



Salvation and the Jews

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In Jesus's exchange with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John, he tells her that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Scripture affirms that indeed "?? ?? ? ??????? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?" (from them is the Christ according to the flesh) (Romans 9:5).

The teaching of the Church since the Second Vatican Council insists that the relationship with Jesus's people, the Jewish people, the constant reference to the Scriptures of Israel (known by Christians as the Old Testament) and familiarity with Israel's traditions are essential elements in order to get to know Jesus, recognized by Christians as the Christ-Messiah, Son of God, and savior of the world.^[1] However, whereas the Church indeed affirms that our salvation is from the Jews, where is salvation for the Jews from according to Church teaching?

Born out of the womb of Israel, grafted onto the domesticated olive tree that is Israel, too often members of the Church have been dismissive of their Jewish roots and their debt to the Jewish people. At the Second Vatican Council, the Church resolved to rethink her relationship with the Jews. After two thousand years, a reflection on the history of Jewish-Catholic relations challenges the traditional conceptual language and strategies of the past. Taking seriously this often-traumatic history also obliges Catholics to rethink Christian mission to the Jews. Is it, as some suggest, rendered both futile and obsolete because of the historical teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism, now clearly an object of regret, and because of the methods sometimes used to coerce Jews to become Christians? Perhaps even more importantly, the Council restated what the Apostle Paul had said in his Epistle to the Romans, namely that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (*Romans* 11:29). This astonishing theological claim recognizes the fidelity of God to God's promises and to the election of Israel.^[2] Whatever the human failings of the Jews, God is always faithful, and that is good news for Christians, who most certainly share in these same failings.

The Second Vatican Council document *Nostra aetate* affirmed, "Indeed, (the Church) proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (*John* 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself." Fifty years later, in 2015, the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews reaffirmed this principle of Christian mission in a document entitled, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*. However, it also recognized the complexity of this task with regard to the Jews, asking "the highly complex theological question of how Christian belief in the universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ can be combined in a coherent way with the equally clear statement of faith in the never-revoked covenant of God with Israel. It is the belief of the Church that Christ is the Savior for all. There cannot be two ways of salvation."^[3]

The affirmation that there cannot be two ways of salvation because Christ is the unique Savior makes many Jews uncomfortable, so uncomfortable that the great twentieth-century Jewish American thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel, commented, "If I were asked either to convert or to die in Auschwitz, I'd rather go to Auschwitz."^[4] Many Jews reject anything that smacks of mission. Rabbi David Rosen, a prominent Orthodox Jew in the dialogue between the Church and the Jews, demanded clarification on mission to the Jews in his address at the Vatican commemoration of the 40th anniversary of *Nostra aetate* in October 2005:

It appears to me that there is a pressing need for a clear reaffirmation of the Magisterium in this regard. Without such, there will remain not only an unhealthy ambiguity in our relationship, but we will continue to have to deal with unfortunate and unnecessary tensions regarding motives, including the presence and role of specific personalities in the Church whose background is particularly pertinent to this relationship.[\[5\]](#)

Rosen's remarks pointed to the refusal of the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo di Segni, to participate in the event because the Holy See had invited Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, to be a main speaker at the celebration.[\[6\]](#) These dramatic reactions oblige Catholics to reflect on the tension between a Christian commitment to preaching Christ as Savior of all and the Church's attitude of respect for the Jews, dialogue and collaboration with them.

The 1974 guidelines for the implementation of *Nostra aetate* insisted, "In virtue of her divine mission, and her very nature, the Church must preach Jesus Christ to the world." However, the document, sensitive to the historical context in which the Church encounters Jews, continued,

Lest the witness of Catholics to Jesus Christ should give offence to Jews, they must take care to live and spread their Christian faith while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty in line with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. They will likewise strive to understand the difficulties which arise for the Jewish soul - rightly imbued with an extremely high, pure notion of the divine transcendence when faced with the mystery of the incarnate Word.[\[7\]](#)

In response to Jewish concerns about mission, some have suggested distinguishing "mission" (often conceived as active proselytization) from "bearing witness." Walter Kasper, eminent Catholic theologian and one-time head of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, has explained,

Because as Christians we know that God's covenant with Israel by God's faithfulness is not broken, mission – understood as call to conversion from idolatry to the living and true God – does not apply and cannot be applied to Jews. They confess the living true God, who gave and gives them support, hope, confidence and strength in many difficult situations of their history. There cannot be the same kind of behavior towards Jews as there exists towards Gentiles. This is not a merely abstract theological affirmation, but an affirmation that has concrete and tangible consequences: namely, that there is no organized Catholic missionary activity towards Jews as there is for all other non-Christian religions.[\[8\]](#)

Dialogue with Jews leads Catholics to discover the Jewish reality in all its vibrance and diversity. They need to know that religious Jews already see themselves within a dynamic relationship with God, Creator and Redeemer, the God whom Christians identify as Father of Jesus Christ. Most Jews reject the messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth. However, they do share with Christians a profound understanding of an ordered creation, the involvement of God in the history of salvation and an eschatological restoration. At best, Jews who are not believers in Jesus might see him as a *Torah* faithful Jew, as great as, if not greater than, any other in the Jewish tradition.[\[9\]](#) In the face of Jewish unbelief in Jesus as Messiah, Cardinal Kasper went as far as to say, "This does not mean that Jews in order to be saved have to become Christians; if they follow their own conscience and believe in God's promises as they understand them in their religious tradition they are in line with God's plan, which for us comes to its historical completion in Jesus Christ."[\[10\]](#)

Nonetheless, the question remains: does the Church continue to teach that Jews ultimately should recognize Jesus as Christ? If the answer is affirmative, does that imply that in the view of the

Church, the best Jew is a baptized Jew? It is perhaps revealing to examine how the Church prays for the Jews. Once a year, the prayer for the Jews is recited formally in the Great Litany of Good Friday. Prior to Vatican II, the traditional Good Friday prayer for the Jews read,

Let us also pray for the perfidious (unbelieving) Jews: that our God and Lord will remove the veils from their hearts, so that they too may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ. Almighty, eternal God, who does not withhold thy mercy even from Jewish unbelief, heed the prayers that we offer for the blindness of that people, that they may acknowledge the light of thy truth, which is Christ, and be delivered from their darkness, through Christ our Lord.[\[11\]](#)

Pope John XXIII officially annulled the Good Friday prayer's reference to "the perfidious Jews" even before the Council commenced.[\[12\]](#) However, in light of the Council, the prayer was completely rewritten to read:

Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of His name and in faithfulness to His covenant. Almighty and eternal God, long ago you gave your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Listen to your Church as we pray that the people you first made your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption.[\[13\]](#)

Of course, the fullness of redemption can be understood in various ways, but most Christians would view Jesus Christ as that fullness.

Jews might well insist that if God does not revoke the covenant, as Catholics affirm today, then surely Jews only need to be always more faithful to the *Torah* that God has given to them in order to be on the right track. Some Jews have suggested that consistent with this affirmation of the fidelity of God, theologically the Church should develop the understanding of Jesus as unique savior for the Gentiles whereas, in a parallel fashion, God calls the Jews to live *Torah*. Jesus and *Torah* are then two parallel ways of salvation according to this view.[\[14\]](#) Some Christian theologians have been proposing a "two-covenant theology," Judaism for the Jews, Christianity for the nations.[\[15\]](#) However, in remaining faithful to Scripture and Tradition, the Catholic Church cannot affirm such a position and must continue to maintain that ultimately Christ is the way, the truth and the light for all.

In dialogue with the Jews, it is important to realize that the question of salvation is a very Christian one; Jews tend not to debate the question "who is saved?" Nonetheless, for Christians engaged in the relationship with the Jewish people, the soteriological issue remains a significant even if ambiguous one. The Church, having rediscovered the Jewishness of Jesus and the heritage it shares with the Jewish people, continues to insist that both Jews and Gentiles depend on the same savior for salvation. However, this reflection on salvation from the Jews and salvation for the Jews not only must be consistent with Christology and ecclesiology; it also must consider the millennial relationship with Jews and Judaism.

In the time of Jesus and his first disciples (all Jews), those who believed in him understood the Jewish tradition as finding its fulfillment in the *sequela Christi* (the following of Christ). This was at the heart of the Christian dynamic that understood the Old Testament's fulfillment in the New. However, parallel to the development of the early Church, the fundamental transformation of the Jewish tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple, leading to the production of the Talmud and its extensive commentaries, rendered the relationship between Judaism and Christianity much more complex. The learned rabbis of the centuries after the destruction of the Temple proposed a fundamentally different dynamic with regard to the Scriptures of ancient Israel,

seeing an unbreakable link between a written Torah (mostly parallel to the Christian Old Testament) and an oral one (the Talmud). In relating to the ancient Scriptures of Israel, the Christian coupling of new and old constituted only one possibility, a Christian one, of reflecting on the actualization of these ancient Scriptures. Rabbinic Jews proposed a very different coupling, that of written and oral. Traditional Christian thinking often has posited that the rabbinic teaching, deriving from the tradition of Israel in the Talmud and subsequent Jewish writings, constituted nothing more than an obstacle to Jews coming to see Jesus as the promised Christ, who fulfills the Scriptures of Israel. This reached tragic dimensions when the Talmud was burned repeatedly in the Middle Ages.

Traditional Church teaching understood the Jews as the people of the Old Testament. Israel was supposed to be only a part of the preparation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church. For the most part, Church teaching refused to see the Jews as a permanent fixture in the history of salvation. Rather, Christians looked forward to a time when, as the Apostle Paul says, “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians* 3:28). *Nostra aetate* (no. 4) does explicitly speak of a future eschatological time when Jews and Christians will be one: “In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and ‘serve him shoulder to shoulder’ (*Zephaniah* 3:9).” Noteworthy however, in the Council’s formulation of this messianic future vision of unity, there is no explicit reference to the Jews embracing belief in Christ in the Church.^[16] Furthermore, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) teaches, “The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions is already a response to God’s revelation in the Old Covenant.”^[17] However, it also speaks of an eventual convergence of unrealized Jewish Messianic expectations with the Christian expectancy of the return of Jesus Christ in the end times. The 2015 document, *The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable*, cited Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who proposed already in the Middle Ages that for the Jews “a determined point in time has been fixed which cannot be anticipated.”^[18]

The reflection on salvation for the Jews as a future eschatological reality is rooted in chapters 9 to 11 of Paul’s epistle to the Romans, the same chapters that provided the Council with the source for its reflection on the fidelity of God. Paul, already in his time, had to confront the arrogance of Gentile believers who were looking down on Jews because they did not believe in Jesus. Using the evocative imagery of two olive trees, one wild and one domesticated, Paul writes, “They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you” (*Romans* 11:20-21). In strongly rejecting arrogance, Paul posits the “disbelief” of Israel as a “mystery” (*Romans* 11:25) of God’s design whereby Israel’s refusal of the Gospel enables the preaching of the Gospel to the nations, who do believe. Moreover, expressing his conviction that God’s faithfulness ultimately would bring all of Israel into the new covenant, he points to the future working out of God’s fidelity in the re-grafting of the Jews onto the domesticated olive tree. “For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree” (*Romans* 11:24).

However, it is not enough to push the issue of the Jewish encounter with Christ into an unknown future, where Jews and Christians might converge. A 2018 article published by Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, which provoked perplexity among some Jews and strong criticism from some Catholics,^[19] renewed the debate about Christian mission and the fidelity of God to the Jews. Whereas Benedict insists that God’s covenant with the Jews is unrevoked indeed, from a human point of view the covenant is “codetermined by the whole drama of human error,”^[20] a reference to the Jews’ rejection of faith in Christ. According to Benedict, one cannot ignore this drama and thus he insists that the task of the Church remains the call to greater fidelity, a fidelity that finds its perfection in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jews and Christians together share in this “drama of human

error” in their sinful humanity and yet together with all others they are called to walk the way towards the Kingdom. Eschewing all arrogance, today, the Church teaches with insistence that Christians too often have failed in their witness because they themselves have not yet been conformed to the image and likeness of Christ, a reality that also is manifest in the traditional teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism and in their forgetfulness of God’s faithfulness.

Christians proclaim not only the *Torah* fidelity of Jesus the Jew but also the newness of the restored filial relationship with God in Jesus the Christ, fulfillment of God’s Word in history. Whereas Christians witness to a Jesus Christ who brings the fullness of salvation, they are called to recognize also how dismally they have failed to live up to his call for discipleship. Thus, their witness only can be coherent in recognizing that Jews who seek to live *Torah* are “not far from the Kingdom of God” (*Mark* 12:34). It was these words that Jesus himself addressed to a scribe who professed his *Torah* fidelity. Christians who seek to take up their Cross and follow Jesus daily can only hope that they too are not far off. God’s fidelity to a Jewish people who has not always lived in fidelity to the *Torah* is the basis for the hope of God’s fidelity to Christians who have not always lived in fidelity to the *Torah* Incarnate in Jesus. As Jews and Christians consider the future, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* formulates the issue with wisdom and respect: “God’s People of the Old Covenant and the new People of God tend towards similar goals: expectation of the coming (or the return) of the Messiah. But, one awaits the return of the Messiah who died and rose from the dead and is recognized as Lord and Son of God; the other awaits the coming of a Messiah, whose features remain hidden till the end of time; and the latter waiting is accompanied by the drama of not knowing or of misunderstanding Christ Jesus.”^[21] This conviction that Jews and Christians will converge in recognizing that *Torah*, that teaching incarnate in the One who is to come on the final Day of the Lord, is fundamental to Christian hope.

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