the aftermath of the debate surrounding “The Church and the Old Testament,” Slenczka made the stakes of his argument clear. Nothing short of the newness of Christianity. The statement that in Christ “everything has become new” (2. Cor. 5:17) has in this sense an existential meaning. The old cannot define the new, Slenczka argued, even if the former is interpreted in light of the latter. Contemporary Protestantism, he contested, shirks away from asserting that Christ brought something new to the world because it fears the breaking of the commonality with Judaism.²⁵ The attempts to bring Judaism and Christianity closer diminish, according to Slenczka, the unique aspects of both religions.

“GOOD AND USEFUL” TO READ: THE OLD TESTAMENT AS APOCRYPHA

Slenczka calls for the decanonization of the Old Testament. What is meant by that depends on his understanding of canon. Canon has at least four meanings: (1) a ruler, measure, or criterion; (2) a model; (3) a rule or norm; and (4) a table or list. The first meaning, as a ruler or measurement rod, derives from the Greek (perhaps through Semitic languages). It is a physical object that later defined the metaphorical meanings.²⁶ The Christian understanding of canon from the fourth century until at least the Reformation combines the third and fourth meanings, turning canon into what we know today, namely “a list of books sanctioned by the majority Christian church as having divine authority and in which each book is understood in light of all others.”²⁷

A central feature of a textual canon is its fixed and binding character. It does not tolerate additions, deletions, or emendations. In the process of canonization, once a text becomes canonical it needs to adapt and be interpreted in light of the organizing idea of the canon as a whole.²⁸ But Slenczka argues

²³ *Christen und Juden*, 3.120.

²⁴ *Christen und Juden*, 3.206.

²⁵ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 251, 323–25.

²⁶ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 90–97.

²⁷ Michael Greenwald, “The Canon of the New Testament,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 557.

²⁸ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 87; Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22–26.

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that a Protestant understanding of the text, based on Luther's doctrine of *sola scriptura*, suggests that the list of books is less central than the idea that Christian scripture is its own grounding. The text is itself the proclamation, sermon, and address. If this is the case, then there is no reason to accept the authority of a previous generation. This orientation toward the future is embedded, in Slenczka's understanding of Luther, in the concept of reformation. Future generations can challenge—for example, through historical understanding—the place and importance of certain books. For Slenczka, placing certain books as apocrypha was one of Luther's achievements, as he has shown a way in which to organize the biblical texts and assign them relative importance.²⁹

For Slenczka, the text is the basis upon which the definition of what is considered Christian is to be found. Biblical texts can be considered normative if and only if they “proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ that aims to awaken faith, and in this sense a self-understanding that is based on Christ.”³⁰ The normative function of relating back to Jesus Christ and the message of salvation constitutes the fixed and binding nature of the canon. Slenczka talks—relying on Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Bultmann—of Christian pious self-understanding or the existential meaning that results in the meeting from the text. This pious self-understanding is grounded in “Jesus Christ as the exclusive ground of human salvation.”³¹ Conversely, the Christian canon is the text without which one cannot self-understand as Christian.

Following Bultmann, Slenczka argues that the criterion for canonicity, “that which defines whether an adoption of a text corpus is justified or unjustified,” lies “not in the question about the genetic conditions and historical meaning of the text, and also not in the question about the agents of the text's formation or the compilation into a canon, but in the question whether the text becomes the origin of self-understanding in the listening subject, [a self-understanding] that may be determined as consciousness of the “presence of God's grace [*Gnade Gottes*]” or consciousness of the unavailability of grace [*unverfügbaren Begandigtsein*].”³² The criterion is in the answer to the question of whether the text is an address to the Christian qua Christian, whether it proclaims the good news in the person of Jesus Christ. Slenczka's central presupposition for decanonization is that the church is not spoken to in the Old Testament.

Who is the addressee of the message of the Old Testament? This question was present already in Marcion, which answered with a dualistic worldview. Historically, the church rejected this position and saw itself as the community that is spoken to and about in the Old Testament. But Slenczka insists that Christological backward readings of the Old Testament are no longer tenable

²⁹ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 51–53.

³⁰ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 137–39.

³¹ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 132–33, 64–65.

³² Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 76.

in light of historical research about both the Old and the New Testament. Such readings are also seen as morally questionable as they are often based on a supersessionist position that does not give the revelation to Jews its due.

Several arguments have been raised against Slenczka's position. The first concerns his interpretation of the relation of the Protestant tradition to the canon. Christoph Marksches, for example, argues against Slenczka's reading of Luther. Without mentioning him by name, Marksches contends that the best way to interpret Luther's *sola scriptura* as a hermeneutical principle is not as Slenczka suggests but as *sola et tota scriptura*, that is to say, as referring to the entire scripture, Old and New Testament alike.³³

Second, there is a historical argument. The process of canonization of both Testaments was long and is contested in research. If, as one position suggests, the Old Testament reached its form as part of the Christian canon alongside, or even before, the corpus known as the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh, then it is inaccurate to claim that the church is not the addressee of the text, which has multiple audiences. This claim is further amplified by contemporary scholarly understandings of the emergence of Judaism and Christianity not as a mother and daughter religions but as fluid categories that emerge vis-à-vis one another.³⁴ For Slenczka, however, the historical process is not as important because it does not change the basic fact that the texts in the New Testament are after Christ, and the texts in the Old Testament, even if canonized later, are most likely earlier and in any case do not point to Jesus Christ.³⁵

A third objection is that for Jesus and the apostles, the Old Testament, in one form or another, was the normative foundation. As Robert Jenson puts it: "For the church the Old Testament is canon as a sheer given, underivable from other facts or axioms."³⁶ The question, Jenson argues, is how "Israel's Scripture accepted—or did not accept—the church" and not the other way around.³⁷ Slenczka agrees that it is unquestionable. The early reliance on the Old Testament is a given datum, a "historical-descriptive" assertion he does not contend. Yet he distinguishes between facticity and validity. A canonical ought cannot be derived from a historical is.³⁸ Put differently, this self-explanatory foundation for the early church does not automatically make it a normative foundation for contemporaries.

Finally, there is the question whether the same objection can be applied to the New Testament. Slenczka disagrees on this point. He admits that the New

³³ Christoph Marksches, *Reformationsjubiläum 2017 und der jüdisch-christlicher Dialog* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 33. The polemic with Slenczka is alluded to throughout: 28, 32, 40, 62, 72, 77, 82.

³⁴ James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Michael Satlow, *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), and the sources in n. 15.

³⁵ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 103–9.

³⁶ Robert Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 20.

³⁷ Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 20.

³⁸ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 105 n. 60, 123, 251–52.

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Testament's Christological understanding is different from the present one. But he believes the addressee of the text remains the same, and its impulse is oriented toward the gospel of the person of Jesus Christ. This, Slenczka contends, cannot be said of the texts of the Old Testament in the twenty-first century.³⁹

With an understanding of the canon as a fixed set of books, decanonization might imply, as Slenczka's opponents have argued, an excision of the Old Testament from the Christian Bible. Slenczka categorically denies that this is his position and states that "there will never be a Bible without the Old Testament."⁴⁰ In practical terms, he seems to suggest that the Old Testament should still be taught, and preached, but in a different way. For the Christian, it is not an equal to the New Testament. The question remains as to why. What function does the Old Testament have for contemporary Protestants according to Slenczka? He believes that the Old Testament should be relegated into the status of apocrypha, which is "good and useful" to read according to Luther, but not part of the canon, strictly speaking.⁴¹

Slenczka identifies a tension between the insistence on the newness of the message of Jesus Christ and accepting the premise that the Old Testament should not be read in a Christological way:

The thesis that the Old Testament—when according to the conviction of the contemporary Church it should not (any longer) be read a priori christologically or as addressing the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ—also can no longer have a canonical status (but is nonetheless still good and useful to read as manifesting the presupposition of universality, which is completely restructured in the encounter with the proclamation of Jesus Christ), this thesis, even as it recognizes the pre-Christian and extra-Christian universality of the singular (in the sense just explained), adheres to the "New" of the person Jesus in the understanding of the Christian faith.⁴²

The claim that the Old Testament is "good and useful" as a "pre- and extra-Christian" (*vor- und außerchristlich*) experience requires unpacking. I suggest there are at least two interrelated meanings to such a claim.

The first meaning is as a historical datum that informs the perception of early Christianity. The Old Testament provides the presuppositions for all the essential texts of the Christian faith. This is true not only because the text of New Testament is full of verses from the Old Testament, without which the former is incomprehensible, but it also true, Slenczka says, for central theological concepts such as creation and messianism. Unlike Jenson's position, in which this makes the Old Testament indispensable, Slenczka thinks it is only a necessary background condition—a historical source to understand

³⁹ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 183.

⁴⁰ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 306.

⁴¹ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 83–84.

⁴² Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 274.

Christianity better. It is a document of the community from which the first Christians emerged, but it is not about Christ.⁴³

Second, the Old Testament is “good and useful” as an expression of pre- and extra-Christian experience of God. It is a text that is not addressed to the Christian community but to the Israelites, and to the Jews as their recognized descendants. The Old Testament thereby serves for him as a “placeholder” (*Platzhalter*) for the Christian religious experience prior to the experience of Christ.⁴⁴ This does not mean that Christians do not hear something in some of the Old Testament texts, such as the Psalms, parts of the prophets, or Job. But Christians hear not as Christians but as human beings. They are listening in, as it were, on God’s conversation with another religious community, a dialogue from which they can learn from as human beings who exist in front of God before they are Christians. The Old Testament is an exemplary placeholder, but Slenczka suggests that it is not singular. In the time of the early church, for example, Christians also found similar inspiration from Hellenistic philosophy. As an expression of a non-Christian, humanly shared experience, the Old Testament has no preference over other texts that speak to one’s being qua human such as Shakespeare or existential philosophy.⁴⁵

In sum, Slenczka’s thesis is less about canon as a list of books and more about the meaning of the Old Testament for contemporary Protestantism. For him, the church is not addressed in the text, which makes the Old Testament “good and useful” to read, but without it having the same normative sense as the New Testament for the Christian believer. The revelation of the Old Testament belongs to the Jews and the Jewish tradition and does not stand at the heart of Christianity despite its historical background, namely, that Jesus Christ was born a Jew. This reading, if one follows Slenczka, gives the revelation to the Jewish people its proper respect and avoids Christian supersessionism while insisting on the newness of Christianity.

THE ROOTS OF SLENCZKA’S POSITION

In making his argument for the decanonization of the Old Testament, Slenczka relies explicitly on Luther, Schleiermacher, Harnack, and Bultmann. Harnack merits closer consideration in this regard because he serves as a crucial link between the themes of canon, Marcion, and Slenczka’s argument.⁴⁶ In fact, one way of reading Slenczka’s work is as a rehabilitation of an argument

⁴³ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 196–98.

⁴⁴ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 74, 83, 322, 326.

⁴⁵ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 198–207.

⁴⁶ Friedhelm Hartenstein, “Weshalb braucht die christliche Theologie eine Theologie des Alten Testaments?,” in *Die bleibende Bedeutung des Alten Testaments: Studien zur Relevanz des ersten Kanonteils für Theologie und Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 24–28. For a focus on Schleiermacher, see also Loncar, “Christianity’s Shadow Founder.”

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made by Harnack nearly a century earlier. The concluding sentence of “The Church and the Old Testament,” for example, invites the reader to consider if “Harnack’s statement that the texts of the OT merit selective appreciation and religious use, but not a canonical position, simply ratifies the factual manner with which we treat these texts in ecclesiastical use.”⁴⁷

No other scholar has done more to renew the interest in Marcion in the twentieth century than Harnack. A century after its publication, Harnack’s monograph *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* (1921) is still the starting point for scholars in the field. In a passage on Marcion’s contemporary relevance, Harnack (in)famously wrote, “the rejection of the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the Great Church has rightly avoided; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate from which the Reformation was not yet able to withdraw. To still conserve it as a canonical document in Protestantism since the nineteenth century is the result of a religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.”⁴⁸ Whereas for the church fathers the question of the canon and dualism were seen as two facets of Marcionite heresy, Harnack’s position is more ambivalent. On the one hand, Harnack does not accept the Marcionite theology in toto and rejects Marcion’s world negation. On the other hand, he identifies Marcion as a central figure for thinking about what it means to be a Christian by looking at the question of canon and salvages Marcion’s positions regarding the Christian canon. For Harnack, the Old Testament has a role for Christians. It is a reminder of the stage that led to Christianity, but it is not canonical since it does not define what Christianity is. The Old Testament, in other words, is part of the prehistory of the church but not of its essence.⁴⁹ Harnack attempted to clarify this position in the aftermath of the publication of his book. In a lecture outline from 1923, we find the succinct comment, “I do not throw the O.T. out.”⁵⁰

The parallels to Slenczka are evident. I deal with some of the Jewish responses to Harnack in the next section, but because Harnack’s thought is a central reference point for Slenczka, it is worth pausing on Christian responses to Harnack. Wolfram Kinzig meticulously details them and draws some general trends.⁵¹ Among supporters of racial and *völkisch* understandings of Christianity, Harnack’s argument found a warm welcome. This is not

⁴⁷ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 84.

⁴⁸ Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John Steely and Lyle Bierma (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1990), 134, and *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1924), 217. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel*, 138.

⁵⁰ Adolf von Harnack, “Marcion: Der radikale Modernist des 2. Jahrhunderts. Vortragskonzept (Uppsala, 13. März 1923),” in *Marcion, der moderne Gläubige des 2. Jahrhunderts, der erste Reformator - Die Dorpater Preisschrift (1870)*, ed. Friedemann Steck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 398.

⁵¹ Wolfram Kinzig, *Harnack, Marcion und das Judentum: nebst einer kommentierten Edition des Briefwechsels Adolf von Harnacks mit Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004), 116–45; see also Achim Detmers, “Die Interpretation der Israel-Lehre Marcions im ersten Drittel des 20. Jahrhunderts: Theologische Voraussetzungen und zeitgeschichtlicher Kontext,” in May, Greschat, and Meiser, *Marcion und seine kirchengeschichtliche Wirkung*, 275–92.

to say that Harnack was a *völkisch* thinker but rather that his argument for the decanonization of the Old Testament, augmented and amplified by his scholarly stature as the leading church historian of the era, was readily utilized for these aims. The same year Harnack published his monograph on Marcion, Friedrich Andersen, for example, argued that Christians should expunge “Jewish muddiness” from the Gospel.⁵² Two years later, Andersen advocated the complete rejection of the Old Testament, citing Harnack approvingly. By contrast, scholars of the Old Testament rejected Harnack’s position. For them, the value of the Old Testament for Christian self-understanding was obvious and could not be contested. The same contemporary rejection was evident among Catholic thinkers, who insisted on the unity of a canon comprised of the Old and New Testament.

Slenczka recognizes that “the religious anti-Judaism of Christianity undoubtedly belongs to the roots of the racial antisemitism of the nineteenth and twentieth century, which reached its apex in the death camps of the Third Reich.”⁵³ But at times he argues that Harnack cannot be accused of anti-Judaism and attempts to maintain Harnack and Schleiermacher’s ideas without their anti-Jewish bias. The result often sounds apologetic.⁵⁴ In order to examine if, and to what extent, Slenczka’s position avoids the accusations of anti-Judaism, two elements should be distinguished: the terms used and the content of the argument.

The first element is the question of language and terms. Slenczka relies on familiar anti-Jewish motifs that are often characteristic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant thought. He talks, for example, about Judaism as an “ethnically bounded tribal religion [*Stammsreligion*],” a concept that has been used in the comparative study of religion to classify certain religions as having less ethical worth than more universal religions.⁵⁵ Slenczka has since regretted his use of the term, but he keeps insisting on treating the Old Testament as a particularistic (*partikular*) text, which “deals with the love of God to a particular people, defined through ancestry.”⁵⁶ The term, in his view, is not derogatory. Yet particularity, as Slenczka is well aware, has negative connotations in the Protestant tradition, where many thinkers argued that Jewish particularism is opposed to, and lesser than, Christian universalism.

One of Harnack’s paradigmatic statements can help explain this point. The context is Harnack’s definition of the essence of Christianity as understood in the life and deeds of Jesus in contrast to the Pharisees:

⁵² Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 45.

⁵³ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 438.

⁵⁴ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 44, 265.

⁵⁵ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 60. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 78–79, 204–6.

⁵⁶ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 316, 305–6. The statement that he regrets the term: 313.

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[The Pharisees] thought of God as of a despot guarding the ceremonial observances in His household; he breathed in the presence of God. They saw Him only in His law, which they had converted into a labyrinth of dark defiles, blind alleys and secret passages; he saw and felt Him everywhere. They were in possession of a thousand of His commandments, and thought, therefore, that they knew Him; he had one only, and knew Him by it. They had made this religion into an earthly trade, and there was nothing more detestable; he proclaimed the living God and the soul's nobility.⁵⁷

The new light that is Jesus stands against the darkness of the Jewish tradition. The contrast between the Pharisees and Jesus has long been identified as an anti-Jewish bias that is present in the church's teachings.⁵⁸ Although Slenczka does not discuss the Pharisees, he adopts from Harnack the description of the Old Testament as having "shadows" of the universalism of the message of Jesus.⁵⁹ This terminology of light and shadow points to a problem in this system of negation and claims of newness made by Slenczka as a Protestant theologian. Stressing the new comes at the expense of painting a negative picture of the old, otherwise there would have been no plausible reason for the new to emerge.

This negative painting of Judaism exposes another potential source for Slenczka's decanonization thesis. As Friedhelm Hartenstein and Micha Brumlik argue, a central figure in this tradition of Protestant decanonization of the Old Testament is the Nazi theologian Emanuel Hirsch, who took the separation of the two parts of the traditional canon to extreme.⁶⁰ In his 1936 work *Das Alte Testament und die Predigt des Evangeliums* (The Old Testament and the preaching of the Gospel), for example, Hirsch declared that "faith in Jesus Christ separates us from the religion of the Old Testament. For us it is voided [*aufgehoben*] and negated."⁶¹ Slenczka's position similarly insists on newness as creating a strong differentiation of "us," Protestants, from the religion of the Old Testament. In this sense, it resembles Hirsch's thought and

⁵⁷ Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Baily Saunders (London: Williams & Norgate, 1901), 36; for the Jewish responses to Harnack's work on the essence of Christianity, see Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870–1914*, trans. Noah Jacobs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 204–5.

⁵⁸ Susannah Heschel and Deborah Forger, "The Pharisees in Modern Scholarship," in *The Pharisees*, ed. Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 361–83; Amy-Jill Levine, "Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 513; *Christen und Juden*, 2.106.

⁵⁹ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 58–59.

⁶⁰ Friedhelm Hartenstein, "Weshalb braucht die christliche Theologie eine Theologie des Alten Testaments?," 24–34; and Micha Brumlik, "Notger Slenczka und Emanuel Hirsch," *Junge Kirche* 77 (2017): 36–38.

⁶¹ Emanuel Hirsch, *Das Alte Testament und die Predigt des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1936), 62; see also Arnulf von Scheliha, "Die Überlehrmäßigkeit des christlichen Glaubens - Das Wesen des (protestantischen) Christentums nach Emanuel Hirsch," in *Das Christentum der Theologen im 20. Jahrhundert: Vom "Wesen des Christentums" zu den "Kurzformeln des Glaubens"*, ed. Mariano Delgado (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2000), 63–65.

could easily be read as anti-Jewish, although Hartenstein himself warns against such a simplistic reading.⁶² In later replies to critics, Slenczka mentions Hirsch, albeit almost always in the footnotes. Less so than in the case of Harnack but still present is an apologetic interpretation of Hirsch's theology, but it appears alongside an unequivocal rejection of Hirsch's political views.⁶³

The question remains as to the relation between Hirsch's politics and his theological construction. I suggest that the comparison between Hirsch and Slenczka ultimately fails, but this only stresses the type of detachment Slenczka seeks from the Old Testament. Hirsch is concerned with history and the decision for the divine in it. As a nationalistic and then Nazi thinker, he assigns importance to epochal moments of self-realization, the last of which he identifies with Nazism, as well as to what he calls Horos, or the "uncrossable boundary" that is God-given to every people (*Volk*).⁶⁴ It is for this reason that Hirsch insists that Jesus was an Aryan.⁶⁵ Slenczka's theological position, by contrast, is based on a more subjective notion of pious self-understanding. He has no qualms with the Jewishness of the historical Jesus precisely because he does not see this historical fact as determining the core of the New Testament's message. It is no more than an empirical statement: not to be contested or denied, but also not central to the understanding of the essence of Christianity. This is a nuanced but important distinction that can get lost in the heat of controversy around Slenczka and the accusations of antisemitism.

The core problem should be clear by now. Both religions read the same scripture (Old Testament/Tanakh), and believe in, and pray to, the same God. Yet they do so in radically different ways. Slenczka's suggested solution is rejected today by the majority, but as shown above, it has a long historical resonance among leading Protestant thinkers. If Marcion had won, Slenczka says, then this would not have been a problem, but for all those who reject Marcion, and Slenczka explicitly includes himself in this group, the question is how to solve this tension.⁶⁶ Slenczka's suggestion is decanonization, which solves the problem by limiting the claim Christians make on the Old Testament but relies on problematic anti-Jewish terminology.

⁶² Hartenstein, "Zur Bedeutung des Alten Testaments," in *Die bleibende Bedeutung des Alten Testaments*, 60, 74–75.

⁶³ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 254 n. 510, 256, 274–75 n. 561.

⁶⁴ Emanuel Hirsch, *Die gegenwärtige geistige Lage im Spiegel philosophischer und theologischer Besinnung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934), 3–5, 33; Robert Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 152–53.

⁶⁵ Emanuel Hirsch, "Die Abstammung Jesus," *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Weimar: Deutsche Christen Verlag, 1939), 158–65; on the Aryanization of Jesus in Nazi theology, see Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, and Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 486.

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A “PEACEFUL OPPOSITION”

Given the intellectual tradition on which Slenczka draws, it is understandable that most responses were very negative. I suggest, however, that alongside rejection there are two other options for Jewish thinkers: disengagement, and acceptance of the basic premise. Because Slenczka identified himself as a follower of Harnack, turning to the ways Jews responded to the latter’s decanonization thesis during the 1920s is a helpful starting point to examine potential Jewish responses.

Rejection is the most obvious and common approach. In “Romantic Religion” (1922), Leo Baeck argued that Christianity is an unethical romantic religion because it is self-centered and focused on one’s own experience of redemption and not the relation to the world in the form of ethics.⁶⁷ In response to Franz Rosenzweig’s accusation that this is a caricature of Christianity, Baeck admitted as much. In a private letter, Baeck explained that his intention was to present Christianity as “‘pure’ Paulinism, in order to depict the way it is, and in theory also has been . . . when it should or would want to be gnostic, Marcionite—cf. Harnack: *Marcion*.”⁶⁸ Put differently, Baeck saw a fundamental connection between a position that attempts to minimize the Jewish foundation of Christianity and an unethical behavior.⁶⁹

Similarly, Rosenzweig saw in Harnack’s decanonization attempt a risky proposition for the Jews. In July 1925, he wrote to Martin Buber about their new translation, or rather Germanization (*Verdeutschung*) of the Hebrew Bible: “Is it clear to you that the situation striven for by the neo-Marcionites is practically already here? The Christian understands Bible today as the New Testament, perhaps together with the Psalms, which he mostly believes do not belong to the Old Testament. So we will become missionaries.”⁷⁰ Baeck and Rosenzweig’s comments are telling regarding Slenczka’s reliance on Harnack. They accept the empirical claim by Slenczka and Harnack that for the Protestant in Germany, the Old Testament does not play a significant role, let alone the same role as the New Testament. This is of course not a given, and Slenczka in fact does not provide any empirical evidence for his claim.⁷¹

Slenczka argues that decanonizing is a position that is respectful to Jewish audiences because it moves away from the problem of supersessionist

⁶⁷ Leo Baeck, “Romantic Religion,” in *Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), 189–292.

⁶⁸ Baeck to Rosenzweig, March 8, 1923, in *Werke 6: Briefe, Reden, Aufsätze*, ed. Michael Meyer (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 578; for Rosenzweig’s critique, see Franz Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. Paul Franks and Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 95–108.

⁶⁹ Yaniv Feller, *The Jewish Imperial Imagination: Leo Baeck and German-Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 67–72.

⁷⁰ Rosenzweig to Buber on July 29, 1925, in Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, ed. Grete Schaeder (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1975), 2:232.

⁷¹ Hartenstein, “Zur Bedeutung des Alten Testaments,” 67.

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claims by the church. In ignoring the power relations between majority culture and a minority, however, Slenczka fails to understand the danger felt by Jews in such an argument and the political stakes of his argument. This is evident not only in Baeck's critique of romantic religion but also in Martin Buber's lecture "The Spirit of Israel and the World Today" (1938), which he delivered shortly after his emigration to Palestine from Nazi Germany. Buber creates a striking parallel between Marcion and Hadrian, who vanquished the Bar Kochba Rebellion (132–35 CE), and Harnack and Hitler: "Three years after the death of Harnack in 1930, his idea, the idea of Marcion, was put into action; not, however, by spiritual means, but by means of violence and terror."⁷² There is a potential for anti-Jewish violence embedded in claims to detach or minimize the role of the Old Testament.

This fear, which many believe had been validated by the Holocaust, stands at the heart of most of the Jewish reactions to Slenczka. Jewish and Christian thinkers who oppose Slenczka's thesis are in line with this long tradition of German-Jewish responses to the Marcionite challenge. The rejection of any position resembling Marcionism and the insistence that there cannot be a Christianity without Judaism, which is central for any ethical Christian self-understanding, is understandable in this context. It is supported by Slenczka's reliance on earlier terminology about particularity and shadows that has a long and problematic history.⁷³

Alongside rejection, a second line of response is disengagement. After the Holocaust, Leo Baeck maintained his critique of Protestantism as a romantic and Marcionite religion but added that the challenge of Marcion is one that the church had to confront on its own. Judaism's part in this inner-Christian discussion was to stand proud and present its value independently, thereby reminding the church that this is part of its tradition to be embraced.⁷⁴ But Judaism is an observer, not a direct participant when it comes to the Christian need to face its own history.

Another example that goes along the same lines, while addressing a different context, is Joseph Soloveitchik's response to the new, reconciliatory voices

⁷² Martin Buber, "The Spirit of Israel and the World of Today," in *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 187–88; see also Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Martin Buber and the Metaphysicians of Contempt," in *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 223–24; Yaniv Feller, "From Aher to Marcion: Martin Buber's Understanding of Gnosis," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013): 390–96; Christoph Schmidt, "Rethinking the Modern Canon of Judaism—Christianity—Modernity in Light of the Post-secular Relation," in *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective*, ed. Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 165–84.

⁷³ Susannah Heschel, "Gibt es ein gemeinsames Erbe von Juden und Christen?," *Rotary Magazin* 6 (2015), <https://rotary.de/kultur/gibt-es-ein-gemeinsames-erbe-von-juden-und-christen-a-7617.html>.

⁷⁴ Leo Baeck, "Das Judentum auf alten und neuen Wege," in *Werke 5: Nach der Schoa - Warum sind Juden in der Welt?*, ed. Albert Friedlander and Bertold Klappert (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 47.

emerging from the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. The rethinking of the Catholic traditional position toward Jews was greeted by many Jewish thinkers, but not by Soloveitchik. He insisted that the total independence of Judaism means that other faith communities cannot tell Jews how to think and act, because “an outsider” should not “intrude upon the most private sector of the human existential experience, namely, the way in which a faith community expresses its relationship to God.”⁷⁵ The same holds true for Jewish relation to Christianity. In this reading, the proper Jewish response to inner-Christian debates, whether it is Second Vatican or the Protestant canon debate provoked by Slenczka, is no response at all. It is not a Jewish affair. The problem with such an approach is that it ignores the connection identified by Baeck, Buber, and others between decanonizing (Marcionite or quasi-Marcionite) and political negative perception of Jews.

The last mode of engagement is thinking through and with Slenczka’s thesis from a Jewish perspective. Elad Lapidot recently argued that Western philosophy after the Holocaust, from Arendt and Sartre to Nancy and Badiou, adopts an anti-anti-Semitic stance that rejects any epistemic value to Jewish history or collective existence. Opposing this position, Lapidot offers an anti-anti-anti-Semitic position, one that stresses a unique Jewish mode of knowledge. His argument is not concerned with Christian theologians per se, but it helps unpack the ambiguity in Slenczka’s position. On the one hand, Slenczka’s thesis and the language he uses can be perceived as anti-Jewish. This is the position of those who reject his claims. On the other hand, Slenczka’s position also resembles anti-anti-anti-Semitism, as it ascribes a unique epistemological value to Jewish knowledge. We have encountered his theological formulation for this position in the last section. The revelation in and of the Old Testament is meant for the Jews, and only for them.⁷⁶

Hanna Liss offers a historical counterpart to Lapidot’s philosophical argument. She claims that even in the case of the Old Testament/Tanakh the faith communities do not in fact read the same text, because the Christian has primarily the Greek and Latin translations in mind, whereas the Jew has the Hebrew and Aramaic. Furthermore, just as the Christian needs the New Testament in order to under the Old, a Jewish reading of the Hebrew Bible, argues Liss, is only possible in light of its reception and radical interpretation in the Mishnah and Talmud.⁷⁷ Lapidot and Liss therefore follow Slenczka in stressing irreconcilable differences, which they imply can be carefully gauged as a productive venue to think about Jewish identity.

⁷⁵ Joseph Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition* 6, no. 2 (1964): 25.

⁷⁶ Lapidot, by contrast, follows Daniel Boyarin, Sergey Dolgopolski, and others in locating the unique Jewish episteme in the Talmud. Elad Lapidot, *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020), esp. 181–83.

⁷⁷ Hanna Liss, “An der Sache vorbei: Eine jüdische Sichtweise zum Streit um Notger Slenczka und das Alte Testament,” *Zeitschriften* 9 (2015): 42–44; see also Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 22–23.

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This third mode of engagement also opens a potential venue for Jewish-Christian dialogue based on difference. Slenczka himself is highly critical of attempts at interfaith dialogue. As mentioned in the introduction, he believes that such an enterprise minimizes the newness of Christianity by attempting to gloss over differences. Slenczka singles out “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christianity” as one such problematic site of engagement.⁷⁸ Dabru Emet (Speak the Truth, drawing on Zec. 8:16) was published in 2001 as a whole-page ad in the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and other newspapers. Coauthored by four leading Jewish thinkers—Tikva Frymer-Kenski, Peter Ochs, Michael Singer, and David Novak—and signed by more than 220 rabbis and Jewish intellectuals, it declared that Jews and Christians believe in the same God, seek authority from the same book (Tanakh/Old Testament), accept the moral principles of the Torah, and should work together for peace and justice. Two further claims are that Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon and that “Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel.” The statement also argued that Judaism will not be weakened by this mutual engagement and that “the humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.”⁷⁹

The context of Dabru Emet is clearly North American, and it is addressed to a broader audience. It is very different in style, argumentation, and context than Slenczka’s intervention in contemporary Protestant theology in Germany. There is a good reason, however, why Slenczka chose Dabru Emet as a prominent example of contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue. Precisely because of its concise and accessible format, as well as the scholarly authority of those who stood behind it, Dabru Emet was well received in several countries, has been translated into multiple languages including German, and is sometimes used as a starting point among Protestants and Catholics in Germany who are interested in interfaith dialogue.⁸⁰

Despite statements to the contrary in Dabru Emet, Slenczka claims that it focuses too much on the commonalities rather than the differences.⁸¹ Instead of commonalities-based dialogue, Slenczka offers a “peaceful opposition” that

⁷⁸ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 50, 455, 485.

⁷⁹ Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky et al., eds., “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christianity,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), xv–xviii.

⁸⁰ For some of the reception in Germany, see Rainer Kampling and Michael Weinrich, eds., *Dabru Emet - Redet Wahrheit: Eine jüdische Herausforderung zum Dialog mit den Christen* (Gütersloh: Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003); Hubert Frankemölle, ed., *Juden und Christen im Gespräch: Über “Dabru Emet - Redet Wahrheit”* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2005); on the statement twenty years later, see the forum in “Dabru Emet: 20 Years Later,” *ICJS* (blog), accessed February 25, 2021, <https://icjs.org/dabru-emet-20>.

⁸¹ In this, he comes close to some of Dabru Emet’s Jewish critics, most notably Jon Levenson, who argued that the text in fact muddles Jewish-Christian difference, for example with respect to the understanding of God (Jon Levenson, “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” *Commentary*, December 2001, 31–37).

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is based on “an affectionate community in the debate between truth-claims [*liebvolle Gemeinschaft in der Strittigkeit der Wahrheitsansprüche*].”⁸² One principle of such an approach is that Christian theological statements that contradict Jewish self-understanding lose their theological credibility. Christological readings of the Old Testament are thereby excluded, which limits the sphere of theological conversation. A comparison with Soloveitchik’s position is once more helpful in this regard. In “Confrontation” (1964)—the name already encapsulates the position—Soloveitchik identifies three levels of existence: as part of nature, as alienated from existence as confronted by the divine, and as part of a reciprocal relation with the divine. The second and third level correspond to religious experiences. A Jew is confronted with revelation as a twofold manner: as a human being (Adam), and as a member of a covenantal community (Israel). On the former sphere, and because Judaism has shaped both Christianity and Western culture, one may cooperate and work together toward shared aims. This is not to say that the shared sphere is devoid of religious content but rather that the core theological questions of each faith community are out of the scope of discussion.⁸³

Slenczka’s suggestion that the Old Testament offers a pre- and extra-Christian experience works along similar lines to Soloveitchik’s distinction between being a general part of creation and a member of a covenantal community. This also has pragmatical consequences. In contrast to Dabru Emet and texts such as *Christen und Juden*, Slenczka offers support for the State of Israel based on historical and moral grounds rather than theological reasoning. Furthermore, as human beings, Jews and Christians can engage in the study of texts that both feel addressed by qua humans. For Slenczka, this is not limited to religious texts, but examples from the Old Testament/Tanakh might include Ecclesiastes or Job.⁸⁴

Soloveitchik might have agreed that the confrontation on the human level is a shared human experience that can be communicated between Jews and Christians. *The Lonely Man of Faith*, one of his best-known descriptions of the human condition, was originally given as an address to Christians and Jews

⁸² Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 458, 461.

⁸³ Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” 17, 24; Soloveitchik’s students disagree on how to interpret his views on interfaith dialogue. The more lenient, pro-dialogue camp includes David Hartman and Eugene Korn. The stricter position, represented by David Berger, interprets Soloveitchik as rejecting dialogue. For an overview of the different strands, see Lawrence Kaplan, “Revisionism and the Rav: The Struggle for the Soul of Modern Orthodoxy,” *Judaism* 48, no. 3 (1999): 290–311; and Ben Johanan, *A Pottage of Lentils*, 287–94. I follow the understanding that Soloveitchik espouses a kind of religious pluralism that limits the scope of dialogue. See Robert Erlewine, “Cultivating Objectivity: Soloveitchik, the Marburg School, and Religious Pluralism,” in *Judaism and the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 129–56; Daniel Rynhold, “The Philosophical Foundations of Soloveitchik’s Critique of Interfaith Dialogue,” *Harvard Theological Review* 96, no. 1 (2003): 101–20.

⁸⁴ Slenczka, *Vom Alten Testament und vom Neuen*, 400–405, 436–37.

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in St. John's Catholic Seminary in Brighton Massachusetts.⁸⁵ The Christian and Jewish reply to the religious experience, to this simultaneous sense of alienation and feeling of the divine, is radically different. On the different covenants there can be no discussion but only, to use Slenczka's terminology, "peaceful opposition."

CONCLUSION

In post-Holocaust Germany, any type of claim about decanonizing raises the specter of Marcionite heresy and with it the fear of antisemitism. There are good historical reasons why Slenczka's provocation was met with almost universal condemnation from both Christians and Jews interested in interfaith dialogue. His argument goes against all perceived gains in Jewish-Christian dialogue and previous attempts to combat theological anti-Judaism. In and of themselves, however, the nearness to Marcion and the nearness to the antisemitic history of the canon debate are insufficient reasons to dismiss his approach. Slenczka's provocative suggestion is that accepting the decanonization of the Old Testament is not part of the problem. On the contrary, he suggests that treating it as a pre- and extra-Christian experience is a solution to the problem of anti-Judaism in the church. Regarding the Old Testament as apocrypha in the Protestant Bible, the argument goes, respects the difference between Judaism and Christianity.

This article suggests that one potential way, alongside rejecting or ignoring Slenczka, in which Jewish thinkers can respond to Slenczka is by following the idea of a "peaceful opposition." Theoretically, just as a Christian might find in the Jewish texts and experiences a pre- and extra-Christian experience, Jews could listen to Christians speak about their religious experience as human beings, just as such a listening is available in other interfaith dialogues. The application of the New Testament in this regard is more complicated, however, because of its historical composition background and reliance on the Old Testament as well as its historical usage in conversion attempts. It is conceivable, however, that parts of the New Testament might be utilized in this way, or that other texts from the Christian tradition would be adduced to reflect the general human experience.

The fact that Slenczka's text drew on anti-Jewish tropes from the Protestant tradition raises red flags. It shows that any potential application of his position should be made with important caveats. First, there needs to be a recognition and rejection of the anti-Jewish tropes implied in a less apologetic way than that offered by Slenczka. Second, missing is a clear statement on behalf of Slenczka about the avoidance of missionizing. On the one hand,

⁸⁵ Eugene Korn, "The Man of Faith and Religious Dialogue: Revisiting 'Confrontation,'" *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 3 (2005): 295–96, 311 n. 12.

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avoidance of missionizing could be deduced from his texts, as the two communities have different revelations as their orientation point. On the other hand, because the Jewish experience is pre-Christian, this could be interpreted as a call for the Jew to experience Christ. This conversionary position, with its long violent history of forced conversion attempts, can hardly be seen as a basis that Jewish thinkers should or would be willing to accept.⁸⁶

If, however, Slenczka's position is nonconversionary, then it opens a potential path for rethinking Jewish-Christian dialogue in a broader interfaith context, because qua humans the shared experience is not limited to Jews and Christians. From a Jewish perspective, the crucial thing for an approach based on Slenczka's argument is that the Christian makes no claim to the Old Testament as revelation to Christians, who are not addressed in the text. As Christians engaging Jews on religious matters—both members of covenantal communities—all the Christians can do is listen to the Jewish voice in an attempt to find the shared human experience. It is permissible, based on Slenczka's model, only insofar as they recognize that they are not the addressee of the message or, in the terminology that should be familiar by now, that it is "good and useful" for the Christian to read but noncanonical.

⁸⁶ David Novak, "What to Seek and What to Avoid in Jewish-Christian Dialogue," in *Talking with Christians: Musings of a Jewish Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 3–4; *Christen und Juden*, 3.154–72.