

16

Nostra Aetate after Fifty Years

Covenant and the Election of Israel

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THE GENESIS OF *NOSTRA Aetate*, no. 4 has generally been analyzed in the narrow context of its place in the history of Jewish-Catholic relations, and its passage has been credited in major part to the efforts of Jewish activists and scholars as well as Catholic thinkers engaged in a wrenching post-Holocaust re-examination of the Church's teachings regarding Jews. The validity and importance of this perspective is beyond question, but the wider environment has, I think, been underappreciated.

It hardly needs to be said that the Jewish component of the Vatican Council's deliberations and documents, whatever its undeniable importance, was not the dominant element in the proceedings. More than a decade and a half ago, I made this point near the beginning of an essay dealing with medieval anti-Semitism, which no doubt escaped the notice of most observers concerned with Vatican II. Here, then, is what I wrote:

Vatican II was convened in a post-colonial age marked by a new regard for self-determination and a new respect for cultural diversity—as well as minority rights. Exclusivist claims did not

sit well in this environment, and harsh punishment, even divine punishment, for religious dissent surely did not. A telling expression of the inner struggle triggered by the clash of this liberal, humanistic sensibility with a narrower, more forbidding tradition was formulated by a playwright hostile to Catholicism whose bitter work, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All To You*, nonetheless has its very funny moments. Sister Mary, an old-fashioned nun teaching in the aftermath of Vatican II, defines “limbo” for her classroom/audience. If I remember correctly, she displays a picture of a baby trapped behind the bars of a crib and declares, “Limbo is where unbaptized children went before the Ecumenical Council.”

The historical and theological precision of this statement may leave something to be desired, but it brilliantly captures a central feature of the ideological atmosphere of the Council, which had nothing to do with Jews and next to nothing to do with the Holocaust. It was this spirit that animated the adoption of a more positive attitude toward Islam and the religions of the East, the assertion that salvation is possible outside the Church—and *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4. One who locates the fundamental impetus of the historic declaration on the Jews in the specifics of the Jewish-Catholic relationship loses sight of the larger process and misses the key point.¹

On reflection, the assertion that this larger reassessment had “next to nothing to do with the Holocaust” was too strong, perhaps much too strong, since even the broader transformation in the Church and beyond may well have been influenced by the Holocaust, but the basic point, I think, remains valid. We are dealing with a watershed in the history of the Church that far transcends the Jewish question, and the reassessment of that question is a part of that larger phenomenon rather than an essentially independent development.

The clearly revolutionary element in *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 is its unequivocal denial that contemporary Jews bear any responsibility for the crucifixion. The point is then reinforced by a concomitant denunciation of anti-Semitism. Because some Catholics are uneasy with the assertion that these teachings—even the first one—are new, they can be insufficiently

1. David Berger, “From Crusades to Blood Libels to Expulsions: Some New Approaches to Medieval Antisemitism,” The Second Victor J. Selmanowitz Memorial Lecture, Touro College Graduate School of Jewish Studies (New York, 1997), 5–6. Reprinted in David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: University Studies Press, 2010), 15–39, at 19–20.

sensitive to their profound significance. Instead, they are inclined to stress what they see as even more far-reaching implications. Thus, they maintain that the document’s allusion to the irrevocability of God’s gifts to the Jewish people affirmed in Rom 11:28–29 was meant to effect a historic reevaluation of the status of the original covenant—Abrahamic and even Mosaic. In its strongest form, this understanding of *Nostra Aetate* sees an implication that the covenant at Sinai remains in full force, so that Jews who fulfill it are fulfilling the will of God. This means *inter alia* that such Jews can be saved through their commitment to that covenant, and that mission to the Jews runs counter to the divine will.

The very fact that such conclusions have been drawn from *Nostra Aetate* is itself a historic development that becomes a key element of the document’s legacy. Nonetheless, the real meaning of the allusion in question is, I think, less dramatic, and the range of understandings that the passage can and to a large degree has generated illustrates its ambiguities as well as its potential for a variety of applications. While most Jews take maximum satisfaction from the most expansive understanding, the available options present a richer tapestry and evoke the ruminations that follow.

Romans 11 has elicited a wide spectrum of interpretations since the patristic period,² so that both the intrinsic options afforded by the text and the history of its exegesis mean that the mere citation of a key verse does not tell us the intent of the authors who cited it. The adoption of *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 was not an entirely smooth process, and even if we are to assume that all those involved in drafting the text understood it in precisely the same way, it is evident that the representatives who ultimately voted for it did not have a uniform understanding of its provisions. It is therefore an exercise in futility to determine *the* import of *Nostra Aetate*’s citation of the affirmation in Romans that God does not repent of the gifts He makes.³

The narrowest understanding of the passage in Romans is that physical or carnal Israel will not cease to exist despite its reprobate nature and

2. For an exhaustive survey and analysis, see Jeremy Cohen, “The Mystery of Israel’s Salvation: Romans 11:25–26 in Patristic and Medieval Exegesis,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005) 247–81.

3. Philip A. Cunningham has pointed to evidence that *Nostra Aetate*’s final version reflects a decision by its authors to postpone the collective conversion of Jews to the *eschaton*. See Cunningham, “Response to Bolton’s ‘Contesting the Covenants,’” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 4 (2010) 399–400. Even if this was indeed the intention of the authors, the salvific force of the Jewish covenant does not necessarily follow.

is assured that at the end of days a remnant will be present to embrace the Christian message in its fullness. In this conception, preeschatological Israel has no spiritual value and no longer enjoys a covenantal relationship with God in more than the most minimal sense. All we find in that passage is an affirmation that this relationship guarantees physical survival until the time when Israel will recognize the truth.

Since most Christians through the centuries adopted a reading of Romans more or less identical with this one, and nothing in the text forces one to a more generous understanding, the revisionist interpretations that have emerged since *Nostra Aetate* reflect a striking desire to construct a more positive assessment of Judaism. Thus, the passage in Romans comes to mean that there remains a meaningful spiritual relationship between God and the Jewish people. Once such an affirmation is made, the persistence of an original covenant with vital religious content becomes distinctly possible, perhaps even probable.

If that covenant is the one with Abraham, a narrow reading can fit fairly smoothly into the standard contours of classical Christianity. God maintains this covenant with the original Israel, which remains in some sense his chosen people, but the old law has little if any relevance to that status. Ideally, Jews should embrace Christianity even in historical time, and there is no theological reason why Christians should refrain from urging them to do so. Even if such efforts are undesirable for pragmatic or ethical reasons, there is certainly no reason to refrain from praying for the conversion of the Jews even before the fullness of time.

As I noted earlier, some ecumenically minded Christians are dissatisfied with this step, rightly seeing it as supersessionist, and not so rightly (in my view) taking it for granted that any form of supersessionism is religiously and morally objectionable.⁴ Consequently, some ascribe a stronger meaning to the persistence of the Abrahamic covenant, while others take the dramatic step of affirming the continuing validity of the Mosaic covenant as well. This approach sits uneasily with key elements of historic Christian theology, and it is no accident that Cardinal Kurt Koch, in an interview on Israel Independence Day in 2013, manifested evident discomfort as he wrestled with the implications of this position.⁵

4. For a defense of the ethical legitimacy of supersessionism that does not denigrate Jews or Judaism, see Berger, "On *Dominus Iesus* and the Jews," *America* 185/7 (September 17, 2001) 7–12, reprinted in Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 378–84, at 380–82.

5. "Jewish-Catholic Dialogue 65 Years after the Founding of the State of Israel,"

Question: The Apostle Paul says in the Letter to the Romans that God remains true to his covenant. Yet in the history of theology the idea that the Jews were disinherited was predominant for a long time. How did that happen?

Cardinal Koch: This has to do with the separation of Church and Synagogue. As historical research has shown, the process of estrangement took place less rapidly than was long thought to be the case. But the process had increasingly radical consequences in the aftermath. The notion became prevalent that the Church had taken the place of Judaism. Nor was Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, which very subtly reflects on the mystery of the interpenetration of the New and the Old Covenant, able to prevent this. How we are to think about the eternal validity of the Old Covenant and at the same time about the newness of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ remains even today a major theological challenge.

Question: But what does that mean? Are there two separate ways of salvation, then, for Jews and Christians? Abraham and Moses for the one group, Jesus Christ for the other? Then the Jews would be an exception to the Church's commission to evangelize.

Cardinal Koch: For Christians there is naturally only one way of salvation, which God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. On the other hand we Christians, in dealing with the Jews, do not have to bear witness to a way of salvation that is completely foreign to them, as is the case with other religions. For the New Testament is built entirely on the Old Testament. For this reason the Catholic Church has no organized mission to the Jews, as is the case for instance in certain Evangelical circles. On the other hand, we Christians witness to the Jews also concerning the hope that faith in Christ gives us.

Catholics who adhere to the older position on the salvation of Jews and their suitability as objects of mission will find here a single argument for altering that position: "The New Testament is built entirely on the Old Testament." And they will respond, "Of course this is true (although 'entirely' is an overstatement). But how does it yield your conclusion?"

The Catholic World Report, May 15, 2013, http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/2259/jewishcatholic_dialogue_65_years_after_the_founding_of_the_state_of_israel.aspx#.UnF3j1_D_cs/.

The New Testament is built on the Old, but it perfects it, transcends it, and provides insight into its deeper, nonliteral meaning. Why should Jews be left to their rejection of these truths, and how does it follow that they are saved?”

Once the persistence of the Mosaic covenant has been affirmed by some Catholics, many Jews engaged in interfaith dialogue (as we shall see presently) have come to regard such an affirmation as a test of a genuinely pro-Jewish stance. Precisely because I recognize the great hurdles that a Christian must overcome to make this affirmation, I do not consider this expectation appropriate, and I even harbor some doubts about its pragmatic usefulness.

Let us turn, then, to a more detailed look at some of the Catholic discussions that have swirled around the question of covenant and mission since *Nostra Aetate*.⁶ As early as the 1970s, some Catholic authors proposed a double-covenant theory.⁷ When the official declaration *Dominus Iesus* was issued in 2000, Cardinal Walter Kasper responded to Jewish concerns a year later in an article containing the following affirmation:

The only thing I wish to say is that the document *Dominus Iesus* does not state that everybody needs to become a Catholic in order to be saved by God. On the contrary, it declares that God's grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. Therefore, the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises.⁸

6. The most thorough survey and analysis of these discussions is that of David J. Bolton, “Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45 (2010) 37–60.

7. Bolton points to Monika Hellwig, “Christian Theology and the Covenant of Israel,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 7 (1970) 37–51; Rosemary Radford Ruether, “An Invitation to Jewish-Christian Dialogue: In What Sense Can We Say that Jesus Was ‘The Christ?’” *The Ecumenist* 10/2 (1972) 17–24; Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974); and Michael B. McGarry, *Christology after Auschwitz* (New York: Paulist, 1977).

8. Walter Cardinal Kasper, “The Good Olive Tree,” *America* 185/7 (September 17, 2001) 12–14. It is noteworthy that this statement does not grant Jews the full special status that dual-covenant theologians normally do. Salvation is available to all in principle; for Jews it is achieved through the old covenant. See note 3 above for my own reaction to *Dominus Iesus*. For an analysis of the views of the author of *Dominus Iesus* regarding our issue, see Richard J. Sklba, “Covenant Renewed: Josef Ratzinger, Theologian and Pastor,” in Robert W. Jenson and Eugene B. Korn, eds., *Covenant and Hope: Christian and Jewish Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 58–79.

The following year, the issue of the eternity of the Jewish covenant came to the fore in two documents by Catholic scholars: “Reflections on Covenant and Mission” (2002) and “A Sacred Obligation” (2003). Both of these asserted that Jews are in “a saving covenant with God,” and the second added that recognition of this reality requires Christians to find “new ways of understanding the universal significance of Christ.”⁹

Within a few months of the appearance of “Reflections,” Cardinal Avery Dulles published a critical response in the Catholic journal *America*, to which three distinguished theologians who participated in its formulation replied.¹⁰ The reply contains an assertion that illustrates the boldness that can characterize the argument for the abiding efficaciousness of the Jewish covenant. I do not believe that every Catholic who affirms such efficaciousness regards the assertion that we shall encounter as indispensable to the argument, but the willingness of the authors to mobilize it helps underscore the reasons for resistance among many traditional Catholics.

What then does the reply assert?

In arguing for the permanence and salvific nature of the Mosaic covenant, the authors say in so many words that Heb 8:13 and 10:9 contradict this position, but the Church has gone beyond those verses and has the authority to say that the author of Hebrews was mistaken. Similarly, they assert that Paul himself, in the very chapter of Romans that serves as the basis for the most liberal position on covenant, mistakenly thought that Israel now consisted of dead branches detached “from God's unfolding plans” but believed this condition to be temporary and soon to be corrected. However, we now know that he too was mistaken. Today's Church speaks of “the permanence of Israel” as “accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity.” “The magisterium can explicitly contradict an idea of an individual New Testament author.”

The authors go on to quote the Pontifical Biblical Commission to defend the legitimacy of these assertions. The Commission declared that

9. For a summary and analysis of these statements, see Mary C. Boys, “The Covenant in Contemporary Ecclesial Documents,” in Eugene B. Korn and John T. Pawlikowski, OSM, eds., *Two Faiths, One Covenant? Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 81–110, at 100–103.

10. Avery Cardinal Dulles, “Covenant and Mission,” *America* 187/12 (October 21, 2002) 8–11; Mary C. Boys, Philip A. Cunningham, and John T. Pawlikowski, “Theology's ‘Sacred Obligation’: A Reply to Cardinal Dulles,” *America* 187/12 (October 21, 2002) 12–16, http://www.bc.edu/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/BoysCunnPaw.html/.

“interpretation of Scripture involves a work of sifting and setting aside; it stands in continuity with earlier exegetical traditions, many elements of which it preserves and makes its own; but in other matters it will go its own way, seeking to make further progress” (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993). When they apply this, they make a critical, unacknowledged modification: “We argue that official Catholic teaching today has, in the 1993 PBC formulation, ‘gone its own way’ and ‘set aside’ the opinion of the author of Hebrews about Israel’s covenant.” The PBC spoke of setting aside exegetical traditions. The authors speak of setting aside the views of Paul and the author of Hebrews. I am hardly in a position to assert that the magisterium cannot do what they say, but their prooftext is unpersuasive and the position itself is surely not upheld universally within the Church.

Several years later, Cardinal Dulles devoted a longer article to the questions raised by the recent re-evaluation of the Jewish covenant, acknowledging the challenges they present, citing a multiplicity of positions, and attempting to develop a viable approach. He noted with approval the oft-quoted remark by Pope John Paul II in a 1980 speech in Mainz, where he spoke of dialogue “between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God, and that of the New Covenant.” However, the Cardinal vigorously rejected the position that the Old Covenant provides Jews a road to salvation separate from the one affirmed in the New.

In a passage that has particular relevance to the questions that I shall soon raise about the content of the Mosaic covenant, Dulles cited an unanswered letter by Michael Wyschogrod to the late Cardinal Lustiger of Paris, a Jewish convert to Christianity, that asks how the Cardinal can assert that he has not run away from Jewish tradition, given his abandonment of Jewish observance. Dulles went on to say, “If Lustiger had responded he might have pointed out that according to the teaching of Paul, which is normative for Christians, circumcision and the Mosaic law have lost their salvific value, at least for Christians, and in that sense been ‘superseded.’” The qualifying phrase “at least for Christians” does not sit well with Dulles’s later denial of a separate salvific road for Jews, or with his earlier assertion that the ceremonial law survives only “in a super-eminent way in Christ and the Church,” and it gives particularly revealing expression, however briefly, to the deep tensions that beset this discussion.¹¹

11. Avery Cardinal Dulles, “The Covenant with Israel,” *First Things* 157 (November, 2005) 16–21, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/11/the-covenant-with-israel/>.

In 2009, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops formally expressed reservations about “Reflections,” going so far as to say that although Jewish-Christian dialogue “would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism . . . the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ to which all are implicitly invited.” Jewish organizations regarded the affirmation that interfaith dialogue contains an implicit conversionary objective as profoundly objectionable, and I was involved in formulating two reactions. The first was a letter that I wrote on behalf of the Rabbinical Council of America and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, which concentrated on the redefinition of *dialogue*.¹² The other was a jointly written letter from five Jewish organizations. Most of the authors wanted to add an additional point criticizing the new statement for implying that the Mosaic covenant is not in effect. In light of my long-standing reservations about telling Christians what to believe about their own religion, I objected and helped formulate a compromise that produced the following text:

The second source of concern has to do with the continuing validity of the Mosaic covenant. There is a range of views within the Jewish community about the appropriate Jewish reaction to a Christian denial of the validity of this covenant. But we all recognize that affirming its validity is more likely to result in more positive attitudes toward Jews, and we were consequently encouraged by a series of what appeared to be weighty statements by Church officials over the years that endorsed this affirmation. The new statement has therefore engendered uncertainty as to the position espoused by the Church and its spokespersons as well as an understandable measure of disappointment.

He does offer a concession, which has little impact on our concerns, that “the observance of some of these [ritual] prescriptions by Jews who have become Christians could be permissible or even praiseworthy as a way of recalling the rootedness of Christianity in the Old Covenant.”

For an uncompromising polemic against any affirmation of an eternal Mosaic covenant, see Robert A. Sungenis, “The Old Covenant: Revoked or Not Revoked?; Jews and Christians: A Journey of Faith,” <http://archive.is/GRh44/>. This piece is written from an extremely conservative perspective but contains a wide-ranging survey of opinions with references to expressions of the most liberal position. For a more balanced essay rejecting what the authors call “extreme supersessionism” but also arguing vigorously against what they call the dual-covenant position that grants Jews salvation through their covenant, see Michael Forrest and David Palm, “All in the Family—Christians, Jews, and God,” <http://www.cuf.org/2009/07/all-in-the-family-christians-jews-and-god-2/>.

12. See <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105461/>.

To our great satisfaction, the bishops agreed to eliminate the offending passage, but what is worth noting for our purposes is that prominent Jews involved in interfaith dialogue have developed so strong an expectation that Christians will affirm the validity of the Mosaic covenant that they see any deviation from this position as profoundly objectionable and deserving of frontal criticism.

At this point, I am no longer certain that it is even in the Jewish interest to have Christians emphasize the Mosaic rather than the Abrahamic covenant. In addition to the points raised by Cardinal Koch's interviewer, a Christian affirmation that the Mosaic covenant remains in effect leads to some intriguing and potentially disturbing questions, at least from the perspective of a Jew for whom all the commandments in that covenant are fundamental to its essence.

If the covenant remains, does that mean that its actual content remains binding on Jews? Would Christians be impelled to regard Jews who do not observe the law of the Hebrew Bible in its fullness as sinners? Since some Christian texts see observance of the Old Law as a near impossibility, does that mean that Jews are for the most part denied salvation because of the failure to observe the Mosaic covenant properly? What of non-Orthodox Jews, especially Reform Jews, who even in principle observe the Old Law selectively, rejecting major elements? For that matter, Orthodox Jews observe the Old Law through the prism of the Talmud, whose validity Christians do not recognize. Can one be saved by a covenant to which one does not adhere? Should Christians at least engage in missionary efforts directed at nonreligious Jews, who do not observe the Old Law at all except to the degree that their moral instincts lead them to behave in ways that happen to accord with some of its provisions? (This last possibility bears an affinity to the position taken by some Reform Jews in the last few decades that Jews should proselytize unchurched Gentiles.)

A *reductio ad absurdum* of this line of questioning would lead to the rejection of individual Jews who wish to convert to Christianity; they are, after all, bound by the Mosaic covenant. Since no Christian takes this position, it follows that the doctrine that the Mosaic covenant remains in effect in its original form applies only to Jews who do not embrace Christianity.

This limitation explains why Jewish converts may be welcomed (thus dealing with the *reductio ad absurdum*), but it does not address the other questions. The deepest irony that could emerge from this discourse

is that Christians, whose tradition regards the so-called legalism associated with the Pharisees of the Gospels with disdain (despite the massive and complex structure of canon law), would be placed in the acutely uncomfortable position of seeing the observance of the laws that mark the Mosaic covenant as a requirement for the salvation of unconverted Jews.

These considerations, then, appear to lead to unacceptable, almost inconceivable, consequences from a Christian perspective. If this is the case, what do Christians mean when they say that the Mosaic covenant remains in effect and that Jews can attain salvation through that covenant? Though they presumably do not restrict this salvation to fully observant Jews, it is difficult to imagine that even the most liberal ecumenicists would affirm that the Mosaic covenant is a vehicle of salvation for any decent human being born of Jewish parents.

Consequently, it appears that their position, while not articulated in quite these terms, consists roughly of the following elements:

God's election of the Jews has not been annulled. That election was manifested in the covenant at Sinai, which remains effective and salvific. Those Jews who continue to adhere to it have been granted a great deal of latitude in determining their obligations under that covenant. That latitude is limited, however, by two broad considerations. First, the moral dimension of the Old Covenant, which has not been superseded by the new one, continues to be obligatory. Second, Jewish modes of relationship to the Old Covenant must be governed by a genuine sense that its core values remain binding; thus, the practices in which committed Jews engage to express that relationship must amount in their minds to continued adherence to its key message. With sufficient effort, one might even argue that many secular Jews meet this criterion on the grounds that a sense of identification with the Jewish people or community qualifies as adherence to the Mosaic covenant. In sum, as long as Jews believe that in some crucial sense they remain loyal to the Sinaitic covenant—even in the absence of a belief that anything noteworthy actually happened at Sinai—that covenant grants them salvation.

The granting of salvation through the Mosaic covenant to people who do not observe much or any of the "ceremonial" law in the Pentateuch is facilitated by the historic Christian devaluation of Jewish ritual, which occasionally even took the form of denial that certain laws were ever intended to be fulfilled literally. Moreover, the acceptability of pentateuchal criticism in the contemporary Catholic Church complicates the question of the very meaning and content of the Mosaic or Sinaitic

covenant in intriguing fashion that we cannot pursue here and may further facilitate the conviction that some of its injunctions were never binding.¹³ What emerges from this speculative analysis is that the sharp, counterfactual irony where Christians insist on the salvific indispensability of Jewish ritual observance for unconverted Jews is replaced by a mild but real irony: Catholics friendly to Jews, who take the greatest pains to express respect for classical Judaism in its own terms, essentially resort to Christianity's historical devaluation of Jewish law so that they can regard Jews who devalue that law as beneficiaries of the Old Covenant's salvific power. This devaluation—along with its generous consequences—is of course perfectly legitimate from a Christian perspective and cannot justly elicit criticism even from the most traditional Jew.

This chain of reasoning may be entirely misguided, but it makes me uneasy about the potential course of a process in which Christians rigorously confront the consequences of an eternal Mosaic covenant. The great advantage for Jews of a Christian affirmation that the Mosaic covenant remains in effect is that it provides a powerful argument against proselytizing directed at them, and nothing that I will say fully negates this advantage. Nonetheless, among Christians sympathetic to Jews, affirming the persistence of an Abrahamic covenant can yield almost the same benefits and is not beset by the majority of the questions that I have raised. (Christians not particularly sympathetic to Jews will in any event not accept the eternity of the Mosaic covenant.) The Catholic Church has abandoned proselytizing efforts directed at Jews even though the continuing validity and independent salvific power of the Mosaic covenant is by no means generally accepted doctrine.¹⁴

13. At a small Jewish-Catholic conference on the understanding of the Bible held in Lucerne in 1984, the head of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome discussed Catholic approaches to biblical scholarship. He summarized what he saw as the contemporary approach by saying that every book of the Bible has two authors: God and the human author. I asked whether he thought that the following formulation would do justice to this position: "Every biblical book has two authors: God and the human author, but God does not read the final page proofs." After brief consideration, he answered in the affirmative. This approach can of course provide support—and is probably even a *sine qua non*—for the position that the magisterium can reject the view of a New Testament author. (The book that emerged from that conference is, Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, eds., *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation* [New York: Paulist, 1987].)

14. For an argument against proselytizing Jews that does not flow from theological considerations, see Berger, "Reflections on Conversion and Proselytizing in Judaism and Christianity," *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations* 3 (2008) R1-R8, [http://](http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1502/1355/)

Moreover, it is the divine blessing to Abraham, which undergirds much of the empathy with Jews affirmed by many evangelical Christians, and their support for the Jewish right to the land of Israel (currently far more important to most Jews than abstract discussions of salvation through the Old Law) that requires no recourse to the Mosaic covenant. The prophetic passages that these Christians often cite foretelling a restoration of the Jewish people to its land can stand on their own or be understood as a function of the promises to the patriarchs. (As medieval Jews argued in debates about the True Israel, it is difficult to spiritualize those promises and refer them to the Church since they speak about return from exile, and it was the carnal Israel, not the purported spiritual one, that was dispersed.)

And so we need to note an additional consequence of *Nostra Aetate*, namely, its elimination of the key theological argument justifying non-recognition of Israel. This follows inexorably from the rejection of the view that postcrucifixion Jews bear responsibility for the killing of Jesus. Nonetheless, the Vatican did not translate this implication into practice for many years. The refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Israel was a sore point in Jewish-Catholic interaction, and it is difficult to take seriously the forced theoretical rationales such as the absence of settled borders or a formal peace that were proffered for this refusal. At this point, however, there is no value in rehearsing the problematic character of the Vatican's delay in exchanging ambassadors with Israel; what matters is that the situation has been rectified, and that this was ultimately made possible by *Nostra Aetate*.

In the decades following Vatican II, the central Church and various national conferences of bishops issued a series of documents that flesh out the general prescriptions of *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4. While most Jews have responded to these initiatives with appreciation and enthusiasm, a minority have reacted in a grudging, even churlish fashion. They have complained that *Nostra Aetate* itself did not specifically use the term "deicide" in its denial of Jewish guilt, and that it "deplored" rather than "condemned" anti-Semitism (though the latter "defect" has been rectified by later pronouncements); they have objected to the fact that the 1998 document on the *Shoah* did not hold the Church *qua* Church responsible for

ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1502/1355/. The piece also appeared in Joseph D. Small and Gilbert S. Rosenthal, eds., *Let us Reason Together: Christians and Jews in Conversation* (Louisville: Witherspoon, 2010), 131-40, and was reprinted in Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 367-77, at 376-77.

anti-Semitism and its most terrible manifestation; they have demanded that the Church explicitly recognize the moral deficiencies of Pius XII's behavior during the Nazi era; they have insisted that even what I regard as benign supersessionism be rejected as an offense against interfaith morality. Some Jews indignantly denounce the historic Church for its teaching of contempt and then dismiss the revocation of that teaching as an overdue triviality. Such responses strike me as inherently unjustified and/or pragmatically unwise.

At the same time, celebratory reactions to these post-Vatican II documents need to be tempered by the recognition that the impact of such statements is often limited, and not only with respect to reception by the laity. Declarations by Church representatives charged to deal with Jews can reflect a perspective different from that of other Church authorities. There can be profound differences, for example, between declarations regarding Israel issued by the Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee and the equivalent committee of Catholics and Muslims. Even when a statement is issued by a national Catholic body, there is no guarantee that it will be honored when tested in a context involving authorities who do not regularly work with Jews. Thus, the document on *Criteria for Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States was utterly ignored by the Conference's own Office of Film and Broadcasting in its review of Mel Gibson's controversial film.¹⁵

Let me close with a brief remark about the implications of the deep changes in the official Catholic views of Jews and Judaism for Jewish self-reflection. I am implacably opposed to modifications of what I regard as core Jewish evaluations of Christianity in the service of ecumenical reciprocity. At the same time, Jews have confronted troubling issues relating to their view of Christianity and their general attitude to non-Jews over a period of many centuries when *Nostra Aetate* was not even a glimmer in the eye of the Church. This inner confrontation was stimulated by theological, ethical, economic, and legal factors that were not always connected to Christian attitudes toward Jews; and when they were, the reaction could sometimes move in an unexpected direction.¹⁶ Precisely

15. I commented on this point in "Jews, Christians, and 'The Passion,'" *Commentary* 117/5 (May 2004) 23–31 (reprinted in David Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 399–416, at 413), as well as in the exchange in *Commentary* 118/2 (2004) 10.

16. See *inter multa alia* Jacob Katz's classic work, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), and my discussion: Berger, "Jacob Katz on Jews

because Christianity is simultaneously similar to Judaism and profoundly different from it, limning its contours from the perspective of Jewish law and thought is a daunting challenge, and I have struggled with it for years in a variety of forums.¹⁷ Like the Christian effort to define a proper relationship with Judaism, this task, in the famous words of the Mishnah, is not for us to complete, but we are not free to desist from it.

and Christians in the Middle Ages" in Jay M. Harris, ed., *The Pride of Jacob: Essays on Jacob Katz and his Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 41–63, reprinted in Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 51–74. See too my observations in Berger, "Christians, Gentiles, and the Talmud: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Response to the Attack on Rabbinic Judaism," in Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner, eds., *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 115–30, reprinted in Berger, *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue*, 158–76, at 176.

17. My most extensive and personal expression of this struggle is an essay titled "Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts," in Marc D. Stern, ed., *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 83–108.

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