

Martin Buber and Covenantal Faith

Walter McGuire, O.P.

"From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Saviour has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which, for his sake and my own, I must endeavour to understand. . . . my own fraternally open relationship to him has grown ever stronger and clearer, and today I see him more strongly and clearly than ever before. I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories."¹

These are the words of Martin Buber, Jewish religious thinker *par excellence* and a life-time devotee of Jesus Christ, his great brother, but not his God and Saviour. This article is an attempt to present Buber's well-developed notion of covenantal faith, as manifested in three of his major Biblical works: *Moses*, *The Prophetic Faith* and *Two Types of Faith*. The first two works deal with the Jewish Covenant (according to Buber the Christian forecourt and Jewish sanctuary), in which he unfolds his notion of *Emunah* (trust). In *Two Types of Faith*, Buber presents his case against Christian Faith: *Emunah vs. Pistis*.

To most readers Martin Buber is known as the man who pioneered and developed the richness of the "I-Thou" relation which has forged its way into the imagination and spirit of our generation. For those unfamiliar with the general posture of Buber's life and thought, a brief biography is included before the consideration of covenantal faith.

Martin Buber was born in Vienna in 1878 and until he was fourteen lived and studied in Galicia with his grandfather, Solomon Buber, Hebrew scripture scholar and a leader of the Haskala (Jewish Enlightenment). On returning home, he studied at the universities of Vienna and Berlin where he majored in philosophy and the history of art. Nietzsche was his first philosophical love; later profound influences would include Kierkegaard, Simmel, Dostoevsky, Eckhart and Schweitzer. In his twenties he joined the emerging Zionist movement under the leadership of Theodore Herzl. Buber shied away from the political dimensions of this movement but was dedicated throughout a life-time to its cultural and religious goals. When he was 26 he discovered Hasidism, the vehicle which would permanently secure his personal identity with Judaism and profoundly influence his thought and writings. For five years Buber immersed himself in the study of this Jewish Pietistic movement which sprang up in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century basically in reaction to Talmudic legalism. Hasidism sought to "hallow the everyday" under the communal leadership of the Zaddik. Of Hasidism Buber has written: "Because of its truth and because of the great need of the hour, I carry it into the world against its will."²

After World War I Buber collaborated with Franz Rosenzweig on a translation of the Hebrew Bible into German. This attempt to preserve the Hebrew idiom in the German was hailed as the best since Martin Luther's translation. From 1923 (when his "I-Thou" appeared in print) until Hitler's rise to power, Buber was Professor at Frankfurt. In 1938 he left for Palestine where he became Professor of Social Philosophy at the Hebrew University. He made several tours of the United States in the 1950's and is widely known here through his extensive writings. This article is an attempt to present and assess a portion of the legacy left by Martin Buber on his death in 1965.

Moses³

The Covenant God appears to Moses in the "Burning Bush" as he is tending the flocks of his father-in-law. God identifies Himself to Moses as *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, traditionally translated as "I am Who I am," but Buber insists on rendering this text, "I will be present as I will be present." This rendition is critical to Buber's description of the

covenantal relation between God and Israel. "YHVH is 'He who will be present' or 'He who is here,' He who is present here; not merely some time and some where but in every now and in every here." (p. 53)

Buber depicts the literary category of the Moses and Covenant revelation as *saga*, which is "generally assumed to be incapable of producing within us any conception of a factual sequence." (p. 13) "However even if it is impossible to reconstitute the course of events themselves, it is nevertheless possible to recover much of the manner in which the participating people experience those events." (p. 16) Buber sees the task of the Biblical scholar when dealing with such material as that of separating the kernel of tradition from the husk of legend. He readily admits the miraculous manner of events from the Burning Bush incident to the ratification of the Covenant on Mount Sinai: "events which, however extraordinary, if by no means supernatural, admit of such an interpretation according to their time and sequence." (p. 64) Buber here is referring to the plagues which beset Pharaoh's Egypt because of his crass obstinacy in dealing with Moses and his people. The plagues in Egypt along with the miraculous feeding and guiding of the people in the desert of Sinai are signs of the God "Who will be present as He will be present."

But now "the hour has come. The sign promised to Moses by the voice which spoke from the burning bush is now about to be fulfilled. At this mountain Israel is to enter the service of the God. What had come into being yonder only as word must now take on flesh. It is the hour: not of revelation, which had begun with that call 'Moses'; it is the hour of the 'Covenant'! (p. 101) The "I" of Yahweh addresses the "Thou" of Israel in the Covenant (*Berith*) in such a way that henceforth every "I" of every generation can confidently address His "Eternal Thou."

According to Buber, the characteristic response of the Israelite to YHVH must be *Emunah* (trust). This steadfastness in the Lord is exemplified by Moses as he "appears on a neighboring hill with the staff of God in his hands; and as long as his strength permits, he holds his hand aloft. 'And it came to pass that as Moses held his hand up Israel prevailed, but when he rested his hand, Amalek prevailed' (Ex. 17:11). . . . And now his hand remains *emunah*, i.e. firmness, staunchness, until at sunset victory is won." (p. 91) Buber will contrast this response of *emunah* with his conception of Christian Faith *pistis* in *Two Types of Faith*. Since Israel did not always respond

to Yahweh with *Emunah*, it became necessary time and again for a "turning," a *Teshuvah*. To effect the *Teshuvah* of an unfaithful Israel became the divinely appointed task of the Prophets, so vividly described by Buber in *The Prophetic Faith*.

The Prophetic Faith⁴

The kingdom of Israel is split in two, and the Northern Kingdom is bound to fall within the generation when Amos, the Prophet of Righteousness, is sent by God to deliver judgment on Israel. But even now there is still time for a "Turning" since "The true prophet does not announce an immutable decree. He speaks into the power of decision lying in the moment, and in such a way that his message of disaster just touches this power." (p. 103) The encounter with God will inevitably occur as Amos bids "Prepare to meet your God, Israel." (Amos 4:12) "The meeting with God approaches. Every listener knows that he to whom YHVH shows His face without bestowing grace upon him, will die. YHVH calls the people to turn, and its turning will call upon Him for grace and mercy." (p. 106)

Again, before Israel falls, God sends Hosea, Prophet of YHVH's *hesed* (loving kindness). Hosea's tragic married life becomes the symbol of Israel's sinfulness in the sight of YHVH. In discussing Hosea Buber relates: "the two key words from God's dialogue with Moses in the burning bush were *ammi* (my people) and *ehyeh* (I will be with you); the two of them burn in the heart of the man who had plunged deep into the history of the Exodus from Egypt. Hosea calls his last child by the name *Lo-amni*, 'Not-my-people.' You are not my people, and I am not Ehyeh to you." (p. 116) It is precisely in this situation of a torn covenant that the *Hesed* of YHVH reveals a new promise, "directed at the perfect turning of the people: 'And I will say to *Lo-amni*, Thou art my people, and he will say, my God.' (Amos 2:25)" (p. 117)

While Amos and Hosea were proclaiming God's Prophetic Word to the Northern Kingdom at Bethel, Isaiah, the Prophet of God's Holiness, spoke at the temple in Jerusalem. "This, that YHVH is present to Israel, even with His most sublime and essential characteristic, His holiness, and that Israel is able to receive His influence to follow His footsteps, and to place human activity at the disposal of His activity, in other words, the hallowing of Israel by the Holy YHVH: this is the root idea of the divine attribute so dear to

Isaiah. . . . In one generation Israel's faith developed these three basic conceptions of the relationship to God, and only all together could express what is meant by the being present of the One Who is present to Israel, Who is 'with it.' The name YHVH was unraveled at the revelation to Moses in the thorn bush; in the revelation to the three prophets it has been unfolded." (p. 129)

But Israel as a whole did not turn to its God and fell to the Assyrians in 721. During the life time of the Prophet Jeremiah the kingdom of Judah with its glory, Jerusalem, fell to Babylon in 587. Jeremiah delivered his prophecy in this desperate situation and Buber detects in him the prophet who dared to dialogue with God. "Only Jeremiah of all the Israelite prophets has dared to note this bold and devout life conversation of the utterly inferior with the utterly superior. . . . All Israelite relationship of faith is dialogic; here the dialogue has reached its pure form. Man can speak, he is permitted to speak; if only he truly speaks to God, there is nothing he may not say to Him." (p. 165)

Buber characterizes Ezekiel as the Prophet of personal responsibility. This prophet appears after the irreparable damage to the Old Covenant and before the emergence of the Eternal Covenant. "In days to come a new cult will unite the members of the people; but now each one stands for himself over against His God; that is to say, each one in the religious solitude of the prophet. And God stands over against each individual with demand, zeal, and avenging power just as before He stood over against the people. The people no longer exists as covenant partner, until God will make for it the "eternal covenant"; but in the time of transition there is opened to *every man* of Israel a covenant relationship to God, each one, as formerly the people, being set at the crossroads between life and death. This is in force especially at the hour before the catastrophe; the hour, that is, in which and for which Ezekiel, sent to the "house of Israel" as "watchman" and warner of persons (3:7-21), speaks his message of personal responsibility." (p. 187)

Two Types of Faith⁵

The eternal covenant of Ezekiel is realized for Christianity in Jesus Christ, but not so for Martin Buber and Judaism. In *Two Types of Faith*, the product of Buber's mature thought, he makes a clear-cut

distinction between Jewish faith, *emunah*, and Christian faith, *pistis*. Just as the *emunah* requires a *tehuwah* so does *pistis* require a *metanoia* (conversion). Buber claims that Christian faith posits several mediators: Christ, who is now an object of faith, and the propositions of faith (e.g. creedal statements). For Martin Buber the Christian notion of faith has fallen victim to Hellenic intellectualism and thus has forfeited the spontaneity of the encounter of the whole person in *emunah*. Here we must take exception to this antithesis that Buber has set up. Balthasar in his critical work *Martin Buber and Christianity* speaks of the "artificiality of the antithesis between the two forms of faith, on the one hand a purely Jewish 'trusting faith' and on the other hand an intellectual, hellenistic form of faith, an 'object faith.' The Antithesis is artificial because the Old Testament faith is founded upon a similar objective and positive belief (a belief in a 'that,' to use Buber's terms), that is to say upon the fact of the promise given to Abraham and all the consequences that flow from it, upon the authority of Moses and the sealing of the Covenant on Sinai, upon the promise of divine faithfulness which the prophets renewed."⁶ Actually Aquinas anticipated this difficulty of Buber when he observed the complex way in which the intellect grasps truth. Since Divine Faith is an act of the intellect commanded by the will, "from the point of view of the believer the object of faith is something complex by way of a proposition" (*Summa Theo.*, II-II, 1, 2), but most important "the act of belief does not terminate in a proposition but in the object" viz. God Himself (*Ibid.*, ad 2). Thus, although the intellect must be enlightened through propositions about God, still the act of faith terminates directly and immediately in God.

Does Buber blame Jesus Christ for what he would consider the Jewish schism called Christianity? Not at all; in fact, he is most lavish and sincere in his admiration for Jesus. He does consider Christ as his great brother, as the most perfect witness of an "I" in response to the address of the Eternal "Thou." For him, nevertheless, Christ is not the Son of God in the Christian understanding of the term. Ironically from a Christian point of view, he perceives a harmony between Christ and the basic teachings of the Pharisees: "The attitude of the Sermon on the Mount to the Torah accordingly appears to be the opposite of that of the Pharisees; in reality it is only the sublimation of a Pharisaic doctrine from a definite and fundamental point of view, the character of which can again be made clear

by comparison." (p. 63) Of Christ's teaching on love of enemies he says, "in its fundamental meaning it is deeply bound up with Jewish faith and at the same time transcends it." (p. 68)

Buber blames the followers of Jesus, particularly St. Paul and St. John, for the phenomenon of Christianity. It seems to me that here, especially through Paul, and later through John, the process of deification began. . . . Now it is declared (John 3:13): 'No man ascended to heaven except him who came down from heaven, the Son of Man.' Only one step had to be taken from this to deification." (p. 113) Father Sloyan replies to Buber on this point: "It seems to me that a Jesus who chose to assert His own divinity accounts for the gospel report much more adequately than a Jesus whom His disciples deified."⁷⁷ On this point there can be no doubt. The Christian believes in the risen Christ, co-eternal with the Father and Holy Spirit. "If Christ is not risen then our faith is in vain." (I Cor. 15: 14)

Conclusion

In reading Martin Buber's commentaries on the Old Covenant, I am impressed with a man very much at home with a vast knowledge and feeling for the covenantal relationship between God and man. When Buber ventures into the New Covenant, I do not perceive a man at home. Rather, in spite of his technical competence in this area, I see a stranger with inept guides in a foreign land. Professor Buber's thesis on *pistis* as opposed to *emunah* makes us painfully aware of the gulf between Judaism and Christianity. Martin Buber was a realist and he perceived this gulf when he wrote: "To the Christian the Jew is the incomprehensibly obdurate man, who declines to see what has happened; and to the Jew the Christian is the incomprehensibly daring man who affirms in an unredeemed world that its redemption has been accomplished. This is a gulf which no human power can bridge."⁷⁸ But after all there is a common ground and Buber perceived this when he addressed Christians: "What have you and we in common? If we take the question literally, a book and an expectation.

"To you the book is a forecourt; to us it is the sanctuary. But in this place we can dwell together, and together listen to the voice that speaks here. That means that we can work together to evoke the buried speech of that voice; together we can redeem the imprisoned living word.

"Your expectation is directed toward a second coming, ours to a coming which has not been anticipated by a first. To you the phrasing of world history is determined by one absolute midpoint, the year nought; to us it is an unbroken flow of tones following each other without a pause from their origin to their consummation. But we can wait for the advent of the One together, and there are moments when we may prepare the way before Him together."⁹

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Two Types of Faith* by Martin Buber; trans. by Norman Goldhawk. Harper Torchbook (New York, 1961), p. 12.

² *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* by Martin Buber; trans. by Maurice Friedman. Harper Torchbook (New York, 1960).

³ *Moses* by Martin Buber. Harper Torchbook (New York, 1958).

⁴ *The Prophetic Faith* by Martin Buber. Harper Torchbook (New York, 1960).

⁵ *Two Types of Faith*. (see No. 1)

⁶ *Martin Buber and Christianity* by Hans Urs Von Balthasar; trans. by Alexander Dru. MacMillan (New York, 1961), p. 102-3.

⁷ *Buber and the Significance of Jesus* by Gerard S. Sloyan. *From The Bridge*, Vol. 3, edited by John M. Oesterreicher. Pantheon (New York, 1958), p. 231.

⁸ *Israel and the World, Essays in a Time of Crisis*. Schocken (New York, 1948), p. 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.



"Wouldn't you think the Sisters would want to modernize?" (NC Photos)