

The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible

INTRODUCTION BY CARDINAL WALTER KASPER

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

In greeting all of you I wish to express my deep contentment to meet you and to have the opportunity to discuss with you this evening a theme of great importance for our Jewish-Christian relations. These relations are unique within the whole history of religions, and I am happy that this uniqueness has been brought anew to the consciousness of our times after a long period of mutual estrangement. The reason for this uniqueness is a strong and a fundamental one; we claim in common our Sacred Scriptures, what you call the Tanach and we the Old Testament. Thus we share a rich common patrimony. Unfortunately this communality was for a long time of our history practically more or less forgotten, and we can only be grateful for the historical shift that has occurred in our times, a shift through which, beyond all lasting diversities, we have rediscovered our common history and our common heritage, and this means also that we have rediscovered our common responsibility for the future, our common future, as we hope.

It is against the background of this new situation that the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 2001, under the presidency and with a foreword of the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger released a document entitled: “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible”. This text will be discussed this evening by a Jewish and a Catholic speaker. I do not want anticipate what they have to say; my task is only to introduce this document. This seems to me necessary because I have the impression that after its release and the positive reaction of biblical scholars almost everywhere, this important and helpful document was left almost unknown and received too little within the wider public forum.

The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission stands clearly in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council and its Declaration “Nostra aetate”, which decried all forms of anti-Judaism and laid the basis for new and positive relations between Jews and Christians. These relations cannot be founded and motivated only from a humanitarian or even only from an emotional perspective, or in terms of political interests; at least for religious people on both sides they have a deeper foundation, which touches both our identities. Both, Jews and Christians, are people of the Word, a word which does not come out of ourselves, but which is given to us as light for our path (as Psalm 119:105 says), as a guide for our life and as a key for the understanding of ourselves and of all reality. In being people of the Word we encounter in each other a fundamental communality over against modern autonomous secularist thought and self-understanding. We are both listeners to the Word of God.

Thus in the Bible we have a common patrimony. Because the New Testament does not abolish or substitute what the Jewish people call the Hebrew Bible or the Tanach, what we call the Old Testament; on the contrary, it refers almost on every page to it, it makes its own not only the language of images and expressions of the Hebrew Bible, but even more importantly it stands in profound continuity with its fundamental message on the one and unique God, creator of heaven and earth, its messianic promises and its central commandments to seek justice, to work for peace and to love God and one’s neighbour. For the New Testament there is one divine design which leads from Abraham, our common father in faith, to Moses and – for us – to Jesus, who was a Jew, the most famous Jew, born from a Jewish woman, Mary of Nazareth, and from there to the eschatological fulfilment, when God gathers all nations and brings about schalom, peace.

Thus both Testaments are for us internally and inseparably intertwined. They constitute for us the one Bible. “Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither” (n. 84). John Paul II spoke of the Jewish people as our elder brothers who deserve our respect, esteem and love.

Throughout her history the Church not only once but several times has had to defend this interconnection of the Old and the New Testament. Already in the first centuries against the Manicheans and especially against Marcion and his one-sided spiritual understanding of the

Scriptures she constituted the one Biblical canon out of the Old and the New Testament. It was the main hermeneutical principle of the Church Fathers and still of medieval high scholastic theology to interpret the Scriptures as a whole. But even in modern times since the Enlightenment, especially in liberal theology up until the first decades of the 20th century, there was a strong dispute about the lasting importance and validity of what Jews call the Hebrew Bible. For Rudolf Bultmann, a famous Protestant biblical scholar and theologian in my student days in the fifties of the last century, the New Testament does not prove the fulfilment of the Old Testament, as the Fathers told us, but its failure. Anti-Judaism had a long aftermath.

Though anti-Judaism unfortunately was for a long time present also in Catholic circles Catholic doctrine and theology never accepted such a thesis. “*Nostra aetate*” stands in the line of a longstanding Catholic tradition when it highlights the Jewish roots and the common spiritual heritage. This Declaration then was the starting point for an intensive and fruitful co-operation between Jewish and Catholic biblical scholars, where both learned from each other and both enriched each other. The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission is an official result and acknowledgement of this co-operation and at the same time an impulse and a stimulus for further co-operation. It aims, as it says, “to advance the dialogue between Christians and Jews with clarity and in a spirit of mutual affection” (n. 1, introduction). So it could become a challenge for future common Jewish-Christian biblical studies. There are a lot of open theological questions raised by this document that should be dealt with in theological academic circles, faculties, symposiums and seminars.

Let me now give a short overview of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document, which is divided into three major sections and concludes with final reflections and pastoral implications:

1. The text begins by documenting how the New Testament writings themselves recognize the authority of the Old Testament; for the New Testament and for the early Church it constituted “the Scriptures”. Then in this section we find considerations about the parallel formation of the canons in the post-Biblical Jewish and the early Christian periods and about the debt the New Testament and early Christianity owed to Jewish methods of interpretation.

2. A second section explores the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments by tracing major motifs that are common in both: convictions about God, about the nature of the human person, and key concepts such as the election of Israel, the covenant, messianic expectations, the land and temple, and so on. In each instance, the document demonstrates how the relationship between the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament is marked: on the one side by continuity – that is, a similarity of content, values and perspectives – on the other side by discontinuity – that is, changes, omissions, re-interpretations and differing emphases, traceable primarily to Christian faith in Jesus as the Christ. Finally there is also progression – that is, development of understanding or fuller meaning given to texts, motifs, or events as read in the light of Christian faith.

3. A third section concentrates on the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament. The document traces the historical context of post-exilic Judaism, noting the gradually evolving alienation and complex relationship between the first-century rabbinic Judaism and Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity. In this context it surveys each of the New Testament writings and assesses their portrayal of Jews and Judaism.

The main point is that as Jews and Christians we look at the same Scriptures with different eyes; this is why Christian faith sees Jesus Christ as the “interpretative key” (cf. Lc 24:27). As Christians we read the Old Testament in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection. This is a retrospective view. Therefore the document clearly recognizes that Christians read the Old Testament in a different manner to Jews, but at the same time it insists on the value and validity of the Jewish Scriptures in and of themselves and not just as a preface of the New Testament. It goes even a step further and acknowledges that the Catholic Church admits an interpretation of the Scriptures other than the Christian one, this means the Jewish interpretation is possible and legitimate.

In this regard the document states: “The Old Testament in itself has great value as the Word of God. To read the Old Testament as Christians then does not mean wishing to find everywhere direct reference to Jesus and to Christian realities. ... Although the Christian reader is aware that the internal dynamism of the Old Testament finds its goal in Jesus, this is a retrospective perception whose point of departure is not in the text as such, but in the events of the New Testament proclaimed by the apostolic preaching. It cannot be said, therefore, that

Jews do not see what has been proclaimed in the text, but that the Christian, in the light of Christ and in the Spirit, discovers in the text an additional meaning that was hidden there” (n. 21).

In the next paragraph, for our relations perhaps the most important one, the document states: “Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion. Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible” (n. 22).

The retrospective nature of a Christian reading of the Jewish Scriptures is significant, as it acknowledges the historical development of interpretation and also eliminates any justification for accusing the Jews of being blind and not seeing what is in the text. The different readings of the Bible are expressions, not of anti-Judaism, but of disagreement at the level of faith; but the source of religious controversy between us that take their point of departure from the same faith basis in the Old Testament; our disagreement is on how to conceive the final development of that faith.

It is obvious that this acknowledgement of the ongoing Jewish “right” to the Jewish Scriptures has significant implications for present and future relations. In former times within the Catholic Church there have been opinions that the Jewish Scriptures no longer belonged to Jews but had become the property of the Church and that Jewish interpretations were false whereas only Christianity could offer the correct interpretation. Now the document negates explicitly that old paradigm of the theology of supersessionism or replacement. The document states: “The New Testament never says that Israel has been rejected. From the earliest times, the Church considered the Jews to be important witnesses to the divine economy of salvation. She understands her own existence as a participation in the election of Israel and in a vocation that belongs, in the first place to Israel, despite the fact that only a small number of Israelites accepted it” (n. 36).

Instead of speaking of replacement the Second Vatican Council states in accordance with Saint Paul that the covenant with the Jewish people is unbroken (cf. Rom 11:29). Christians

believe that in Jesus the promises given to the fathers find their definitive irrevocable AMEN (cf. 2 Cor 1:20). In this regard the document clarifies: “Israel continues to be in a covenant relationship with God, because the covenant-promise is definitive and cannot be abolished” (n.42). Later on the same affirmation: “The New Testament attests that Jesus, far from being in opposition to the Israelite Scriptures, revoking them as provisional, brings them instead to fulfilment in his person, in his mission and especially in his paschal mystery” (n.65).

Whilst Jews expect the coming of the Messiah, who is still unknown, Christians believe that he has already shown his face in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we as Christians therefore confess as the Christ, he who at the end of time will be revealed as the Messiah for Jews and for all nations. In this regard our document explains: “The definitive fulfilment will be at the end with the resurrection of the dead, a new heaven and a new earth. Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us” (n. 21).

The Christian idea of fulfilment does not negate the Jewish reading of the Sacred Scriptures. This “concept of fulfilment” is not inspired by a theology of supersessionism. The document clarifies: “The notion of fulfilment is an extremely complex one, one that could easily be distorted if there is a unilateral insistence either on continuity or discontinuity. Christian faith recognises the fulfilment, in Christ, of the Scriptures and the hopes of Israel, but it does not understand this fulfilment as a literal one. Such a conception for us would be reductionist. Because in the mystery of Christ crucified and risen, fulfilment is brought about in a manner unforeseen. ... Jesus is not confined to playing an already fixed role – that of Messiah – but he confers, on the notions of Messiah and salvation, a fullness which could not have been imagined in advance; he fills them with a new reality; one can even speak in this connection of a ‘new creation’” (n. 21).

Thus both our faiths are open towards the future. Jews and Christians agree that their sacred texts are open texts pointing out to a future which at the end of time will be determined by God alone. So together they can give witness to the incompleteness of the world and to its non-completeness by human efforts. Together we stand against pessimism, scepticism,

relativism and nihilism and give witness to the openness of history towards the future and to the unwavering hope of a completion which God alone can and will fulfil at the end of time. To give witness to this common and yet distinctly perceived hope is a compelling urgency in our world today, so in need of hope and so devoid of its consolation.

In conclusion I want to say: This document articulates clearly a theological development in Catholic teaching about the relationship between the Church and Judaism, beginning with the Second Vatican Council's fundamental teachings. The document gives witness to a growing maturity of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, which has developed steadily since the publication of *Nostra aetate* in 1965. There we find a definite NO to all kinds of anti-Semitism and of anti-Judaism and a undeniable YES to the Jewish roots of Christianity. At the same time it clarifies the very essence of our remaining differences and it does it in a way which does not deny but respects Jewish identity.

This does not at all mean that we are already at the end of our journey. A lot of theological questions are still open and should be treated by competent theologians committed to Jewish-Christian dialogue. Therefore I welcome this meeting organized by the "Israel Jewish Council for Interreligious Relations", and I look forward to new clarifications, new and deeper insights and – who knows – also to new questions, which will bring us forward and closer together.

Thank you for your kind attention.