



## The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible: A Response to the Pontifical Biblical Commission Document

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**Dr. Edward Kessler, Director of the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge, England, reviews the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 2002 statement on the role and authority of the Hebrew Scriptures for Christians and the New Testament view of the Jews and Judaism.**

### **The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible: A Response to the Pontifical Biblical Commission Document**

[Edward Kessler](#)

#### **Introduction**

After so many centuries of unhappy and traumatic relations between Christians and Jews, a new era has started in the last couple of generations. Begun by pioneers in the first half of the twentieth century such as Claude Montefiore and James Parkes, the relationship received renewed and widespread attention as a result of the Shoah (Holocaust). This resulted in a general awareness of the immensity of the burden of guilt which the Church carried not only for its general silence, with some noble exceptions during 1933-45, but also because of the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition which led to a 'teaching of contempt' towards Jews and Judaism which it carried on for so many centuries.

As Jules Isaac showed immediately after the war, it was this that sowed the seeds of hatred and made it so easy for Hitler to use antisemitism as a political weapon. Cardinal Ratzinger, who wrote a warm forward commending the document under review, shows awareness of this legacy stating that "the Biblical Commission could not ignore the contemporary context, where the shock of the Shoah has put the whole question [of the Scriptures] under a new light".

The significance of [The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible \(JPSSCB\)](#) to Jewish-Christian relations is best understood in the context of earlier statements by the Churches and meetings between Christians and Jews. There are a number of key moments in the second half of the twentieth century, which illustrate Christian reassessment of Judaism. One need only mention the meeting at Seelisburg in 1947, which brought together Christians and Jews who issued an historically significant [10 point statement](#) and agreed to found the International Council of Christian and Jews. Another important milestone was the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 in [Amsterdam](#) and the growing ecumenical movement, which attempted to break down the barriers between the churches. Regular WCC meetings since then have contributed to the Christian reassessment of relations with Jews and Judaism.

The Roman Catholic Church joined the modern Jewish-Christian dialogue during Vatican II, but its importance began to be recognised a few years earlier when John XXIII changed the Good Friday

liturgy during which Catholics said, “Let us pray also for the perfidious Jews”. In 1960, one year later, the Pope received wide attention for publicly greeting Jewish visitors with the words, “I am Joseph your brother”.

In 1965, [Nostra Aetate](#) was published and in its wake came a rich growth in Catholic-Jewish dialogue. A key paragraph states:

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred Synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

According to Edward Flannery, *Nostra Aetate* “terminated in a stroke a millennial teaching of contempt of Jews and Judaism and unequivocally asserted the Church’s debt to its Jewish heritage.”<sup>1</sup> Most importantly of all, it ushered in a new era, fresh attitudes, a new language of discourse never previously heard in the Catholic Church concerning Jews. The concept of a dialogue now entered the relationship.

However, the success of the document was dependent upon “things still to be worked out”.<sup>2</sup> There were a number of questions left unanswered and looking back over 40 years, what *Nostra Aetate* achieved was a series of possibilities which can be seen in such phrases as “God holds the Jews most dear” and “mutual understanding and respect”. These concerned issues such as preaching, Christian antisemitism and the interpretation of Scripture. For instance, *Nostra Aetate* stated that nothing was to be taught or preached that was “out of harmony with the truth of the Gospel”.<sup>3</sup> 1965 was clearly still too soon to consider why texts in Matthew and John tended to excuse the disciples, but accuse more and more Jews by excluding more and more Romans. As I shall explore below, *JPSSCB* sets this question as one of a number of tasks in its exploration of the relationship between Scripture and the Jewish-Christian encounter. It aims to answer Cardinal Ratzinger when he asks, “has not the New Testament itself contributed to creating a hostility towards the Jewish people that provided a support for the ideology of those who wished to destroy Israel?”

Since 1965 both Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church have issued significant statements on the Jewish-Christian relationship. The former include:

- The Rhineland Synod in 1980 (Evangelical Church in the Rhineland) entitled [Towards a Renewal of the Relationship of Christians and Jews](#)
- The Lambeth Conference of 1988 (Anglican Communion) entitled [Jews, Christians, Muslims: the Way of Dialogue](#)
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1994 entitled [Declaration to the Jewish Community](#)
- The Leuenberg Church Fellowship (consisting of the Reformation Churches in Europe) in 2001 entitled [The Church and Israel](#).

These statements demanded that Christianity abandon its historical religious animosity and misleading caricature of Judaism, which were admitted as wrong. As a result Christianity began to shift from what was, for the most part, an inherent need to condemn Judaism to one of a condemnation of Christian anti-Judaism.

The Roman Catholic Church has also produced a number of significant statements on Jews and Judaism since Vatican II. All were issued by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and provide the basis for *JPSSC*:

- 1974 [Guidelines and Suggestions](#) for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*

- 1985 [Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis](#)
- 1998 [We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah](#)<sup>4</sup>

This process has not led to a separation from all things Jewish but in fact, to a closer relationship with “the elder brother”. Thus, as far as a Christian contribution to antisemitism is concerned, the Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church instead of being part of the problem have now become part of the solution. We have travelled a great distance from the time of my parents’ generation, which felt so abandoned during the Holocaust and long afterwards when Jews wondered whether they would ever be accepted as part of humanity. It seems hardly conceivable that only one or two generations have passed since then.<sup>5</sup>

During this transformation in relations, it is possible to trace a gradual emergence of two themes with increasing clarity, both of which are becoming more and more significant in the Jewish-Christian encounter. Indeed, it is my view that they will remain central to the contemporary Christian encounter with Judaism. Firstly, the documents point out that the history of Judaism did not end with the destruction of the Second Temple but developed an ongoing innovative and living religious tradition. Secondly, they point out that Christians need to understand Judaism as a living faith and must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.

For example, the 1985 *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis* calls on preachers and catechists to “assess it carefully in itself and with due awareness of the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today”. This instruction is one of the criteria by which we need to judge the 2001 document – to what extent does *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* show an appreciation of the modern Jewish understanding of Scripture? In other words, does Christianity appreciate Judaism in its own terms or does the old theology of *Adversus Iudaeos* continue in more subtle ways?<sup>6</sup>

This means we need to explore the difference between Christian respect and reverence for Judaism and appropriation or replacement of Judaism. Is it possible – perhaps we should also ask, is it desirable? – to expect Christians to integrate living Judaism to some extent into its identity? This desire, doubtless, lies behind the canonisation of Edith Stein in 1999. As far as the Pope was concerned, her canonisation made the suffering of Jews understandable to the masses of the Catholics and teaches that an attack on Jews was an attack on the Church. One of the goals of the canonisation was to develop the sense of communion with the Jewish people. However, a concern expressed by some Jews and Catholics represents the negative side of such integration – the appropriation of Jewish suffering by Christians.

It is clear from the above example that the modern Christian-Jewish encounter requires great patience. Yet, in a very short space of time (the last 40 years), the Roman Catholic Church has produced a remarkable series of documents, which have not only repudiated its anti-Jewish theology but has reversed it. The Jewish people are no longer viewed as cursed but blessed. *JPSSCB* represents another key stage in the development of a new Christian understanding of Judaism.

*JPSSCB* represents current Roman Catholic teaching on the Jewish-Christian relationship in the context of biblical scholarship and aims to “advance the dialogue between Christians and Jews with clarity and in a spirit of mutual esteem and affection” (Forward). It is the first statement on Jewish-Christian relations issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. This is significant because it illustrates that consideration of the Christian-Jewish encounter extends beyond the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. It is the concern of the Church as a whole.

The document is divided into three parts.

1. The first explains how the “sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people are a fundamental part of the Christian Bible” and that the New Testament writings acknowledge the Jewish Scriptures have a permanent value as divine revelation.
2. The second part examines key themes, which link both Jewish and Christian Scriptures.
3. The third addresses New Testament attitudes to Jews and Judaism.

## 1. Sacred Scriptures of the Jewish People as a Fundamental Part of the Christian Bible

The first section tackles what the Pope has identified as the resurgence of Marcionism and emphasises that the New Testament should not be viewed in opposition to the Old. Indeed, the Jewish Scriptures (generally used as an alternative to the term ‘Old Testament’) forms an integral part of the Christian Bible (interestingly, at no point does the document refer to the Catholic Bible). In the second century CE Marcion had argued, albeit unsuccessfully, that Christianity should reject the Jewish Scriptures (as well as most of the Gospels). The tension between the Scriptures is, therefore, as old as Christianity itself. The early Church insisted simultaneously on the continuity and the discontinuity of the relationship between the ‘Old Testament’ and the ‘New Testament’. *Continuity* centred upon the claim that the God of the Hebrew Bible was the same as the God of Christ. *Discontinuity* derived from the belief that the Hebrew Bible pointed to a future saving event – to Christ. The use of terms such as ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ is also common in *JPSSCB* but with one significant difference – neither term implies that Jews have lost their ‘ownership’ of their ‘Sacred Scriptures’. Rather, Christianity and Judaism share a common heritage, “the Sacred Scripture of Israel” (§10), which is no longer viewed as solely owned by the Church.

The ongoing Jewish ‘right’ to the Jewish Scriptures has significant implications for the present day and future Christian relations with Israel for it rejects the claims of some Christians that Christianity has replaced Judaism as the New Israel. Acknowledgement of Jewish ‘ownership’ of the Scriptures marks another important step by the Roman Catholic Church in its abandoning of the ‘teaching of contempt’ and unease about its *Adversus Iudeos* heritage. The traditional teaching is based on the writings of the church fathers, as evidenced by Justin Martyr (d.160), who argued that the Church had taken over the Hebrew Scriptures from Judaism because only Christianity could offer the correct interpretation:

Let all of us Gentiles come together and glorify God, because He has looked down upon us; let us glorify Him by the King of glory, by the Lord of hosts. For He hath taken pleasure even in the nations, and He receives the sacrifices more gladly from us than from you... I think that by these arguments I shall be able to persuade even those who are of slight intelligence. For the words have not been fitted together by me, nor adorned by human art, but they were sung by David, proclaimed as good news by Isaiah, preached by Zechariah, written down by Moses. You recognize them, Trypho? *They are laid up in your scriptures, or rather, not in yours but in ours, for we obey them, but you, when you read, do not understand their sense* [italics added].<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the Church has historically taught that the Jewish Scriptures did not belong to Jews but had become the property of the Church and that Jewish interpretations were false because only Christianity offers the correct interpretations.<sup>8</sup> This view is no longer acceptable within the Roman Catholic Church. Even when *JPSSCB* uses the terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament” it emphasises that the Church “has no wish to suggest that the Jewish scriptures are outdated or surpassed. On the contrary, it has always affirmed that Old Testament and the New Testament are inseparable” (§19). Misunderstanding these terms illustrates an ignorance, which the document aims to overcome, of the deep ties linking the New Testament to the Old, an ignorance that is

based on the prejudice that Christians have nothing in common with Jews. Thus, the document emphasises “the authority of the Jewish Bible as Divine revelation” (§1) so that the relationship between the two is not undermined. Again and again it stresses the dependence of the New Testament upon the Old, regularly using the phrase “the New Testament, in continuity with the Old” (eg., §32, §84 and elsewhere) and concludes that “without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an unintelligible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither”.

As a result, it is impossible to express the “mystery of Christ without reference to the Jewish Scriptures” (§7). Jesus’ human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel and with the Old Testament, as illustrated for example, by his taking part in the synagogue and Jewish religious life. Significantly, the document calls for Christians to learn about Judaism and how it retained its vitality and continued to develop for over 2000 years after the birth of Jesus. As far as Jewish interpretation of Scripture is concerned, it radically calls for the use of Jewish commentaries by Christians (§22). This continues the emerging trend noted in the introduction that the Church has identified a need for Christians to learn about Judaism as it developed in post-biblical times.

However, its courage in making this radical step is somewhat undermined by its failure to put this into practice. For example, *JPSSCB* commonly quotes from texts found at Qumran which represent the Dead Sea Scroll community in order to portray mainstream Jewish views, contemporaneous to Jesus. At best, it is questionable to state that “the clearest expression of how Jesus’ contemporaries interpreted the Scriptures are given in the Dead Sea Scrolls” (§12). Such an opinion may have been forthcoming because the Pontifical Biblical Commission possesses more experts on the Dead Sea Scrolls than on Rabbinic Judaism but the lack of references to mainstream (Rabbinic) Judaism indicates a serious weakness. The Dead Sea Scroll community did not at any time represent mainstream Judaism and it would have been better to acknowledge that it represents a minority tradition within Judaism (closer to John the Baptist than Jesus). The demand – repeated in this document and commended in earlier Catholic documents – that a good understanding of Judaism is, according to the 1974 *Guidelines*, essential for the formation of Christian identity and “a right relationship with Judaism”, remains unfulfilled.

An example of this exaggerated concern with Qumran can be seen in the document’s explanation of the Jewish understanding of covenant and its emphasis on the significance of the leader of the Dead Sea Scroll community, the Teacher of Righteousness, rather than to rabbinic explanations (§39). In fact, there is only one brief quotation from the Rabbinic literature in the whole document (a brief mention of Hillel (§79), which consists of over 100 pages of text and nearly as many pages of footnotes.

In its defence, one could argue that because the beginnings of Rabbinic Judaism are shrouded in mystery and the earliest written texts are dated from the second century CE, the Pontifical Biblical Commission might have decided against making reference to the Rabbinic writings. However, the strength of the oral tradition and the similarity between many of Jesus’ statements with the words of the rabbis – the ‘Golden Rule’ being a famous example – demand that the document exhibit an awareness of the rabbinic contribution. In other words, the commendation to take Jewish commentaries seriously should have been implemented.

By failing to do so, *JPSSCB* inadvertently ignores contemporary scholarship, which is becoming increasingly aware of the interaction between Jewish and Christian biblical interpreters over the first few centuries.

This weakness is reinforced by the way the document tackles the Jewish understanding of Torah. For many hundreds of years Christians have identified Torah solely with ‘Law’ (as a result of its translation in the LXX as *nomos* and in the Vulgate as *lex*). The term, ‘Law’ fails to depict the full

meaning of the Hebrew word (the root of which means ‘teaching’), which includes ‘Law’ – but much more beside. The document discusses the development and observance of Torah in Judaism and although it refers to post-biblical writings, limits itself to Baruch and Ben Sira and fails to mention the rabbinic understanding of Torah (§43).

One final example is worth mentioning – the surprising omission of the rabbinic context in the section, which deals with prayer in the New Testament. In a discussion about the ‘Our Father’ the document simply notes that the formulas “resemble Jewish prayer . . . but with an unparalleled sobriety” (§49). Even a brief mention of the ‘Our Father’ prayer in its Jewish context should have referred to the Rabbinic writings since it has been shown that each line of the ‘Our Father’ prayer contains a parallel in the Rabbinic literature. This most Jewish of prayers is an excellent example of how it is impossible to appreciate fully New Testament passages without their proper Jewish context.

## 2. Key Themes in the New Testament and in the Jewish Scriptures

The second section examines key themes, which link both Jewish and Christian scriptures. It begins by explaining that the relationship between the Old Testament and the New is based on reciprocity – on the one hand the New Testament has to be read in light of the Old; on the other, the Old needs to be read in light of Jesus Christ. This approach causes difficulty because it can be overly dependent upon a typological or allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Neither *Nostra Aetate* nor the *Guidelines* commented on issues associated with typology and the *Notes* simply highlighted the existence of a problem. The *Notes* (1985) explained that the Church had traditionally resolved the problem of the relation between the Old and New Testaments by means of typology but admitted that this caused unease and was a sign of a problem unresolved. The *Notes* warned that, “we should be careful to avoid any transition from the Old to the New Testament which might seem merely a rupture” (§12).

*JPSSCB* tackles this problem squarely and is an important development in Roman Catholic teaching on interpretation of Scripture. It reiterates the point that “the New Testament cannot be fully understood except in the light of the Old Testament.” (§21) but acknowledges that links between the Old with the New were abused and that Scripture could be ‘severed’ from their context. As a result “interpretation became arbitrary” (§20). The document points to the dangers of a “fundamental” approach to Scripture, stating that it “would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipation of future events” (§21), particularly messianic prophecies. The emphasis on fulfilment of biblical prophecy can be seen not only in the writings of some Christians but also fundamentalist Jews. For example, what was once viewed an interpretation about the nature of the biblical word and promise has for some in the situation of Israel now become concretised in a contemporary event. *JPSSCB* refutes this approach to biblical interpretation.

The document suggests that one of the ways, Catholics can overcome an unhealthy dependence upon typological interpretation is by increasing their knowledge of the Rabbinic literature and the Jewish approaches to the Bible. This recommendation is based on a startling statement, which explores the value of Jewish approaches to Scripture:

Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible *is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple Period* [italics added] , a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion. Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible. On the practical level of exegesis, Christians can, nonetheless, learn much from Jewish exegesis practised for more than two thousand years, and, in fact, they have learned much in the course of history. For their part, it is to be hoped that Jews

themselves can derive profit from Christian exegetical research. (§22)

These words are both bold and significant. Catholics are now told that they should take into consideration rabbinic and contemporary Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament. They are also told that the Old Testament contains a divine revelation unrelated to the coming of Christ and Christianity. This was not only valid for the Hebrews at the time of its writing and but is still valid for contemporary Judaism. By stating that Jewish interpretation of Scripture is possible – I am told ‘valid’ is an appropriate understanding – the Pontifical Biblical Commission is applying the Pope’s oft-repeated comment about the “covenant remaining with the Jews” to the interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. If the covenant remains with the Jewish people, alongside Christians, their interpretation of Scripture must, at the very least, remain “possible”. Thus, the document formally acknowledges themes that the Pope himself has long advocated.

Of course, the document does not deny the truth of the Christian interpretation of Scripture but allows room for the validity of Jewish interpretation, which regardless of the lack of references to such Jewish interpretations mentioned above, is a major step forward in the Christian reconciliation with Judaism. It therefore contributes significantly to the creation of theological space required for a genuine interfaith encounter.

This section also devotes some time to the closely connected themes of covenant and election and discusses their place in both the Christian and Jewish Scriptures. Of all the New Testament passages considered, one of the most commonly cited is Romans 9-11, which (not coincidentally) has also been central to John Paul II’s teaching about the Jewish-Christian relationship and the identity of the *verus Israel* (true people of Israel).

Once again we notice a significant development in *JPSSCB* in comparison with previous statements. *Nostra Aetate* presented the Church as the new people of God. The *Guidelines* avoided mention of supercessionism although it warned against stereotypical descriptions of the Old Testament and Judaism as a religion of justice, fear and legalism in contrast to the New Testament and Christianity as a religion of compassion, mercy and love.<sup>9</sup> The *Notes* presented Jews as “the people of the God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked” (§1). The new document moves on the discussion.

It begins by acknowledging a divergence of opinion about the identity of the “children of God” – are they only Christians (“children of the promise” – Rom 9:6-8) or Christians alongside Jews because “God has not cast off his people” (Rom 11:2)? Since “the root is holy” (Rom 11:16), Paul is convinced that at the end, God, in his inscrutable wisdom, will graft all Israel back onto their own olive tree (Rom 11:24); “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26).

To the question of whether the election of Israel remains valid, the document explains that Paul gives two different answers: the first says that the branches [Jews] have been cut off because of their refusal to believe (Rom 11:17,20), but “a remnant remains, chosen by grace [Christians]” (Rom 11:5). The second response says that the Jews who became “enemies as regards the Gospel” remain “beloved as regards election, for the sake of the ancestors” (Rom 11:28) and Paul foresees that they will obtain mercy (Rom 11:27,31). The Jews do not cease to be called to live by faith in the intimacy of God “for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29; §36).

The document concludes that, “the Church . . . understands her own existence as a participation in the election of Israel and in a vocation that belongs, in the first place, to Israel, despite the fact that only a small number of Israelites accepted it (§36).” This passage serves to provide the theological space for present day Judaism as we highlighted earlier but how, might one ask, does the document deal with those New Testament texts, which stand in opposition to this teaching? One thinks of the Epistle to Hebrews in particular as an example of a New Testament book that argues

for the replacement of the old Israel (Judaism) by the new Israel (Christianity). It is interesting to notice that *JPSSCB* does not tackle this directly but summarises the position of Hebrews in one short paragraph. It states that the author of Hebrews rejects the temple sacrifices of Second Temple Judaism and teaches that, “the covenant announced and prefigured in the Old Testament is fulfilled” (§42). It does not elaborate on what Hebrews means by ‘fulfilled’ (‘replaced’ is what Hebrews really means, which of course allows no room for Judaism theologically). In contrast, the document points out that Paul’s comments in Romans 9-11 do allow for the theological space for Jews and Judaism. *JPSSCB* reduces the significance of Hebrews by giving precedence to Paul and states forthrightly that “far from being a substitution for Israel, the Church is in solidarity with it” (§65).

Does this imply a two-covenant view of salvation, which would have the effect of undermining contemporary missionary activity towards Jews? Does it move away from the efforts of the earliest church to convert Jews? The statement certainly raises questions about the way the church understands Jews and salvation, demanding further reflection on the significance of the universality of Christ’s redemptive action. To what extent does salvation of Jews depend primarily on their own covenant rather than on the universal work of Christ? This question remains unanswered for the moment and will perhaps be tackled by another document in the not too distant future. However, the very question sets a challenge (threat?) to Evangelicals outside the Church and conservatives within who criticise it for abandoning evangelism and replacing it with dialogue, which, in their view, compromises Christianity itself. It should be noted that their position now stands outside the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

The result of the discussion on covenant and election is that the Church now teaches that although Jews do not recognise God’s salvific plan in the New Testament, they remain the people of God. This is part of God’s mysterious plan of salvation, the final outcome of which is the salvation of all Israel, “a very important doctrine which Christians should never forget” (§59).

The document acknowledges a special status of “elder brother” for the Jewish people, thereby giving them a “unique place among all other religions” (§36). At the End Time, however, the Church expects Jews to realise the truth of Christianity. Does such an eschatological expectation cause difficulty for Jewish-Christian relations? No, because Judaism also expects the *eschaton* to reveal the truth of its position. In other words, Jews have their own eschatological expectations. Both communities are convinced they possess the ultimate truth.

A striking passage which deals with eschatological expectations states that, “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain”. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church now teaches that Jews, alongside Christians, are commended for keeping alive the messianic expectation. The difference is that for Christians “the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us”. (§21). What Christians believe to have been accomplished in Christ “has yet to be accomplished in us and in the world”.

*Nostra Aetate* had not touched on the Jewish ‘no’ to Jesus while the *Guidelines* had called on Catholics to understand the difficulties for the “Jewish soul” with its “pure notion of divine transcendence when faced with the mystery of the incarnate word”. (Section I) The *Notes* suggested that the Jewish ‘no’ was “a sign to be interpreted within God’s design” (§6) but the new document develops this much more fully. It shows that the Jewish Scriptures, with their associated Jewish interpretations, can make a contribution to the Christian understanding of the Scriptures when previously they had been a point of difference and argument. The acknowledgement of the legitimacy of a Jewish understanding of waiting for the Messiah is an example because the document identifies Jewish expectations of the coming of the Messiah with the second coming of Jesus. Both Jews and Christians share this anticipation. “Christians, like Jews, live in expectation”.



### 3. The Portrait of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament

The third and final section of *JPSSCB* addresses New Testament attitudes to Jews and consists of a detailed survey of statements about Jews in Christian scripture. It repeats the Second Vatican Council's condemnation of the view that the New Testament supports contempt and hostility toward the Jews. Although the New Testament exhibits reproach towards Jews (which increases in virulence for those who actively oppose Christians), the document denies that the New Testament contains an attitude of contempt. "Real anti-Jewish feeling, that is, an attitude of contempt, hostility and persecution of the Jews as Jews, is not found in any New Testament text and is incompatible with its teaching" (§87).

The document explains the polemic by an argument of detailed contextualisation, pointing out that it is influenced by the later "redactional context" and that it is similar to the polemic found in the prophetic writings, as well as in apocalyptic literature. This makes its "vigour . . . less astonishing". The document explains that the polemic in the New Testament was also a response to:

the Jewish rejection of Jesus,

arguments between Jews and Jewish Christians,

harassment of Christians by Jews.

Most importantly, the document explains that the polemic was "for the most part internal, between two groups both belonging to Jerusalem" (§70). Although this phrase is mentioned almost in passing, it seems to me that polemic directed towards those Jews who did not accept Jesus as messiah by those Jews who did, provides the most obvious explanation for its existence in the New Testament. If only the fact that the New Testament records arguments (sometimes bitter, sometimes less so) *between groups of Jews were more widely known*, their harmful consequences might not have been so severe. The New Testament is not an account of arguments between Christians and Jews! This teaching needs to be widely taught in the Roman Catholic Church (and also within the Jewish community – but that is another paper).

It is somewhat disappointing to note that *JPSSCB* failed to explore why Christian Scripture has been used to justify persecution of Jews. Why have the consequences of the New Testament polemic towards Jews proved so destructive? The contextualisation of the polemic is a valuable tool in tackling the problem but it would also have been valuable to tackle why the problem exists in the first place. Why have some Christians (and others) used the New Testament as a tool to disparage Jews? This brings us back to the challenge set by Cardinal Ratzinger when he stated that Jewish-Christian relations need to be considered in light of the Holocaust. The document mentions the Shoah only once when it states that "the horror in the wake of the extermination of the Jews (the Shoah) during the Second World War has led all the Churches to rethink their relationship with Judaism and, as a result, to reconsider their interpretation of the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament" (§22). Although no-one would deny that Nazism was opposed to Christianity, it is well-known that Hitler often justified his antisemitism with reference to the Church and Christian attitudes towards Judaism.<sup>10</sup> The document fails to examine to what extent there is a relationship between the Shoah (and the history of Christian antisemitism) and the New Testament.

I am not suggesting that the New Testament is antisemitic – such a charge is false – but it has

been used to justify antisemitism and the Pontifical Biblical Commission missed an opportunity to tackle the reasons for this abuse of Scripture. A study of the relationship between Jews, Christians and the Bible (for this is true also of the Old Testament as well as the New) should consider why it has been interpreted to promote hatred, discrimination or superiority of one group over another. It has been altogether too common to come across a biblical text used for the purpose of the subjugation of women to men, black to white, Jew to Christian. The document would have benefited from acknowledging that the traditional 'teaching of contempt' has fostered an abuse of the Sacred Scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

Had the document considered this topic, it surely would have helpfully pointed out that the Scriptures themselves provide the hermeneutical principle (shared by both Christians and Jews) to overcome such misinterpretation: humanity should live by the commandments and not die by their observance. This means that in light of the Holocaust, biblical texts need to be examined in light of potential damage they may cause (or the real damage they have caused). It is a shame that *JPSSCB* missed this opportunity.

The document does of course tackle difficult texts in the New Testament, which it notes, were provoked in a time of conflict. It explains that the situation has radically changed since then and that the polemic has no relevance to contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. "The New Testament polemical texts, even those expressed in general terms, have to do with concrete historical contexts and are never meant to be applied to Jews of all times and places merely because they are Jews."

Among the troublesome passages tackled include the Passion Narratives, some of the most difficult texts in the New Testament because they exaggerate Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus and downplay Roman responsibility. Consequently, they have been extremely harmful in Jewish-Christian relations. The document is troubling at this point because it claims that the leadership of the Jewish people was intent on killing Jesus and destroying Christianity whereas it is more likely that the Roman government and Pontius Pilate were particularly oppressive, not the Pharasaic leadership. The document might even have pointed out that in Passion Narratives the one Jewish group that disappears from the accounts is the Pharisees. This fact, it seems to me, is highly significant not only for the biblical account but also for modern Jewish-Christian relations, since the Pharisees were the forerunner of Rabbinic Judaism.

## Conclusion

Overall, *JPSSCB* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the Sacred Scriptures and Jewish-Christian relations. It also contributes to an improved understanding of Judaism among Christians. The document does of course have a number of weaknesses, notably the lack of awareness of the debt the New Testament owes to Rabbinic Judaism, an over emphasis on the Dead Sea Scrolls and a reluctance to explain why biblical texts are open to abuse.

Nevertheless, its strengths far outweigh these weaknesses and it is to be commended. Those of us who have been touched by the angel of interfaith dialogue and who are presently engaged in the Jewish-Christian encounter, should take heart. Most noteworthy, is the courageous call for the use of Jewish commentaries by Christians since Jewish interpretation of Scripture is legitimate and the challenging statement that Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain.

The document prepares the ground for future documents, which are likely to consider theological issues, possibly those concerning salvation. *JPSSCB* succeeds in advancing the dialogue between Christians and Jews and is another step towards the healing of the world (*tikkun olam*). It also clears much debris, and to adapt imagery from Isa 29:17, ploughs the land and plants the seeds so that in the future a fruitful field can develop. This future field will generate theological space for

Jews and Christians, which is essential for today's encounter.

Appropriately, the document concludes with a quotation from a Papal speech made in 1997. This illustrates the personal perspective of John Paul II, which is central to the message of *JPSSCB*. It also provides the basis for the future dialogue with Jews and Judaism:

This people has been called and led by God, creator of heaven and earth. Their existence is not a mere natural or cultural happening . . . . It is a supernatural one. This people continues in spite of everything to be the people of the covenant, and, despite human infidelity, the Lord is faithful to his covenant.

#### Notes

1. E. Flannery, 'Seminaries, Classrooms, Pulpits, Streets: Where we have to go' in R. Brooks (ed.) *Unanswered Questions: Theological Views of Jewish-Catholic Relations* ed., R. Brooks (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 128-9.
2. idem.
3. A. Flannery, *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dominican Publications: Dublin, 1981), p. 741.
4. For the statements, see [www.jcrelations.net](http://www.jcrelations.net). For a review of the statements see my, "Jewish-Christian Relations in the Global Society: What the Institutional Documents Have and Have Not Been Telling Us" in E. Kessler, J. Pawlikowski and J. Banki (eds.), *Jews and Christians in Conversation* (Cambridge: Orchard Academic, 2002), pp 53-73.
5. *We Remember* is somewhat different from *Nostra Aetate*, *Guidelines* and the *Notes*. While rounding condemning antisemitism, the Vatican had until then largely avoided the question of the Holocaust. In 1987 in the wake of controversy over the Pope's reception of Austrian President, Kurt Waldheim, who had been an active Nazi, the Vatican promised to issue a document. *We Remember* stresses the evils of antisemitism, although it did not go as far as the French bishops who stated that "it is important to admit the primary role played by the consistently repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes wrongly perpetuated by the Christians in the historical process that led to the Holocaust".
6. This is neatly illustrated by Yossi Klein ha Levi's remarkable portrait of an encounter with a Sister of the Beatitudes in Israel in *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*. The danger of the reassertion of the 'old theology', the sister informs the author, is illustrated when Christians simply say "thank you, Jewish people, for giving us the Bible. Thank you for being the people of Jesus'. But that's archaeology. Am I ready to encounter Judaism as it is or just for nostalgia?" (New York: Harper Collins: 2002) p 203.
7. *Dialogue with Trypho*, 29.
8. Irenaeus, another second century theologian, also focused on the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the Early Church. In Book 4 of *Adversus Haereses*, he refutes the argument put forward by Marcion and other Gnostics that the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament were opposed to each other. His response to Marcion's criticisms became the basis for the standard patristic refutation of internal and external criticism and consists of treating difficult passages as types and allegories and claiming a unity of the Testaments.
9. Cf C. Montefiore *The Synoptic Gospels Vol 1* (London: Macmillan, 1910) pp 326-7.
10. See excellent summary in R.L. Rubenstein & J.K. Roth *Approaches to Auschwitz* (London: SCM 1987) pp 199-228.
11. I should point out that this is a problem shared by both Jews and Christians for there are Old Testament texts which are equally problematic e.g., Psalm 137:5.