



## Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* and Christological Understanding

01.11.2025 | John T. Pawlikowski

**Vatican II's Declaration *Nostra Aetate* does not delve into Christological understanding in a direct way. But through its affirmations of continued covenantal inclusion on the part of Jews and Judaism it undercuts a central base for classical Christianity. How can the restored covenantal inclusion for Jews be proclaimed side-by-side with the longstanding belief in Christ's salvific work?**

### INTRODUCTION

Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* does not address Christological issues directly. But it does in fact deal with the foundations of basic forms of Christological statement over the centuries. Did the coming of Jesus Christ as the long promised Messiah relegate post-Easter Judaism to irrelevance? Should Judaism fade away as Christianity integrated into its self-identity whatever was valuable about the Jewish tradition? *Nostra Aetate*'s response to these core questions was definitely negative. The Jewish People's covenantal identity remained in force after the Christ Event. That was and is its central assertion as is evident in the Vatican statement celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the conciliar declaration in 2015.<sup>[1]</sup> Though the leading theologian and Cardinal Avery Dulles challenged this claim of continuing validity of the Jewish covenant after Christ in several articles and in a lecture delivered at the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops<sup>[2]</sup> his view did not carry the day as is clear from the 2015 document.

The end of Jewish covenantal inclusion after Easter was traditionally grounded since the Patristic era on the assertion that Jews failed to accept him as the promised Jewish Messiah and killed him as a result.

This led to their expulsion from the original covenant made with the People Israel which in christianized was only provisional, eventually being supplanted by the covenant in Christ. According to St. Augustine Jews were regarded as a cursed people after their rejection of Jesus' Messiahship. They were to serve as witness to the suffering and marginalization in society anyone who rejected Christ would endure. Jesus as the instigator of a new and permanent Covenant was at the center of Christian christological thought. Chapter four of *Nostra Aetate* totally undercut this classical Christian claim when it proclaimed that Jews as such could not be blamed for the death of Christ even if some of its leaders may have collaborated to a degree with the planned execution ordered by Pontius Pilate. The centuries long indictment of the Jews as responsible for Jesus' death was stricken from the record at Vatican II.

In light of *Nostra Aetate* Christian theologians faced a new major challenge as Cardinal Walter Kasper defined it during his tenure as President of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews theologians today must find a way of merging two fundamental assertions: (1) The Jewish Covenant remains vibrant and (2) Jesus' salvific work has a universal dimension.<sup>[3]</sup>

I have been concerned about the question of christology for most of my academic career. I have

discussed the christological question and light of the church's new theology of the Jewish people in several volumes: *Christ in Light of Christian-Jewish Dialogue*<sup>[4]</sup> originally appeared in 1982 with a reissue version 2001<sup>[5]</sup> it was followed by *Jesus and the Theology of Israel*<sup>[6]</sup> published in 1989 and *Restating the Catholic Church's Relationship with the Jewish People: The Challenge of Supersessionary Theology*<sup>[7]</sup> that appeared in 2013 took my basic christological Vision some steps beyond my original analysis.

My volumes were initially inspired by the comments of two leading Catholic Scholars Gregory Baum and Johannes Baptist Metz. Baum was part of the original drafting commission for what became *Nostra Aetate* which was headed by Cardinal Augustin Bea. Baum's initial book on the Christian-Jewish relationship<sup>[8]</sup> and especially comments he made during an address at the 1986 Convention of the Catholic theological Society of America where he identified chapter 4 of *Nostra Aetate* as the most profound change in the ordinary magisterium of the church to emerge from the second Vatican Council.<sup>[9]</sup>

Thanks to my seminary professor the biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan who first raised the Christian-Jewish relationship for me and who authored one of the first commentaries on *Nostra Aetate* I was led to the writings of Johannes Baptist Metz. While Metz's contribution to the discussion of post-supersessionary theology has not been extensive he approached the topic with considerable passion and with an unwavering conviction that the experience of the Holocaust renders any proclamation of a Christology that obliterates the Jewish People from continued covenantal inclusion patently immoral.<sup>[10]</sup>

Metz strongly argued that post Holocaust Christian theology must be guided by the insight that "Christians can form and sufficiently understand their identity in the face of the Jews."<sup>[11]</sup> This involves a definite reintegration of Jewish history and Jewish beliefs into Christian theological consciousness and statement. For Metz Jewish history is not merely Christian pre-history but an integral part of church history. Jewish history, in terms both of mode and content must assume a central place in Christian faith expression. The crucial theological question after the Holocaust as Metz sees it is the presence/absence of God. Obviously any Christological statement is highly dependent on how we finally resolve the God question. But such a resolution is impossible for the Christian without some direct link with the contemporary reflections upon God by Jews, a people for whom the Holocaust represented the threshold of communal extinction.

With respect specifically to Christology Metz's thought is far less developed than some other theologians who have taken up the challenge of expressing Christological understanding in light of Vatican II's assertion of continuing Jewish covenantal inclusion after the Christ Event.<sup>[12]</sup> While affirming the continuity of the Jewish covenant he does seem to posit some new revelation through Christ that goes beyond the mere entry of the Gentiles into this ongoing covenant established at Sinai. He briefly develops the idea of two modes of believing the New Testament. One he terms the Pauline mode which has tended to dominate in Christianity for most its history. The other he calls the synoptic mode. This latter form of belief he basically identifies with the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures. But he strongly emphasizes that it is a crucial element in New Testament faith as well.

The problem that Metz highlights is the process whereby this Hebraic mode of faith expression was pushed to the theological fringes throughout the history of dogmatic construction. Thus for him the first necessary step in the process of theological reconciliation between Jews and Christians must involve a major return to the Hebraic mode of faith expression. Such a return will in turn profoundly affect the shape of christological statement within the Church, resulting in the disappearance of the "victorious" form of Christology which leaves little place for Jews and Judaism after the Christ Event. Engagement in this transformative process will generate a more future oriented and open-ended Christological approach in which the central theme will be discipleship. The expression of Christology in the Hebraic mode will rely far more on narration and discipleship rather than the

classical style of dogmatic assertion. It might be noted that this form of Christological expression bears a resonance to the Jewish scholar David Boyarin's claim that Christology was a "job description" already existing in Judaism at the time of Jesus which was applied to Jesus rather than created specifically for him.[\[13\]](#)

The Christology that Metz proposed envisioned a decisive eschatological role for the Jews. But his understanding of this role for the Jews is not the same as that argued by many evangelical Christians who insist on Jewish conversion at the end of days. Rather, following the lead of the great Protestant scholar, Karl Barth, Metz argued that the primal "ecumenical unity" sought by Christians is with the Jewish People. Only through such a unity, such a partnership, which can open up into an expanding partnership with other world religions, will the eschatological reign of God fully emerge.

In light of the new theological context grounded in the affirmation of Jewish covenantal inclusion in *Nostra Aetate* noted by Baum and outlined by Metz the ecumenical Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations in its signature document issued in 2002 affirmed the Christological impact of this conciliar declaration. Titled *A Sacred Obligation*, it declared that the turn to Jewish covenantal inclusion within the churches will force Christianity to rethink its understanding of Christ.[\[14\]](#)

## **CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS RESPOND TO THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CHALLENGE OF *NOSTRA AETATE***

In the first decades after Vatican II a number of Christian theologians picked up on the Christological challenge inherent in *Nostra Aetate*. Included in this list were Rosemary Ruether, Monica Hellwig, Franz Mussner, Peter von der Osten-Sacken, Clark Williamson, Kendall Soulen, and especially Paul van Buren who produced a trilogy of books on the subject. In differing ways these theologians attempted to build a constructive theology of Christianity's relationship with the Jewish People after the Christ Event as a replacement for the long dominant patristic theology (especially in the world of St. Augustine) that viewed Judaism as superseded by Christ and the Church.

In more recent times additional scholars have contributed to the rethinking of Christology in the face of Vatican II's assertion of Judaism's continuing covenantal identity. Leading names in this generation of new perspectives include Didier Pollefeyt, Philip Cunningham, Mary Boys, Marianne Moyaert, Elizabeth Groppe, Barbara Meyer, Gregor Maria Hoff, Gavin D'Costa, and Hans Hermann Henrix. Particularly significant have been the writings of Cardinal Walter Kasper, both because of his personal status as a leading European theologian and his role at the Vatican as President of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. In addition to his own publications on the relationship between Jews and Christians Kasper, as President of the Holy See's Commission, assisted in the organization of a multi-year international dialogue centered around the mega question "How can Christian proclaim the universal salvific work of Jesus Christ and still maintain the continuity of the Jewish covenant?" This effort led to the publication in English and Italian of a volume titled *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* for which Kasper contributed a substantive Foreword.[\[15\]](#)

The coming of Cardinal Walter Kasper to the Presidency of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews provided initial optimism that some of the important Christological questions raised in *Nostra Aetate* might receive substantive theological attention. He had solid theological credentials internationally even though his publications prior to his assumption of the Presidency of the Commission show little reflection on the theological bonds between Christians and Jews. But his enthusiasm for finally addressing such questions was quickly evident to those of us who had been involved in Christian-Jewish relations since Vatican II. The

idea of an official Vatican commission to pursue the Christological issues raised by *Nostra Aetate* clearly was his first impulse. However, in light of the controversial document *Dominus Iesus*<sup>[16]</sup> promulgated by the then Congregation for the Defense of Catholic Doctrine (CDF) headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger with whom Kasper had disagreed on a number of ecumenical and interreligious issues (including *Dominus Iesus*) Kasper concluded that an “official” commission would not gain the approval of key Vatican leaders. So the informational commission described above to which he gave visible support and in whose deliberations he personally participated to a degree was a more realistic option given Vatican politics at the time. He added further to the stature of this informal commission by agreeing to write the Foreword to the commission’s volume. This commission was supported by a number of leading academic institutions.

As I will show in a moment Kasper published several important articles during the multi-year existence of this international commission. Unfortunately after his departure from the Presidency of the Commission Kasper lost personal interest in the topic of Christian-Jewish relations. In a conversation with him at the Conference at the University of Notre Dame which celebrated his eightieth birthday he indicated his retirement goal was to publish updated versions of his most important theological works. I specifically asked him if he would take up Christian-Jewish issues in these new editions and his firm answer was no.

During his tenure as President of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Kasper contributed some valuable insights for rebuilding Christological understanding in light of *Nostra Aetate*. Kasper clearly argued for the continued salvific validity of the Jewish path to salvation. In an essay titled “The Good Olive Tree” Kasper wrote that “If they (the Jews) 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.”<sup>[17]</sup>

Hence for Kasper there exists no need to proselytize Jews because they are already in a covenantal relationship with God. The theological justification for this assertion lies in the fact that Jews are the only non-Christian community to possess authentic revelation from the Christian point of view. While true, this assertion by Kasper does not resolve all theological issues in the Christian-Jewish relationship. The Jewish religious tradition clearly continued to evolve subsequent to the Christ Event. But Kasper fails to say whether he also regards post-Christ Event forms of Judaism as containing “authentic revelation.” Jews who practice any form of religious Judaism today combine in that practice both biblical tenets and religious texts that post-date the time of Jesus Christ. Given his unwillingness to further discuss the theological dimensions of the Christian-Jewish relationship subsequent to his time at the Holy See’s Commission it is unlikely that Kasper will further discuss his claims about Judaism and authentic revelation.

It should be noted at this point that Kasper’s viewpoint regarding the *sui generis* dimensions of revelation in Judaism bears certain similarities with the perspectives found in the writings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. Both popes in somewhat differing arguments advanced Kasper’s claim about the unique dimension of revelation in Judaism. While Pope John Paul II does not address the notion of Jewish conversion in light of the attribution of authenticity of Jewish revelation Pope Benedict XVI in his second volume on Christology written as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger rather than as Pope seems to endorse a position on proselytizing Jews quite similar to that of Kasper.<sup>[18]</sup>

For Kasper, and he strongly insists on this point, there exist two distinctive, but not totally distinct, “paths” to salvation. Christians follow one, Jews walk down the other. These paths, according to Kasper will eventually converge in some form of eschatological unity known only to God. In a conference in which I participated with Kasper at Cambridge University Kasper expressed some discomfort with my use of the term “paths” to describe his view but offered no substitute. I remain convinced that “two distinctive paths interrelated in a single covenant” remains the best way of describing where Kasper had taken us while he still was reflecting on the link between Judaism

and Christianity from a theological perspective.

Cardinal Kasper, in his discussion of eschatological fulfillment, has never indicated that Jews will have to explicitly recognize the Christ as the Christ has been interpreted within the Christian tradition. Neither does he clearly rule out such a salvific requirement. So his position remains ambiguous and in need of further clarification. Given the political context in which Kasper was operating while he served as President of the Holy See's Commission with Cardinal Ratzinger heading the Vatican's doctrinal office it is likely Kasper felt constrained in how far he could go regarding salvific fullness for Jews as Jews. Cardinal Avery Dulles' claim that Vatican II did not actually affirm the continuity of the Jewish covenant was under public discussion at the time. Cardinal Kasper along with Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore who chaired the U.S. Bishop Commission on Catholic-Jewish relations at the time both absented themselves from Dulles' controversial presentation at the fortieth anniversary commemoration of *Nostra Aetate* in Washington.

The one other theological statement that merits mention in this overview is the 2015 document from the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations of the Jews. Titled *The Gifts and Call of God Are Irrevocable* it was issued to honor the half-century of positive developments in the Christian-Jewish relationship since the publication of *Nostra Aetate*.<sup>[19]</sup> It clearly affirmed the central thesis of the original declaration that Jewish covenantal inclusion was not terminated in and through the Christ Event. This is strongly affirmed in the actual title of the declaration. Covenantal inclusion was a gift bestowed upon the Jewish People by God himself. And God does not take back divine gifts.

This 2015 document, however, did not address the points raised in the writings of Cardinal Kasper. The mega question as to whether the church can affirm both the continuity of the Jewish covenant and the universal significance of Christ's salvific work was not pursued. During the tenure of Cardinal Kurt Koch, Cardinal Kasper's successor as President of the Holy See's Commission, the issues raised by Cardinal Kasper remained off the table.

## **BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON THE EARLY CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONSHIP AFTER *NOSTRA AETATE***

The work of theologians with regard to Christological understanding subsequent to *Nostra Aetate* was greatly enhanced by the research of a number of biblical scholars. Unfortunately this research has not yet sufficiently penetrated the realm of systematic theological scholarship. Important biblical contributions to the significance of Jesus as the Christ within the early Christian-Jewish relationship have come from Clemens Thomas, Raymond Brown, Daniel Harrington, John Meier, Anthony Saldarini, John Dominic Crossan, Krister Stendahl, Robert Wilken, John Gager, Robin Scroggs, and Johannes Beutler, to name only a few.

Brown, Scroggs, and Meier's writings are particularly significant. In an article that too often has been overlooked in Christological discussions published in *Theological Studies* in 1965 titled "Does the New Testament Call Jesus God?"<sup>[20]</sup> Brown discussed at length all passages that appear to equate Jesus with God, passages that seem to convey a degree of separation and passages that are somewhat ambiguous with regard to direct linkage. All three types can be found in the New Testament according to Brown and none of these the three clearly predominate. As Brown sees it, the Christological understanding that has dominated in the Church for centuries developed only gradually in the early centuries of Christian-Jewish co-existence, primarily in and through a liturgical context. Vatican II's affirmation of Jewish covenantal inclusion after the Christ Event forces us to take another look on the complexity in the God-Jesus Christ relationship as outlined in Brown's 1965 article.



John Meier has argued in multiple volumes<sup>[21]</sup> that a careful examination of New Testament evidence reveals Jesus as presenting himself to the Jewish community of his time as an eschatological prophet and miracle worker in the likeness of Elijah. He was not interested in creating a separatist sect of holy remnant along the lines of the Qumran community. But he did envision the development of a special religious group within the People Israel. As Meier summarizes the question in *Companions and Competitors* this community “within Israel would slowly undergo a process of separation from Israel as it pursued a mission to the Gentiles in this present world – the long term result being that his community would become predominantly Gentile finds no place in Jesus’ message or practice.”<sup>[22]</sup>

Robin Scroggs pushed this growing consensus among contemporary biblical scholars about the roots of Jesus and his teachings in Judaism even further. Scroggs emphasized the following points: (1) The movement begun by Jesus and continued after his death in Palestine can best be described as a reform movement within Judaism. Little or no evidence exists to suggest a separate identity within the emerging Christian community. (2) Paul understood his mission to the Gentiles as fundamentally a mission out of Judaism which aimed at extending God’s original and continuing call to the Jewish People to the Gentiles. (3) Prior to the end of the Jewish war with the Romans in 70 C.E. it is difficult to speak of a separate Christian reality. Followers of Jesus did not seem on the whole to understand themselves as part of a separate religion from Judaism. A distinctive Christian identity only began to develop after the Jewish war with Rome. (4) The latter parts of the New Testament do exhibit the beginnings of a sense of separation between the church and the synagogue, but they also retain some sense of continuing contact with the Christian community’s original Jewish matrix.<sup>[23]</sup>

Apropos to this last point we now know from the research of scholars such as Robert Wilken, the late Anthony Saldarini, and Amy-Jill Levine that some Jews and some Christians continued to worship together on a regular basis into the fourth century, and in the case of Dr. Levine’s research possibly into the fifth century C.E. So it is clear from the accumulation research that Christological development that would make the revelation in Christ totally distinct and separate from Judaism developed only gradually. In this context we are reminded of the scholarship of Daniel Boyarin of the University of California in Berkeley who has argued that “Christology” has origins in first century CE Judaism. Jesus did not create it *de novo*, but in forging his own identity during his lifetime he picked up a framework that already existed in Judaism.<sup>[24]</sup>

An important document on the Catholic side emerged in 2001 from the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The document carried a supportive introduction by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger under whose jurisdiction as head of the Congregation for Defense of the Faith (CDF) the document fell. Released without much fanfare this document opened up several new possibilities in terms of expressing the significance of the Christ Event while leaving theological space for Judaism as a living religious entity.<sup>[25]</sup>

The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document, despite some significant limitations in the way it portrays post-biblical Judaism, makes an important contribution to the development of a constructive Christological understanding while keeping alive a belief in the continuity of Jewish covenantal inclusion after the Christ Event affirmed in chapter four of *Nostra Aetate*. Two statements in particular within the PBC document bear special significance for the Christological discussion in the context of Judaism.

The first assertion is that Jewish messianic hopes are not in vain. This assertion is coupled with a recognition that Jewish readings of the Hebrew Scriptures in terms of human redemption represent an authentic interpretation of these biblical texts. Here we have the seeds of what appears to be a recognition of a distinctive salvific path for the Jewish People as a theological principle. This affirmation is in part responsible for Cardinal Walter Kasper’s claim, discussed earlier, that if Jews are faithful to their religious convictions and believe in the divine plan for human salvation as they

understand it they are on a salvific course.

The second important statement in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document is one that somewhat advances what has been proclaimed by Vatican II. The PBC document speaks of the eschatological messiah as the One who is to come. Upon arrival this eschatological Messiah will exhibit the traits Christians have already seen and acknowledged in the Jesus who has already come and remains with the Church. While this statement opens up only a small window for fresh Christological thinking, an opening seems to be provided for acknowledgement of the future Messiah by Jews without necessarily speaking of that Messianic figure in specific Christian language. I may be reading into the text in this regard but I would suggest this as a possible interpretation. The authors of this PBC document had to exercise some caution with regard to such theological projections as they lack any mandate to engage in dogmatic questions.

## PAULINE THINKING ABOUT CHRIST IN LIGHT OF *NOSTRA AETATE*

Thinking about Paul and Christology has undergone substantial change in recent decades as a result of new biblical research, in part generated by the conciliar declaration. The work of Bishop and scholar Krister Stendahl has been foundational in the transformation of attitudes towards Paul and Judaism.<sup>[26]</sup> The process of rethinking Pauline Christology took on new steam with the publication of several books by E.P. Sanders.<sup>[27]</sup> Those who joined Sanders in this quest such as Daniel Harrington, Wayne Meeks, Peter Thompson, together with the participants in the three year project at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium with which I was personally involved<sup>[28]</sup> move in varying directions. But they all espouse a vision of Paul as still positively conscious of his personal links with the Jewish tradition. They all reject any notion that Paul radically and completely broke with a Jewish framework in developing his vision of the significance of the Christ Event. Fr. Raymond Brown, SSS, summarized this new attitude toward Paul when in a speech in Chicago shortly before his death he said that he had become convinced that if Paul had fathered a son he would have had him circumcised. The frequent portrayal of Paul as a person who broke once and for all from the notion of any continuing link between Judaism and Christianity, a view that significantly affected Christological thought over the centuries, is giving way to one in which Paul profoundly remains rooted in his original Jewish heritage. It should be no surprise that in developing the text of *Nostra Aetate* at Vatican II the framers of the document built upon Paul's generally positive outlook on Jewish continuity in Romans 9-11.

In recent years we have witnessed a movement in scholarly circles to reorient the image of Paul. That effort has led to a focus on the compatibility of Pauline teaching with the tenets of Second Temple Judaism. Hence any Christology rooted simplistically in a "law-gospel" or "flesh-spirit" dichotomy can no longer stand the test of scholarly inquiry relative to Paul. While the new scholarship may present Pauline teachings on the significance of Jesus the Christ with different shadings there is a building consensus that earlier portrayals of Paul's vision in this regard have seriously distorted his intent.

At a 2010 conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, organized by the Evangelical Theological Faculty, I summarized some of the pertinent developments in the continuing transformation of Paul's image relative to Judaism. The depiction of Paul as one who after his 'conversion' totally rejected the Jewish Torah tradition as salvific, replaced by a new salvific process he had discovered through his deep-seated encounter with Christ, is rapidly collapsing.<sup>[29]</sup> I cannot repeat that analysis in full in this paper. But a summary would be in order as these new scholarly developments clearly impact our understanding of Pauline theology, his Christological vision in particular. The transformed picture of Paul as a follower of Jesus who continued to value the Jewish tradition as he worked to integrate it with his mandate to bring the teachings of Christ to the nations is gaining greater ascendancy in Pauline interpretation within the context of what has been termed the "parting of the Ways" scholarship.

In the mind of the scholars who have engaged in the “Parting of the Ways” scholarship the separation between Jews and Christians was a long, drawn-out process that lasted for several centuries after its beginning in the first century C.E. The longstanding belief that the Council of Jerusalem and the Synod of Jamnia had forged a notion of total Christian-Jewish separation by the end of the first century no longer holds in the light of new scholarship. John Gager has argued that in fact it was the author of Acts who created the profoundly anti-Jewish theology often attributed to Paul himself.<sup>[30]</sup> Overall, on the Jewish question, Paul seems closer to the picture of him presented by John Gager and John Meier than what we have in Acts. This new understanding is crucial for Christological interpretation as Pauline writings played a significant role in the development of Christological thinking. Bishop Krister Stendal's seminal essay published in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1963 began the undermining of the portrayal of Paul in Acts.<sup>[31]</sup>

Let me at this point summarize some of the scholarly rethinking emerging on Paul and Judaism. Galatians 3 and Romans 9-11 are especially significant. These texts show Paul at his Christian-Jewish best as he struggled to comprehend God's salvific plan within the continuation of the covenant with the Jewish people. Romans 9-11 is in fact the foundation of what is stated about Christ and Judaism in *Nostra Aetate*.

While it may appear in Galatians that Paul has a quarrel with Judaism as a whole such scholars as Daniel Harrington have interpreted this letter in a far more nuanced way.<sup>[32]</sup> As Harrington sees it, Paul here is not condemning Judaism and its Torah tradition as such. Rather he is engaging in a harsh critique of certain Jewish-Christian missionaries who had been contradicting Paul on the question whether the Gentiles need to convert fully to Judaism in order to be saved. Paul was arguing that they did not have to embrace Judaism in a full sense and he exhibited considerable anger towards those who preached otherwise.

It is quite clear from Galatians that, while Paul never denigrated Judaism and firmly believed Jews remained in a covenantal partnership with God, the ultimate roots of salvation were to be found at a far deeper level that could be found in the Torah tradition. Galatians clearly established the key dimension of the salvific process. This dimension must play a central role in any discussion of a Pauline theology of Judaism.

Romans 9-11 represents Paul's most developed reflection on the Christian-Jewish bond. The fact that this reflection appears in one of the last of the Pauline epistles and also the most theologically developed is particularly important. Romans 9-11 clearly reveals that Paul was still struggling with the “Jewish question” at the end of his public ministry. If we ask why this is so, the answer lies in understanding Paul as still very much a Jew in his self-perception. While he had uncovered the dynamics of human salvation at an in-depth level that took him beyond the parameters of the Torah tradition he still believed that for himself and many other Jews the Torah tradition added to and abetted his new understanding of salvation through Christ. Though he freed Gentiles from the observance of Jewish law and ritual in my view this gesture on Paul's part is to be understood as a concession, not as the ideal. In Paul's understanding the Christological basis of human salvation did not obliterate the continued value of Jewish law and ritual.

In any discussion of Pauline Christology it is necessary as well to examine the arguments presented in Colossians and Ephesians. Many scholars regard these two epistles as “deutero-Pauline,” composed not by Paul but by some of his disciples. Whatever their actual authorship they definitely move the Christological discussion in new directions from Galatians and Romans. Though Colossians and Ephesians retain some of the Pauline language they rarely refer to the Hebrew Scriptures and definitely introduce a different vocabulary in terms of interpreting the meaning of the Christ Event. Overall they show much more interest in the global and cosmic dimensions of the Christ Event than in the Jewish Jesus or in the question of the church's continuing connections to Judaism in the salvific process. Whether intended or not, these epistles were in fact preparing the way for the widespread “Gentilization” of the church and its



proclamation of Christological consciousness.

Would Paul himself have been comfortable with the new emphasis on the cosmic Christ over the Jewish Jesus? The question can never be answered with full certainty. Without doubt the authors of these epistles felt they were keeping within the framework of Pauline thought. They were not totally wrong in making such a claim even though it is unfortunate that they more or less severed ties with the Jewish Jesus in their interpretation. Focus on the cosmic Christ, it can be argued, is a logical outcome of the new vision Paul had attained in his conversion experience. It would be my view that the authors of Colossians and Ephesians drew out what was present in embryonic form in the letters Paul wrote himself.

The crucial text in Colossians is to be found in 1:15-20. Here Christ is presented as the Wisdom of God in terms of creation and redemption. In part this text echoes language that was already evident in Wisdom texts in the Jewish tradition where Wisdom itself becomes personified. But it goes beyond this form of personification. It portrays Christ as ruling over the church and the entire cosmos. Jesus' death and resurrection is understood as igniting reconciliation on a cosmic scale. This cosmic reality found in and through Christ far transcends the understanding found in the Jewish tradition. The cosmic Christology is the foundation for the overall perspective articulated in the remainder of the letter as well as in the letter to the Ephesians.

For the author of Colossians Jewish rituals fade into insignificance after the Christ Event, something Paul himself may well have found problematic. Though Colossians remains rooted in Pauline thought its theology significantly severs the connection with Judaism, moving Christianity towards becoming a new world religion apart from Judaism. While others in the church struggled to continue a sense of Jewish-Christian linkage Colossians definitely began the process of unraveling this linkage.

Ephesians is generally regarded as a somewhat more theological revision and expansion of Colossians. Emphasis is placed by its author on the cosmic Christ and on the church as the body of Christ. Its pivotal argument is that through Jesus' death and resurrection God has abolished the wall that separated Jews and Christians. But this action on the part of Christ resulted in the abrogation of the Jewish Torah tradition and provided equal access for both Jews and Christians to the salvific process. Israel's central role in human salvation had been taken over by the church as "the one new humanity" in Christ. Once again I suspect Paul himself may well have challenged this new theological vision as too severe in cutting the ties with Judaism. Nonetheless it eventually came to dominate Pauline theological interpretation. Only in the latter part of the twentieth century has this approach to Pauline theology come into question. A decided stress on the cosmic Christ in Pauline theology tends to mute any sense of continued covenantal thinking in Paul. Downplaying covenantal thinking contributes to a downplaying of continuing ties with Judaism given the centrality of covenantal thinking in the Jewish tradition. We certainly can never ignore the cosmic Christ theology whether it comes from the hands of Paul himself or some of his disciples. That theology has become deeply embedded in Christian self-understanding. But this emphasis has to be balanced with a continuing affirmation of Pauline covenantal theology. I remain convinced that the two theological approaches are in fact to a large extent compatible.

Though covenantal theology in Paul has been under stressed in analyses of his writings and this omission is undergirded by the lack of the use of the term "covenant" in this literature it is clearly present if we do a dedicated search. We have seen in Romans that Paul continued to struggle with the complexity of the Jewish-Christian relationship to the very end of his missionary journey. It is possible to argue, as John Gager<sup>[33]</sup> and Lloyd Gaston<sup>[34]</sup> have argued that Paul maintained the existence of two covenants, one for the Jews and one for the Gentiles. Acceptance of such a perspective would in fact contradict Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's strong emphasis on a single covenant, a position that, as we saw earlier, Cardinal Walter Kasper also stressed despite his overall theological differences with Ratzinger.

A crucial text in any discussion of covenantal thinking in Pauline theology is 2 Corinthians 2:14-7:4. Paul's arguments in this section of the epistle were framed to challenge the ideas espoused by a rival group of missionaries who established a presence in Corinth after Paul had composed First Corinthians and prior to his writing of the various letters that make up Second Corinthians in its present form. Paul's theological perspectives in Second Corinthians, some of which remain unique within the body of his epistles, were likely attempts to counteract the influence of those missionaries whose gospel preaching was at odds in some important ways with Paul's own preaching.

The appearance of these missionaries in Corinth occurred as Paul was rethinking his outlook on the theme of the Covenant. In 1 Corinthians 11:25 Paul employed the term "New Covenant" in reference to the Last Supper. But he ignored any connection to the term "New Covenant" with biblical antecedents, in particular Jeremiah 31 and Exodus 36. In contrast, in Second Corinthians he makes no reference to the Eucharistic tradition. Instead he associates this notion of "New Covenant" explicitly with the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Thus Paul seems to be saying that the ultimate meaning of the Christ Event must retain a connection to the biblical tradition on covenant.

In 2 Corinthians 3:2-4 Paul makes a connection between his vision of the covenant in and through Christ with the covenantal transformation spoken of by Jeremiah (31:31-34) and alludes to the text in Ezekiel 36:24-28. But he also posits an important difference between these two covenants of renewal in the Hebrew Scriptures and what is to be understood as the final covenantal renewal in and through Christ. Paul sees the original covenant as temporarily limited in scope since it could be broken. The renewed covenant in and through the Christ Event he considers eternal and incapable of significant rupture.

In his discussion of covenantal renewal Paul did not confine himself to the above passages from Jeremiah and Ezekiel. There is, for example, the Moses narrative in Exodus 34 which Paul reinterprets in a creative way and which ultimately is a narrative of covenantal renewal. As Moses was bringing the tablets of the law down from Mount Sinai where he received them, he found the people in the process of breaking one of the central requirements of the covenant grounded in the provisions on the stone tablets: no images of YHWH. Yet the people were creating an image of YHWH as a golden calf (Exodus 32:1-20). Paul then goes on to describe how Moses moved very quickly to overcome this covenantal violation by composing a text on covenantal renewal, something he undertakes with a definite sense that this is what God is asking him to do.

For Paul, then, the covenantal renewal in Christ stands in the tradition of covenantal renewal but had a permanency that the previous ones lacked. From everything we have said above it certainly would appear that Paul regarded the original covenant given to Moses as transformed on a number of occasions in biblical history, the most decisive and lasting renewal coming in the Christ Event. Thus any understanding of Christian identity in and through Christ must retain a permanent linkage with the provisions of the original covenant. In other words, the Christ Event did not obliterate the Sinai covenant and its prior forms of renewal but merely transformed it yet another time albeit a transformation that would endure permanently.

As an aside, it can be noted that Paul seemed to privilege religions rooted in covenantal framework. For him this would basically be Judaism and Christianity. The question of the status of non-covenantal religions did not really arise for Paul. So it is clear that his writings alone do not provide the basis for a Christian Christology in light of where we are today in terms of interreligious understanding. Nor does *Nostra Aetate* present us with the complete foundations for such a theological understanding.

A continuing point of discussion in our time is whether seeing the Christ Event as an entry point into the ongoing Sinai covenant, albeit a transformed covenant, forces us to use the term "Israel"

for both Jews and Christians. John Gager and Paul van Buren have both argued for such a dual application. Most Jews would feel uneasy if such a dual application would become standard fare among Christian scholars. Although I can see reasons for such an extension of the term “Israel” I do not favor its use because of the concern expressed by Jewish colleagues who feel it would rob Judaism of its particularistic identity.

The question put on the table by van Buren and Gager nonetheless does raise an important issue which requires some response. Is the Christian-Jewish dialogue launched at Vatican II a unique “in house” conversation or is it better described as an interchange between two separate religious traditions? Pope John Paul II, in his many writings on Christian-Jewish relations, seemed to favor an “in house understanding.”<sup>[35]</sup> While I would underscore the importance of continuing to recognize altogether special links between Judaism and Christianity I would want equally to stress their distinct identities today.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW CHRISTOLOGICAL VISION IN LIGHT OF *NOSTRA AETATE***

Let me now move to a succinct explanation of my Christological perspective in the post-conciliar era. In the course of Christian history three major positions (with many variants) on the meaning of the Christ Event have emerged. The first is the Messianic. This is the primary Christology of the biblical tradition as well as Christian liturgical understanding. In this Christology Jesus is viewed as the projected Jewish messianic figure who's coming to earth inaugurated the decisive final chapter in the history of human salvation. The covenantal connection with the Creator God which Jesus reaffirmed and reinterpreted was broken in this understanding strongly affirmed in Patristic writings. Messianic Christology rests on shaky ground given the some twenty-five understandings of the Messiah circulating in Judaism during Jesus' ministry. It also tended to leave Judaism out in the cold after the Christ Event in terms of covenantal relationship and human redemption. *Nostra Aetate* seriously undercut the foundation for this classical Christology.

The second Christology has been what could be termed “Blood Christology.” It was largely developed within the Patristic tradition though it has some rootage in Pauline writings. This Christological tradition argues that Jesus washed away the sins of humanity in and through his own death on Calvary. Jews do not automatically experience such cleansing. They must accept Jesus as the ultimate Savior in order to experience its effects.

The third Christology is the Incarnational, one strongly linked to the Gospel of John. It remains in my judgment the best starting point for any discussion of Christology in light of *Nostra Aetate*. In part this is due to some similarities with recent writings from contemporary Jewish scholars such as Daniel Boyarin and Shaul Magid.<sup>[36]</sup> Some of these scholars have spoken of a form of “Incarnationalism” in parts of the Jewish tradition, the Jewish mystical tradition in particular. But language about “Incarnationalism” remains very controversial in Jewish academic circles. Even those Jewish scholars who introduce this term stress its difference from the proclamation of Incarnationalism in and through Jesus.

Working within an Incarnational framework and with an understanding of gradual Christological development in early Christianity in a liturgical context as argued by Raymond Brown<sup>[37]</sup> I would maintain that ultimately what came to be recognized with additional clarity through the ministry and person of Jesus was how profoundly integral humanity was to divine biography. This in turn implied that each human person somehow shares in divinity. Christ is the theological symbol that the Church has selected to express this reality. As the later strata of the New Testament stress, this humanity existed in the Godhead from the beginning. The Christ Event was crucial, however, for the manifestation of this reality to the world. In this regard I could be quite comfortable theologically with the term “transparent,” an image floated but never adopted by Paul van Buren. The Christ

Event in this perspective gave greater transparency to the human-divine linkage.

The above vision, let me make clear, does not mean to equate God with the totality of humanity. That would be a fundamental misreading of my approach. But it does advance Pope Francis' strong stress on the importance of biodiversity in which there is a pronounced integration within all of creation which in turn is permeated by the divine spirit. A gulf does remain in my perspective between God and the community of creation that is forever impassable. Moreover, in spite of the intimate link with God made known to us through the Christ Event, humankind remains conscious of the fact that this God is the ultimate Creator of the life that is shared with all of creation as a gift. Nor does it mean that there was not a uniqueness about the manner in which humanity and divinity were united in Jesus. Humanity would never have come to the full awareness of the ultimate link between God and all creation occasioned by the Christ Event on its own. While this event has allowed us to experience a new closeness with the Creator God, our humanity will never share the same intimacy with the divine nature that existed in the person of Jesus.

One modification I would make from my earlier writings on Christology would come in the emphasis on Jesus' use of the term "Abba" as an argument for this new divine transparency. This is an argument advanced by Edward Schillebeeckx in his writings on Christology.[\[38\]](#) While I still believe it is possible to mount an argument for Jesus' enhanced sense of intimacy with God as a basis for the Christological vision that I am proposing, the "Abba" argument has definitely been overplayed as a resource for this view.

A second modification would be to introduce the term "kingdom of God" or "reign of God" more centrally into the expression of my Christological perspective. I have been persuaded on this point by the noted Jewish scholar of the New Testament Amy-Jill Levine. She sees Jesus' sense of the presence of the divine kingdom as the most distinctive aspect of his teaching. I find her view persuasive. But I would go on to tie this notion very directly with my vision of Jesus making transparent the full linkage between creation and divinity, humanity in particular. It is this revelation of the linkage that makes possible the proclamation that the kingdom is already in our midst, even not yet fully realized. The presence of the kingdom can be perceived both within human consciousness and human history. Here again I would underscore the importance of seeing history and human consciousness as profoundly intertwined.

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

In summary, Gregory Baum's assertion about the profound impact of *Nostra Aetate* on Christology has been proven correct even though many theologians have not yet incorporated this new theological vision into their Christological affirmations. Clearly we are still at an early stage in the process of rethinking Christology within the context of the Christian-Jewish dialogue. The classical super-sessionist approach needs to be permanently shelved. But the effort to construct a widely accepted replacement Christology touches on the very nerve center of Christian theological self-identity. Hence the road of reformulation must of necessity be carefully done and will inevitably be very slow as Cardinal Kasper has underlined. Fundamental self-identities are not altered easily within any faith tradition. As Christians we may never come to a point where our Christological affirmations will lead us into a theology of religious pluralism that squares totally with the basic faith affirmations of Judaism or any other world religion. But I believe we have a continuing obligation to pursue this issue since in our globalized world interreligious understanding is not merely confined to the realm of theological ideas but directly impacts peoples' life in community. The interreligious dialogue must become an integral part of the search for theological vision. This is the mandate left us by Vatican II. With the upcoming celebration of the seventeenth hundred anniversary of the Council of Nicaea where together with the decrees from the Council of Chalcedon the Patristic Christology rooted in a super-sessionist framework became molded in Christian consciousness is it not incumbent upon the Christian churches to repudiate this theology once and for all. Its

replacement must be grounded in a theological vision based on Jesus' profound links to the Jewish tradition of his day.

In the new developing understanding of religious pluralism engendered by *Nostra Aetate* several important building blocks will remain central in the process. The first is the notion of distinctive paths to salvation/redemption for each faith community with the Christian-Jewish relationship at its core. Though these paths remain distinct they remained linked as well. This perspective remains preferable to the classical single/double and more recently multiple covenantal reality. From the Christian point of view the Christian-Jewish relationship remains *sui generis* its re-examination impacts the very core of Christian self-identity. But this central impact is limited to a far more positive assessment of the Hebrew Bible's influence on Christian-Jewish identity. Certainly the emphasis of Cardinal Kasper on the revelatory aspects of the Jewish biblical tradition discussed previously remains crucial, Judaism is more than the Hebrew Bible. Biblical Judaism was undergoing significant change in Jesus' day, particularly with the rise of Pharisaism. The Jewish scholar Reuven Firestone has made this point strongly. The Judaism of Jesus' day which became part of the Christian theological heritage went considerably beyond the parameters of biblical Judaism in several key areas.<sup>[39]</sup> So we cannot build the renewed Christian-Jewish relationship exclusively on what Cardinal Kasper has termed "shared revelation."

In my current, still evolving, theological perspective on the Christian-Jewish relationship that aims at uprooting super-sessionism once and for all, I would want to argue that Jews will not be required explicitly to pick up Christological language, even at the end time, as part of their redemptive process. Hence, I would make it clearer than Cardinal Kasper that the two distinctive paths stand on an equal footing. The Christian path is not inherently superior to the Jewish one. This seems to be the implication of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's assertion that Jewish messianic hopes are not in vain. And through the PBC document later speaks of the eschatological messiah of the Jews as the One who will exhibit traits already recognized and affirmed by Christians in Jesus who has come and remains in the Church, there is an opening, albeit small, for arguing that the "One" need not be spoken of in exclusively Christological terms. But there is only one covenant because it is the presence of God in humanity and all creation that empowers the distinctive eschatological paths.

With St. Paul I would want to argue for significant "newness" with universal significance as Cardinal Kasper has done in terms of revelation in and through Christ. This "newness" relies heavily on the incarnational approach to Christology whereby humanity saw with greater transparency than ever before the intimate humanity and divinity. A Christology based on the notion of Jesus fulfilling messianic prophecies or one rooted in the vision of him "cleansing" humanity of all sinfulness through the spilling of his blood leaves us with little or no room for creating a constructive theology of the Christian-Jewish relationship that would permanently undercut super-sessionist thinking.

We will need to continue to explore whether such incarnational awareness has any resonance in Jewish theology. A few years ago the response might have been absolutely not. But scholars such as Michael Wyschograd, Elliot Wolfson, Benjamin Sommer, and Daniel Boyarin have begun to explore the question in recent years.<sup>[40]</sup>

In addition, in the lengthy process of emergent separate paths for Christianity and Judaism, Christianity became largely a Gentile religion. It lost its appreciation for its Jewish roots and saw its theology translated into Greek philosophical categories and language, there losing an important revelatory dimension rooted in the Torah which Jesus himself maintained and which Paul struggled to maintain even though it was a struggle that he would eventually lose thanks in part of the author of Acts who, as John Gager has maintained, redefined his message. Thus Judaism as well preserves a distinctive revelation in history and creation. Christians will need to recover this Jewish revelation as part of eschatological completeness.



The Jewish and Christian revelatory paths cannot be merged all that easily. That is why I speak of distinctive paths. In the pre-eschatological age I see them continuing to play off each other.[\[41\]](#)

---

**John T. Pawlikowski**, OSM, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at the Catholic Theological Union (Chicago, Illinois, USA). The author of numerous publications, he is also Honorary President of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ).

Source: Presentation delivered at the international seminar “*Christum principium nostrum esse*’ – *The Christology of Vatican II*,” organized by Professors Ângelo Cardita (Université Laval, QC, Canada) and Ilaria Morali (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome), on April 18, 2024. Published with kind permission by the author.