The Fire and the Water. Christian Antisemitism, Narrative Diagnosis, and Theological Repair

01.03.2026 | Geoffrey Ready

The fire of antisemitism is being fed by stories that Christians tell about themselves, about Jews, and about the relationship between the two. And until those stories change, no amount of goodwill, no quantity of interfaith programming, no number of Holocaust memorials will provide the water we need to extinguish it.

I. The House Is on Fire

Thank you for welcoming us, and for the depth of work you've been doing here in Montreal in Jewish–Christian dialogue. You know this terrain. Many of you knew Victor Goldbloom personally; some of you have been doing this work for decades. So I'm not going to spend time telling you what you already know about the history and importance of dialogue. Instead, I want to make a case—and I want to make it as sharply as I can.

The house is on fire. Antisemitism is rising across North America and around the world, and it is rising in forms that many Christians either do not recognise or feel no particular urgency to resist. That is the fire. And I want to argue that the reason Christians are so often unable to see what is burning—let alone put it out—is theological. Not political, not cultural, not merely a failure of education, but theological. The fire is being fed by stories that Christians tell about themselves, about Jews, and about the relationship between the two. And until those stories change, no amount of goodwill, no quantity of interfaith programming, no number of Holocaust memorials will provide the water we need.

Now, many organisations address antisemitism through education, legislation, and social action—and that work is essential. But the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), and its renewed Canadian affiliate the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Canada (CJDC), insist that underlying theological questions must be confronted. We are not claiming that theology is the only cause of antisemitism. But Christian anti-Judaism has historically paved the way for antisemitism, and—this is the crucial point—it has consistently failed to resist antisemitism when it emerged. Christians should be the first to recognise and oppose anti-Jewish hatred. The fact that they so often are not tells us something profound about the stories by which we live.

II. Diagnosis: The Stories That Feed the Fire

Stories All the Way Down

Human beings are, at the deepest level, story-shaped creatures. We do not first work out abstract principles and then apply them to our lives. We inhabit narratives—stories about who we are, where we come from, what has gone wrong, and where we are heading—and these narratives shape what we desire, what we value, and how we act, largely without our being conscious of it. As Alasdair MacIntyre put it, I cannot know what I am to do until I know what story I find myself a part of. Or to put it more starkly: the story a community tells about itself determines what it can see and what it cannot.

This is not a point about explicit beliefs. It is a point about the deep grammar of perception. If the narrative you inhabit does not include a particular reality—or worse, if it positively excludes it—then that reality becomes invisible to you. You do not reject it consciously. You simply have no place for it in your world. It falls below the threshold of perception.

And this is precisely the problem with the dominant Christian story as it has been told for nearly two millennia.

The Story Most Christians Inhabit

Let me sketch the narrative that most Christians absorb—not from any single text or sermon, but from the cumulative weight of liturgy, hymns, preaching, art, catechesis, and biblical interpretation. It goes something like this: God chose Israel and gave them the Law. Israel failed to keep the covenant. The prophets warned, but Israel did not listen. Then God sent Jesus as the fulfilment of everything the Old Testament promised. The Jews rejected Jesus and had him crucified. God therefore rejected the Jews and transferred the covenant to the Church, the "new Israel." The destruction of the Temple in year 70 confirmed this divine rejection. Judaism after Jesus is a spent force—a religion that missed its own meaning, clinging to the letter while the Spirit moved on.

Now, no responsible theologian today would state the story quite so baldly. Since *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, since decades of scholarship and dialogue, most educated Christians would disavow the crudest elements of this narrative. They would say, "Of course the Jews didn't kill Jesus," or "Of course God hasn't rejected the Jewish people."

But here is the critical point: disavowing individual propositions is not the same as inhabiting a different story. You can reject the explicit claim that God has rejected the Jews while still living inside a narrative that has absolutely no room for God's ongoing, living, covenantal relationship with the Jewish people as they actually are—that is, as rabbinic Jews, as the people of Torah and Talmud, of Shabbat and kashrut, of a rich and continuous tradition stretching from Sinai to the present day.

The revised story typically says something like: "God didn't *reject* the Jews—they still have a special place in God's plan. But the fullness of what God intended is found in Christ and the Church. Judaism was the preparation; Christianity is the fulfilment." This sounds generous. It sounds like progress. But notice what it actually does: it still makes Judaism a stage that has been *surpassed*. It still leaves no theological space for rabbinic Judaism as a *living* covenantal reality. The Jewish people are honoured as ancestors, perhaps even as unwitting witnesses—but not as partners in an ongoing divine drama that has its own integrity and its own future.

The Prejudice You Cannot See

This is why the narrative question matters so much more than individual doctrinal corrections. When the underlying story remains one in which Judaism is essentially a prelude to Christianity, the prejudice it generates is invisible—invisible precisely because it is built into the very structure of how Christians perceive the world.

Consider how this works in practice. A Christian who has been told that supersessionism is wrong, and who sincerely believes this, will still read the New Testament through a lens shaped by the old story. When the Gospel of John speaks of "the Jews" as opponents of Jesus, the instinctive response—shaped not by conscious belief but by the deep grammar of the inherited narrative—is to see a conflict between Jesus and "Judaism," rather than a conflict *within* a diverse first-century Jewish world. When Paul contrasts "law" and "grace," the reflex is to hear a contrast between Jewish legalism and Christian freedom, rather than an intra-Jewish argument about how Gentiles can be incorporated into the covenant people.

When “Pharisee” is used as a synonym for hypocrisy in a sermon—without any awareness that the Pharisees were the spiritual ancestors of rabbinic Judaism, and that Jesus’s debates with them look very much like the debates among the rabbis themselves—the preacher is not being deliberately anti-Jewish. The preacher is simply telling the story the way the story has always been told. The stereotype is embedded in the narrative itself.

Two Faces of the Same Fire

What makes the current moment particularly dangerous is that this narrative logic generates antisemitism across the entire political and theological spectrum—not only in the places we might expect to find it.

On the theological and political right, we are witnessing what can only be described as a revival of straightforward retributive supersessionism: the Jews rejected their Messiah, they are punished, they are no longer God’s people. This has found new energy in the resurgence of Christian nationalism, which tells a story about the identity of the Christian nation that has no room—or only an instrumentalised room—for actual Jewish people and their own self-understanding. Christian Zionism of a certain kind belongs here too: it affirms Jewish presence in the land, but only as a prop in an eschatological drama whose meaning is entirely determined by the Christian narrative. The Jews are assigned a role, but they are not consulted about it.

On the theological and political left, the fire takes a different but no less dangerous form. Post-colonial readings of the New Testament—which have much to teach us about power and empire—can slide, almost without noticing, into frameworks where Jews become identified with privilege and oppression. Amy-Jill Levine pointed this out years ago: in certain readings of the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, the Samaritan becomes the paradigmatic oppressed figure, while the Jewish characters become the oppressors. Feminist biblical criticism has sometimes fallen into similar patterns, contrasting the supposed patriarchal legalism of “Judaism” with the liberating message of Jesus—replicating the very supersessionist trope it claims to have outgrown. And liberation theology, for all its prophetic power, can unconsciously cast the conflict between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities as a straightforward story of the powerless against the powerful—with “the Jews” on the wrong side.

What unites these otherwise very different theological movements is the deep story beneath them. Whether the framework is nationalist or liberationist, conservative or progressive, the underlying narrative logic is the same: Judaism is something to be surpassed, corrected, or left behind. The particular reasons for surpassing it differ—on the right, because the Jews rejected the Messiah; on the left, because Judaism represents an oppressive or outmoded structure—but the structural result is identical. There is no room in the story for a living Judaism that has its own covenantal integrity.

And this is why Christians across the spectrum so often fail to recognise contemporary antisemitism. On the right, it is invisible because the inherited narrative already tells you that Jewish suffering is divinely ordained. On the left, it is invisible because the inherited categories of oppressor and oppressed have been mapped onto the Jewish–Christian (or Israeli–Palestinian) relationship in ways that make anti-Jewish hostility look like justice. In both cases, the Christian story provides no brakes against antisemitism—because the story itself has no place for the Jewish people as bearers of a covenant that God has not revoked.

III. Repair: The Water We Need

Telling a Different Story

If the fire is fed by stories, then the water must also be a story—not merely a correction appended to

the old narrative, but a genuinely different way of telling the Christian story from within. This is not about importing external values of tolerance and pluralism and then decorating them with Christian language. It is about recovering something that the tradition itself contains but has suppressed: a story in which following Jesus the faithful Jew leads not away from the Jewish people but into a deeper recognition of God's irrevocable covenant with them.

What would such a story look like? I want to sketch three elements of it—three sources of water for the fire.

First: Jesus Within Judaism

The explosion of scholarship over the past several decades on the "Jewish Jesus"—from E.P. Sanders to Amy-Jill Levine to the work emerging from the "within Judaism" school—has shown beyond reasonable doubt that the earliest Jesus movement was not a break *from* Judaism but a movement *within* it. Jesus was a Torah-observant Galilean Jew who debated with other Jews about the meaning of Torah and the coming of God's kingdom. His prayer life was saturated with the Psalms. His parables draw on the deep well of Jewish storytelling. He went up to the Temple for the festivals. His first followers were Jews who saw themselves as faithful Israelites, not as founders of a new religion.

If we take this seriously—not as an interesting historical footnote but as the foundation of a renewed Christian story—then it means that to follow Jesus faithfully is not to leave Judaism behind but to take it with utmost seriousness. The God whom Christians worship is the God who made and keeps covenant with Israel. Encountering Judaism should mean recognising not a rival or a relic but a living witness to the same God.

Second: The Slow and Painful Parting

The scholarly consensus is now clear: the "parting of the ways" between Christianity and Judaism was not a sudden break precipitated by Jewish rejection of Jesus. It was a gradual, centuries-long, often painful process of differentiation. For generations after the destruction of the Temple, the boundaries between the two movements were porous and contested. There were Jewish followers of Jesus and there were Christians who kept Torah. The clean separation that the traditional Christian story assumes—Jesus came, the Jews rejected him, the Church replaced Israel—simply did not happen.

This matters enormously. If the separation was gradual and contingent rather than instant and divinely ordained, then it cannot bear the theological weight the supersessionist narrative places on it. The simplistic story of rejection and replacement becomes historically untenable—and with it, the entire narrative logic that makes Judaism a superseded religion.

Third: The Irrevocable Gifts and Calling

The deepest source of water is Paul himself—in a passage too often ignored or explained away. In Romans 9–11, Paul wrestles agonisingly with the question of Israel's place in God's purposes, and his conclusion is unequivocal: "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29). God has not rejected the people whom he foreknew (11:2). The covenant with Israel stands.

A Christianity that has no room for this irrevocability has misunderstood its own story. And here is where the reparative narrative must become tradition-specific—because different Christian traditions will need to tell this story in their own idiom. The Orthodox Christian tradition, from which I come, has particular resources here: a theology of divine faithfulness rooted in the Fathers' understanding of God's covenant as *unbreakable*; a liturgical life still deeply shaped by the Psalms, the prophets, and the Jewish scriptures; and an apophatic theology that is wary of the kind of

triumphalist claims that fuel supersessionism. But every Christian tradition—Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, Anglican—has its own deep wells to draw from. The key is that each must find within its own resources a story in which the Jewish people are not a footnote, not a prelude, not a stepping stone, but partners in God's ongoing covenantal drama.

The goal is not a Christianity embarrassed by its own confession, nor a bland interfaith consensus that ignores or papers over real differences. The goal is a Christianity that tells its own story truly—and discovers that, told truly, the story includes an irreducible place for the Jewish people and their covenant.

It is a story in which, as long ago promised to Abraham, and renewed in the covenants with Moses and David, and expressed in the expectations of the prophets, that one day all the world would come to know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God of the Jews – as the one true God, and all the nations would worship this God *alongside* Israel. Not in place of, not better than, but together with.

As the prophet Zechariah writes: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 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, for we have heard that God is with you'" (8:23).

If I live in *that* story, the last thing I would ever want to do is cause harm to Jews. Not because of some externally imposed ethic of tolerance, but because the deep logic of my own faith makes such harm unthinkable.

Repentance as a Narrative Act

One more thing must be said about the water. The reparative story is not only a story we tell about God and Israel. It is also a story that calls the Church to repentance. Telling the story differently means confronting the fact that the Church has told it wrongly—and that the consequences of telling it wrongly include centuries of persecution, exclusion, and complicity in genocide.

This is not about guilt as an end in itself. It is about the kind of repentance—in Greek, *metanoia*, a turning of the mind—that is itself a narrative act. To repent is to recognise that you have been living in the wrong story and to turn toward the right one. The Church's repentance for its treatment of the Jewish people is not a concession to political pressure or cultural fashion. It is a theological act of the highest order: a recognition that the story we told was not only harmful to others but unfaithful to our own deepest convictions about the God who keeps covenant.

IV. Why This Matters Here: The Canadian Context

You in Montreal know better than most why this work matters. You know the legacy of Victor Goldbloom, who served as president of the ICCJ from 1982 to 1990 and who understood that building bridges requires both deep roots in one's own tradition and genuine openness to the other. You know the pain of what happened when the previous Canadian Council of Christians and Jews collapsed—when key Protestant denominations adopted "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction" strategies that alienated Jewish partners and destroyed the trust that decades of dialogue had built.

That collapse was not simply a political disagreement. It was a symptom of the narrative problem I have been describing. When Christians have no theological framework for understanding Jewish connection to a particular land and a particular polity—when their story has spiritualised away the material, embodied character of God's promises—then they cannot understand why such actions feel to Jewish partners not merely as political criticism but as an existential threat to their

covenantal identity. The inability to see was not a failure of information. It was a failure of story.

The CJDC, as Canada's re-established affiliate of the ICCJ, is committed to rebuilding differently. Rather than avoiding the theological questions, we are putting them at the centre. Rather than assuming good intentions are enough, we are committed to the hard work of examining the stories we tell—not just at the level of individual claims, but at the level of their fundamental narrative logic.

The foundation for this work stretches back to Seelisberg in 1947, when Jules Isaac and sixty-four other Jews and Christians gathered in the aftermath of the Shoah to begin the urgent work of setting right Christian teaching. The Ten Points they produced were the first attempt to challenge the Christian story at its roots. The Berlin Document of 2009 carried that work further. But as scholars noted at the 75th anniversary of Seelisberg, there are still "many pockets of the Christian world where the basic truths expressed at Seelisberg would be considered shocking at best—and quasi-heretical at worst."

The work of changing the story is barely begun. And it is work that must happen not only in seminar rooms and academic consultations, but in parishes, in pulpits, in catechetical programmes, and in the daily practices of Christian communities. This is where the local work of groups like yours is indispensable. When you study texts together, when you grapple with difficult questions, when you build relationships of genuine trust across religious boundaries, you are doing something more than socialising. You are participating in the slow, patient, essential work of narrative transformation.

Through the CJDC, we want to connect your work to the international resources, scholarship, and networks of the ICCJ. We want to bring the insights of global Jewish–Christian dialogue to the Canadian context, and to contribute Canadian perspectives—forged in the particular crucible of this country's history—to worldwide conversations.

The theological work of combating antisemitism is not finished. In many ways, it has barely begun. Because what is required is not the correction of individual errors but the transformation of a story. The story by which Christians live must become a story that has room for the Jewish people—not as a footnote, not as a prelude, but as partners in God's ongoing covenantal drama. Only then will Christians have the eyes to see antisemitism when it rises, and the will to resist it.

Thank you for your commitment to this essential work. We look forward to continuing it together.

Rev Dr Geoffrey Ready is the director of Orthodox Christian Studies at Trinity College within the University of Toronto, Canada, where he teaches liturgical theology, pastoral studies, and both Old and New Testament. He chairs Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews, a working group addressing anti-Judaism in Orthodox preaching, teaching, and worship.

Source: Address by Dr. Geoffrey Ready, Founding Director of the Christian–Jewish Dialogue of Canada, at the roundtable "Current Issues in Jewish–Christian Dialogue and Relations," February 17, 2026, in Montreal.

Copyright JCRelations