***“Jerusalem in Latin America: The Jewish Roots of Liberation Theology”***

A Book Proposal by Silvana Kandel Lamdan, Ph.D.

1. **Abstract**

The politically turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s saw the beginning of “Liberation Theology,” one of the most influential religious movements in Latin America and worldwide, to this day. The goal of this movement was to articulate a theology that could embrace the challenges of millions of Latin American Catholics living under the hardest conditions of marginality and poverty. This new approach to Catholicism was built, to a large extent, on retrieving the Jewish roots of Christianity, as a way of shaking it out of what they saw as the moral atrophy into which it was plunged by adopting the Greco-Western world view. *Jerusalem in Latin America: The Jewish Roots of Liberation Theology* traces, for the first time in research, how four representatives of the first generation of Latin American liberation theology took up ideas from ancient Judaism and modern Jewish thought to ignite the debate between center and periphery.

By breaking the disciplinary bounds between Jewish thought and Catholic theology, this book seeks to contribute to the integration of theology into other study fields, as an important venue for the understanding of intellectual history far beyond the focus on religion. In addition to shedding light on the past and present of the Christian–Jewish dialogue, whose relevance for the renewal of Catholic theology is explored in the context of political questions, this project can open up to the Jewish side the content of hope and the political potential of their own traditions of thought. By negotiating these questions within the horizon of encounters, conflicts and reception processes between the Global North and Global South, new impulses emerge for post‐colonial discourses, decolonial thinking and a fundamental critique of the hegemonic paradigms of Western modernity, insofar as their roots in Jewish thought, in its Christian reception and in traditions of messianic thought are revealed.

1. **Statement of Purpose and Scope**

The story of the foundational years of liberation theology has usually been researched from either theological or historical perspectives. This book proposes a new framework for the research into this trend: it addresses liberation theology as a significant chapter in the intellectual history of the interchanges between Judaism and Christianity in the turbulent twentieth century. This framework opens up a whole set of possibilities that help to shed new light on the study of the three fields to which this research belongs—history of modern Catholic theology, Jewish thought, and Latin American intellectual history. In doing that, it is telling a story that is much more than a peripheral, passing episode. First, geographically, this reframing broadens the territory to which the research on liberation theology is traditionally confined.  It now includes not only Latin America but also Europe and even the Middle East, which, as this book demonstrates, played a crucial role in the consolidation of this theology. By the same token, it expands the time framework of the research, because it understands the phenomenon of liberation theology as a reaction to a long chain of previous attempts to bring about the renewal of Catholicism in the twentieth century, among them the *ressourcement* movement and Vatican II, which, as this work illustrates, are also connected in more than one way to Judaism. In addition, the approach of this research also helps to conceptualize encounters and failed encounters between the Jewish and Catholic world views that go far beyond the obvious question of the acceptance or rejection of Jesus as messiah.

This work focuses on the ideas of four individuals: the Argentines Enrique Dussel and Juan Carlos Scannone, the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez, and the Mexican José Porfirio Miranda. I have chosen these individuals for two main reasons. First, they represent a range of intellectual and political life trajectories. This variety allows us to examine liberation theology not as a homogeneous phenomenon but, rather, as a spectrum of possibilities. And second, they all utilized ideas taken from ancient Judaism and modern Jewish thought to ignite the debate between center and periphery. And yet, although the use of Jewish motifs was a significant building block in the critical edifices of these theologians, the current study is the first academic attempt at an in-depth analysis of this exchange.

*Jerusalem in Latin America* belongs to the field that aims to understand how Christians read Jewish texts and used them to support certain political agendas. The theologians studied here not only made massive reference to passages from what they much more often called the “Hebrew Bible” than the “Old Testament,” they also drew explicit inspiration from modern Jewish thinkers. Hence, this book investigates, for example, how Martin Buber’s idea of Oriental Indigeneity informed Dussel’s articulation of the Semitic-Christian renaissance he envisioned for the American continent; how Ernst Bloch’s messianic hope fed Gutiérrez’s theological commitment to the liberation of the Peruvian poor as well as Miranda’s Marxist universalist Christianity; and how Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical otherness contributed to shaping Scannone’s “national and popular” theology and the idea of Latin America as the Other of the West.

Liberation theologians saw Latin America as a messianic space and a fertile ground for the Hebrew-prophetic spirit of Catholicism - a spirit that would foster the liberation of its people. The prophetic spirit emanating from the Hebrew sources provided these thinkers with the language of marginality and otherness that had once been the province of the Jews and which they now appropriated for the Latin American peoples. However, I demonstrate that the assimilation of Jewish elements fueled their new concept of the evangelization of Latin America in a way that left Judaism itself and actual Jews out of their project entirely. The choice to embrace the Hebrew world view as a key source for their new messianic model was neither an endorsement of Vatican II’s message of reconciliation with contemporary Judaism nor a sign toward open dialogue with contemporary Jews or Judaism. On the contrary, it was an attempt to recreate the biblical messianic space in a different landscape where Judaism is often viewed with hostility. Unraveling this tension is the task of this book.

1. **Proposed Chapter Outline**

*Jerusalem in Latin America* is divided into three sections. The first section, titled “Back to the Semitic Origins: Tracing Enrique Dussel's Foundational Path to Liberation Theology,” This dissertation is divided into three sections. The first section is dedicated to the foundational years of Dussel’s intellectual enterprise: from his childhood and youth in an Argentina marked by dramatic political events, to the decade he spent in Europe and Israel, and to the process that led him to set the foundations of his life-long theological and philosophical enterprise. I characterize this enterprise as an attempt to trace an ideological connection between the Hebrew ethical-mythical nucleus and the American continent, inspired by Martin Buber’s idea of Semitic Indigeneity, albeit recreated in a new messianic space and in a supersessionist way. This section is largely based on archival research, which includes unpublished diaries, notebooks, and letters from Dussel’s youth, that reveal unknown facets of this influential author.

The second section, titled “Judaism without Judaism” is concerned with a textual analysis of some echoes of one seminal event: the Second Vatican Council and the Catholic renewal. Among the principles of this renewal were the need to retrieve theology’s interest in secular history, a reconnection with the sources of Christianity, among them the Hebrew Bible, and a reconciliation with Judaism. The theologians at the core of this section, Gutiérrez and Miranda, adopted the first two principles, and dismissed the third. Disillusioned with the overly moderate tone of the conciliar documents regarding political issues, they raised arguments for the need for a radicalization of theology, based on the messages of the Hebrew Bible, the modern messianic Jewish thought and Marxism. This section analyses the nature of this radicalization, which included the replacement of the Western model of development with a model of political liberation, and Ernst Bloch’s belief in revolutionary hope to make the future burst into the present. Despite the differences between Gutierrez and Miranda’s messianic models, they had two things in common: one, that to realize their models, they had to “Christianize” both Marx and Bloch; and second, the dream of a fully Catholic messianic Kingdom, the consequence of which would be a non-pluralistic society that excludes in practice any “other.”

A similar pattern is to be found in the last section of this work, which precisely concentrates on the question of the Other, as its title, “Liberation Theology and the Question of the Other,” indicates. It analyzes how Levinas’s ethical otherness contributed to shaping Scannone’s “national and popular” theology and the idea of Latin America as the Other of the West. Scannone’s theology may be summarized as an attempt to intertwine two opposing world views: Heidegger’s ontology of rootedness and Levinas’s phenomenological ethics, in the context of the political turmoil of the 1970s in Argentina. In addition, contrary to Levinas’s message that religion and politics are two different realms that should not be mixed, Scannone and the other liberation theologians believed that what would bring not only spiritual but also political liberation to the Latin American people was a new evangelization of the continent. This new evangelization, inspired by the first evangelization of America in the sixteenth century, would spread the voice of a re-Semitized Christianity. As in the previous section, this part, too uses primary and secondary sources, combining historical, theological and philosophical textual work.

1. **Proposed Table of Contents:**

Introduction

Section 1: “Back to the Semitic Origins: Tracing Enrique Dussel's Foundational Path to Liberation Theology”

Chapter 1: Dussel's Early Years in Argentina: The Seeds of a Religious and Intellectual Commitment

Chapter 2: The Madrid period - Three Models of Catholicism

Chapter 3: Enrique Dussel’s Ecstatic Experience in the Young State of Israel

Chapter 4: Back in Europe: Between East and West, Centre and Periphery in the Wake of Martin Buber

Section 2: “Judaism Without Judaism”

Chapter 5: *Ressourcement* in Vatican II and in Latin America: The Projects of Gutiérrez and Miranda

Chapter 6: From Development to Liberation and from ‘Progress’ to ‘Liberation’

Chapter 7: The Concept of ‘Structural Sin’—A Case Study

Chapter 8: Revolutionary Pathways to the Kingdom: re-reading Ernst Bloch’s Messianic Utopia

Section 3: Liberation Theology and the Question of the Other

Chapter 9: Juan Carlos Scannone and Emmanuel Levinas: From Ethics of Alterity to Religious Populism

Chapter 10: Between Colonization and Evangelization: America as a Messianic Project

Conclusion

**5. Potential Audience and Market**

The interdisciplinary nature of my research makes this book an important resource for a variety of audiences:

-Non-specialist, general readers: this book provides an accessible introduction for anyone interested in Latin American liberation theology, the intellectual history of Latin America, modern Jewish political thought, and the intersection between religion, politics, and the postcolonial and decolonial current debate.

-Scholars of Jewish studies will find in this book a laboratory in which to test the potential of the ancient Hebrew worldview and modern Jewish thought, as a catalyst for revolutionary religious messages of social and political change.

-Scholars of Catholic theology will find in it a comprehensive overview of the major intra-religious debates about the role of the church in modern society and on the different approaches to the renewal of Catholicism in the twentieth century. This account can also stimulate dialogue on systematic theology in relation to the question of center and periphery, and contribute to the growing research on Global Christianity.

-Scholars of Latin America will find here a significant contribution to the understanding of the continent’s religious, cultural and political identity and its intellectual history.

-Scholars concerned with Jewish-Christian relations will find in this book insights into interreligious relations that go beyond dialogue in its classical form.

1. **List of Comparative Titles: \*(prepared for Notre Dame, but I have a list of 8 potential publishers and I’m open to other options you may consider better or easier)**

I am unaware of other studies that address the phenomenon of Latin American liberation theology from the point of view of its Jewish sources. The current state of the field focuses instead either on contemporary developments in contextual theology; on the theological messages as they appear from within Catholicism; or, to a lesser extent, on the relationship between liberation theology and national politics.

This book deals with various aspects of the complex encounter between religion and modernity, in particular the interplay between local and global politics, colonial heritage and religious and cultural identity. In this sense, I am convinced that this book is an appropriate addition to the Notre Dame Press. First, it can contribute to the insights generated by the “Contending Modernities” series on the intertwining of religious traditions in secular society, for example in Religion, Modernity, and the Global Afterlives of Colonialism (UNDP, 2024). As my book addresses the phenomenon of populism and religion through the Argentinean case study, it can complement other books in this series that deal with populism and religion, such as Religion, Populism and Modernity (2023) and Inclusive Populism (2019). My book will also respond to the interest of the press in narratives from the Global South in general and Latin America in particular by analyzing the links between evangelization and politics, as the UNDP series “History, Languages and Cultures of the Spanish and Portuguese Worlds” does. In addition, of course, it is important to mention the great interest of the UNDP in a variety of expressions of liberation theology, and especially in the thought of Gustavo Gutiérrez - one of the protagonists of my book. In sum, these thematic connections of my book with at least three series of this publisher make this match only natural.

1. **Status of the work, length, illustrations:**

The manuscript is already completed and is currently undergoing second revision, after the adaptation from dissertation to book, which comprises abbreviation and reformulation of arguments of an excessively specialized character, including reducing the number of footnotes, in order to make it more communicable to a broader audience -I don’t know if or how I should say that). This revision will be ready in the Fall of 2024. The manuscript consists of approximately 110,000-120,000 words, including footnotes and biography (actually, now as a dissertation it has 150,000, but I assume I’ll need to shorten it for the book). Some unpublished pictures from Enrique Dussel’s personal archive and handwritten teaching notes by Scannone can be added to the book at the publisher’s request.

1. **Author’s Information:**

I am currently a researcher at the Department of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In September 2024 I will be undertaking a postdoctoral position at the Department of Cultural History and Theory at Humboldt University in Berlin. I received my Ph.D. from the Department of Jewish History at the University of Haifa. I have published several articles, one of them in the *Harvard Theological Review* (115:4 (October 2022).