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The Impact of Christian-Jewish Dialogue on Catholic Biblical Studies

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The Impact of Christian-Jewish Dialogue on Catholic Biblical Studies

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The origin of this essay lies in 1943, with Pope Pius XII's encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Just as *Mystici Corporis*, also issued by Pius in 1943, was a precursor of *Lumen Gentium* by advancing beyond the neoscholastic ecclesiologies of the time and re-embedding the Catholic Church in history, so in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* Pius XII called for a "fresh investigation" of scripture, freeing Catholic biblical scholars for the first time to apply biblical-critical methodology to the understanding of Sacred Scripture. This in turn made possible the fresh interpretations of Scripture, especially Romans 9-11, which Cardinal Augustin Bea included so effectively in *Nostra Aetate*.

Bea, of course, was a biblical scholar whose work was profoundly influenced by Pius' 1943 encyclical, and so was able to accept John XXIII's mandate that the Council take up the question of the Catholic Church's understanding of its relationship with the Jewish People armed with and ready for new understandings of New Testament texts long interpreted as solely negative about Jews and Judaism. An excellent series of papers on the history and significance of *Nostra Aetate* has recently been published. It is based on the proceedings of an international conference on the subject held in Jerusalem in 2005 in conjunction with the fortieth anniversary of the promulgation of the document on October 28, 1965.¹ I will not repeat that history, save for identifying several points of interest.

First, it may be noted that section four of *Nostra Aetate*, devoted to the Jews, is very short. Only fifteen sentences in Latin, each word was most carefully constructed after long and searching debates by the bishops, consultants and staff of the Pontifical Secretariat (later, Council) for Christian Unity, which was headed by Bea. The Council had an enormous amount of initial material to work with. Fr. Thomas Stransky, csp, who was the youngest member of the staff and the only one still alive, refers to the materials sent in by the French Jewish scholar, Jules Isaac (whose June 1960 meeting with the pope inspired the idea to take up the issue) which included the famous 10 points of Seelisberg²; a "Council-like" statement submitted by a group of European Catholic scholars headed by Dutch priest Anton Remselaar; a report submitted by Msgr. John Oesterreicher's Institute for Judeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, which had been founded in 1953 as the first such academic institute in the history of Christianity; and several studies and statements of the World Council of Churches.³ The fact that so much was distilled in such a brief statement illustrates the depth of the efforts of those

¹ Neville Lamdan and Alberto Melloni, eds., *Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish-Catholic Relations* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007), distributed in North America by Transaction Publications of New Brunswick.

² Stransky in *ibid*, pp. 30-31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

who worked on it. It is also worth noting in this context that the statement on the Jews was one of the earliest undertaken during the Council and among the last to be voted upon, which again testifies to the enormity of the task that was being undertaken: reassessing almost two millennia of negative assumptions about Jews and Judaism. Stransky's article notes the numerous severe setbacks the tiny document faced, as well as the creative solutions to seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Second, *Nostra Aetate* is distinctive among the Conciliar documents in not referring to a single previous ecumenical council or Father of the Church. Cardinal Bea's successor, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, on more than one occasion stated that this was because "never before ha[d] a systematic, positive, comprehensive, careful and daring presentation of Jews and Judaism been made in the Church by a Pope or Council."⁴ Statements of previous Popes and Councils, such as the four discriminatory canons of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) were disciplinary laws only and, while assuming the negative theological framework of the times (which Jules Isaac quite accurately called "the teaching of contempt), did not actually take it up as such and therefore had no doctrinal significance for Church teaching. Therefore the Second Vatican Council was able to go directly to the biblical text itself and begin afresh to form Catholic tradition concerning the mystery of Israel.

In this renewed understanding of the Church and the Jewish People the most crucial text was considered to be that of St. Paul's considerations in Romans 9-11. I will not present a detailed exegesis of the biblical and theological implications of *Nostra Aetate*, § 4. This has been done elsewhere by myself and others, most recently in a volume of essays from an international colloquium held at the Pontifical Gregorian University's Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Conciliar declaration.⁵ Among other key documents the volume includes (I believe for the first time all together in print) the full texts of all seven drafts of the declaration, as well as essays by Catholic leaders such as Cardinals Walter Kasper, Jorge Mejia, and Achille Silvestrini, and present and past secretaries of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Fathers Pier Francesco Fumagalli and Norbert J. Hoffman, SDB.

I will, however, provide a simple illustration of the profound new understanding of Rom 9-11 that is to be found in the document's unprecedented positive revisiting of Paul's words by comparing the chapter and subchapter headings of the 1970 New American Bible (NAB), which did not yet reflect Conciliar teaching, and that of the 1990 NAB version. I personally wrote the headings for the latter version after pointing out to the Catholic Biblical Association, which puts out the New American Bible, that the 1970 headings did not at all reflect the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, § 4.

⁴ Cited by Eugene J. Fisher in "Evolution of a Tradition: from *Nostra Aetate* to the *Notes*," in International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, Selected Papers, 1970-1985* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, and Rome: Librerice Editrice Lateranense, 1988) p. 240. Interestingly, two years preceding this volume, a volume edited by Eugene J. Fisher, A. James Rudin and Marc H. Tanenbaum, entitled *Twenty Years of Jewish-Catholic Relations* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986) was published in the United States. This illustrates the pioneering role of Catholic-Jewish dialogue in the United States, due to the size and institutional depth of the two communities in this country and the fact that here, unlike in Europe, the Catholic community was never in a position of power over the Jewish community. Both were immigrant groups equally discriminated against by "the Protestant establishment."

⁵ Philip A. Cunningham, Norbert J. Hofmann, SDB, and Joseph Sievers, eds., *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Recent Reflections from Rome* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

1970

Overall heading for Romans 9-11:
"Israel's Present Rejection"

9:1 Grief for the Jews
 9:6 God's Free Choice
 9:25 Witness of the Old Testament
 9:30 Israel's Unbelief

Ch. 11: *Partial Rejection of Israel*

11:11 Israel's Fall the Gentiles'
 Salvation
 11:25 Israel's Final Conversion
 11:30 Triumph of God's Mercy

1990

Overall heading for Romans 9-11:
"Jews and Gentiles in God's Plan"

9:1 God's Love for Israel
 9:6 God's Free Choice
 9:25 Witness of the Prophets
 9:30 Righteousness Based on Faith

Ch. 11: *God's Irrevocable Call*

11:11 The Gentile's Salvation
 11:25 God's Irrevocable Call
 11:30 Triumph of God's Mercy

This effectively illustrates how the same text can be understood differently, depending on how one engages it. In this case – which represents the clear and unambiguous approach of the Council – the change in meaning when the negative notions about collective guilt and punishment are removed, is profound.

One small but significant change was made in the translation itself. Rom 9:4-5 had been translated in the past tense: "Theirs were the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law-giving, and the promises; theirs were the patriarchs, and from them came the Messiah." I informed NAB editorial staff members that *Nostra Aetate* very pointedly translates the same text in the present tense, "Theirs are the adoption...theirs are the patriarchs..." The underlying reason for the correction of this consistent past tense negative gloss on the text is not only theological, but biblical. In Greek the two verses have no verb, saying simply "theirs the adoption," etc. However verse 3, which immediately precedes them, is in the present tense. The presumption in the Greek is that the tense in such situations does not change unless it is specifically changed, which would have required a past tense verb in at least verse 4. What had happened over the centuries, of course, is that the negative "teaching of contempt" about Jews and Judaism had so permeated the mind-set of Christians that it was imposed on a text in a place where the context clearly indicates that Paul's obvious intent was positive and which, on linguistic and exegetical grounds, demanded to be translated in the present.

Now it is.

Toward a Dialogical Hermeneutic

Twenty-five years ago in a paper given at meetings of the Catholic Biblical Association and the American Academy of Religion, I approached the topic of the present paper with "a tentative tone."⁶ Today, after a quarter century of continuing progress, I can be more certain of the results. Also, twenty-five years ago, I could be reasonably sure that I had covered virtually all of the relevant literature. Today, I can only say I have over the years kept up reasonably well. But the field of Christian-Jewish studies and the biblical studies relevant to it have exploded beyond the point where one person can claim to have read all the related resources. So this study, while by

⁶ Eugene J. Fisher, "The Impact of Christian-Jewish Dialogue on Biblical Studies," in Richard W. Rousseau, SJ, *Christianity and Judaism: The Deepening Dialogue* (Scranton, PA: Ridge Row Press, 1983), 117-138.

no means exhaustive, can be said to be based on a reasonable, ongoing sampling of the literature over the years.

Since I first undertook the study of this topic the field of Catholic biblical studies has undergone immense change. When I presented that paper twenty-five years ago I was likely one of the few if not the only layperson in a room filled with Catholic priests. None of us in the room would have guessed that only a quarter of a century later the book review editor for the New Testament would not only be a woman, but a Jew! My conviction of twenty-five years ago still holds today; my analysis can be said to be as much about the impact of biblical studies on the Catholic-Jewish dialogue as it is about the latter's impact on the former.

In my 1982 article I noted that the neutral interpretive language of the historical-critical methodologies enabled Jews and Christians to approach the Scriptures together. I identified five areas of biblical studies that were being enriched by the "dialogical hermeneutics" implicitly called for by *Nostra Aetate's* appeal for a dialogue of "mutual esteem" between Catholics and Jews.

The first area to benefit from dialogical interpretation of scripture was exegesis itself. Text criticism was improved. A number of related issues were clarified, such as understanding that, while it is not invalid for Christians to read chapters two and three of Genesis to bolster our Christian understanding of original sin, it is also not the sole valid interpretation of the text. Similarly, removing the notion of collective guilt from our understanding of Jews has led to new insights in Pauline, Synoptic and Johannine studies.

A second area is the change in the biblical-critical enterprise itself. It is now understood as a collaborative effort among Catholic, Protestant and Jewish scholars rather than a means to use the scriptures to "score points" against one another. This has led to a new appreciation of Pharisaism, and understanding that the polemics against the Pharisees in the gospel of Matthew reflect the needs and disputes of Matthew's own time and place more than events or realities in Jesus' lifetime. Two excellent publications by Fordham University Press can serve as examples of what Catholics can learn from Jews in understanding Sacred Scripture: two articles by Jean-Pierre Sonnet, SJ in the 2007 volume, *Friends on the Way: Jesuits Encounter Contemporary Judaism*, and Gerson Appel's *A Philosophy of Mitzvot: The Religious and Ethical Principles of Judaism, their Roots in Biblical Law and the Judaic Oral Tradition*, (2008). While the latter does not deal directly with the biblical texts or with Pharisaism, since it is centered on a 13th century rabbinic text, it illuminates the general ongoing Pharisaic/Rabbinic tradition within which Jesus' teaching is most properly interpreted and understood.

The third area of hermeneutics raises the question. "Is the New Testament anti-Semitic?" The matter has been debated by numerous scholars, both Jewish and Christian. While clarifying our understanding of the polemical nature of some New Testament passages, these studies have also put them in a larger perspective. It is imperative that a significant distinction is made between the polemical strands of the New Testament which were a common characteristic of the main disputes among Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, and modern racial anti-Semitism with its genocidal potential. We are left with the question: are roots of anti-Semitism to be found in the New Testament? The answer to this is a nuanced "yes" since the misunderstandings of the New Testament that led to the "teaching of contempt" began as early as the second century, imposing themselves on the reading of the New Testament for subsequent generations. It took many centuries and many subsequent developments for the Christian teaching of contempt to play its role as one of the factors leading to modern, racial anti-Semitism.

The fourth area is that of the relationship between the Scriptures. In the past an unbridgeable chasm stressed the discontinuity between biblical and post-biblical Judaism such that the presumed “legalism” of Judaism became a foil for the superiority of every aspect of Christianity. However, the New Testament authors, beginning with Paul, draw a relationship, not of discontinuity, but of essential continuity: promise/fulfillment. The inherent problem is that “fulfillment” theology easily slides, as it has in the past, into supersessionist or replacement theology. As the 1974 Vatican Guidelines put it:

An effort will be made to acquire a better understanding of whatever in the Old Testament retains its own perpetual value When commenting on biblical texts, emphasis will be laid on the continuity of our faith with that of the earlier Covenant, in the perspective of the promises, without minimizing those elements of Christianity which are original. We believe that these promises were fulfilled with the first coming of Christ. But it is nonetheless true that we still await their perfect fulfillment in his glorious return at the end of time.⁷

In Mainz in 1980, Pope John Paul II made the following remarkable assertion: “[T]his 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.” The 2002 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*⁸ thus stresses that the Jews are not wrong to still await the coming of the Messiah, and will not wait in vain. Or, to put it liturgically, we must always remember all three parts of the Church’s proclamation: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!”

Finally, what had been a model of discontinuity and triumphalism is now seen as a mandate for Jews and Christians together to witness to the world the truths of the Scriptures we share. The 1985 Vatican *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching and Teaching* issued the following ringing call:

Attentive to the same God who has spoken, hanging on the same word, we have to witness to one same memory and one common hope in Him who is the master of history. We must also accept our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons, and for social and international reconciliation. To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbor, by a common hope for the Kingdom of God and by the great heritage of the Prophets.⁹

⁷ The full text can be found on the website, www.bc.edu/cjlearning or in Eugene J. Fisher, *Faith Without Prejudice: Rebuilding Christian Attitudes toward Jews and Judaism* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 133-141.

⁸ Published by Libreria Editrice Vaticana with an enthusiastic introduction by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, to whose Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith the Pontifical Biblical Commission reported the document, it deserves study as a reflection of the state of the art of the field of Catholic biblical scholarship and theology.

⁹ The text can be found in Fisher, *Faith Without Prejudice*, pp. 144-155.