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## Do We Share a Book? The Sunday Lectionary and Jewish-Christian Relations

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# Do We Share a Book? The Sunday Lectionary and Jewish-Christian Relations

Michael Peppard

## Abstract

This paper analyzes the role that the Sunday Lectionary, revised after Vatican II, plays in the Catholic Church's presentation of Jews and Judaism. The presentation of Jews and Judaism in the current Lectionary is clearly a vast improvement over what preceded it. However, there is still much work to be done in order to bring the Lectionary in line with official Catholic teachings on the Old Testament and the Jews. The recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), provides a new and authoritative impetus to reconsider the selection of Old Testament texts and their relationship to Gospel texts in the Lectionary. The article argues that continued Lectionary reform – specifically with regard to the Old Testament lections – would improve Jewish-Christian relations in the long term.

**KEYWORDS:** lectionary, scripture, old testament

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The Sunday Lectionary and Jewish-Christian Relations”

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## The Lectionary: Locus for Jewish-Christian Relations<sup>1</sup>

Every three years in the Roman Catholic liturgy, on the eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C), the lectionary prescribes readings from 2 Samuel 12 and Luke 7. The historian Walter Sundberg recounts an especially poignant experience of these texts in the practical life of a Christian community.<sup>2</sup> The congregation was enraptured by the drama of the Old Testament reading, a portion of the David and Bathsheba story: deceit, lust, betrayal, indictment, and conviction. What would the homilist do? What was the word of God trying to say to that congregation at that time? But soon, after an unrelated reading from Galatians, the readings continued with another dramatic story: the deeply penitent woman who anoints Jesus with her tears and perfume. Sundberg writes:

After hearing 2 Samuel, many of us had a sense of being convicted by the law. Now after the reading from Luke, we were encouraged to identify with an extravagant act of repentance and Jesus' forgiveness....I was not surprised when, after the service, one person even offered a Marcionite reading of divine behavior based on a

comparison of the texts: "The God of the Old Testament kills babies," he said; "Jesus forgives those who weep." The lectionary had done its disruptive work yet another week.<sup>3</sup>

This story is anecdotal, of course, but I expect that many have had a similar experience in a Sunday assembly. The lectionary frequently propagates a problematic view of the Old Testament among Christians. For this reason, in a 2004 speech to the Brazilian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Cardinal William Keeler mentioned the lectionary among the topics of necessary liturgical reform:

The reform of Catholic liturgy with respect to its traditionally negative portrayal of Jews and Judaism is not yet complete. The Good Friday prayer...has been radically altered....But this does not exhaust the challenges faced by Catholic liturgists....Numerous questions of selections of lectionary texts abound. Often, it is difficult in the juxtaposition of biblical texts to distinguish between a theological relationship of fulfillment, which is the Church's teaching, and supersessionism, which clearly is not.<sup>4</sup>

It is my opinion that lectionary reform – specifically with regard to the Old Testament lections – would improve Jewish-Christian relations in the long term. This opinion rests on two foundational premises: first, a Christian's perception of Jews and Judaism is frequently intertwined with his or her conception of the Old Testament. The 2001

<sup>1</sup> This essay is revised from the talk I delivered at the conference *Nostra Aetate Today* at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Sept. 27, 2005. I thank Philip Cunningham and the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, Boston College, for organizing the session and inviting me. I also thank the Yale Department of Religious Studies, Yale Judaic Studies, and the Graduate Student Assembly for financial support. The content of this paper was improved by suggestions from Joshua Garroway, David Kelsey, Bishop Luis del Castillo (Uruguay), and two anonymous reviewers from *SCJR*. Michael Signer and Adela Yarbro Collins also offered encouragement during its preparation.

<sup>2</sup> This was a Lutheran service, not a Catholic Mass, but the anecdote applies to the Roman lectionary as well. In fact, the situation is worse in the Roman lectionary, since it includes even less of the context for the Old Testament story. Walter Sundberg, "Limitations of the Lectionary," *Word & World* 10 (1990):14-20.

<sup>3</sup> Sundberg, "Limitations," 15.

<sup>4</sup> Cardinal William H. Keeler, "Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: A Developing Agenda," at a dialogue sponsored by the Brazilian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Salvador, Brazil, June 7, 2004.

[http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/Keeler\\_agenda\\_June04.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/Keeler_agenda_June04.htm).

document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, upholds this premise, saying that “a study of [the] relationships [between the Old and New Testaments] is indispensable for anyone who wishes to have a proper appreciation of the links between the Christian Church and the Jewish people” (§19).<sup>5</sup> The relationship between the Old and New Testaments symbolizes the Jewish-Christian relationship.<sup>6</sup> This symbolic link is most explicit for Christians who have little or no opportunity for interaction with living, breathing Jewish people today. And scholars sometimes forget that, thinking globally, this situation is true for the vast majority of Christians. Most Christians learn about the Jews not through social interaction but through their Bibles.

Second, the Sunday Liturgy of the Word is the primary encounter with the Bible for Catholics.<sup>7</sup> The Word of God is carried not through the *leather* binding of the printed text but

<sup>5</sup> The text along with explanations of errors in its English translation can be found at <<http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/psc2001intro.htm>>.

<sup>6</sup> Consider the words of John Paul II at the synagogue in Mainz, Nov. 17, 1980: “The first dimension of this dialogue, that is, the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God (cf. Rom 11:29), and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and second part of her Bible.” We should be clear, though, that while the relationship of the testaments often symbolizes that of the religions, the Old Testament should not be understood to *exhaust* Judaism.

<sup>7</sup> In the trenchant words of John Dominic Crossan: “When I first heard the words *Epistle* and *Gospel* they were not parts of a book, but sides of an altar” [*A Long Way From Tipperary: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000), 130]. Of course, there are exceptions and things have changed since the pre-Vatican II liturgy of Crossan’s reminiscence. There are some Catholics who study Scripture on their own or in small groups, borrowing from the Protestant model, and this is fruitful. But for most Catholics, most of the time, Scripture is encountered through liturgy and that means through the lectionary for Sundays and Solemnities.

through the *liturgical* binding of the sign of the cross. Therefore, reforms of Catholic biblical hermeneutics, and concomitantly of Catholic perspectives on Judaism, are effective to the extent that they are integrated in the liturgical proclamation and interpretation of Scripture. The recent PBC document – of which I am very proud as a Catholic biblical scholar – reconsiders in often radical ways the interpretation of the Old Testament. But I fear that the analysis and vision which this document sets forth will not reverberate in the chapels and pews of the Catholic Church, since only a small number of Catholics study the Bible and Church documents with any regularity.<sup>8</sup> The PBC document does not explicitly discuss the lectionary and its role in promulgating the Catholic perspective on the Jewish people and our shared Scripture. This essay attempts to do just that.

### Parallel Histories: Lectionary Reform and the Catholic Stance toward Judaism

But first I want to sketch two parallel histories of the last forty years. I begin with a brief history of lectionary reform in the wake of Vatican II. From the Council of Trent to Vatican II, the Roman missal included a one-year cycle of readings for Sundays and Solemnities. The Old Testament was almost entirely absent from liturgical proclamation. The crucial point of departure for lectionary reform was the following text in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, promulgated at Vatican II: “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way a more representative portion of the holy scriptures will be read to

<sup>8</sup> Documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission are not very well known among the laity. A professor at Yale recently offered a graduate seminar on “Contemporary Christian Theologies of the Old Testament,” but the professor was unaware of the existence of this PBC document, officially promulgated by the largest Christian denomination.

the people in the course of a prescribed number of years" (§ 51).<sup>9</sup> The council set up a *Consilium* for implementing the liturgical reforms established in principle by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, and one working group, *Coetus XI* (Group 11), had the enormous task of lectionary reform. They organized and executed a review of 1800 years of lectionary traditions, spanning Eastern and Western Christianity, and drafts were reviewed by hundreds of pastors and scholars over four years. I will offer criticisms of and propose changes to this work with great trepidation and no ill will toward their accomplishment. In truth, the criticisms I will offer probably could not have been foreseen. The older "teaching of contempt" for Jews had not yet been formally renounced. When *Coetus XI* began its work *Nostra Aetate* had not even been promulgated, much less digested and implemented.

The group eventually decided on three readings per Sunday over a cycle of three years. The readings were organized around the principles of semicontinuous reading and thematic harmonization or correspondence.<sup>10</sup> From Advent through Easter, the principle of harmonization governs the majority of choices. In Ordinary Time, the Synoptic gospels and epistles are read semicontinuously, more or less, and the Old Testament lections were chosen for their supposed correspondence with the gospel reading. On the whole, the lectionary tried to emphasize the idea of "salvation history," with a particular focus on the paschal

mystery, the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is little doubt among biblical scholars that the new lectionary was a vast improvement on what preceded it, especially with regard to Jewish-Christian relations. Many vitriolic New Testament passages had been left out of the Sunday lectionary and the new weekday lectionary. The Old Testament had been restored to the liturgies of almost all Sundays and Solemnities. But within a decade criticisms began to emerge from both scholars and pastors. Many critical voices agreed that, while the treatment of the Old Testament was better than before (which was almost nonexistent), it was still inadequate or even harmful. Gerald Sloyan was the first Catholic scholar to articulate the problems with the treatment of the Old Testament. The lectionary purported to provide the congregation with "a knowledge of the whole of God's word."<sup>11</sup> The committee declared that "the treasury of the word of God will be opened up in such a way that nearly all the principal pages of the Old Testament will become familiar to those taking part in the Mass on Sundays" (§ 106). *Nearly all the principal pages of the Old Testament* – really? To such a claim, Sloyan had this response in 1977: "If we assume that one of their major intents is to give Christian hearers a feel for the whole Bible, we must declare the plan a failure."<sup>12</sup> He declared it a failure

<sup>9</sup> This and other Conciliar documents can be found at <[www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)>. Other official Catholic documents relevant for Jewish-Christian relations can be found at <<http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/>>.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent introduction and analysis of the Sunday Lectionary on these points see Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 31-55. A detailed account of the lectionary reform is provided in Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975*, trans. M. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 406-25.

<sup>11</sup> Quotations from *Lectionary for Mass, Second Typical Edition, Introduction* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), § 60.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald S. Sloyan, "The Lectionary as a Context for Interpretation," *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 138. He followed this up constructively with "Some Suggestions for a Biblical Three-Year Lectionary," *Worship* 63 (1989): 521-35. Sloyan has recently re-stated part of his case in "What Kind of Canon Do the Lectionaries Constitute?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 30 (2000): 27-35; and "Thus Faith Comes from What is Heard (Romans 10:17): How Much of the Bible Do People Hear?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002): 100-06.

because of the brevity of the Old Testament readings, the “overall absence of biblical robustness,” and “the reduction of the Hebrew revelation to something inconsequential apart from Jesus Christ.” He continued: “A vision allowable in the first century is not to be entertained in the twentieth....It is one thing to affirm that Christ is to be found on every page of the Bible and another to prove it by a series of narrow correspondences that leaves room for little else.”<sup>13</sup> Other Catholic scholars joined to criticize the choice of Scripture texts in the Roman Lectionary,<sup>14</sup> and one of Sloyan’s students later completed a dissertation highlighting many hermeneutical problems with the Sunday lectionary.<sup>15</sup>

Many Protestant scholars imbued the lectionary movement with an ecumenical spirit. Horace Allen reported on the progress of the “Consultation on Common Texts” (CCT) which met to discuss how to appropriate the Roman lectionary in Protestant Christianity. In particular, the CCT convened a working group to “provide readings that are more completely representative of the Hebrew Bible and not simply prophetic or typological.”<sup>16</sup> According to Allen, the presentation of the relationship of Old and New Testaments was “the most serious theological question” of lectionary

reform.<sup>17</sup> Many other Protestants perceived this problem and addressed it in their scholarship and ecclesial bodies.<sup>18</sup> A key locus for the Protestant lectionary reforms was the long sequence of Ordinary Time, which covers over half the liturgical year. I will analyze that sequence later in this essay.

During and after the lectionary reform of Vatican II and the Protestant responses, another change was developing in mainline Christian denominations: inspired by *Nostra Aetate*, Christian communions were modifying their stance toward Judaism. Most readers of this journal know the basic outline of this development, so I will merely highlight some points in this process that are germane to my argument. *Nostra Aetate*, § 4 states “the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>19</sup> The 1974 Vatican Commission “Guidelines” apply this statement liturgically, saying that “An effort will be made to acquire a better understanding of

<sup>13</sup> Sloyan, “Lectionary as Context,” 138.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Eileen Schuller, OSU, “Some Criteria for the Choice of Scripture Texts in the Roman Lectionary,” in *Shaping English Liturgy*, eds. Peter Finn and James Schellman (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1990), 385-404. A crucial contribution was John T. Pawlikowski and James A. Wilde, *When Catholics Speak About Jews* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1987). For a different perspective, see Joseph Jensen, OSB, “Prediction-Fulfillment in Bible and Liturgy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 646-62.

<sup>15</sup> Regina A. Bosclair, “Proclaiming Salvation: The Hermeneutics of Six Contemporary Christian Lectionaries” (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Horace T. Allen, Jr., “The Ecumenical Import of Lectionary Reform,” in *Shaping English Liturgy*, 368.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, “Ecumenical Import,” 379. Allen also connected the question to Jewish-Christian relations: “This issue cuts deeply into that bedrock business of how it is that the Christian community receives the Hebrew Scriptures as the Word of God, and by implication, that red-hot business of how the Christian community continues to relate to the people of those Scriptures, the Jews” (379). He added, “One might make bold to say that as this question works itself out so also will certain other questions having to do with the Church’s ‘mission’ to the Jews [and] its attitude toward that Jewish institution known as ‘Israel’” (381).

<sup>18</sup> Some examples are: Lloyd R. Bailey, “The Lectionary in Critical Perspective,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 139-53; Arland J. Hultgren, “Hermeneutical Tendencies in the Three-Year Lectionary,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 145-73; Richard Nelson, “Reading Texts in Lectionary Pairs,” *Dialog* 21 (1982): 95-101; Gail Ramshaw, “The First Testament in Christian Lectionaries,” *Worship* 64 (1990): 494-510.

<sup>19</sup> The documents quoted in this paragraph can all be found at <[www.bc.edu/research/cjl/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/)>.

whatever in the Old Testament retains its own perpetual value (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 14-15), since that has not been cancelled by the later interpretation of the New Testament.”<sup>20</sup> As I noted earlier, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments is here understood as symbolic of the Jewish-Christian relationship. One concrete way that Christians avoid presenting the Jews as “rejected” is to communicate the “perpetual value” of the Old Testament. The 1985 Vatican Commission “Notes” deal specifically with the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, emphasizing the unity of the divine plan and the precarious situation of typological hermeneutics:

Typology...makes many people uneasy and is perhaps the sign of a problem unresolved. Hence in using typology, the teaching and practice of which we have received from the Liturgy and from the Fathers of the Church, we should be careful to avoid any transition from the Old to the New Testament which might seem merely a rupture. The Church, in the spontaneity of the Spirit which animates her, has vigorously condemned the attitude of Marcion and always opposed his dualism.<sup>21</sup>

The United States Catholic Bishops added two more practical documents to this list, on dramatizations of the Passion and the Jews in Catholic preaching.<sup>22</sup> But the most important document for my topic has come only recently, in

<sup>20</sup> Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate**, § 4, § 2.

<sup>21</sup> Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, § 2, 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> The latter, “God’s Mercy Endures Forever” (1988), is very important for the liturgical implications of *Nostra Aetate*. It can be found at: [http://www.bc.edu/research/cj/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/NCCB\\_Gods\\_Mercy.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cj/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/NCCB_Gods_Mercy.htm).

2001, from the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC).<sup>23</sup> My claim is that this document has yet to be brought into dialogue with the practical implementation of *Nostra Aetate*.

The document’s main question, set forth in §1, is: “What relations does the Christian Bible establish between the Christians and the Jewish people?” But if the Bible is mediated mostly through the Sunday lectionary, we ought to ask more emphatically, “What relations does the lectionary establish between Christians and the Jewish people?” The PBC document speaks forcefully and radically at times; some lines seem to be drawn directly from Sloyan’s 1977 article on the lectionary. The PBC states: “The Old Testament in itself has great value as the Word of God. To read the Old Testament as Christians then does not mean wishing to find everywhere direct reference to Jesus and to Christian realities” (§ 21). The most salient moment for the study of the lectionary concerns the notion of fulfillment, and I must quote it at length.

The notion of fulfillment is an extremely complex one, one that could easily be distorted if there is a unilateral insistence either on continuity or discontinuity. Christian faith recognizes the fulfillment, in Christ, of the Scriptures and the hopes of Israel, but it does not understand this fulfillment as a literal one. Such a conception would be reductionist. ...Jesus is not confined to playing an already fixed role – that of Messiah – but he confers, on the notions of Messiah and salvation, a fullness which could not have been imagined in advance;...It would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipations of future events. All the texts, including those which later were read as messianic prophecies, already had an immediate import and

<sup>23</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 2001.

meaning for their contemporaries before attaining a fuller meaning for future hearers (§ 21).

This quotation comes from an official Catholic Church document, introduced and endorsed by then Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict. But anyone with even a passing knowledge of the Catholic lectionary can see the problem here: the hermeneutical theory and the liturgical practice do not cohere. The pronouncements of the officially sanctioned biblical scholars have not been incorporated into the liturgical proclamation of Scripture. This is a problem worth examining, and I will now move toward some specifics.

### The Selection of Old Testament Texts: Do We Share a Book?

As stated above, the Lectionary committee claims that “the whole of God’s word” and “nearly all the principal pages of the Old Testament” are proclaimed at Sunday Mass. Is this true? Consider Table 1, which tabulates the Old Testament readings (excluding Psalm responses) that a Catholic who attends Sundays and Solemnities will hear over the course of three years.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> I tabulate the Old Testament readings from all Sundays where the Old Testament is used and all other Holy Days of Obligation, as observed in my home country (USA). Those are Christmas, Ascension, Corpus Christi, Mary Mother of God, Immaculate Conception, and Assumption. I have excluded special vigil readings (since most parishioners only go once each Holy Day) but included the entire Easter Triduum. I have only counted one reading from the four Christmas options (all four are from Isaiah). For Sundays or Solemnities whose reading is the same each year (e.g., Ash Wednesday), I have counted that reading all three times, since that is how the congregation experiences it.

Table 1:  
Frequency of Old Testament books in Sunday Lectionary

<u>OT book</u>	<u>frequency</u>
Isaiah	49
Genesis	21
Exodus	16
Ezekiel	10
Deuteronomy	10
Jeremiah	9
Sirach	9
Wisdom of Solomon	8
1 Kings	7
Joel	6
Numbers	4
1 Samuel	4
Baruch	4
19 books	3 or less
13 books	not used

Total = 189 readings from OT

The choice of Old Testament lections can be criticized for some grave imbalances.<sup>25</sup> Almost half the lections (86 of 189) are from the three books of Isaiah, Genesis and Exodus. Moreover, some substantial books are *never* proclaimed, notably Ruth and Esther. The representation of the traditional wisdom literature genre (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) is scant, receiving only 6 lections total, while Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon receive 9 and 8 lections, respectively. Of the almost 200 lections that a faithful parishioner hears in the lectionary cycle, over 25% are from the prophet Isaiah, 49 out of 189. This eclipses the 43 lections from all the other prophets combined. Within the prophet Isaiah, 27 lections are from Deutero-Isaiah (or Second Isaiah), so that this one portion of Isaiah still has more lections than any other Old Testament book. Furthermore, only 20% of the Isaiah quotations are fixed by liturgical traditions, so this imbalanced representation of Isaiah cannot be based substantially on the desire to keep those traditions. When tabulating this data, I recalled a famous quotation from Martin Buber about Jewish-Christian relations. In essence, he said that Jews and Christians share a book and a hope.<sup>26</sup> But the lectionary's choices from the Old Testament obscure the idea that we share a book.

<sup>25</sup> See also the statistics in Bonneau, *Sunday Lectionary*, 48. For an impressive online collection of lectionary information, see the website of Felix Just, SJ, at <<http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/index.html>>.

<sup>26</sup> I was unable to find the quotation in its original context, but it is quoted by David Rosen as follows: "We have in common 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 together we can strive to evoke the buried speech of that voice; together we can redeem the imprisoned living word." David Rosen, "Learning From Each Other: A Jewish Perspective" <<http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=2369>>.

Still, let's give the lectionary the benefit of the doubt for a moment. Many choices of texts for Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter are bound by venerated ancient tradition. These seasons have a higher concentration of Old Testament texts interpreted as predictions. Perhaps in Ordinary Time, when the lectionary is not bound by calendrical or seasonal concerns, the Old Testament is better represented. Table 2 contains a summary of the Old Testament lections for three years of Ordinary Time. I divide them into law, narrative, prediction (or *fore-telling*), exhortation (or *forth-telling*), wisdom, and other oracles.<sup>27</sup>

Table 2:  
Genres of Old Testament Readings in Ordinary Time

	Law	Narrative	Prediction	Exhortation	Wisdom	Other
Year A	3	4	12	10	2	3
Year B	4	11	12	0	3	4
Year C	1	14	7	3	7	2
Total	8	29	31	13	12	9

There is not much legal material in Ordinary Time; and while there is a substantial amount of narrative, the stories are extremely short, usually five verses or less. Texts of prediction are still the highest percentage, even in Ordinary Time. The exhortations of the prophets are not well represented compared to their proportions in the Bible, or

<sup>27</sup> I have classified the readings according to how they appear to the listener who has not yet heard the Gospel reading, as in the context of liturgy.

even the liturgical use of the Bible among Protestant Christians or Jews.<sup>28</sup> The representation of wisdom literature is not insignificant, but the Hebrew wisdom texts are far outweighed by the Greek.

There are at least three general problems with the choice of Old Testament lections for Christian theology and for Jewish-Christian relations. First, the current cycle of Old Testament readings does not adequately portray the identity of God.<sup>29</sup> Without a good dose of narrative and Hebrew wisdom literature, the lectionary omits God's primary activities as creator and sustainer of Israel and the whole world. James Sanders argues:

Lectionaries as usually conceived destroy the Bible as...God's story. God is the principal actor throughout the Bible, but Christian lectionaries leave the impression for the most part that the whole truth is told in the New Testament and that the Old Testament merely points to it....Lectionaries tend to leave us to think that Jesus did it all, whereas *all* of what Jesus said and did pointed to God.<sup>30</sup>

Without a narrative identity of God in the Old Testament, can the lectionary even be considered Trinitarian? Or rather, is the worship guided by the Roman Catholic lectionary guilty of what H. Richard Niebuhr called the "unitarianism of the

Son?"<sup>31</sup> These questions bring into focus the challenge of adapting the theocentric Bible to the christocentric liturgical year.<sup>32</sup> Christians and Jews share a covenantal commitment to the God of Israel, but the christocentric lectionary de-emphasizes this fact. It may seem paradoxical, but a more Trinitarian lectionary would encourage a better understanding of Jews and Judaism.<sup>33</sup> A lectionary reformed to include more narrative and wisdom literature from the Hebrew Scriptures would encourage Christians to see God as creator, reconciler, and consummator, all in the context of the Old Testament.

Second, the lectionary propagates some stereotypes of Judaism. The clearest stereotype is that Judaism mainly predicts and prepares for Christianity. This use of the Old Testament in the lectionary does not cohere with the recent PBC document or the pontifical documents about Judaism that preceded it. I will give examples of this problem in the next section. Furthermore, there is hardly any positive legal material offered from the Old Testament, although many relevant and edifying examples could be found, for example, in Deuteronomy, such as Dt 24:17-22.

<sup>28</sup> It is no wonder that most American Catholics assume that the author of "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream" was Martin Luther King, Jr. instead of Amos!

<sup>29</sup> On the role of narrative in theology, see Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> James A. Sanders, "Canon and Calendar: an Alternative Lectionary Proposal," in *Social Themes of the Christian Year*, ed. Dieter Hiesel (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983), 259.

<sup>31</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3 (1946), 371-84. See also the brief discussion in Sundberg, "Limitations," 14-20.

<sup>32</sup> The best chance for a theocentric emphasis in the lectionary is precisely during Ordinary Time, when the earthly biography of Jesus' life does not govern the readings as strictly. On this conundrum, see the excellent work of Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> The Church might also consider more emphasis on pneumatology in the construction of the lectionary, although a discussion of that here would take this essay too far off its topic.

Third, the lectionary does not reinforce the idea that we share a book. Huge portions of the Bible's core are missing; one scholar laments the neglect of the Old Testament's epic stories from Joshua to 2 Kings. "These Bible stories have been shared by generations of Jews and Christians....It is a shame, therefore, that on Sunday mornings the walls of Jericho never fall (Jos 6:20) and that David's cry: 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom!' (2 Sm 18:33) is never heard."<sup>34</sup> This plea is not simply a cry for more "biblical literacy" about famous stories such as these (although that would be a welcome development). The criticism becomes more startling and incisive when one looks for the patriarchs and matriarchs in the lectionary. How can the lectionary committee claim to present a "more representative portion" of the Bible without Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Esau, and Joseph? The omission of the Jacob-Esau stories is especially troubling for those involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue, since in recent years, the relationship of these two brothers has been adapted analogically for the purpose of Jewish-Christian understanding.<sup>35</sup> But for the analogical adaptations of this story to take root in the Catholic imagination, Catholics in the pews first need to hear the original story! In short, if Jewish-Christian dialogue in part depends on our shared commitment to the Bible, then the lectionary hinders our quest more than it helps.

### The Correspondence of Old Testament and Gospel

In Ordinary Time, the Old Testament readings are chosen out of some supposed correspondence with that day's

<sup>34</sup> Sundberg, "Limitations," 18.

<sup>35</sup> Among many recent examples, Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000); and Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1-6.

Gospel reading. The way in which the readings correspond is, as the PBC document stated above, symbolic of the Jewish-Christian relationship. The correspondence of the two testaments is often discussed in simplistic terms: law and gospel or prophecy and fulfillment. I prefer to use the four categories outlined by Laurence Hull Stookey, an American liturgical scholar. Having four categories allows us to think beyond a false dichotomy that sees only two kinds of Christian texts – those that are supersessionist and those that are not. Stookey's descriptions in their entirety follow in Table 3. He states them to analyze typological hermeneutics in the New Testament and in the contemporary Christian pulpit. For him, the labels A and B refer to the antitype and the type in a relationship of correspondence between two stories. For my essay, A and B stand for the Old Testament and Gospel readings in the Roman Catholic lectionary.

Table 3:  
Four Possible Relationships between OT and Gospel Readings<sup>36</sup>

#### 1. Revolutionary displacement

B is utterly superior to A. B supplants A and reveals the weaknesses and deficiencies in A. B could not have arisen out of A. The emergence of B is an obviating judgment upon A. Hence B displaces A.

#### 2. Revelatory replacement

B is so virtually identical to A as to have been predicted by the existence of A. A "prefigures" B in an obvious way. The emergence of B renders A an obsolete precursor, but B's role is to fulfill rather than to judge A. B replaces A in every way that counts, without brutally displacing A.

<sup>36</sup> Adapted from Laurence Hull Stookey, "Marcion, Typology, and Lectionary Preaching," *Worship* 66 (1992), 251-62.

### 3. Evolutionary progress

B evolves from A, though B may surprise us in its coming. The emergence of B may even enable us to see A in a new and fuller light. Yet B is a progressive evolution and thus is more advanced than A. However, both can exist together without B displacing or replacing A.

### 4. Complementarity

B is closely related to A, indeed develops from A, as in the third option. But no judgment is made equating development with positive progress. A and B co-exist as closely linked and complementary entities.

In short, category 1 equates to what we often call “supersessionism.” Category 4 encapsulates the complementarity of A and B; there is no sense that one is better than the other. But categories 2 and 3 helpfully fill out the areas in between, which in fact is where many of our lectionary pairings reside.<sup>37</sup> I have applied Stookey’s

<sup>37</sup> I acknowledge that, here and elsewhere, it may be misleading to say a text “resides” in an “established” relationship to another text, since there must always be readers and preachers who give these static texts meaning and make them dynamic for new interpretive contexts. Indeed, one of Stookey’s points is that, even in lectionary churches, preachers play a big role in relating the Old and New Testaments. Nevertheless, the framers of the lectionary play a prior and bigger role by focusing the available interpretations that readers and preachers give to these texts. They are like curators of an art gallery who shape the viewers’ interpretations of the art by their juxtapositions of the works on display. The viewer does have some interpretive freedom, but the curator has established relationships among the works that are difficult to ignore. The preacher, like a tour guide, may help the viewers see things they would not see on their own, but in the gallery of the Sunday lectionary, the museum never changes and there are no traveling exhibits.

categories to the lectionary in Ordinary Time, to see what kind of relationships the lectionary establishes when it is not bound by other liturgical traditions. Table 4 summarizes the results of using these four categories to classify the correspondence implied by the lectionary in Ordinary Time.<sup>38</sup>

Table 4:  
Category of Correspondence between OT and Gospel Readings  
Implied by the Lectionary in Ordinary Time

	<u>Cat 1</u>	<u>Cat 2</u>	<u>Cat 3</u>	<u>Cat 4</u>	<u>ambiguous</u>
Year A	0	9	6	14	5
Year B	4	14	5	8	3
Year C	<u>1</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>5</u>
Total	5	30	18	36	13

I will provide and explain one example of each category, to give a sense of how they differ. The readings for Sunday B-6 exemplify category 1. The Gospel reading is Mark 1:40-45, in which Jesus heals a leper. The Old Testament reading contains two short sections from Leviticus 13, which explain laws revealed to Moses and Aaron concerning lepers. The reading skips over all the nuances of the legal code and, in the end, declares that the unclean leper must live outside of the camp. The actions of Jesus are clearly intended to displace the prescriptions of the Levitical law.

<sup>38</sup> The application of these categories to the lectionary is based on my own judgment. But even if other readers disagree about a few choices, the general trends should hold.

Sunday A-21 provides a good category 2. Matthew 16:13-20 expresses Simon Peter's confession, Jesus' calling him the rock of the church, and Jesus' giving him the keys to the kingdom, symbolizing the power of binding and loosing. Isaiah 22:19-23 recounts an oracle about a certain Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah, who will receive the key of the house of David, with the power to open and shut with certitude. The keys given to Peter have not "brutally displaced" the key given to Eliakim, but Peter's keys render Eliakim "an obsolete precursor." Eliakim's key prefigures Peter's, but while the former's key only functioned for a brief period, the latter's key has eternal authority.

Category 3 can be seen in Sunday C-17.<sup>39</sup> The Gospel reading (Luke 11:1-13) is Luke's teaching on prayer, including the "Our Father" and the saying of "ask, seek, knock." What does the lectionary prescribe from the Old Testament? The narrative of Abraham's dialogue with God about the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:20-32). On one hand, this narrative cannot be reduced to the concept of "prayer." It is more about "theodicy" or "mercy and justice" than "prayer." On the other hand, construing this narrative as a "prayer" avoids the blunt fact that Sodom was subsequently destroyed! The intercession of Abraham was a failure while the prayer of Jesus' disciples will be successful. Both types of intercession "can exist together," but Jesus' teaching on prayer is couched as a "progressive evolution" over Abraham's method.

Sunday A-18 provides a category 4 example. The Gospel is Matthew's parable of the Great Banquet (14:13-21), in which the invited guests are too busy to attend, and the master extends the invitation to all the marginalized around town. The Old Testament pairs Isaiah 55:1-3, which begins:

"All who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat." The listeners are also promised that "I will renew with you the everlasting covenant." These readings complement each other. Not only does the Old Testament reading characterize the radical offer of sustenance in Jesus' parable, it also promises to renew the everlasting covenant. The readings "co-exist as closely linked and complementary entities."

In my reading of the PBC document, category 1 is totally discouraged or even forbidden in Catholic hermeneutics. Category 2 is questionable at best. The document overall prefers some combination of categories 3 and 4. The good news is that over half the pairings in Ordinary Time are based on categories 3 and 4. But let us not avoid the bad news of how many examples of categories 1 and 2 exist in the lectionary. Year B is especially distanced from Catholic doctrine, when over half the pairings correspond through category 1 or 2.<sup>40</sup> Does the Catholic Church promote such a large discrepancy between doctrine and practice in other aspects of its ministry? What can be done to bring the lectionary in line with current Catholic doctrine?

Reform can begin with either individual selections or the entire sequence of Ordinary Time. As I mentioned above, the Protestant "Consultation on Common Texts" disapproved of many of the Old Testament lections in categories 1 or 2. They took over much of the Roman lectionary from Advent through Easter, but in Ordinary Time, they introduced semicontinuous reading of the great Old Testament narratives. Gerald Sloyan endorses this also, from a Catholic perspective. He gives five reasons for a lectionary that emphasizes semicontinuous reading over typological

<sup>39</sup> The peculiarities of this pairing were highlighted for me by Nelson, "Reading Texts," 99.

<sup>40</sup> The Gospel of Mark, the guiding text of Ordinary Time in Year B, is not particularly supersessionist. The *Revised Common Lectionary* pairs Mark differently, one example of which I provide in the next paragraph.

correspondence: “the earliest tradition, the confusion caused by the brevity and apparent non-relevance of the present first readings, the seeming reduction of the entire Testament to a preparation for Jesus only, the making available to hearers of a fuller biblical heritage than now, and the possibility that the liturgical churches can be Bible churches.”<sup>41</sup> To see what one change can do, consider the pairing on Sunday B-6, which was my example of category 1. In place of the legal passage from Leviticus about lepers, the Protestant *Revised Common Lectionary* substitutes 2 Kings 5:1-14, the story of Naaman the leper and Elisha.<sup>42</sup> This change solves most of the problems mentioned so far. It replaces a category 1 pairing with a 3 or 4; it adds some captivating narrative material from a previously neglected part of the Old Testament; it doesn’t propagate a negative stereotype of Judaism; and it narrates the identity of God as sustainer and healer in a Jewish context.

This is only one possible solution, and I am sure many more creative solutions would arise, if the Church gave the opportunity to a team of clergy, liturgists, and biblical scholars. The Catholic Church does not need to abandon the principle of thematic correspondence or, far worse, the centrality of the paschal mystery in order to reform its lectionary. Rather, the changes should develop organically from the Church’s own teaching, taking into account the current state of biblical scholarship as already expressed by the Vatican’s own chosen scholars (the PBC). The changes will be challenging, beginning from the aforementioned tension between the theocentric Bible and the christocentric liturgical year. This tension was already present for reformers of the lectionary and the larger liturgical economy well before the recent PBC document. And now the recent document has complicated the task by reconsidering the role

<sup>41</sup> Sloyan, “Some Suggestions,” 530-2.

<sup>42</sup> This example was briefly discussed also in Stookey, “Marcion,” 257-8.

of the Jewish people and their sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible. Therefore, reform of the lectionary will require an ability to compromise, that is, to balance the theological centrality of the paschal mystery with the hermeneutical principles articulated by the PBC. But even if coherence between the Catholic Church’s doctrine and practice is a laborious goal to achieve, it should not be a radical one. And there is no lack of ingenuity in this people of God, over one billion strong.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

This past year has been filled with celebrations of *Nostra Aetate*, a document. It is a document created by human beings that attempts to rectify a long history of human misunderstanding and atrocity. Those of us involved in Jewish-Christian relations know how this document has spawned many other documents which advance its cause. Having done research on the impact of *Nostra Aetate*, and having learned of the broad effects of the document *Dabru Emet* in Poland, for example, I would never question the importance and relevance of generating, disseminating and discussing documents such as these.<sup>44</sup> They are constitutive and representative of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

<sup>43</sup> At the *Nostra Aetate Today* conference in Rome, Bishop Luis del Castillo suggested that Catholics cannot stand by and idly wait for the issues raised in this paper to be resolved by lectionary reform. Many dioceses offer brief commentaries on lectionary passages for the laity in advance of each week’s Mass. While thoroughgoing reform would be ideal, these brief commentaries could be revised more quickly to cohere with the PBC document’s perspective on the Old Testament. In addition, I should mention a recent book based on the *Revised Common Lectionary*: Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> See Stanislaw Krajewski, “*Dabru Emet* in Poland: A Personal Account” <<http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=1968>>.

However, I want to conclude with a quotation from Abraham Joshua Heschel that caused me to reconsider my priorities in Jewish-Christian dialogue. His words remind me that there is one primary set of documents – the book that we share, the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament – whose words unite us in a shared pursuit more than any curial document can. In 1966 Heschel commented on the significance of *Nostra Aetate* and *Dei Verbum*:

And finally, one other word as a friend, as a person who prays for the spiritual health and integrity of Christians, I am particularly delighted with the new emphasis on the study of the Hebrew Bible. I think the renewal of biblical studies encouraged by the document on Scripture is to me, as a Jew, of equal importance. All I would like to see is that the world should open its mind and heart to the words of the prophets, and then there will be no need for documents on Jews or others.<sup>45</sup>

I would extend Heschel's insight to the lectionary: if the lectionary is reformed to represent the Old Testament more accurately, faithfully, and "lavishly"; if the great narratives and writings are given time to reveal the active identity of God as creator, reconciler, and consummator; and if the prophets are allowed to address the gathered assemblies not only as fore-tellers but also as forth-tellers; then we will not need as much discussion of how to implement *Nostra Aetate*. Christians will know through their liturgy that they share a book and a hope with the Jews.

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted from an interreligious discussion in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, ed. John H. Miller (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 373-4.