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“Can Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?”

– A Reply to Jon D. Levenson”

Henry Wansbrough, OSB

Ampleforth Abbey

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I have been asked to comment, as a Christian in the Roman Catholic tradition, on the stimulating reflections of Professor Jon Levenson<sup>1</sup> on the 2001 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*.<sup>2</sup> His reflections are warm, wise and welcoming, appreciative of the new tone which it introduces officially and definitively into Christian-Jewish dialogue. He focuses particularly on two positive elements of the document, which nevertheless pose two difficult questions.

It is heartening that Levenson welcomes especially two allied statements which set so much of the tone of the document:

1. The first welcomed statement comes in the discussion of the continuity between Jewish and Christian messianic expectation: "Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain... 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" (§21). This is rightly seen as a far cry from a previous attitude of patronizing pity for the Jews who, still waiting for the Messiah to come, have simply missed the boat.

2. The second is even more far-reaching, and qualifies the whole of the Christian attitude to a Jewish reading of the Bible: "The Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one... analogous to the Christian reading" (§21-22). The whole tenor of the document is that the Jewish interpretation of the Bible

cannot be characterized as wrong. It is simply not the Christian interpretation. "Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths...Consequently, both are irreducible" (ibid.).

However, as Levenson rightly sees, both these statements, but particularly the second, far-reaching as it is, raise a problem. He points out that they suggest a relativism that is met constantly today in our sceptical society, and is an inherent danger of religious dialogue. This is 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."<sup>3</sup> Such relativism is, as Levenson points out with a quotation from Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, not an attitude acceptable within Catholicism. Such is the first difficulty.

Levenson's second difficulty with the logic of the document is its claim that "the Law as revelation predicted its own end as an institution necessary for salvation" (§8). In this case, rejoins Levenson, if the Law is self-destructive, "the effort to validate the Jewish understanding of scripture, one of the key points of the document, will have to be scrapped".<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Status and Style of the Document

Before discussing these central questions, I should comment on the status and vigor of the document itself. At various points in his article Levenson suggests too strongly the authority of the PBC document, asking whether we are dealing with "normative truth incumbent on all Roman

<sup>1</sup> Jon D. Levenson, "Can Roman Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?" *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 1 (2005-2006): 170-185. <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol1/iss1/art19>.

<sup>2</sup> Originally published in French as *Le peuple juif et ses Saintes Ecritures dans la Bible chrétienne* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001). Levenson refers to an article of Charles H. Miller, criticizing errors in the English translation.

<sup>3</sup> Levenson, 173.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 175.

Catholics.”<sup>5</sup> The document of the PBC is by no means an infallible statement of Christian faith. The Commission has the authority of a group of twenty scholars, chosen by the Pope to form an advisory body within the framework of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Its task is to promote biblical studies and provide the Congregation with help in interpreting the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Its documents are therefore teaching aids rather than pronouncements, and its authority is the cumulative authority of the sum of its members. It advises the Congregation, rather than teaching the Christian public directly, though the issuance of the document with a preface from and under the seal of the Prefect of the Congregation does of course signify the approbation of the highest normal teaching body within the Church. The authority of the document is therefore not insignificant, but Catholics may disagree with it without disloyalty to the Church.

Before proceeding further I should also like to comment on the criticisms near the end of Levenson’s article on the tone of the PBC document. He comments that the document neglects “God’s passionate and unmotivated love for the people Israel.”<sup>7</sup> At the very end<sup>8</sup> he is joined by my old friend and senior colleague, Fr Roland Murphy, who is quoted: “There is a certain tone missing in the document of the PBC – call it wonderment, awe, admiration, that is present in the Old Testament text.”<sup>9</sup> To this I can only say that it is disappointing that such an impression should be given. Perhaps something of the enthusiasm and savor of the discussions was lost in the stringent condensation of papers

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 63 (1971), p. 666.

<sup>7</sup> Levenson, 182.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Roland E. Murphy, “The Biblical Commission, the Jews, and Scriptures” in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32:3 (Summer 2002): 147.

that were originally longer. I think all the participants in the discussions were continually moved by the tracing of those great themes throughout the Bible which constitute more than half the document: God as liberator and savior, election, covenant, prayer and promises. All these were seen as elements in the dialogue of love, with all its divine constancy and with all its human failures and tragedies, which runs through the Bible. The appreciation of the depths of these motifs throughout the Bible, and the reflection that their expression in the New Testament is in utter continuity with and dependent upon their earlier biblical elaboration, was a continually enriching experience. If it no longer finds expression in the text, that is a great sadness. It can only be hoped that the condensed and often skeletal presentation may still enable students of the document to put flesh and sinews on the bones.

The balance might be somewhat redressed by an answer to Levenson’s question, “Once Christians cease to read Genesis, Leviticus, Joshua and Ecclesiastes exclusively through a Christological lens, what should they make of these books?”<sup>10</sup> The answer is that the historical books are the record of the constant loving care of the Lord in forming and guiding his People, bringing them back repeatedly to fidelity to the covenant. Books of the Law like Leviticus are revered by Christians as the reaction to and safeguard of the awesome divine holiness, and as the expression of the implications of being the Chosen People of God. Ecclesiastes is more challenging, but all the more enriching as the author pits his puckish humor against the doubts and difficulties brought to faith by the clash with Greek culture.

<sup>10</sup> Levenson, 178.

## 2. Two Irreducible Valid Readings

The first major difficulty to which Levenson points is the danger of relativism if the Jewish and the Christian readings of the Bible are considered both possible ones, but each irreducible, one to the other. This statement comes in the document as the immediate preface to the survey of fundamental themes shared by the two Testaments, a survey which makes up half the document, and shows in encouraging detail the common ground and similar approach on such matters as the concept of God as liberator and savior, divine choice, the paradox of human dignity and human failure, and the approach to God in prayer. This survey shows, as no previous Christian document has done, the extent of the common ground, the extent to which Christian views of the world and aspirations are the product of a revelation shared with Judaism. Above all, it shows the Christian appreciation of the Jewish attitude to the Bible, and of Jewish faith as a means to salvation. Gone for ever are the days when the Church could sanction that shaming starburst of insult, the inscription on the wall of the little church across the street facing the Grand Synagogue of Rome the words of Isaiah 65:2, "I held out my hands all day to a rebellious people."

It does not, however, imply that the Christian can say that Jewish and Christian readings of the Bible are equally valid. They are irreducible one to the other because Jewish faith reads the Bible in one way, Christian faith in another. The acceptance of the central role of Jesus as the Christ or the Messiah, and of the death and resurrection of Jesus as the keystone of the arch of history is what makes the one reading of the Bible or vision of reality irreducible to the other. The Christian cannot say that the Jewish reading is wrong, but must say that the Jewish reading is not the Christian one. While rejoicing in and reverencing the Jewish understanding of the Word of God in the Bible, the Christian

must say that the Christian focus on the Christ-event gives a new focus to that revelation. The contrast between the Christian and the Jewish perspective is already expressed in the passage on eschatology cited above, which Levenson picks out, "the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come." As the PBC document works through one aspect after another of the biblical revelation it becomes clear that the Christian view, thoroughly indebted to the Law, the Prophets and the Writings and impossible without them, nevertheless is seen as transcending them.

The valuable work presented by Levenson on comparison of the Christian notion of *sensus plenior*<sup>11</sup> and the Jewish notion of *peshat* throws into relief the difference between them. No Christian could claim of the *sensus plenior*, as the Jew does claim of the *peshat*, that it was always there, inexplicit in the oral tradition, from the beginning. The *sensus plenior* was not merely *unperceived* before the Christ-event; it *could not* have been perceived, precisely because of the new focus or new understanding conveyed by the Christ-event. I will take two examples used in Christian argument but dependent on the Septuagint text of the Bible, the translation initiated for the Greek-speaking Jews of Alexandria, received as the original Bible of the Christian Church, but not now enjoying within Judaism the authority of the Hebrew text. In the account of Peter's speech at Pentecost Acts 2:31 argues that Psalm 16:10, "He was not

<sup>11</sup> The *sensus plenior*, one of the four traditional senses of scripture, can be used very widely, and in medieval times it was used to justify all kinds of allegorical readings. In the 1950s it enjoyed a revival in the Catholic Church (cf. 'Le *sensus plenior* de l'Écriture' by Pierre Benoit in *Revue biblique* 1956, p. 285-287). It was the subject of the 1955 doctoral thesis of Raymond E. Brown, who became arguably the most respected of all biblical exegetes in the English-speaking world. To avoid opening the door too widely, I confine myself to two instances of such exegesis sanctioned by Christian scripture itself. I use instances where the Greek rather than the Hebrew Bible is at stake for irenic purposes.

abandoned to Hades nor did his flesh see corruption,"<sup>12</sup> speaks of the resurrection of Christ because it was not fulfilled of David, considered the author of the Psalms. The Christian contention is not that previous readers were stupid not to see in this text the resurrection of Christ, but that now, in the light of the new event, a reader can see that it was always there. Similarly, when Matthew 1:23 sees the virginal conception of Jesus in the Septuagint text of Isaiah 7:14, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,"<sup>13</sup> the gospel-writer would not claim that Isaiah conveys the meaning that the Messiah would be born of a virgin in such a way that a reader who failed to perceive this would be failing to understand the text. On the other hand, once Jesus had been born of a virginal mother, it was possible to see this in the prophetic text.

Are these meanings really within the text? Not in the sense that they can be deduced or learnt from the text alone, though the text does raise questions which it does not wholly satisfactorily answer. The *sensus plenior* is, however, more easily understood within Judaism and Christianity than it would be to an outside literary critic. The PBC document opens by stressing that in many respects Judaism and Christianity share the same attitudes to the Bible. One of these shared basic attitudes is that the Bible is the book of the community, and is rightly understood only within that tradition. Christianity insists that each and every part of the Bible must be understood within the context of the whole (Christian) Bible as the full divine revelation. This is called

<sup>12</sup> "For You will not abandon me to Sheol, or let Your faithful one see the Pit" in the JPS version, translating the Masoretic Text.

<sup>13</sup> JPS version, "Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son." The Hebrew text *'almah* is there correctly translated. The Greek text has *parthenos*, which often includes in the notion of "fresh, young girl" the status of virginity. On the whole, scholarly opinion refuses to opt between these two texts for an "original" reading, and settles for the ambivalence of two different traditions of text.

canonical reading of the scripture: the whole forms one canon. Within the Catholic Church this appears in the teaching (stressed at Vatican II) on the single fount of revelation, scripture as understood within the tradition of the Church. This corresponds roughly, if not exactly, to the teaching on written and oral Torah within Judaism. The difference is that for Christians there is a new event which transforms the text: it is the Christ-event which gives a new focus to the texts, and the Bible must be read as one whole.<sup>14</sup> The Jewish reading, though sharing a huge corpus of belief in the nature and purposes of God, does not attribute to the Christ-event the significance in the divine plan that Christianity attributes to it.

### 3. The Law as Self-Destructive

Levenson's other major difficulty is the somewhat bluff statement of the PBC document, "the Law as revelation predicted its own end as an institution necessary for salvation." A preliminary question, posed by Levenson, is whether the document accepts that Paul shows this to be the case, or whether it merely means that Paul argues it. If the former, then "the effort to validate the Jewish understanding of scripture, one of the key points of the document, will have to be scrapped."<sup>15</sup> I have no doubt that the document does intend the former meaning, but Levenson's deduction is nevertheless not inevitable: the real issue is what is meant by "an institution necessary for salvation." This plunges us into the heart of one of the most vibrant quarrels of early

<sup>14</sup> Levenson criticizes the PBC document for allowing the treatment of the Old Testament section on the human person to be colored by the treatment of the same theme in the New Testament (p. 180). So long as this coloration is a matter only of emphasis, not of distortion, I think it is fair that a holistic reading from within the Catholic Christian tradition should be given. The same answer could be made to another criticism that has been made, that the document does not even mention more recent Jewish exegesis.

<sup>15</sup> Levenson, 175.

Christianity: what is the relationship between Christianity and Judaism? Must Christians be Jews?

If in Judaism the most important thing is belonging (with behaving like a Jew coming second, and belief only a poor third), an important point is that, of the principal five writers within the New Testament, three wanted to remain within Judaism. Matthew's warning that 'they will flog you in their synagogues' (Mt 10:17) shows that his community attempted to remain within Judaism. Only the *halakhoth* of the followers of Jesus and their whole approach to legal observance were different from that of the members of "their [i.e. the Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah] synagogues." Mentioned more than once in John's Gospel is the fear of being put out of the synagogue, this time for reasons of doctrine about Jesus (Jn 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Thirdly, if Paul had not been keen on remaining within Judaism he would never have put himself in the position of being flogged in the synagogues five times with such rigor that they 'spared him but one lash in the forty' (2 Cor 11:24).

Even within the community that accepted Jesus as Messiah there were differences about legal observance. Peter was happy to eat with gentile Christians until he was warned off it by delegates from James' group in Jerusalem. His withdrawal provoked such a furious response from Paul that relationships between Peter and Paul never recovered (Gal 2:11-14). When the same group attempted to induce Paul's Galatian converts to observe the legal requirements of Judaism, Paul's reaction is so violent that he transgresses all the rules of convention (he omits the usual thanksgiving at the beginning of his letter (Gal 1:6), courtesy (Gal 3:1) and even decency (Gal 5:12). News of his attitude would get round, and, dogged by such a reputation, he has no easy task on his hands when he sets about convincing the Jewish Christians of Rome that he still deserves their help. Even then Paul makes clear that he still clings passionately to his

solidarity with his brothers in Judaism (Rom 9:3-5), and will not hear of the Law being called anything but holy (Rom 7:7).

The whole basis of his letter to the Romans and his appeal to the Jewish members of the Christian community in Rome is that in Christianity the promises to Abraham reach their fulfilment. What, then, can he mean by arguing – if he does so argue – that "the Law as revelation predicted its own end as an institution necessary for salvation"? By this he means that the Law as a rule of life has done its work when it leads to Christ. Paul uses the image of the Law as a *paidagogos*, a slave who leads the child to school (Gal 3:24-25). When the slave has led the believer to Christ he has no more to do (and can doze in the shade). By contrast, the Law as promise is central to Paul's thinking, so that it is Abraham's faith, his trust in those promises, which is central, not Abraham's observance. In the *midrash* on Genesis 15:6 in Romans 4 Paul seems to be tilting expressly at the theory that it was Abraham's obedience in the *Aqedah* which won him justification. Similarly, for Paul circumcision is not in itself a saving work but only a sign and expression of faith, of acceptance of the promises to Abraham. Justification is actually wrought not through any observance of the Law but (Rom 5:12-21) by the obedience of Christ, which undoes the disobedience of Adam (by which, of course, Paul means "human disobedience" *tout court*, the endemic and habitual disobedience of the whole human race).

There is, it will be immediately evident, a certain duality in Paul's thinking. Justification is achieved by faith, that is, by trust in the divine promise to Abraham, by solidarity with the trust of Abraham. At the same time reconciliation is achieved by Christ's obedience, and by the solidarity of his followers with him in being baptised into Christ's death. This duality is to me a sign of just how involved with the Law Paul's thinking is. In his earlier letter to the Galatians on the subject

he explains the Law as “added because of [or to deal with] transgressions until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made” (Gal 3:19), and there he seems to be thinking of the cultic, legal means of purification from transgressions, which he regards as temporary. In his first treatment in Romans (3:25) he uses the same cultic language, speaking of Christ as the “sacrifice of reconciliation.” But it is notable that by both explanations he sees reconciliation as occurring outside the Law. There are, then, two dualities in Paul’s thinking:

1. Justification is by faith after the model of Abraham’s faith. Reconciliation is by Christ’s sacrifice.
2. Christ’s sacrifice is, in cultic terms, the ultimate sacrifice of reconciliation, which the Law could not accomplish. Christ’s sacrifice is the perfect act of obedience which reverses and washes away human disobedience. The yearning to give glory to God and to compensate for human failure, which is expressed in various ways in the sacrificial system of the Bible, is accomplished in a new and transcendent way by the sacrifice of Christ.

So in Paul’s thinking the Law leads people to Christ and Christ’s saving work, but that work itself is outside the Law. That seems to me to be the meaning of the somewhat blunt statement which Levenson queries. I should only add here my agreement with two underlying cautions well expressed by Levenson. Firstly, Paul puts the question in the terms which suit his own answer. Secondly, it is dangerous to put to one religion the questions of another. Question and answer fit together since they determine the whole framework of the religious vision, and, as Levenson wisely

says, “It is very dangerous to project the soteriological focus of Christianity onto non-Christian religions.”<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Paul and the Law as an Enslavement

Levenson also mentions that “whereas Paul sees Torah as enslaving (Rom 4:21-5:1), the rabbis tend to see it as liberating.”<sup>17</sup> This is not unrelated to the complaint, discussed at the beginning of this article, that the document fails to appreciate the awe and wonder of the Bible. It must, however, be remembered that Paul is an aggressive controversialist, and the presentation of the Law as an enslavement is – especially in a world where slaves were regarded as barely human – part of his rhetoric. Only the slightest acquaintance with Judaism as it is today is needed to refute the Christian caricature of the Law as a stultifying dead weight. Joy in the Law, the festivities of *simchat torah*, dancing at the Western Wall, the joy of the Sabbath, the constant linking of Law and love in such biblical books as Deuteronomy, the presentation of the covenant as a bridal union – all these show the Law as a liberating force. Paul shares this view by his frequent assertions throughout Romans that the Law is good and holy, and especially in such passages as Rom 7:22, “In my inmost self I delight in the Law of God.”

On the other hand, one cannot forget Paul’s controversies over legal observance, not only those five almost merciless floggings, but the struggles over the exclusion of those whom he considered to be faithful members of Christ and beneficiaries of the promises made to Abraham, simply on the grounds that, by the conventional boundary-markers of circumcision, Sabbath observance and culinary purity, they were beyond the pale of Judaism. Paul’s quarrel was at least

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

as much, if not more, with Christian as with non-Christian Jews. Paul, "brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral Law" (Acts 23:3), was trained in legal argument. Again and again he uses legal arguments in correct rabbinic fashion. But he was also an artist as turning at turning Jewish arguments on their head to his own advantage. So in his *midrash* on Sarah and Hagar he turns on its head the conventional view that Hagar was the mother of gentiles and Sarah the mother of the children of promise, instead making Sarah the mother of Christians and Hagar the mother of enslaved Jerusalem (Gal 4:21-31). In Paul's forceful advocacy, the participation of angels in the giving of the Law is evidence not of the solemnity of the occasion but of the inferiority of the Law then given (Gal 3:19). The veil over Moses' face is evidence, not of the awesomeness of his encounter with the Lord, but of the blindness of the Jews (2 Cor 3:13).

Paul's quarrel is with the obligations of legal observance, not with the Law as such. I would suggest that Paul's quarrel with what he considered the excessive and unnecessary restrictions imposed on his converts to Christianity is the reason for his denigration of the Law, and his representation of the Law as an enslaving rather than a liberating force. There can be no attempt to excuse or justify the Christian persecution of Jews down the centuries, but it must also be remembered that in the first decades of Christianity Christians were a persecuted religious minority within Judaism. Paul (and others) wanted to remain within Judaism, but this required re-defining what it meant to be a Jew in a way which was simply unacceptable to the main body of Judaism. The tensions and discolored engendered by this, and still reflected in the Christian writings, should remain an object lesson for Jews and Christians alike.

##### 5. Can Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?

The first task of interreligious dialogue is to understand the other side, to see whether or to what extent the dialogue partners are expressing the same underlying beliefs and values in different language. Is "nirvana" really the same as "heaven" but expressed against a different philosophical background and in particular a different concept of what we express as "personal individuality"? Do the spirits of the ancestors play the same role in African religious life as the sacred dead in Christianity? Is Allah the same as the God of Christians under a different name? This does not necessarily imply that there is no such thing as truth, but only that truth can be differently expressed. Rather it implies the conviction that all people – or at any rate the partners in the dialogue – have to some extent the same values though differently encapsulated, that you get the same kick out of Budweiser as I get out of Newcastle Brown.

The situation between Christianity and Judaism is somewhat different from dialogue between, say, Christianity and Hinduism, because in the former case so much of the language and imagery is shared. A principal purpose of the PBC document was to show just that; namely, that Christians share and revere so many values and attitudes inherited from Judaism, to insist that disagreement between the two must always be respectful and fraternal. Christianity cannot validate Jewish biblical interpretation, and has no business trying to do so. But Christianity can and must say that it shares with Judaism the faith in the promises made to Abraham. It must, however, add that Christianity sees the transcendent fulfilment of that faith as coming through Christ.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Finally I would like to point out that my presentation referred to in John R. Donahue's lecture cited in footnote 2 of Levenson's article was given not at Catholic University but at Cambridge University.