

STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers in Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

Can Roman Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?

Jon D. Levenson

Harvard University

Volume 1 (2005-2006): pp. 170-185

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol1/iss1/art19>

1. Introduction

The document on *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) in 2001,¹ which John R. Donahue, S.J., has aptly dubbed “the stealth missive from the Vatican,”² surely demands much more attention than it has commanded. It constitutes a major milestone in Roman Catholic thinking about the Jews and their Bible and the vexing question of how the Church is to relate to them. It also raises the question of just how far one religious community can go in affirming the legitimacy of another community—a thorny one, to be sure, and one that many involved in the quest for interreligious understanding are not inclined to ponder. Because the burden of my discussion will subject the document to critique and point out places where I think its logic fails, I want at the outset to express appreciation for it and, in particular, briefly to draw attention to two points at which, in my judgment, it marks a noteworthy change—and from the Jewish point of view, a change for the better—over historic Christian positions.

The first concerns the fact that Jews, or at least Jews who are religious in a traditional sense, continue to pray for

and expect the arrival of the messiah. In classical Christian theology, this was a sad thought that reflected poorly on the Jews, for if the messiah had come—and what could be more typical of the Gospel than the announcement that he had?—then surely these prayers and expectations are in vain and testify only to the spiritual blindness and hard-heartedness of the once chosen people. So much for the traditional attitude, still found among many Christians, of course. Now compare this statement from our text:

Insistence on discontinuity between both Testaments and going beyond former perspectives should not, however, lead to a one-sided spiritualization. What has already been accomplished in Christ must yet be accomplished in us and in the world. The definitive fulfillment 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.³

Now, anyone can see that what this paragraph expresses is ancient and orthodox Christian doctrine: the messiah has come, he is Jesus, he has already “accomplished” his mission, and he will come back. But the very fact that he needs to come back at all implies that “the definitive fulfillment” lies in the future, for all is not finished. “The resurrection of the dead” and the institution of “a new heaven and a new earth,” both of which are central to Jewish eschatology as well, have not yet happened. And the awareness of this generates that revolutionary seven-word sentence: “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain.” In place of the model of Christians living joyfully in realized

¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2002). In general, note must be taken of the important translation corrections to this document in Charles H. Miller, “Translation Errors in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005): 34–39. I thank Professor Richard J. Clifford, S.J., for bringing Miller’s piece to my attention.

² John R. Donahue, S.J., “Joined by Word and Covenant: Reflections on a Recent Vatican Document on Jewish Christian Relations,” <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/Donahue.htm> (consulted June 1, 2006). This was the Msgr. George A. Denzer Lecture, given at Huntington, Mar. 16, 2003.

³ PBC, *The Jewish People*, 60.

eschatology but Jews living in tragically unrealizable eschatology, this paragraph speaks of Jews and Christians together living in expectation of a realm very different from the current world order.

The second of the two points on which I see the document making a noteworthy change relates to the question of Jewish biblical interpretation, that is, the way Jews have traditionally understood the book that Christians, for very good Christian reasons, call “the Old Testament.” Here, we must bear in mind that much of the Jewish-Christian debate over the past two millennia has taken place on the battlefield of biblical interpretation, and even modern historical criticism of the Bible, for all its claim to have transcended tradition, has often served as just the latest installment of this ongoing controversy.⁴ A particularly pungent Christian image of the Jews’ alleged blindness when it comes to the Bible can be found in Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

¹²Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, ¹³not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was set aside. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. ¹⁵Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; ¹⁶but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in

⁴ See Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), especially chapters 1 and 2.

a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:12–18, NRSV)

The key point for us in this densely allusive and intertextually complex passage is that it presents the mind of the Jews as hardened, sclerotic if you will, with the result that when they read “the old covenant,” they do so through a barrier that prevents them from seeing clearly. The point is to fault the Jewish tendency to read the Torah (I assume that is what is meant by the “old covenant”) in a non-Christological fashion and to attribute this to a profound spiritual flaw. That attribution once enabled Christians to inflict enormous suffering on Jews.

Contrast that passage from 2 Corinthians with this one from *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*:

. . . 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.⁵

In my judgment, this is the most extraordinary affirmation in the entire document. The statement that declared that “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain” relies, as we have seen, on orthodox Christological expectation. But behind this second affirmation there is a clear reliance on modern historical-critical thinking and its awareness of historical contingency and the communal particularity of

⁵ PBC, *The Jewish People*, 62.

interpretation. Once we have attained such awareness, we cannot deny that both the classical Jewish and classical Christian interpretations depend on the conventions of reading of their times, that both are, in a sense, midrashim, not simply the literal or plain sense (what Western Christians have traditionally termed the *sensus literalis* and Jews, the *peshat*).⁶ This means that these two systems of interpretation derive from a type of interpretation that is to some degree at odds with those types that strive to place the passage within its most immediate literary or historical context. The implication is that what validates interpretation is “the vision of their respective faiths,” and not simply the intentions of the biblical authors themselves, authors who, I must stress, lived before the emergence of either Christianity or rabbinic Judaism. This, in turn, implies that Judaism and Christianity are *systems*, and one cannot turn to this verse or that in order to score points for one’s own religion at the expense of the other. Instead, the systemic reality, the architectonic structure, of each tradition must be a given for its interpreters of sacred scripture. This is what I take the text to mean when it says, perhaps too cryptically, “both are irreducible.”

2. True Inter-religious Dialogue vs. Autonomous Pluralism

This awareness of communal particularity and the absence of a master perspective that validates our respective visions carry with them a corollary danger. This is

⁶ The “plain sense” is, of course, anything but plain in the sense of self-evident. On the contrary, exegetes have argued over it with reference to almost every verse from the time they began questing after it about a thousand years ago and into our days. Still, it does have a certain interreligious character to it, and scholars do not depend on the divergent theological structures of Judaism and Christianity to identify it. In this, it differs to a very large degree from the “midrashic” senses on which both Judaism and Christianity are, each in its own way, based.

the danger of relativism, which prompts one to say that each vision is true for the person who has it, indeed that every vision is true for whoever experiences it, and specifically that all religions are equally valid and all putative witness to the truth of one’s own religious tradition is but self-expression in support of private opinion. Many years of experience in Jewish–Christian dialogue have convinced me that there is something in the very nature of interreligious dialogue that pushes toward just such relativism (though these days the push needn’t be very strong, given the prevalence of relativism in western culture). I also have the sense that many Jews are quite comfortable with such religious relativism (probably more so than most Christians), since for them the objective of Jewish–Christian dialogue is simply to reach the point where each partner in dialogue pronounces the other’s tradition to be altogether valid: Judaism for the Jews, Christianity for the Christians—end of story. I question, though, whether it is wise for a religious minority to dismiss the question of truth so readily. After all, if the degree of truth is actually the same in all religious traditions, why should anyone make the special sacrifices required of a minority tradition if it is to survive and thrive in an open society? This is a question that Jews have long had to ask, and it is one that, given the current cultural situation, serious Christians need to ask as well.

The deep involvement of Roman Catholic tradition in the legacy of medieval philosophy is for its adherents a bulwark—substantial, though I suppose not impregnable—against religious relativism, the danger of which Pope John Paul II clearly articulated in his encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio* (1998). “Rather than make use of the human capacity to know the truth,” wrote the late pontiff, “modern philosophy has preferred to accentuate the ways in which this capacity is limited and conditioned”:

This has given rise to different forms of agnosticism and relativism which have led philosophical research to lose its way in the shifting sands of widespread scepticism. Recent times have seen the rise to prominence of various doctrines which tend to devalue even the truths which had been judged certain. A legitimate plurality of positions has yielded to an undifferentiated pluralism, based upon the assumption that all positions are equally valid, which is one of today's most widespread symptoms of the lack of confidence in truth.⁷

John Paul II's words define, it seems to me, the parameters within which the document on *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* must chart its course. On the one hand, the document acknowledges "a legitimate plurality of positions," giving up the totalistic claim that the Church alone has correctly interpreted the Jewish Bible, whereas the Jews have not. On the other hand, it speaks from the standpoint of Roman Catholic doctrine, and not from the agnosticism, relativism, and "lack of confidence in truth" against which the late pope warned. What it seeks to do is to provide a *Catholic* validation to the Jewish people and their understanding of their Bible—not a view from nowhere, not a description of Jewish views of the matter, but a position in consonance with Catholic teaching, as the PBC understands it.

The reader may be rather irritated to see me point out that a document authored by a body that has the word "pontifical" in its title seeks to speak from fidelity to Roman Catholic teaching. So what else is new? I do so, however, to draw attention to the fact that a document like this can never fully satisfy those who believe in an autonomous pluralism. By that term, I refer to the position that holds that Religion A

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html, consulted Mar. 21, 2006.

must never pronounce on Religion B in its own name and in accordance with its own norms, but must instead speak of Religion B only in the latter's terms or in the supposedly neutral terms that, borrowing Thomas Nagel's phrase, I above called "the view from nowhere."⁸ In my experience, a belief in autonomous pluralism is, in fact, quite widespread among us practitioners of interreligious dialogue.⁹ In Jewish-Christian dialogue, one sees a good example of it in the common reluctance of Christian participants to use the term "Old Testament," though that is the traditional Christian term and makes eminent sense in the context of the traditional Christian doctrine of scripture. It is not, as I have pointedly argued, a term that makes sense in a Jewish context or in a context defined by historical criticism, which necessarily seeks to place the anthology in question in the context of its authors, all of whom lived before anybody ever heard of Christianity and its New Testament.¹⁰ When Christians speak of the "Tanakh" (a Jewish term) or the "Hebrew Bible" (a relatively new term that reflects the historical-critical commitment to religious neutrality), they inevitably raise the question in the theologically attuned reader of whether what they say will be Christian at all. And if Christians are not willing to speak in Christian terms, then there can be no Jewish-Christian dialogue. What results may be a more comfortable and relaxed exchange, but Jewish-Christian dialogue it will not be.

⁸ See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁹ On the problems with autonomous pluralism, see Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996): 223–32.

¹⁰ See Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, especially pp. 1–32, and Christopher R. Seitz, *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 61–74.

On the other hand, if Christians are not open to the new perspectives that come from interreligious dialogue and from historical criticism, they will freeze themselves in traditional postures that will seem increasingly desiccated and ultimately indefensible to themselves and others. Fortunately, the Roman Catholic Church distanced itself from such a posture more than six decades ago and remains open both to historical criticism of its Bible and to interreligious conversation. It is between fidelity to historic Catholic teachings and openness to these new realities that our document must chart its perilous course.

3. “Additional Meaning” or Two Discrete Senses?

Other scholars, more knowledgeable in early Christianity than I, have discussed and critiqued the PBC document in some detail.¹¹ Instead of retracing their steps, I shall focus on these larger hermeneutical and theological issues.

One of the keynotes of the entire document is that the New Testament is deeply and inextricably dependent on the Old Testament and cannot be understood apart from it. At one point, for example, the text goes so far as to say that in the Acts of the Apostles, “the kerygmatic discourses of the Church leaders ... place the events of the passion, resurrection, Pentecost and the missionary outreach of the Church in perfect continuity with the Jewish scriptures.”¹² That claim might at first seem to warm the cockles of the hearts of those Christians closed to historical criticism, such as biblical fundamentalists, but the document also openly

acknowledges differences and historical changes. It notes, for example, that the Roman Catholic Old Testament includes books that are not found in the Jewish Bible and that the relative weighting of subsections of the two canons is different.¹³ For the Jews, “the Law [to use the problematic term that the document prefers] was at the center,” whereas “in the New Testament, the general tendency is to give more importance to the prophetic texts, understood as foretelling the mystery of Christ.” Indeed, in the context of a discussion of Paul’s letters to the Galatians and to the Romans, our document goes further, claiming that “he [that is, Paul] shows that the Law as revelation predicted its own end as an institution necessary for salvation.”¹⁴

Quotations like these have a disconcerting ambiguity about them. Does the Pontifical Biblical Commission mean to say that Acts actually does present the Christian kerygma “in perfect continuity with the Jewish scriptures” or only that Acts *wants* to do so? Does it mean that Paul “shows that the Law . . . predicted its own end” or only that Paul *argued* that “the Law . . . predicted its own end”? Are we, in other words, dealing with a historical description of ancient authors’ claims or with normative truth incumbent upon all Roman Catholics and presumably perceivable by outsiders as well? If the latter, then the cockles of the hearts of those arch-traditionalists and fundamentalists are rightly warming up. And, more importantly for our purposes, the effort to validate the Jewish understanding of scripture, one of the key points of the document, will have to be scrapped.

Despite this odd ambiguity, it seems to me that most of the time, the document of the Commission recognizes the existence of a gap between the New Testament

¹¹ See especially Roland E. Murphy, “The Biblical Commission, the Jews, and Scriptures,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32:3 (Summer 2002): 145–49; Amy-Jill Levine, “Roland Murphy, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Jews, and the Bible,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 33:3 (Fall 2003): 104–13; and the work of John R. Donahue referred to in n 2, above.

¹² PBC, *The Jewish People*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48, 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

interpretation of the Old, on the one hand, and the “plain” or contextual sense of the Old Testament and the Jewish interpretation of the Tanakh, on the other (of course, the plain sense and the Jewish interpretation are not the same thing either, as we shall soon see). Its strategy is to uphold both, as we hear in this sentence: “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.”¹⁵

Or, as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, points out in his preface, “the Christian hermeneutic of the Old Testament, admittedly very different from that of Judaism, ‘corresponds nevertheless to a potentiality of meaning that is really present in the texts.’”¹⁶

The great question this all presents, then, is, how do these meanings relate to each other? Alas, the idea of an “additional meaning” given “in the Spirit” seems to reflect the old idea that Jewish exegesis is literal and carnal, whereas Christian exegesis is transcendent and spiritual—not a very secure foundation for a Christian validation of Jewish interpretation! To be sure, the term “additional” does not necessarily mean “higher” or “more profound,” but it is hard to see how an additional meaning discovered through the activity of the Spirit can possibly be put on the same plane as a meaning that any rational person can readily see. So, the implication remains that the Jewish reading, though “a possible one,” as the document puts it, is also a spiritually shallow one, at least in comparison with the fuller meaning, the *sensus plenior*, available to Christians alone. However

¹⁵ Ibid., 61.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17, quoting the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993).

unpalatable that implication may be to Jews and to Jewish–Christian dialogue, perhaps the structure of Christian faith requires that it be retained. Perhaps the only alternative is the relativism that Pope John Paul II rightly faulted in *Fides et Ratio*. I say “perhaps” because I am interested in hearing Roman Catholic theologians address the issue. And here I must underscore my earlier point that Judaism, too, cannot allow itself the easy way out that is relativism.

If the Christian hermeneutic augments the sense of scripture available to Jews in an important way, as the document affirms, then clearly the latter cannot really mean that the “kerygmatic discourses” in Acts are “in perfect continuity with the Jewish scriptures.” For whatever continuity there is would subsist only in that “additional meaning” discovered through the Spirit and not in the more generally available meaning that even Jews can find. And the same thing would be true of the statement that Paul “shows that the Law as revelation predicted its own end as an institution necessary for salvation.” If Paul really showed that in ways that anyone not graced by special revelation can see, then surely there is something very, very wrong with the Jews, who, it must be frankly acknowledged, still do not see it. In both these cases and others as well, the PBC document seems unwilling to consider in any depth the possibility that the distinctively Christian understanding of the Old Testament may actually *violate* both the contextual sense and the Jewish interpretation (which, again, are often different from each other). It is one thing to affirm the existence of multiple senses of scripture. It is something very different to say that the fuller meaning is in no serious tension with the more basic meaning, or to put it in classical Jewish terms, that the *derash* does no violence at all to the *peshat*. On this point, I prefer the stance of those classical medieval Jewish commentators who combined a fully traditional commitment to Talmudic law with an open

acknowledgment that the exegesis by which the law was ostensibly derived is not the *peshat*, not the more limited contextual sense, the meaning available, that is, whether one knows of rabbinic literature or not. And these same commentators pursued the contextual sense with a passion that must have been energized by their spiritual lives; it is unlikely to have been merely an academic exercise.

A striking example can be seen in the exegesis of Exod 23:2, which I can rather too literally render thus: “You shall not follow the multitude for evil purposes, and you shall not testify in a biased way so as to tilt the verdict in favor of the multitude.” In the Talmudic interpretation, this injunction has to do with judicial process. It forbids a Jewish court to condemn a person in a capital case when those judges voting for condemnation exceed those voting for acquittal by just one; but if the majority exceeds the minority by two or more, then one must decide with the majority for condemnation. In other words, condemnation in a capital case requires a supermajority.¹⁷

It is not hard to see that the use the rabbis thus made of these words for their own *halakhah* (normative Jewish law) involves a number of dubious assumptions—dubious, that is, according to a strictly contextual reading of Exod 23:2. For nothing in the verse speaks of capital cases, it is by no means obvious that its injunctions are directed at judges, or that the “multitude” of which it speaks means a majority of one, and not two, or three, or a hundred. Lest this observation seem like a distinctively modern one, I must quote the words of the Torah commentator *par excellence*, Rashi, who lived in northern France in the 11th century: “Regarding this verse, there are many midrashic interpretations by the Sages of Israel [that is, the ancient rabbis], but the language of the verse is not explained

¹⁷ *b. Sanh. 2a.*

properly in them.” After carefully giving the Talmudic interpretation that I have just summarized, Rashi goes on to say, “And I say, in order to explain it properly, its interpretation is this: If you see wicked people perverting justice, don’t say, ‘Since they are the majority, I shall incline after them.’” In other words, one must not allow the inclinations of the majority to deflect one from speaking out for justice.

Now, anyone who knows anything about Rashi knows that his intention here is not at all to overthrow rabbinic law, to which he was scrupulously dedicated; after all, he also wrote an enormously influential Talmudic commentary, a staple of the Talmudic curriculum to this day. He was, in other words, anything but a medieval Jewish equivalent to a Protestant committed to *sola scriptura*, the authority of scripture apart from tradition. Rather, his objective in a case like this, it seems to me, is to address the verse in two distinct frameworks. The first is that of normative rabbinic law; the second is the *peshat*, the contextual sense, a newer sense gaining in prestige in Rashi’s lifetime and even more so thereafter. For the first sense, the rabbinic midrashim, the classical non-contextual interpretations, are valid, in fact, normative; for the second, they are wrong and distracting. To ask bluntly which interpretation Rashi thought was right and which he thought was wrong would be simplistic, for it would fail to reckon with the polyvalence of scripture in traditional Judaism.

Shall we say, to adopt the words of the PBC, that Rashi thought the rabbis had “discover[ed] in the text an additional meaning that was hidden there”? On the contrary, the rabbinic meaning was the standard one in Rashi’s culture; it was anything but “hidden.” The sense that Rashi pursued with a special passion was the *peshat*, a less-known way to interpret the familiar scriptural texts in his time. Furthermore,

I suspect (though I don't know for sure) that Rashi did not think the rabbinic meaning of Exod 23:2 was really "there" in a hidden or any other way. Rather, the implication of his comments like the one I just read is that the rabbis used the verse as a peg upon which to hang the *halakhah* that they inherited through Oral Torah, not through a limited contextual reading of the Written Torah. If so, it was what the rabbis call '*asmachta*' *be'alma*', a mnemonic device. Shall we say that the rabbinic interpretation, to adopt the words of Pope Benedict's preface, "nevertheless corresponds to a potentiality of meaning that is really present in the texts"? To this question, I would answer that if Rashi's interpretation is correct, the rabbinic interpretation is not really present in the texts at all. It becomes present only when the text migrates from one framework to another, from the framework that stresses the literal meaning of the words and the immediate context of the verse to the framework that stresses *halakhah* and the ultimate unity of the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The midrashic interpretation is not an additional meaning within the framework of *pashtanut*, the pursuit of the immediate contextual sense, and the *peshat*, the immediate contextual sense, is not an additional meaning within the framework of rabbinic midrash. We are not, in the first instance, adding senses; we are adding interpretive frameworks, and the ongoing Jewish tradition is heir to both these frameworks and others as well.

I wonder whether Roman Catholic theology could make a similar move. Instead of speaking of "a potentiality of meaning that is really present in the texts" or "an additional meaning that was hidden there," what if our document had spoken of two discrete *senses* of the Old Testament, one derived from the framework of the more immediate Old Testament context and one derived from the Christian midrashim that developed as the early Church sought to harmonize its own counterpart to Oral Torah (that is, the

Gospel) with the scriptures, which in the earliest years of the Church meant, of course, only the Jewish scriptures? What I am suggesting is along the lines of the approach of the Presbyterian biblical scholar, Brevard S. Childs, who speaks of "the discrete testimony of the Old Testament" and "the discrete testimony of the New Testament" within "theological reflection on the Christian Bible."¹⁸ To my mind, untutored in Catholic theology, this does not seem very different from what the PBC proposes in the document under discussion, to be sure, but it does remove the implication that biblical texts can exist and be interpreted in the absence of a larger hermeneutical framework, with various meanings "really present" in the text itself or "hidden there." It also removes the implication that the Jewish reading, while "possible," is thinner than the Christian reading, which alone reveals the "fuller meaning." After all, if the "plain sense" were thinner or emptier, would Rashi, his Jewish successors, and subsequent medieval Catholics and Reformation Protestants who followed in his footsteps have been so eager to uncover and develop it? Finally, I should add that the approach I am suggesting also raises another stimulating theological question: What is the religious use of the *peshat*, that more immediate contextual sense? Once Christians cease to read Genesis, Leviticus, Joshua, and Ecclesiastes exclusively through a Christological lens, what should they make of those books? How should they deploy them in their Christian spiritual life? Needless to say, an analogous question arises for Jews, the question of the religious value of the *peshat*.¹⁹ To speak of multiple senses, as I have and as anyone aware of the legacy of medieval Jewish or Christian biblical interpretation must, is to raise at least by implication the

¹⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 95–322.

¹⁹ See Uriel Simon, "The Religious Significance of the Peshat," *Tradition* 23:2 (Winter 1988): 41–63.

larger question of how the various legitimate senses of scripture are related to each other—a very nettlesome issue for both communities and for anyone, religious or secular, who does not want pluralism to degenerate into relativism.

If both Jews and Christians can authentically derive spiritual meaning from an understanding of the text that is not peculiar to their own traditions, then surely we are entitled to speak of the Tanakh/Old Testament as constituting to a limited degree a bond of commonality between the two communities. I say “to a limited degree” because neither community rests purely on that immediate contextual sense and both necessarily bring to bear larger frameworks that the other community does not share. A more truthful statement would therefore be that the scriptures that are common to the two traditions constitute both a source of closeness and a source of distance between them.²⁰ They open up the possibility of Jews’ and Christians’ learning from one another while at the same time limiting that possibility and drawing attention to the distinctive claims of these two scripturally based communities. But even this element of distinctiveness and mutual exclusiveness, even this distancing, can be a source of closeness in its own paradoxical way. For the Jewish and the Christian midrashim, different as they are in so many ways, also have profound points of contact,²¹ and living in the tension between *peshat* and *derash* is a sine qua non for both thoughtful Jews and thoughtful Christians. Indeed, we might

²⁰ On the problems with seeing the Tanakh/Old Testament as constituting an element of commonality alone, see my critique of “*Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*” in Jon D. Levenson, “Judaism Addresses Christianity,” in *Religious Foundations of Western Civilization*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 581–608, especially 591–98.

²¹ See James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

go further and note that the contact is especially strong between Judaism and Roman Catholic Christianity in that both affirm *traditio* alongside *scriptura* as a source of truth and thus must deal with the tension that inevitably results.

4. Projecting Christian Categories onto Judaism

Now, I would like to return to a sentence from the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document that I quoted earlier. Speaking about Paul’s letters to the Galatian and the Roman churches, the Commission writes, “he [that is, Paul] shows that the Law as revelation predicted its own end as an institution necessary for salvation.”²² Once one emends that verb “shows” to “argues” or “wants to show,” as I suggested one should, the statement is, alas, still problematic within the context of Jewish–Christian dialogue. For one thing, from a Jewish point of view, it can hardly be said that the Torah—a much better word in this context than “Law”—is necessary for salvation. If the rabbis thought that were the case, they would hardly have spoken, for example, so warmly of the possibility of deathbed repentance. “One person gains eternal life over many years,” goes a statement in the Talmud; “another gains it in a single hour.”²³

But there is something even more misleading in the implication that Judaism believes that “the Law [is] an institution necessary for salvation.” For the normative rabbinic teaching is that gentiles are *not* obligated by the commandments of the Torah, but only by seven very basic commandments that do not derive from Sinaitic revelation. On that point, Judaism and Christianity would be in broad agreement; neither believes gentiles ought to observe the Torah. The problem only arises if the Church claims to be

²² PBC, *The Jewish People*, 35.

²³ *b. Avod. Z. 17a.*

Israel, as its older, supersessionist theology suggested. For in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Judaism alike, the Torah is Israel's inheritance alone and Israelites alone are obligated to practice it. How Paul saw this issue is a matter of great controversy among scholars of the New Testament and not something I would be bold enough to address here. My point, rather, is that the PBC ought to have taken notice of the fact that at least the Hebrew Bible does not claim that the observance of the Torah is necessary for the salvation of non-Israelites and that the rabbinic tradition likewise maintains that the righteous of all nations have a portion in the World-to-Come. So doing would have helped the PBC avoid the mistake of projecting a Christian view of salvation onto the first testament of the Christian Bible. The Commission might also have noted that both in biblical and in subsequent Jewish tradition, salvation is not the sole, perhaps not even the dominant, motivation for the observance of Torah. It has been said that different religions don't just provide different answers; they also ask different questions. It is very dangerous to project the soteriological focus of Christianity onto non-Christian religions.

The same tendency to place the law within the framework of soteriology underlies this passage:

The Law did not bring with it a remedy for sin, for even if he recognizes that the Law is good and wishes to keep it, the sinner is forced to declare: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rm 7:19). The power of sin avails of the Law itself to manifest its destructiveness all the more, by inciting transgression (7:13). And sin produces death that provokes the sinner's cry of distress: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rm 7:24). Thus is manifested the urgent need for redemption.²⁴

²⁴ PBC, *The Jewish People*, 80.

This paragraph, essentially a running paraphrase of a passage from Romans 7, occurs in the New Testament part of the section on "The human person: greatness and wretchedness." What is striking to me is that the preceding Old Testament part does not mention the Torah at all.²⁵ And yet the observance of Torah, the keeping of the divine commandments, is often seen in the Hebrew Bible as ennobling, that is, as augmenting human greatness and defeating human wretchedness, and as a force of sanctification, not at all, as Paul would have it, as an incitement to transgression. Nor in the Hebrew Bible is human nature so fallen and disfigured by sin that no one can perform the commandments of the Torah or otherwise obey the will of God. As Deuteronomy puts it, "No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it" (30:14). "The thing" here is the *mitzvah*, the commandment, the instruction of God to Israel (v. 11). In rabbinic Judaism, this line of thinking continues to develop. It bears mention that whereas Paul sees Torah as enslaving (Rom 4:21–5:1), the rabbis tend to see it as liberating.

This is not to say that merely observing the commandments of the Torah defeats sin and exempts the practicing Jew from the need for redemption. On the contrary, the rabbis were well aware that its practitioners (certainly including themselves) sin frequently and thus stand in need of repentance and God's grace, without which repentance would be fruitless. The difference between Paul and the rabbis (who, of course, mostly lived after him) has to do with the nature of the remedy for sin. It is, in other words, the dispute between Torah and Gospel.²⁶ My point here is not to claim that Christians should take the Jewish position

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71–76.

²⁶ Among the many works on this vast subject, see E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

on this or any other matter, abandoning Gospel for Torah. On the contrary, were we to take each other's positions, we would shed our identities and therewith destroy the possibility for authentic dialogue. For when Judaism is the subject, we would talk like Jews; when Christianity is the subject, we would talk like Christians. My point, rather, is that a document on *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* needs to be aware of the questions of framework and interpretive context that I have been stressing. It needs to confront the differences between the Old and New Testaments on those old chestnuts of Torah, sin, and redemption and to recognize that the New Testament understandings of those issues are in tension not only with Judaism but with the Old Testament as well. In my judgment, its section on the Old Testament view of "The human person: greatness and wretchedness" is heavily colored by the New Testament section on the same subject, thus submerging "the discrete testimony of the Old Testament" into "the discrete testimony of the New Testament." This not only yields a very doubtful harmony of the testaments but also deprives the Church of a biblical perspective that it might possibly find worthy of development and appropriation.

5. Israel's Chosenness and the Church's Particularity

The Torah is not the only major item in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic Judaism with which the document of the PBC shows considerable uneasiness. Another is the whole issue of Israelite or Jewish particularism—that is, the idea of Israel as God's chosen people.²⁷ We first hear of this singling out on God's part even before Israel has come into existence, indeed before the word "Israel" has crossed the biblical

²⁷ On this subject, see Jon D. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," in *The Bible and Ethnicity*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 143–69.

narrator's lips, when a Mesopotamian of no particular pedigree or note is commanded to leave his homeland and go to an unnamed land, where he is to become "a great nation" and "a blessing" (Gn 12:1–3). The last verse of this passage reads as follows:

I will bless those who bless you
And curse him who curses you;
And all the families of the earth
Shall bless themselves by you. (Gn 12:3)²⁸

The verse presumes the existence, and thus the legitimacy, of both insiders and outsiders, that is, both of those who belong to the "great nation" to descend from Abraham and those who do not. Nothing here implies that part of Abraham's charge is to make the outsiders into insiders, and nothing here implies in the least that the outsiders are under a curse of any sort. On the contrary, Gn 12:3 explicitly holds open the possibility that the outsiders may be blessed—and blessed by reference to Abraham at that.

Now let us compare what the PBC document says about Genesis 12:3:

The plan of God is now revealed as a universal one, for in Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3). The Old Testament reveals how this plan was realized through the ages, with alternating moments of wretchedness and greatness. Yet God was never resigned to leaving his people in wretchedness. He always reinstates them in the path of true greatness, for the benefit of the whole of humanity.²⁹

²⁸ This translation is taken from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988/5748).

²⁹ PBC, *The Jewish People*, 75–76.

In this interpretation, the singling out of Abraham—or, if you will, Jewish particularism—is strictly subordinated to a universal mission. The alternative for the descendants of Abraham is either to mediate blessing to “the whole of humanity” or to live “in wretchedness.” That Israel’s own special status can have validity apart from this putative universal mission does not occur to the authors of the PBC document. And note that it presents this univocally universalistic interpretation not as a Christian one, but as that of the Old Testament itself. In its view, even “the Old Testament reveals how this plan was realized through the ages.”

The notes that the Commission’s document sounds here have analogies in Judaism, but I wish it had noted that some texts in the Hebrew Bible see the reason God chose the people Israel to lie not in a universal mission but in something very different, a love affair. Consider this text from Deuteronomy:

⁶For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God: of all the peoples on earth the LORD your God chose you to be His treasured people. ⁷It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples; ⁸but it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the LORD freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Dt 7:6–8)³⁰

The verb *chashaq*, translated here as “set his heart on,” carries a connotation of passion, even erotic passion. Elsewhere in Deuteronomy, for example, it is used of the Israelite warrior who spies “among the captives a beautiful

woman” whom he desires (*chashaqta*) and wishes to marry (Dt 21:11). This notion that God has a love affair with Israel (whether his love is consistently requited or not) is richly attested in the prophets and in rabbinic literature; indeed, it underlies the classic midrashic interpretation of the Song of Songs. And love affairs, it seems to me, cannot be explained in rational, instrumental terms; they are not simply items in some larger universal plan. Their validity is not dependent on their mediating something to outsiders. They have integrity in their own right.

Why does the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission so stress the notion of a universal plan “for the benefit of the whole of humanity” in choosing Abraham and so neglect God’s passionate and unmotivated love for the people Israel? Here again, the answer would seem to lie in an eagerness to discover a deep continuity between the two testaments of the Christian Bible. Note the following statement:

From the earliest times, the Church considered the Jews to be important witnesses to the divine economy of salvation. She understands her own vocation 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.³¹

If I understand this passage correctly, its point is that the Church, far from rejecting the Jewish people, is simply doing what they are supposed to have been doing all along, carrying out a Christian vocation that, alas, “only a small number of Jews accepted.” (This tendency to recast the election of Israel in the image of Christian mission is connected with the fact that in the PBC document, as Amy-Jill Levine aptly puts it, “Judaism appears generally

³⁰ Also quoted from *Tanakh*.

³¹ PBC, *The Jewish People*, 95.

xenophobic while the church is universal.”³²) If the election of Israel has integrity of its own apart from some larger universal vocation, however, then the claim that the Church, by carrying out its vocation, is simply participating in the election of Israel would be cast in grave doubt. I am not, please note, arguing that the Church should adopt the classical Jewish understanding of Israel, only that it should acknowledge the sources of that understanding in the Old Testament and not subordinate the Old Testament to the New quite so hastily and quite so thoroughly. That a Christian document would try to find things in the Old Testament that point to the New is readily understandable. But what about the things in the Old Testament that do *not* point to the New?

This issue of the chosenness of the Jews bears on the question of the anti-Jewish materials in the New Testament. In the penultimate page of the PBC document, one finds this claim: “In the New Testament the reproaches addressed to Jews are not as frequent or as virulent as the accusations against the Jews in the Law and the Prophets.” Here again, the purpose is a noble one, to counter those who wish to use these “reproaches” “as a basis for anti-Jewish sentiment.”³³ But I wonder whether things said internally, by ancient Israelite authors, really do have the same meaning they have when made externally, by early Christian writers. Does the fact that some African Americans use the n-word to refer to each other mean that there is no anti-black sentiment involved when a white uses the same word? Obviously not, for the community in which the discourse takes place is a key ingredient in its interpretation. When a community like the early Church, which claimed to be the people of God and heir to the promises of Israel, criticizes the Jewish people,

this surely is not quite the same thing as the intramural critique found in the Torah and the prophets. In this, I cannot agree strongly enough with an observation of Professor Levine’s. “Matthew and John are writing to people who do not see themselves as members of the group being excoriated,” she writes. “New Testament polemic is not comparable to Jeremiah, and as long as it is read so, the true difficulties these texts pose to Jewish–Christian relations will never be honestly addressed.”³⁴ A rough Roman Catholic analogy might go like this: Both Catholics and non-Catholics have been highly critical of the handling of the priestly sex scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church in recent years. But when the criticism comes from people who have no particular desire to see the Catholic Church survive and who think its mission is now carried on better by other groups anyway, then the criticism has a very different import. Again, I think the PBC document would have been better served by a more robust acknowledgment of the particularism of the Church itself, which, given its rooting in the Hebrew Bible, inevitably led to a collision with Judaism.

Indeed, we can go further. Rather than attempting yet again to squeeze the Church into a model of universal community in contradistinction to the putative exclusivism and xenophobia of Judaism, the PBC document would, in my estimation, have been better served by reflecting on what George Lindbeck calls “the nature of the church as Israel.”³⁵ To be sure, this carries with it the risk of supersessionism, as Lindbeck keenly recognizes. But, as he points out, losing the ancient Christian practice of “seeing the church in the mirror of Old Testament Israel”³⁶ also carries risks, to which I think

³² Levine, “Roland Murphy,” 107.

³³ PBC, *The Jewish People*, 218.

³⁴ From an unpublished response cited in Donahue, “Joined.”

³⁵ George Lindbeck, “The Church as Israel: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism,” in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 78–94, here 80–82.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

the PBC document has, in fact, succumbed. As Lindbeck sees it, yesterday's supersessionism and today's shallow universalism (or, in more contemporary parlance, "being inclusive") are, paradoxically, closely linked. "Supersessionism generated a communally impenitent triumphalism that has contributed not a little to reducing peoplehood to an individualism for which church membership is increasingly, even for Roman Catholics, a matter of changeable personal preference rather than lifelong communal loyalty."³⁷ If the Catholic Church is to combat that widespread and culturally prestigious reduction and the concomitant loss of identity, it needs to approach the understanding of Israel in both testaments of its Bible with more openness and more humility than *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* displays. For the difference between Judaism and Christianity is not the difference between particularism and universalism. It is the difference between two particularisms, each of which makes, in its own way, universal claims.

6. Is Full Validation of the Other's Interpretation Possible?

In his own comments on *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, the late Father Roland Murphy, one of the finest Old Testament scholars of his generation, asks, "What is missing here?" The answer: "A feeling for the Old Testament." "There is," he goes on to say, "a certain tone missing in the document of the PBC—call it wonderment, awe, admiration, that is present in the Old Testament text it studied."³⁸ The reason for this deficit, it seems to me, is precisely the eagerness of its authors to present the Old Testament as exactly that—the older of the

two testaments in the history of Christian scriptural revelation. The key words in its title are thus those last four, "in the Christian Bible." The amount of wonderment, awe, and admiration one can feel when contemplating the Old Testament is, to some degree, inversely proportional to the amount of wonderment, awe, and admiration one feels in contemplating the New, for the two collections are not, as the PBC document fully recognizes, the same, and, as I have argued here, their messages are to a not inconsiderable degree at odds with one another. The Old Testament of the Church, the Tanakh of the people Israel, and the Hebrew Bible of historical-critical reconstruction are, as I noted at the outset, components of separate and discrete systems. There is, to be sure, fruitful overlap among the systems, and modern biblical scholarship has shown that that a community can enrich its understanding of its own book by considering the contexts of the other systems and the insights these other contexts generate. But in the last analysis, Roman Catholic interpretation, in order to be Roman Catholic interpretation, will have to place the book in question within a context that is foreign both to Judaism and to historical-criticism. For that reason, Catholicism cannot ever fully validate Jewish biblical interpretation, any more than Judaism could ever fully validate Catholic biblical interpretation, or historical criticism could ever fully validate the characteristic interpretive moves of either Catholicism or Judaism. What members of each community can strive to do, however, is to be attentive to the texts they interpret and to the systemic dimensions of their interpretive work and thus aware of their own preconceptions of what those texts ought to mean.

I must not omit to note an asymmetry between the Jewish and the Catholic situations. In the case of Judaism, there is no compelling theological reason to be concerned with Catholic biblical interpretation (It may be unwise for

³⁷ Ibid., 93.

³⁸ Murphy, "The Biblical," 147.

Jews not to be concerned with it, but that is another matter). In the case of current Catholic teaching, by contrast, involvement with Jewish readings of the Tanakh would seem necessary. Here I refer to the observation of Pope John Paul II at the synagogue in Mainz, Germany, in 1980: “The encounter between the People of the Old Alliance, which has never been abrogated by God, and that of the New Alliance is a dialogue internal to our Church.”³⁹ One product of that encounter, I would add, is a renewed appreciation of the Old Testament apart from its harmonization with the New Testament, and this, in turn, ought to bring in its train a heightened sense of the tension between the theological visions of the two collections. That heightened sense of tension carries with it the potential to undermine Christian faith, but if Pope John Paul II’s point about the “dialogue internal to our Church” is correct, the risk is unavoidable. When Christian theology is projected onto the Hebrew Bible, as it is to a large degree in the PBC document, that dialogue can only be stillborn.

7. Conclusion

As I come to the end of my discussion, I am keenly aware and even a bit troubled that I have concentrated on what I see as the weak points in the document on *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. So before I conclude, I should like to reiterate a few of the reasons that I value the document. One is that it combines a deep reverence for scripture with openness to historical-critical study. As a Jew, I appreciate the key fact that the document speaks to Christians in a Christian voice and does not rest content with merely surveying the historical record. It thus cannot be accused of what I have

elsewhere called the “historicist evasion,”⁴⁰ yet at the same time it avails itself of historical research abundantly and does not retreat into the hermetic world of self-referential traditionalism. This is refreshing in an age in which believers too often dismiss scholarship and scholars too often dismiss belief (I am speaking of traditional religious belief, of course; secular scholars of religion have no lack of beliefs, even axiomatic presuppositions, of their own). Another reason for my appreciation is that the document takes the theological affirmations of the Church with the greatest seriousness, even when confronting the painful legacy of Christian anti-Judaism. It resists the temptation to take the easy way out that reduces Judaism and Christianity to their putative lowest common denominator or seeks to affirm the legitimacy of each tradition for its own community alone without reference to the universal claims that each makes. Here again, it avoids the Scylla of speaking from some imagined tradition-neutral perch and the Charybdis of absolutizing its own tradition. If the document is not altogether successful, that is largely because what it has attempted is very big and very worthwhile indeed.

³⁹ Quoted in Henry Wansbrough, “The Jewish People and its Holy Scripture in the Christian Bible,” *Scripture Bulletin* 32:2 (July 2002): 50, from *Documentation Catholique* 77 (1980): 1148.

⁴⁰ Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, 82–105.