

A Catholic Perspective on the Mission of Israel

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IN THE second volume of his trilogy *Jesus of Nazareth*, Joseph Ratzinger, writing not as pope but as a theologian, makes the rather startling statement that in the present time, until the fullness of the Gentiles enters the Church, “Israel retains its mission,” and that “Israel is in the hands of God who will save it as ‘a whole’ at a proper time when the number of the Gentiles is complete.”¹ Ratzinger bases his statement on the Pauline view of the history of salvation as sketched out in Romans 9–11. What is new in his position is the positive affirmation, only implicit in Paul, that during the time of the Gentiles “Israel retains its mission.” In the context of Ratzinger’s theology of history, this cannot mean two parallel covenants, as if Israel had a special way of salvation apart from Christ. Ratzinger has always maintained the universal salvific role of Christ for all human beings. There is only one covenant, he stated in an earlier work,² but it has several stages in history, each directed toward Christ, fulfilled in him and made effective by him. The Mosaic Covenant, then, was and is salvific for the Jews in good faith who express their trust in God’s promise of redemption by their obedience to the Mosaic Law. To clarify the topic of my essay, I start with a quote from that earlier book by Ratzinger, which explains his statement on the interim mission of Israel:

¹ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part II, Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 44, 46. Ratzinger does not imply here that individual conversions from Judaism are to be discouraged. In his writings he emphasizes the Church’s universal mandate of evangelization.

² See Ratzinger, *Many Religions, One Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999).

[T]he question of Israel's mission has always been present in the background [of Catholic theology]. We realize today with horror how many misunderstandings with grave consequences have weighed down our history. Yet a new reflection can acknowledge that the beginnings of a correct understanding have always been there, waiting to be discovered, however deep the shadows.³

In the first part of my article I plan to explore some of the “deep shadows” as well as the “beginnings of a correct understanding” in the past two millennia. In the second part I propose a tentative and partial outline of a reflection on “what waits to be discovered” regarding the mission of Israel.⁴

History of the Catholic View on Israel's Mission

The New Testament

For those familiar with St. Paul's presentation of Israel's role in God's plan of salvation, Ratzinger's position may not be too surprising. In Romans 9–11, Paul outlines the complex relationship between Israel and the Church, as well as Israel's past, present and future in the light of his christocentric view of history. Even though “a hardening has come upon Israel in part” on account of their unbelief, this will last only “until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and thus all Israel will be saved” (11:25–26). In the meantime, Israel is both an enemy of the Christians with respect to the Gospel and “beloved” by God “because of the patriarchs” (11:28). The Israel of the Old Testament is the “noble olive tree” and the Gentile Christians are the “wild olive shoots” who are grafted onto it, nourished by the rich sap of the root which supports them (11:17–24). Even the branches that were broken off on account of their unbelief may be grafted on again if they do not remain in unbelief (11:20, 23). Paul seals his affirmation of God's enduring love for Israel by stating that “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (11:29).

Paul is not alone in the New Testament in showing forth the enduring importance and final “acceptance” and salvation of “all Israel” (Rom 11:15, 26).⁵ The four Gospels affirm or at least imply, each in its own way, the enduring presence of Israel and its salvation at the end of history.

³ Ibid., 44.

⁴ In this essay I use the term “Israel” in the sense of religious Jews, faithful to the First Covenant, rather than the state of Israel. I also talk about “Catholic” rather than “Christian” attitudes toward Israel since in Protestant Christianity there exists a widely divergent range of views on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

⁵ It is not clear what “acceptance” (*proslēmpsis*) means in the text: acceptance into the Kingdom of God, into the Church, or Israel's acceptance of the Gospel?

Matthew, written for Jewish Christians, draws a stark picture of Israel's unbelieving *elite* by presenting the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard and denouncing the sins of the scribes and Pharisees in a passionate discourse on the terrible judgment awaiting them and the Temple. Yet after his sevenfold woe of condemnation, he finishes his address by announcing, "I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mt 23:39). In Matthew, unlike in Luke, this prophecy cannot refer to his triumphant entry into Jerusalem (21:9), since he has already entered the city. Being placed before the eschatological discourse, it must mean his coming at the end of this age.

Moreover, the angel's message to Joseph before the birth of Jesus, "[Y]ou are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins" (1:20), is a divine promise that must ultimately be fulfilled. God's design to save Israel is irrevocable. In fact, his saving plan for Israel is revealed paradoxically by the shouting of the "whole people" before Pilate: "His blood is on us and on our children" (Mt 27:25). The blood-thirsty crowd, of course, is unaware that the blood of Jesus cries out not for vengeance but for mercy and forgiveness. The saving power of his blood had been already manifested by Jesus to the disciples at the Last Supper, when he pronounced the words over the chalice: "For this is my blood of the covenant which is to be poured out for many unto the remission of sins" (26:28). In the "for many," all humankind is included and yet, before the Gentiles, Jesus' saving blood is offered to, and falls upon, Israel.⁶

As seen above, Jesus in Matthew's Gospel predicts that Jerusalem will accept Jesus as her Messiah at the end. The evangelist, however, suggests even more: in harmony with the early kerygma, the evangelist sees in Jesus the embodiment of the final, eschatological Israel. This needs some explanation. The Servant in the four Songs of Isaiah points to an individual and also to the collective Israel (Is 49:3). The Son of Man in Daniel 7 also designates both an individual heavenly being who accedes to the throne of the Ancient of Days (7:13–14) and the "holy ones of the Most High" (7:18; 21–22), the collective Israel of the end times. This does not create any confusion in Hebrew thought, since those who represent the people, such as ancestors, kings and prophets, can naturally be identified with the

⁶ Paul also respects this "heilsgeschichtliche" priority which follows from God's plan: "[The Gospel] is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then the Greek" (Rom 1:16). The same priority of Israel is expressed by Paul's way of acting in Acts: he visits first the synagogue in every city and goes over to the Gentiles only after the Jews refuse to listen to him.

people; they embody, as it were, Israel in themselves. If, then, Jesus is the Servant who through his suffering has become the glorious Son of Man, he is not merely one of the Israelites but the new, eschatological Israel. Hence we can understand from a new perspective that, through being called back from Egypt (Hos 11:1 as interpreted by Mt 2:15), through his temptations, and also through his public ministry, Jesus re-lives the historic experience of Israel. This identification of Jesus with Israel is already prepared in the ancient kerygma, quoted by Paul in 1 Cor 15: 3–7. In this perspective, far from being contrived, the application of Hos 6:1–3 to the resurrection of Jesus on the third day (v. 4) sheds light on the mysterious link between the destiny of Israel and that of Jesus: God becomes man as the eschatological Israel and the resurrection of Christ is the resurrection of Israel of which the prophet Hosea spoke.⁷

Even though addressed to a Hellenistic audience, the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel represent a traditional Jewish perspective: Mary's son will sit on the throne of his father David and rule in the house of Jacob forever (1:32–33).⁸ Only the prophecy of Simeon opens up a universal perspective. The child is destined to be revealed to the Gentiles, but he remains the glory of God's people, Israel (2:32).

Although by the end of Luke-Acts the center of the Church is transferred from Jerusalem to Rome (after the persecutions in Jerusalem caused Peter's departure and Paul's imprisonment), the divine promise, delivered by Gabriel and through Simeon's prophecy, was never revoked. In fact, when the apostles ask Jesus before his Ascension, "Lord, is it at this time that you are going to restore the kingship to Israel?" Jesus does not reprimand them for this narrow nationalistic perspective but simply refuses to reveal the time of this *apokatastasis* (restoration): "It is not for you to know the time or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority" (Acts 1:6–7). Thus not even the universalistic Jesus of Luke excludes the kingship of Israel from the end stage of salvation history.

The Fourth Gospel has long been accused of an anti-Jewish tendency, as it frequently equates the enemies of Jesus with the "Jews." The frequent identification is indeed a fact, and it reflects the situation around the end of the first century when Christians were everywhere excommunicated from the synagogues, and Christianity was treated as a dangerous heresy. Nevertheless, the Gospel of John, like all the New Testament documents

⁷ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* (New York: Fontana Books, 1965), 103, and Roch Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: The Fundamentals of Christology*, new ed. (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2002), 157–58.

⁸ Marcion was so disturbed by the Jewish character of the infancy narratives that he cut out the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel.

(and even more forcefully than some of them), insists that all that Jesus did and suffered fulfills the Scriptures and festivities of Israel: Abraham rejoiced when he saw his day, Moses wrote about him, and Isaiah saw his glory. His last word on the cross, *tetelestai*, “it has been completed” or “achieved,” means in context that he fulfilled, not only the will of his Father, but also the Scriptures.⁹ Even though the Jews are often characterized as enemies, Jesus expresses the greatest praise for a Jew that is found in all the four Gospels, by calling Nathanael “the true Israelite in whom there is no guile” (1:17). Moreover, Jesus counts himself among the Jews when he tells the Samaritan woman, “You worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand,” and he gives the cause for this knowledge by saying what no other Gospel does, “because salvation is from the Jews” (4:22).

A most surprising but often overlooked feature of this Gospel concerns the kingship of Jesus. At a superficial glance, it appears that Jesus’ kingdom is completely different from the Davidic kingship because it is not of this world. In fact, Jesus is not, anywhere in John, labeled “son of David,” nor is his kingdom that of David. Yet the evangelist uses the device of inclusion to emphasize that Jesus, as the Son of God and the Son of Man, is the messianic king of Israel. The exclamation of Nathanael, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel” is echoed and intensified by the shouts of a “big crowd” which greets Jesus when he solemnly enters Jerusalem as the king prophesied by Zechariah: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel” (Jn 1:49; Zec 12:13–14). Of course, Nathanael and the crowd do not understand the nature of Jesus’ kingship, which is gradually revealed in Jesus’ trial, Passion, and Resurrection. The hearing before Pilate centers on the question “Are you the king of the Jews?” Aware that Jesus has no political ambition, Pilate and the soldiers nonetheless mock the kingly claim of Jesus, not only when they dress him in a purple cloak and place a crown of thorns on his head, something which is also described in the Synoptics, but also when Pilate seats Jesus on Pilate’s own bench of judgment and declares, “Behold your king!”¹⁰ The title fixed above his head on the cross and written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek reads: “Jesus the Nazorean, the king of the Jews.” When the chief priests protest the wording, Pilate remains firm: “What I have written, I have written” (19:19–22). This presentation is a fascinating example of what the exegetes call “Johannine irony.” On the level of what this world can understand, Jesus

⁹ Recall John 19:28, which interprets the last cry: “after this Jesus, aware that all has been fulfilled (*tetelestai*), so that the Scripture may be fulfilled (*teleiothe*), he said: ‘I thirst.’”

¹⁰ The Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible translate *ekathisen* as transitive.

is seated on Pilate's bench and enthroned upon the cross out of mockery. Those who contemplate the scene with the eyes of faith, however, know that, unaware and unwilling, Pilate and the soldiers are carrying out God's design: Jesus is truly enthroned on the cross as the King of Israel. At the same time, the inscription in the three languages, which from a contemporary Jewish viewpoint encompassed the entire world, proclaims to all peoples the universal kingship of Jesus. But he is made universal king as king of Israel. Having fulfilled God's will to the end, Jesus is enthroned on the cross to rule over all creation. In a similar way as in Matthew's perspective, the universal king of Israel embodies in himself the eschatological Israel; he is the mysterious Son of Man in Daniel who represents "the saints of the most high." Thus also in the Gospel of John, the mission of Israel is fulfilled in Jesus the Messianic King, the Son of Man, to whom is given "dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him" (Dn 7:14, 18).

Regarding the New Testament's appraisal of Israel, we may conclude that her mission culminates in Jesus. The unbelief of the "official" Israel is experienced as a "great sorrow and constant anguish" (Rom 9:2), yet none of its writings considers her unbelief definitive. Moreover, her survival to the end of times is not just one of many possible historical scenarios; it becomes, rather, a necessary part of God's providential plan of mercy. In this sense, then, according to the New Testament Israel has a mission. God wills its existence so that after the fullness of the Gentiles enters the Church, all Israel may be saved.

The History of the Church

Most Jewish and Christian theologians hold to a one-sided negative appraisal of historic Christianity's view on Israel's mission. For example, a recent study by a Jesuit scholar quotes approvingly the phrase coined by the Jewish French historian Jules Isaac, who characterized Catholic teaching on Jews throughout the centuries as *un enseignement du mépris* ("a teaching of contempt").¹¹ Therefore, most historians regard the document *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II and the subsequent actions and speeches of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI as causes of a revolutionary turn in Jewish-Christian relations. While no one can deny the momentous change which occurred after the Council, the history of the relationship is far more complex than an unambiguously negative critique suggests.¹²

¹¹ David Neuhaus, "Engaging the Jewish People. Forty Years since *Nostra Aetate*," in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 395.

¹² A notable exception to the wholesale negative appraisal is the book by David Dalin, *The Myth of Hitler's Pope* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2001), which shows

Like the New Testament, later Catholic tradition has never ceased to consider the (temporary) unbelief and the existence and destiny of Israel intrinsic to the existence and destiny of the Church. For the Fathers of the Church, Israel is both the mother of Jesus and the mother of the Church. Many of them, however, like to add that she acted more like a cruel step-mother who persecuted her son, crowned her son with thorns and killed him.¹³ Yet as the mother of Jesus and of the Church, she belongs to their very mystery. When in the second century Marcion removed the Old Testament from his Bible, the Church removed Marcion from the body of the Church, and she continued to consider herself the legitimate heir of the Jewish Scriptures as an integral part of the inspired word of God without which the New Testament becomes incomprehensible. Whenever pogroms and persecutions threatened the survival of the Jewish people, the official Church, especially the popes, condemned them. According to Rabbi and Professor David Dalin, the only state that never in history expelled the Jews was the Papal States.¹⁴ Pope Gregory X officially states that he offers the Jews “the shield of his protection,” following, as he writes, “in the footsteps of our predecessors . . . Callixtus, Eugene, Alexander, Clement, Celestine, Innocent and Honorius.” Gregory also condemns those Christians “who falsely claim that Jews have secretly and furtively carried away [Christian] children and killed them.”¹⁵ St. Bernard of Clairvaux severely reprimands the monk Rudolph who incited a pogrom in the Rhine valley. If the Jews were exterminated, he says,

where does that saying come in, “not for their destruction I pray” and “When the fullness of the Gentiles shall have come in, then all Israel will be saved,” and “the Lord is rebuilding Jerusalem, calling the banished sons of Israel home?” Who is this man that he should make out the Prophet to be a liar and render void the treasures of Christ’s love and pity? This doctrine is not his own but his father’s. But I believe it is good enough for him, since he is like his father who was, we know, “from the first a murderer, a liar and the father of lies.” What horrid learning, what

the popes’ consistent policy of protecting the Jews from persecution throughout the centuries.

¹³ See, for example, Petrus Chrysologus, *Collectio sermonum*, *sermo* 164: *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts*, 0227; Eusebius Gallicanus, *Collectio Homiliarum* 49: CI 0966; Apponius, in *Canticum Canticorum Expositio* 5: CI 0194.

¹⁴ *The Myth of Hitler’s Pope*, 18–19.

¹⁵ Letter of Gregory X, October 7, 1272. Even though the popes consistently defended the Jews from persecution, they did insist on discriminatory measures: the Jews had to live in a ghetto, wear special clothing, and were barred from public office and the military. They were free, however, to engage in trade, banking, and medicine.

hellish wisdom is his! A learning and wisdom contrary to the prophets, hostile to the apostles, and subversive of piety and grace. It is a foul heresy, a sacrilegious prostitution “pregnant with malice . . .”¹⁶

Let us note: according to Bernard, it is Satan himself who instigated the monk to persecute the Jews.

In Sermon 79 of his *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, Bernard explains the relationship between Synagogue and Church as root to branch, mother and daughter:

The branches should not be ungrateful to the root, nor daughters to their mother. The branches should not envy the root since they have drawn (the sap) from the root, nor daughters be envious toward their mother since they sucked her breast.

Bernard interprets the words of the bride in Songs 3:4 as the words of the Church Bride to her Bridegroom, Christ: “I have held on to him and will not let him go until I introduce him into my mother’s house and into the bedroom of the one who bore me.” Thus, according to Bernard, the Church Bride is not at all envious of her estranged mother, the synagogue, but wants to introduce her Bridegroom to her:

How could this be that she yields her spouse, or rather desires her spouse for another? No, this is not the case. Indeed as a good daughter she desires Him for her mother but this is not the same as yielding Him to her, but rather to share Him. One (Groom) suffices for both; they, however, will no longer be two but one in Him. He is our peace who makes the two into one, so that there will be one bride and one Bridegroom who is Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁷

Bernard here (and elsewhere) expresses in a new and passionate way a general patristic belief: Israel is the object of a special Providence and will

¹⁶ Letter 393 in *The Letters of St. Bernard*, trans. and ed. Bruno Scott James (Regnery: Chicago 1953), 466.

¹⁷ Bernard, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, 79, 5–6. We also need to acknowledge that there has been much friendly contact between certain Christians and Jews throughout ancient and medieval history. Many popes had Jewish physicians as their personal doctors. St. Jerome learned Hebrew from Jewish rabbis, and in his Bible translation he consulted the Hebrew text of the books of the First Testament. In the Middle Ages, Blessed Stephen Harding, one of the founding abbots of the Cistercian Order, amended the Vulgate translation of his Bible by asking for the help of Jewish rabbis. St. Thomas studied and used the works of the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides. Thomas himself teaches that after all the pagans chosen for salvation have embraced the faith, all Jews in general (not every individual) will be saved (cf. *Super Epistolam ad Romanos* II.2).

exist until the end of history when all Israel will be saved. Moreover, Bernard advises Pope Eugene III about the inopportunity of trying to convert the Jews at this time: "For them a determined time has been fixed which cannot be anticipated."¹⁸

On the other hand, the protection of the Jews by the Church hierarchy coexisted with Church support of repressive measures. For example, the Fourth Lateran Council ruled that Jews may not hold public office, must wear distinctive dress, and may not appear among Christians during the Easter holidays.¹⁹ Thus, according to Jewish scholar Robert Chazan, the official policy of the Catholic Church was "moderate toleration."²⁰

Three false beliefs have justified the Church's approval and even promotion of unjust laws against the Jewish people. Throughout the centuries the Church has acted out of the conviction that the Jews are collectively responsible for the execution of Jesus, since the Jews of today are the descendants of those who condemned the Son of God and thus they share in their forefathers' guilt. The second misunderstanding was the belief that the truth of Christianity is so evident to everybody that the Jews' refusal to believe in Christ manifests their bad faith and, therefore, makes their rejection of him inexcusable. The third reason was fear: the pastors of souls were afraid that "Jewish error" might compromise the faith of their flock.

In order to provide a more balanced picture of the relationship between Jews and the Catholic Church, we must mention the official declaration of the Church in the sixteenth century regarding Jewish guilt, found in the Roman catechism and composed after the Council of Trent:

The guilt in us seems more enormous than in the Jews, since according to the testimony of the same Apostle, "If they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:8); while we, on the contrary, professing to know him, yet denying him by our actions, seem in some sort to lay violent hands on him.²¹

In light of this history, *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II and the words and actions of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI do not appear completely

¹⁸ Quoted from Bernard's *De Consideratione* III 1, 2 in Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. II, 44.

¹⁹ Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, nos. 68, 69: *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. I, 266–67.

²⁰ R. Chazan, "Christian-Jewish Interactions over the Ages," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensy et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 7–24.

²¹ *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests* (New York: J. F. Wagner, 1923), 50–61; 362–65.

unprepared by, or contrary to, the previous history of Catholic thought. Even though supersessionism, which claims the definitive rejection of Israel and its replacement by the Gentile Church of the New Covenant, had been the prevailing belief of Catholics at large, the Fathers and the best theologians of the Church as well as the popes have never succumbed to it. They could not do so, since they all read, and accepted the teachings of, the Letter to the Romans, which excludes such a position.

In spite of the Jewish opposition to the Gospel, the official Church remained convinced on theological grounds that the Jews had to be preserved and protected against the violent outbursts of popular anti-Judaism. If Israel were wiped out, God's promise, made known through Jesus and Paul, would prove false. Moreover, if the Church were to participate in the destruction of Israel, she would be guilty of matricide, the murder of her own mother.

We must admit that, before Benedict XVI's writings on the subject, the awareness of the Church's duty to preserve Israel did not include the explicit recognition of her mission. Her mission was implied, however, in the belief that the actual survival of Israel in spite of so many adversities bears witness to God's absolute fidelity before the world.

The Present and Future Mission of Israel from a Christian Perspective

After the historical overview, we attempt to start a "new reflection" on what Benedict calls "the beginnings of a correct understanding" of the mission of Israel during the time of the Gentiles which "has always been there, waiting to be discovered."

According to David Novak, the renowned professor of Jewish studies at the University of Toronto, the most important contribution of Judaism to the world is the teaching on the natural moral law, which derives from what he calls a general revelation to all humankind.²² If both Jews and Christians proclaim together the principles and demands of the natural moral law, the secular world cannot ascribe this position to a particular religious belief, and it may more easily recognize the natural law as universally valid and inscribed in the very nature of humanity. I welcome this recommendation and note that a united witness in certain moral matters (such as the protection and promotion of the dignity and rights of persons, the struggle against any sort of discrimination, poverty, disease, and oppression) has already begun in some regions of the world. I believe, however, that in addition to proposing the natural moral law to all humankind, believing

²² See David Novak, *The Natural Law in Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Jews do have a much more specific mission in the world, which derives from their irrevocable election as the people of the First Covenant. This mission has been expressed with great depth in a short story by Franz Werfel, a famous German Jewish novelist. The story is based on real events. The following excerpt is taken from a scene set in an Austrian village where a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi have become good friends. One day the rabbi asks this question of his Catholic companion:

“What would happen if one day all Jews in the world became Christians? Israel would disappear. But with Israel, the only real witness of God’s revelation would also disappear. In that case the Bible would no longer be documented by our own existence, it would become an empty and lifeless saga, just like the Greek myths are. Does the Church not see this danger? . . . Reverend Father, we belong to each other but we are not ONE. In the Letter to the Romans it is said that the Church is built on Israel. My conviction is that as long as the Church exists, so also will Israel. But if Israel has to fall, so must the Church, too.” “Why do you think this is true?” asked the priest. “On account of our sufferings that last up to this very day,” replied the rabbi. “Do you think that God allowed us for no reason to endure what we have endured and to survive what we have survived for two millenia?”²³

Our Jewish readers, I trust, will not hold against us Catholics that we can only partly agree with this profound statement. We cannot be expected to give up our hope that at the end Israel will recognize her Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth. For us, a full agreement would be tantamount to our disregarding the love which animated the soul of Jesus, whose direct mission was to gather the lost sheep of Israel. Moreover, as a Catholic theologian, I believe that even after “all Israel” recognizes her Messiah in Jesus, Israel will not disappear within the Church but will always retain its special identity and mission within it, as the “noble olive tree” onto which the Gentile “branches” have been grafted.

At the same time, we can all recognize the rabbi’s admirable insight into the inseparable connection between Israel and the Church: “As the Church exists, so will Israel. But if Israel has to fall, so must the Church, too.” Martin Buber expresses a similar awareness of mutual belonging to one another: “Only we two, the Church and Israel, know what Israel really means.”²⁴ John Paul II also describes the intrinsic bond which unites the Church to Judaism:

²³ F. Werfel, *Die wahre Geschichte vom geschändeten und wiederhergestellten Kreuz* (Berlin: Verlag Haude & Spener, 1965); my translation.

²⁴ *Die Stunde und die Erkenntnis: Reden und Aufsätze* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1936), 148.

[T]he Church of Christ discovers her “bond” with Judaism by “searching into her own mystery.” The Jewish religion is not “extrinsic” to us, but in a certain way is “intrinsic” to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.²⁵

Let us now examine the different aspects of our mutual belonging, in particular, the mission of Israel from a Catholic perspective. First, with Werfel’s rabbi we must acknowledge that *Israel in its very existence witnesses to the reality of God*. Not simply to the ultimate Cause of the cosmos and the ultimate foundation of morality, but to the living God of the Covenant who cares about us, speaks to us, freely binds himself to us by covenant. He chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in whose offspring the entire world will be blessed; in spite of the multiple infidelities of his people, he remains unshakable in his faithfulness. With the rabbi, we must also include the sufferings of Israel throughout history in this witness—in fact, consider them a sign of her election. As the rabbi said: “Do you think that God allowed us for no reason to endure what we have endured and to survive what we have survived for two millennia?” Pope Benedict confirmed this aspect of Israel’s mission at his visit to Auschwitz:

The rulers of the Third Reich wanted to crush the entire Jewish people, to cancel it from the register of the peoples of the earth. Thus the words of the Psalm: “We are being killed, accounted as sheep for the slaughter” were fulfilled in a terrifying way. Deep down, those vicious criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid. If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die and power had to belong to man alone—to those men, who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world. By destroying Israel, by the *Shoah*, they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention: faith in the rule of man, the rule of the powerful.²⁶

²⁵ In the Pope’s original Italian: “Il primo è che la Chiesa di Cristo scopre il suo ‘legame’ con l’Ebraismo ‘scrutando il suo proprio mistero’. La religione ebraica non ci è ‘estrinseca’, ma in un certo qual modo, è ‘intrinseca’ alla nostra religione. Abbiamo quindi verso di essa dei rapporti che non abbiamo con nessun’altra religione. Siete i nostri fratelli prediletti e, in un certo modo, si potrebbe dire i nostri fratelli maggiori” (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 78 [1986], 1120).

²⁶ Address of Pope Benedict in Auschwitz Birkenau on May 28, 2006; available on the Vatican website.

Second, in this deeply emotional speech, Pope Benedict points not only to the vocation of Israel as the living witness of the living God but also to *the patrimony of her faith as a taproot of our Christian faith*. He has evoked this Pauline metaphor of Israel's heritage as "taproot" many times and has shown concretely in his speeches and writings how Israel's faith serves him personally to enrich and deepen his own insights.

Pope Benedict begins his theological writings almost always with an explanation of what the First Testament (and, often, what Jewish tradition) says about his topic. In this way he shows the direction and consistency of God's revelation, the gradual process by which God has educated his people and, through them, also the Church. But against our Jewish interlocutors, who often note that the sacred books are only a preparation in the eyes of Christians, most of these texts are considered by the Catholic Church to be essentially more than mere preparation. Through the First Testament we understand better not only the background and preparation for the realities of the New Testament but also their full meaning. For instance, Jon D. Levenson has gathered much convincing evidence that the entire Jewish sacrificial system, including the Passover Lamb, was understood in the Second Temple period as patterned and inspired by the *akeda*, the sacrifice (the binding) of Isaac by Abraham.²⁷ This conclusion implicitly questions the theories of a number of Christian exegetes who claim that Jesus could not have understood his death as sacrifice and that this interpretation was developed only at a later stage of the New Testament. From Levenson's book it becomes plausible to think that Jesus and his immediate disciples had at hand the conceptual tools to interpret his death as the fulfillment of all previous Jewish sacrifices.

In addition to being a preparation, the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham helps us enter more deeply into the mystery of Jesus' sacrifice. It reveals the depth of God the Father's love for humankind: he did not let Abraham sacrifice his beloved Son, but he did allow the sacrifice of his own beloved Son. As the hymn of the Paschal Candle sings, "In order to redeem the slave, you handed over your Son." We could continue the examples indefinitely to document the deepening of our faith by relating the New Testament fulfillment to the type in the Old. The type is not simply a stepping stone to be left behind once we come to know its fulfillment in Christ; rather, it continues always to shed light and provide a deeper understanding of the Christian mystery. This awareness is expressed in the liturgy by the proclamation of texts of the Old Testament

²⁷ See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

without which our understanding of our feasts and of the Eucharist would become flattened and distorted.

Third, Israel's faith also belongs to her mission before the end of history. On the level of the explicit, propositional content of that faith, a Christian must see it as incomplete.²⁸ Yet if we consider not what scholastic theology calls *fides quae* but *fides qua*, namely the grace-bestowed act of faith by which we reach God himself, adhere to him and build our existence on him, beyond concepts and propositions, this aspect of faith depends ultimately on the strength and depth of our love for God. *On this intuitive, we might say, mystical level, a Jew who loves God with all his heart, mind, and strength grasps the mystery of God more deeply and more fully even today during the "time of the Gentiles" than a Christian with a mediocre love but sophisticated theological knowledge could do.*²⁹ Gregory the Great and the medieval monastic tradition knew that *amor ipse notitia est* ("love itself is knowledge"), a knowledge based on God's indwelling in the soul and the purity and depth of the love which flows from this indwelling.

Fourth, regarding the existential application of the biblical texts to the life of the individual and community, Christians can learn much from our "older brothers." *In fact, every Christian must go through the "school" of the Old Testament.* We need to experience the slavery to sin and our hopeless inability to break out of its imprisonment. In this way we learn to cry out to God and put all our hope in him. In this way also, we experience the miracle of Exodus: He will liberate us from our sins so that we may become part of his people, a "holy nation, a kingdom of God" (Ex 19:6). We need to go through some desert places in our lives and experience the providential care God exercises in keeping us alive materially and spiritu-

²⁸ Our Jewish friends at times express regret and incomprehension about the fact that Christians consider their (Jewish) faith incomplete in comparison to the fullness of their own. Even Buber thinks that we look at their Bible as a forecourt while for them this is the sanctuary itself. In fact, if we consider the conceptually formulated content of what we believe, he is right. We hold that the Catholic Christian faith is the fulfillment of the First Testament but still awaiting a final consummation. Obviously, this position is not inspired by arrogance but rather by the desire to remain faithful to Christ.

²⁹ Thus, on the level of intuitive grasping, even the *fides quae* of the loving Jew may "fairly compete" with that of a Christian. Nevertheless, by acknowledging the value of this intuitive, love-inspired knowledge, we should not diminish the importance of knowing the propositional truths of the Catholic faith and the reception of the sacraments. The explicit knowledge of the Christian mysteries (such as God as Trinitarian communion, the Incarnation and Redemption, the mystery of the Eucharist) and the Christian sacramental practice have a built-in dynamism toward increasing our love for God and thus intensifying his presence in us.

ally; And we must also, like Israel, go through situations in which we become either materially or spiritually poor, so that we can learn how poverty can liberate us from the dangers of earthly riches to find our true riches in God.

When we Christians see Jews live the Covenant of Sinai by fulfilling the Law with zest and joy, we discover in them the foretaste of the New Covenant in which God implants his Law into our hearts. Observant Jews, like observant Christians, may become pharisaic if they boast of their moral performance. But those who obey the Law in order to sanctify the divine Name and who consider their whole life a sacred worship provide a shining example for those Christians who like to complain even about the observance of some minimal obligations. They may venerate in these Jews the anticipated eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit.³⁰

And finally, Catholics of course cannot agree with the Jewish denial of the Christological meaning of the entire First Testament. The Catholic position, namely that all of the Old Testament points to Christ and finds its full meaning in Christ is, according to Jewish scholars, arbitrary and untenable. Yet there are still many believing Jews for whom hope in the Messianic promises of the prophets remains an essential dimension of their lives. These Jews, whose faith has been nourished by the Jewish Bible, know that "the world to come" cannot result from the civilizational and moral efforts of humankind alone. They learned from the Holocaust that God calls for constant and maximum engagement from us in the battle against moral and physical evil, but they also know that the new heaven and new earth of which Isaiah dreamt can be only the final redemptive work of God. *Our eschatological faith is strengthened by the presence of these Jews, who read with faith the prophetic texts of their Bible and thus share in the experience of the prophets; that is, in some real sense they also see and taste in the Spirit the eschatological reality, the salvation promised to Israel and the world.*³¹ This partial unity in testifying to our converging eschatological expectation does confirm our mission but does not eliminate our division regarding the

³⁰ Neighborly love as the sum total of the Law is not an exclusively Christian insight. In the Talmud R. Akiba declared: "This is the most fundamental principle enunciated in the Torah: 'Love thy neighbor as thyself'" (*The Talmud: Selected Writings*. Introduction by Ben Zion Bokser and Baruch M. Bokser [New York: Paulist Press, 1989], 28).

³¹ This renewed emphasis on the prophets would counter the tendency of rabbinic Judaism that focuses on the Torah. Yet, the secular eschatology of "enlightened Judaism" has been crushed by the experience of the Holocaust. There is a new openness even in Reform Judaism to hope in a transcendent "world to come," an act of divine redemption. On traditional Jewish eschatology, see Frymer-Kensky et al., eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, 269–75.

person and role of Jesus Christ. Yet even in this fundamental opposition, Israel does Christians a great service. Our faith in the Incarnation is enriched by a new, concrete dimension as we discover that God has become not some generic human being but he has become man by becoming a Jew, in fact more than a Jew: Jesus of Nazareth is *the Jew*, the embodiment of the new eschatological Israel. This is so because he fulfills both the Suffering Servant prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah and the Son of Man vision of Daniel. And as we have seen in the historical part of this essay, these two figures represent both an individual and the eschatological Israel. In this way, paradoxically, we are united with believing Israel even in the sharpest difference between us: Jesus of Nazareth is our unbreakable bond with Israel. For us, too, Israel is a holy nation; once the fullness of the Gentiles³² enters the Church, the temporarily separate mission of Israel will come to an end, as she discovers in the face of Jesus her own deepest mystery, the face of the eternal Israel of God. N-V

³² We do not know what in God's plan this "fullness of the Gentiles" means in relation to world population.