

Quasi in Figura: A Brief Reflection on Jewish Election, after Thomas Aquinas

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IT IS NOW widely agreed among Christian theologians that being a supersessionist is a bad thing. In rejecting supersessionism—or perhaps better, in hoping we can avoid it—we do not always agree, however, on what it is we are against. Here I think we can usefully take our cues from *Nostra Aetate*. “God does not repent of the gifts he made to the Jews and his calling of them. They still remain most dear to him for the sake of their fathers”—this, of course, in echo of Romans 11:28–29. So the Jews today, the descendents of the patriarchs, remain God’s elect and beloved. To deny this is supersessionism—to hold that the Jews are no longer God’s elect but are “rejected and accursed.”¹ Supersessionism involves, more precisely, the thought that the gifts God gave and the promises God made to the Jews now apply to us, the Church, *instead* of to the Jews. They have been taken away from the Jews and given to us.

The trick, of course, is to follow *Nostra Aetate* in avoiding this supersessionist thought, while at the same time affirming, also with *Nostra Aetate*, that “the Church is the new people of God,” that in Jesus Christ all the promises of God, not least his promises to the Jewish people, find their *yea* and *amen* (2 Cor 1:20).² Just *how* to do this—to believe in the universal primacy of Christ (cf. Col 1:15–20) without being a supersessionist—is far from clear.

¹ All from *Nostra Aetate* §4. My translation from Giuseppe Alberigo et al., eds., *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1991), 970.26–28; 971.1

² *Nostra Aetate* §4; Alberigo, *Decreta*, 970.38.

I

A theology which seeks support in the Christian tradition for rejecting supersessionism and affirming the permanent election of the Jewish people quickly runs into a problem. It is actually rather difficult to find, in the Christian theological tradition, much interest in the election of Israel. The most basic problem for a post-supersessionist theology is not, as recent Christian reflection on Jewish election often assumes, that the tradition openly rejects God's continuing election of carnal Israel (to borrow Michael Wyschogrod's phrase)—God's irrevocable choice of the family which descends from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be, out of all the nations of the earth, his uniquely treasured possession (cf. Deut 7:6).³ The problem, rather, is that it is difficult to get any traction on the question of Jewish election in the first place.⁴ Israel's election usually is not discussed at all, at least in any explicit way, let alone the question whether Jewish election continues after Christ. As sometimes happens when we go looking in the tradition for ideas we have already decided to reject, clear supersessionist claims (for example, that divine election now takes place by new "spiritual" rules rather than the old "carnal" ones) are more difficult to find than we might assume.⁵ Of course there are passages, especially in the early history of Christian theology, which explicitly repudiate the abiding election of carnal Israel: "You deceive yourselves," Justin Martyr warns the Jews, "while you fancy that, because you are the seed of Abraham after the flesh . . . you shall fully inherit the good things announced to be bestowed by God through Christ. . . . It becomes you to eradicate this hope from your souls."⁶ But texts of this kind are relatively sparse. While Christian theologians across the centuries have a lot to say about the Jews, they rarely reflect openly on the nature and status of Jewish election.

One way to get some traction on the election of Israel in the Christian tradition is by attending to the tradition's ongoing and often very involved discussion of the law of Moses. Theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries devoted particular attention to the "old law," and especially to its "sacraments," namely circumcision and the Levitical ceremonies. Thomas Aquinas is no exception.

³ See Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God and the People Israel*, 2nd ed. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996).

⁴ I am grateful to Robert Wilken for pressing this point.

⁵ More difficult, indeed, than I assumed in my essay "The Jewish People and Christian Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81–100, here 83–85.

⁶ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 44, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 216b–17a.

Aquinas's account of the Mosaic law, however, immediately discourages the thought that he might be a resource in the tradition for post-supersessionist Christian theology. Thomas clearly regards the continued observance of the Torah after Christ as fatal. That is, the vast bulk of the Mosaic legislation, everything in the "old law" which Aquinas considers distinctively Jewish (everything, that is, except the ten commandments), has been set aside by the coming of Christ. More than that: everything which pertains to the worship of God in Israel, the totality of the Levitical cult—what Aquinas calls the "ceremonial law"—is now not only useless, but destructive. After Christ these laws are not simply dead (*mortua*), but deadly (*mortifera*); those who continue to observe them "now sin mortally" (*Summa theologiae* I–II, q. 103, a. 4, c; cf. q. 104, a. 3, c). Thomas devotes special attention on this score to circumcision (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 4). To be sure, Aquinas sides with Augustine against Jerome, and holds that the Levitical cult did not cast its practitioners into the sin which separates from God all at once; it took some time (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 4, ad 1). But that time is now well past (*Super Epistolam ad Galatas Lectura* 2, 3, no. 86).⁷ A person who now, for example, has his son circumcised, in observance of the command which (as Aquinas does not doubt) God gave to Moses, actually disobeys God, and puts in peril both his own salvation and that of his offspring (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 4, *sed contra* and c.).

Aquinas takes this view, which is hardly unique to him, because of the way he understands the rationale (*ratio*) or purpose (*causa*) of the Old Testament ceremonies. All of the ceremonies are ways of exhibiting the inward faith of those who practice or engage in them (*sunt quaedam protestationes fidei*, *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 4, c). They attest the faith of those who practice them in two different ways, corresponding to the twofold purpose for which God gave them to Israel. The purpose of the Levitical cult is at once literal and figurative. Literally its *ratio* is to worship the one true God: to recall the benefits God has bestowed on Israel, to exalt and glorify God, and so forth. Figuratively, its *ratio* is to point toward and anticipate Christ and the Church, the redeemer to come and the body of which he will be the head (*ST* I–II, q. 102, a. 2, c). Thus the literal purpose of the Passover celebration is to recall the liberation of God's elect people

⁷ The period prior to the promulgation (*divulgatio*) of the gospel of Christ was only "a short time" (*modico tempore*), apparently equivalent to "the outset of the time of the apostles" (*sicut tempus Apostolorum in principio*) (*In Gal.* 2, 3 [no. 86]), and a period apparently past by the time Paul wrote to the Galatians (cf. *In Gal.* 5, 1 [no. 280]). Raphael Cai, ed., *S. Thomae Aquinatis super epistolas Pauli lectura*, vol. 1, 8th ed. (Turin & Rome: Marietti, 1953).

from Egypt (*ST* I–II, q. 102, a. 2, ad 1), while its figurative purpose is to sketch out in advance the passion and resurrection of Christ (*ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 4). The literal purpose of circumcision is to signify “the covenant which God had with Abraham” (*ST* I–II, q. 102, a. 2, ad 1), while its figurative purpose is to point toward the saving union with Christ opened up to all nations in baptism (*ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 4).⁸

Given this picture, it is not difficult to understand why Aquinas thinks that the continued practice of the Levitical cult after Christ is sin. It belongs to the divinely given purpose of the cult that it points figuratively to Christ. More precisely, for Aquinas, the ceremonial law points *prefiguratively* to Christ; it anticipates his future advent. To practice this cult is thus inherently to attest one’s faith that Christ will come one day, but has not come yet. To practice this cult *now*, after Christ has in fact come, is thus inherently to deny Christ, to deny his coming (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 4, c; q. 107, a. 2, ad 1). Of course the ceremonies also have a literal purpose, the worship of the one true God. But since the figurative purpose of the ceremonies now makes it impossible to enact them without mortal sin, and since God cannot, presumably, be worshipped by an act which is mortal sin, it seems as though Israel’s liturgy can no longer succeed in worshipping the God who made a covenant with Abraham: its literal purpose was good only “for that time”—namely, before the coming of Christ (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 102, a. 2, c).

Of course Thomas can and does say that God does not, in all this, “repent” of the gifts he once bestowed on Israel. Their purpose, rather, has been fulfilled. We should be cautious, I think, about taking the idea that the Mosaic law has been fulfilled in Christ and the Church as the solution to our problem about supersessionism. Take, for example, the commonplace that the commandment to circumcise is fulfilled in the act of baptism. This does not mean, it is sometimes argued, that the old law (of circumcision) has been rejected or superseded; rather it has been retained in its very fulfillment. This seems to suggest, though, that what a Jew should do in order to observe God’s command regarding his eight day old son is take him to church and get him baptized. It seems, in other

⁸ As Thomas’s presentation here shows, the *ratio* of an act—the reason why the act is performed—should not be confused with the meaning (*sensus*) of a text. The literal sense of texts in which God commands circumcision, for example, is that God commands the removal of the foreskin of Israelite males, while the literal *ratio* of the act of circumcision is to worship the God of Israel. Thomas’s discussion of the literal and figurative *ratio* of the Old Testament ceremonies (for example, *ST* I–II, q. 101, a. 2; q. 102, a. 2) is thus not simply a case of the fourfold *sensus* of scripture at work (cf. *ST* I, q. 1, a. 10), but deals with a different issue. On this see especially *ST* I–II, q. 102, a. 2, ad 1.

words, that on this view the way for *Jews* to observe the law is to become Christians. Now the notion that the law of Moses finds its complete fulfillment in Christ and the Church is, I think, indispensable for Christianity. But this ancient idea is not the solution to the problem of supersessionism. It *is* the problem.

Thomas himself seems quite clear on this score, and so has no trouble viewing the Church's rites and sacraments as straightforward replacements for the old ones: "the ceremonies of the law are taken away (*tolluntur*) when they are fulfilled" (*ST* I–II, q. 107, a. 2, ad 1). Thus baptism "succeeds" circumcision, and the celebration of the Easter Triduum "succeeds" the Passover (*ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 4). Thomas says "*succedit*" here, but he might as well have said "*supersedet*."

Richard Schenk picks up this point, and argues that Aquinas (unhappily, if we want to get beyond supersessionism) places increasing stress on the figural *ratio* of the ceremonies, and increasingly de-emphasizes their literal *ratio*.⁹ Even if this is the case (which raises exegetical questions I will not pursue here), a greater stress on the literal or "immanent" purpose of the Jewish law will not by itself soften what look like supersessionist implications of Aquinas's view. One can make as much as one likes of the literal *ratio* of the Levitical cult. But as long as the saving (that is, justifying) efficacy of the cult depends on its also having a prefigurative *ratio*—as long as a prefigurative purpose is a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for its saving efficacy—then something like Thomas's argument against the continued practice of the cult after Christ will still go through. That is, "figural *ratio*" is just Thomas's term for the connection the ancient rites have to Christ (however this connection may be conceived in particular cases). Without a tie to Christ these rites can have no saving efficacy, whatever their literal *ratio*, and however important we think it to be.

This it (rightly) never occurs to Thomas to doubt. All sacraments give the one grace of Christ, whether under the old or the new law.¹⁰ But here (in *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 4), at least, Thomas attributes to the ancient rites an inherent temporal structure which makes it impossible for them to retain their figural *ratio* after Christ's advent. They no longer point at

⁹ See Richard Schenk, O.P., "Views of the Two Covenants in Medieval Theology," *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 891–915; cf. Francis Martin, "Election, Covenant, and Law," *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 857–90. This essay was originally presented as a response to the papers by Schenk and Martin at a conference on Christian-Jewish dialogue, held at the John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, DC.

¹⁰ "By observing the sacraments of the law the ancient Fathers were joined to Christ [*creban-tur in Christum*] by the same faith and love by which we are joined to him" (*ST* III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 3; cf. I–II, q. 98, a. 2, ad 4; q. 103, a. 2, c; III, q. 61, a. 3, c).

him, but away from him; they no longer attest faith in his coming, but the denial that he has come.

II

There is a lot in Thomas's view of the Jews and Judaism with which the quest for a post-supersessionist Christian theology quickly resonates: his commitment to the eschatological salvation of at least some among Israel, rooted in his conviction that the unfaithfulness of the Jews does not make void the faithfulness of God, who promised to "multiply and magnify" this people (*Super Epistolam ad Romanos Lectura*, 3, 1, no. 253); his vehement resistance to novel and especially cruel forms of coercion, such as baptizing Jewish children without the knowledge, or against the will, of their parents (cf. *ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 12).¹¹ Yet his official view of Israel includes, seemingly at its heart, the conviction that by keeping the commandments of the Torah—by continuing to exist, and to be publicly recognizable, as Jews—Abraham's descendants according to the flesh reject God and exist in opposition to him.¹² It is hard to see how this is compatible with the thought that God continues to elect the Jewish people, to will their existence, precisely as Jews (whatever Aquinas may say, exegetically, about God's faithfulness to the Jews).

Yet on just this score there are suggestions of an unofficial view in Thomas, alongside of, and perhaps in striking opposition to, his official view. This comes out in a particularly noteworthy way when Thomas considers the question whether the worship of infidels, unbelievers, should be tolerated by Christians (*ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 11). In general Christians should tolerate the *ritus* of unbelievers only when some greater evil would result from trying to get rid of them. But the Jews are an exception to this rule. Even though Jewish worship falls under the general stricture that "unbelievers sin in their worship" (*infideles in suis ritibus peccent*), Christians should simply permit this worship, and not attempt to hinder it (*ST* II-II, q. 10, a. 11, c).

The argument Thomas gives for this recommendation is, up to a point, an Augustinian commonplace. Since in the worship of the Jews "the truth of the faith that we hold was at one time prefigured," something good happens when the Jews practice this worship today, namely that "we have a testimony to the truth of our faith from our enemies." Aquinas might

¹¹ On both of these points see Marshall, "The Jewish People and Christian Theology," 86.

¹² By his "official" view I mean what Aquinas (or anybody) says when a question explicitly arises, as distinguished from his "unofficial" view: what he may suggest about the same question when he is dealing with other matters.

well have stopped there, but instead the argument goes on, and takes an unexpected turn. When the Jews practice their rites, observe the Torah before our eyes, “this represents to us what we ourselves believe, in a kind of figure”—*quasi in figura* (all from *ST* II–II, q. 10, a. 11, c). This is not simply the old Augustinian argument that we Christians should leave the Jews their worship in order to show the world that we did not make up the prophecies which we say have been fulfilled in Christ. Rather Aquinas explicitly distinguishes the *prefigurative* sense of Jewish worship from its present significance, and attaches to Jewish worship, even after Christ—in the synagogues of Paris—a kind of continuing figurative worth.

Given the tremendous weight Thomas ascribes to the figurative meaning of Jewish worship *before* Christ, to say that this worship retains a figurative significance after Christ is not a trivial claim. If Jewish worship even now attests Christian truth in a figurative way, it must somehow still do what it did from the beginning: point to Jesus Christ in its own distinctive fashion, join the faithful worshipper to his incarnation and passion, and so confer the grace of justification (cf. *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 2, c; *In Gal.* 3, 4, no. 145). Obviously, present Jewish worship cannot be a figure of Christian truth if it attests some *other* Messiah, if it gives figural witness to some other savior besides Jesus Christ. And if Jewish worship still retains its figural *ratio*, it presumably also retains its literal *ratio* (that is, reason or purpose), which is to worship the one true God. Jesus Christ cannot, presumably, be figurally attested by worship of a false God, or worship which fails to attain the one true God (and is in that sense false, or at least radically inadequate, worship), quite apart from what seems to be the general dependence of the figural upon the literal for Aquinas. So a lot seems to follow from the thought that Jewish worship after Christ still “represents what we ourselves believe, *quasi in figura*.” It means that the Jewish people, just by being faithful Jews, by circumcising their sons and celebrating the Passover, (literally) worship the one true God, and (figuratively) his Christ, despite their literal rejection of him.

Whether there is any way to harmonize this unofficial undercurrent in Aquinas’s theology with his official position I will not here try to decide. To say that there is ambiguity in Aquinas’s position may be something of an understatement. It is a bit hard to see how Jewish worship could be a denial of Christ (as *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 4 says), and at the same time could figurally attest Christ. Thomas seems aware of the difficulty when he says that the Jewish *ritus* before Christ attests him *in figura*, without qualification (*In Gal.* 3, 4, no. 145), while after Christ it attests Christian truth *quasi in figura*. Thomas never says “quasi” unless he means it, so there must be some difference between the figurative function of the Jewish

ritus after Christ and its figurative function before Christ. But what that difference is—compatibly with *any* continued figure—Aquinas does not say. In any case, better a quasi-figure than no figure at all.

Have we gained anything with Aquinas's unofficial view (prescinding from whether there is some way of harmonizing it with his official view)? It takes, after all, a view of Jewish worship which no Jew can endorse. We have gained, I think, at least this: Thomas's unofficial view allows Jews to be Jews, and precisely thereby to worship the one true God. This much, at least, seems necessary for the claim that the Jews remain God's elect, and so it seems necessary if we are, with *Nostra Aetate*, to reject supersessionism. Taking this view does not mean that we Christians construe Jewish worship, and the God we both worship, the same way they do—any more than they construe our worship the way we do. But it locates the issue between Jews and Christians in the right place, and not in a place that denies Jewish election. It locates the difference between Jews and Christians where it truly lies: not in a disagreement over whether the Jews remain God's elect, but in a disagreement over who the one true God is (the Trinity, or not) and what this God has done with Jesus (raise and exalt him, or not). There, perhaps, we can safely let the matter rest until the one true God brings it to a close in his own good time. N V