



The Covenant that was Never Cancelled. Historical facts and Prophetic Visions

30.04.2016 | Michael P. Maier

Lecture presented at the conference “From the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 to Nostra Aetate in 1965”, November 9, 2015, Pontifical Lateran University in Rome.

1. From 1215 – 1965. The Factors that Caused this Great Turn About

800 years have passed since Lateran Council IV, 800 years since terms like “the treachery of the Jews,” “they play an evil game with the Christians,” the impertinence of the converts,” “these arrogant people should be suppressed” were used.

50 years ago at Vatican II the Church used a very different terminology: “That people with whom God in his unspeakable pity made the Old Covenant,” “the root of the good olive tree,” “the Jews are still loved by God.”

There is no doubt: “Nostra aetate” is a milestone in the painful history between Christians and Jews. It has revolutionized our way of thinking and has laid the foundation for a process of again approaching each other, a process which cannot be turned back.

The present day therefore gives us good reason to be glad and grateful. At the same time we must, however, also think about the reasons for this turning point. It is not enough for us to realize that matters have changed for the better. We must also understand how and why this is so, otherwise we risk repeating the mistakes of the past.

So what are the reasons for this turn about? What factors have moved the church to change its position toward the Jewish people in such a fundamental way?

To say it straight out: It was not a voluntary decision. History practically forced the Church to correct its stance of so many years.

In this short presentation I cannot make any detailed analysis. But I would like to list some circumstances that has characterized the path from Lateran IV to Vatican II.

The *first* important factor was the loss of political power. For hundreds of years the Pope was not only a spiritual and a moral authority, but also the head of a state, the Papal State. The possession of worldly power – police, military, courts of justice and administration – allowed it to be head of a state in which Catholicism was the state religion and those who had other beliefs were second class citizens. under these conditions it posed no problem to pass from theological discrimination to social segregation.

So in 1555 the Ghetto was instituted in Rome, in which the Jews were confined for all the years in which the Papal State existed. Only in 1870 was it finally abolished, with the unification of Italy, when the troops of the new state (*a secular state*) conquered the city of Rome.

The end of the Papal State is only a detail in the larger process of secularization, in which the Church lost a large part of its political and economic power in all of Europe.

How should we evaluate this historic process?

In a speech that Pope Benedict held in Freiburg in Germany four years ago he made a surprising statement: "One could almost say that history comes to the aid of the Church here through the various periods of secularization, which have contributed significantly to her purification and inner reform. Once liberated from material and political burdens and privileges, the Church can reach out more effectively and in a truly Christian way to the whole world." [\[1\]](#)

A Church that has no political power is freer to turn its attention to the world. And it is also freer to begin a dialogue with the Jewish world on an equal level and no longer from a superior level.

A *second* decisive factor for the change of the Church's stand were the tragic occurrences of the 20th century: World War II and the murder of millions of Jews in the Shoah.

This crime was perpetrated by a regime that was deeply atheistic. It knew nothing of conscience, sin, atonement and human dignity.

This would, however, not have been possible without the tacit consent and the active cooperation of many baptized Christians. The Christians were not prepared to take a stand against the Nazi ideology and to protect the Jews – not only single persons, but also the communities that had been living among them for centuries.

It was difficult for the Church to admit its guilt, which was more than the guiltiness of its members. It was an institutional guilt, since it concerned the actions of its ministers and its teachings on Judaism. In fact, a "teaching of contempt," as the French historian Jules Isaac called it, had filled the heads and hearts of many Christians since the *Adversus Iudaeos* tractates of the 4th century. In this way the fundamental truth that Jews and Christians belong to the same "family of God," had been obscured.

The *third* historic event is the emergence of the State of Israel. The teaching just mentioned was supported by the conviction that Jews must live in dispersion, because they did not acknowledge Jesus the Messiah. The figure of the "Eternal Jew" who restlessly wanders about in the world justified a teaching of Judaism as an outdated religion which had been replaced by the Christian belief.

At the moment when Theodor Herzl's dream came true – a lasting national home for the Jewish people - this kind of teaching could no longer be advocated. The State of Israel was proof and still is proof of the vitality of modern Judaism.

In this case again the Church accepted the new facts only hesitantly. Almost 50 years had to pass until the State of Israel was officially acknowledged by the Church.

Before I close this short historical survey, I must mention a *last* fact which revolutionized the thinking of the Church. In the decades before "Nostra aetate" there was an enormous development of Bible study: in the historicocritical method. The exegetes rediscovered the literal meaning of the Scriptures and in this, their original Jewish background. "Jesus was not a Christian – but he was a Jew," [\[2\]](#) explained the German exegete Julius Wellhausen. but not only Jesus, but also Mary, the apostles and the first disciples: They were all Jews!

The biblical and theological studies have by no means been concluded; on the contrary, they must be intensified in order to give a new orientation to how the Christians perceive their faith.

2. The Biblical Vision of a Coexistence of Israel and the Nations

In the subsequent chapter I would like to present an outcome of my exegetic research. a theology of the relationship between Israel and the Church that is based on the testimony of the biblical prophets.

The most important prophecy concerning this is *the pilgrimage of the nations to Mt. Zion*. Like the Decalogue that written records have handed down twice, in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, as the ethical basic law of humanity, so also this prophecy has been passed down twice, in the books of Isaiah and Micha, as the promise of a universal salvation.

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,

to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." (Is 2:2-3)

The prophecy continues with the promise that the nations would forge their weapons into agricultural tools and no longer practice for war.

We are still far from the realization of this wonderful vision. However, it is just for this reason that we should grasp the central point – the fact that this teaching comes *from Jerusalem!*

The same Torah that the Israelites received on the Sinai is received by the heathens on Mt. Zion – the place where God lives in the midst of his people. Israel becomes, in the words of a well-known exegete, "the Moses of the nations." That is the person who receives God's revelation and passes it on to the other nations. Not as an abstract book of laws, a sociological theory, but as a teaching that found its realization in the life of a people.

That is why the prophet admonishes his fellow countrymen that they should live according to God's laws: *"house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD! (Is.2:5)"*

Both of them are invited to "move."

The nations should start going to Jerusalem, the only place where they can hear the voice of God, and Israel should go on the path that has been revealed to it. In this way they will meet in any case: The People of the Covenant and the nations that long for the fruits of the Covenant. The natural sons of Abraham and those who can become so through adoption. The prophet Zechariah even predicted that non-Jews would get the same dignity as Israel: *Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people. (Zech 2:11)* - the "non-chosen" nations will be God's people!

Zechariah doesn't explain anything about the relationship between this new people and the already existing one. He only states that God will live in the middle of Jerusalem (see Zech 2:11b). As he takes in the nations he does not leave out the people of his first love, Israel.

The vision of the pilgrimage of the nations thus gives us a view of the basic structure of Jewish and Christian belief: Mt. Zion, Jerusalem is the center of the world and from its fringes the people who want to find God and his teachings draw close.

This biblical conception of the world has left its traces even in cartography. In many maps of the middle ages Jerusalem was in the center and the other countries are arranged around it. Still at the beginning of modern times this knowledge of faith was present, as the following map proves (from: Heinrich Bünting, *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae*, 1581).

It shows "the entire world in a cloverleaf." The "new world", America, had already been discovered, but in the geography of belief Jerusalem remains the center of the world. It is the intersection point of the continents and countries. The most important cities are marked in the map and for each of them the distance to Jerusalem is noted. Damascus is only 40 miles away, Alexandria 72, Ninive 171, Rome even 382 miles.

It even seems as though Zechariah, whom we cited above, had this image before his eyes when he prophesized that "*Peoples shall yet come, the inhabitants of many cities; the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Come, let us go to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts.'*" (Zech 8:20-21).

A few verses later the same prophet uses another, a less impressive but for all that more personal image: *In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you (עִמָּכֶם), for we have heard that God is with you (עִמָּכֶם)." (Zech 8:23)*

Again, it is the nations that take the initiative: They recognize the God who is with Israel and express their eager desire to follow his paths together. It is only the answer of the Jewish man to whom they turn, that is missing. Will he do as they ask? Or will he insist that everyone should continue on his own path?

What is fascinating in the small scene is that the question remains open. Will there be ten men (and women) of all the languages who find each other? And will there be a Jew who is ready to accompany them and be their guide?

Here the prophet does not foresee the melting of Jews and heathens into one single subject. Their relation is rather expressed by the formula עִמָּכֶם, *with you*, expressed in the following: God in midst his people Israel, and the other nations assembled around it - a double circle with the one God in the center.

In the New Testament this prophetic vision of coexistence of Jews and heathens is not revoked. It has only made it concrete, in identifying the "Jewish man" with Jesus - the word and visible countenance of God, the door through which the heathens step into Israel's chosenness.

3. Fifty Years after "Nostrae aetate" - Perspectives for the Future

"Nostra aetate" represents a decisive turnabout, a "point of no return," nevertheless it is - as the former president of the Pontifical Council for the Relations with Judaism, Walter Kasper, said ten years ago - only "the beginning of the beginning of the process of reconciliation and of peace."

The main initiators of the document, Augustin Bea and Johannes Oesterreicher, had the same feeling: that we have reached a decisive stage, but the path to the goal is still long.

Since then 50 years have passed. Have we come closer to the goal? But what then is the goal we are speaking of?

In "Nostra aetate" it is expressed in a rather general way: *The Church awaits the day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice (Nostra Aetate, 4).*

We are still quite far from this day. The name of God (but of what God?) is called on often today - not to proclaim peace, but to declare war against believers of other religions.

Were the fathers of Vatican II too optimistic? Did they underestimate the differences between the religions and their potential for violence? It seems so.

Even more serious is the fact that they have concentrated on the last goal, the unity of all nations, and have overlooked the step before the last: the unity of Christians and Jews. After all these years we can of course no longer imagine this unity in such an undifferentiated manner that the Jews simply acknowledge Jesus and would have to join the Church, just as it is.

It is the Church, rather, that ought to return to its origins, to its roots in the Old Testament and in Judaism. This means rediscovering Jesus the Jew and its mission to gather the people of God; and to rediscover the Torah (that so vilified Torah!) in its function of translating the great plan of salvation into the small details of daily life.

Theological research and dialogue among brothers, to which "Nostra aetate" invites us, would then not be the aim in itself, but tools to overcome the original chasm: the chasm of God's people in Jews and Christians.

Besides the universities, there is also a need for places where the Torah is lived in such a way as Jesus taught it and practiced it. For you should be able to see how the world (at least part of the world) would change according to the original plan of God. That will then also lead to a new attitude toward Judaism. For the Christians this will no longer be another religion, but the foundation and everlasting center of coexisting as the people of God.

[1]http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/de/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110925_catholics-freiburg.html (retrieved Sept 1, 2015).

[2] J. Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, Berlin 1905, 113 (Introduction to the first three gospels).

Dr. Michael P. Maier studied Theology and classical philology studies in Freiburg im Breisgau, Rome and Munich; 1993 ordination to the priesthood by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; 1994 obtaining a doctorate in Old Testament at the Papal University Gregoriana; since February 2005 holding a teaching assignment at the Papal University Gregoriana.