

Karma Ben-Johanán
Jacob's Younger Brother:
Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II

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Review of Chapter 4,
“Joseph Ratzinger and the Jews”

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Karma Ben-Johanán deserves the praise she has received for her well-researched and thought-provoking book *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations After Vatican II*, rightly described by Gavin D'Costa as “hard-hitting and groundbreaking” (back cover). This review, written from the perspective of a Ratzinger scholar, takes on the blows of chapter four, “Joseph Ratzinger and the Jews,” as well as the related material in the Epilogue (278–281).

Ben-Johanán gives Ratzinger credit for integrating “questions of Christian-Jewish relations into the wider landscape of Catholic theology,”¹ even calling him “the very symbol of theology.”² Overall, however, Ben Johanán's point seems to be that Ratzinger was something like a last dinosaur who was still interested in doctrine and theology, whereas the mainstream of Christian-Jewish dialogue had already moved to other avenues, such as symbolic gestures and statements of goodwill. In Ben-Johanán's words, Ratzinger failed to realize that “theology qua theology had become oppressive and antiquated. Rather, Kosher meals at the Vatican, friendly chats, and shared photo-ops came into favor as the way to build a common culture and to convey messages of friendship in a far more efficient manner.”³

Ratzinger's theological contributions to Catholic-Jewish dialogue were, in Ben-Johanán's view, doubly flawed. First, she argues, Ratzinger instrumentalized Judaism to attack some of his more central theological enemies, such as liberal Protestantism or radical secularism. Unlike John Paul II, Ratzinger “did not have a

¹ Karma Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), 110.

² Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 280.

³ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 281.

special personal relation with Jews,"⁴ and so Judaism became for him "a tool in the service of promoting other theological agendas."⁵ Examples include Ratzinger's foreword to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) document *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2002) as well his dialogue with Rabbi Jacob Neusner in the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007).

Second, Ben-Johanán claims that every time Ratzinger tried to make a theological corrective in Catholic-Jewish issues, he ended up making things worse: "Every time he tried to clear the mist hanging over the remaining vague passages in the *Nostra aetate*, his statements created a commotion that undermined his intent, leaving insult and acrimony in the air, and no doctrinal stability."⁶ Concrete instances of this include the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000), the new Good Friday Prayer for the Jews (2008), and the pope emeritus's surprise paper in *Communio* (2018), translated in English as "Grace and Vocation Without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise De Iudaeis." Ben-Johanán's conclusions follow the spirit of public opinion: Ratzinger was a "hidebound conservative," "out of touch," "obsessed with matters of doctrine," "more comfortable with books than with people."⁷

What I found most persuasive in this highly critical chapter was the argument that Ratzinger used Judaism or Catholic-Jewish dialogue as an occasion to deal with other theological issues. What I found missing was a recognition of positive appraisals of Ratzinger's contributions to Catholic-Jewish dialogue, as well as Benedict XVI's own point of view regarding some of the controversies. Let us now look more closely at Ben-Johanán's two sets of criticism and the concrete examples she gives.

First, the claim about instrumentalizing Judaism and the preface to the 2002 PBC document. Here, Ben-Johanán writes, Ratzinger's interest lay in defending "the church's exegetical traditions against modern biblical scholarship, which attacked the Catholic typological and allegorical readings of the Old Testament as invalid."⁸ Ratzinger in effect transformed the PBC document "from a text defending the value of Jewish exegesis within the Catholic tradition to one defending Catholic exegesis within the setting of modern biblical scholarship."⁹ Jews thus became a rhetorical device for Ratzinger to attack liberal Protestantism (the neo-Marcionism of von Harnack etc.) as an example of anti-Judaism.¹⁰ Initially, I was inclined to accept the argument but upon further reflection and especially rereading the last three paragraphs of the preface, it would seem better to say that Ratzinger

⁴ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 109.

⁵ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 110.

⁶ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 134.

⁷ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 278.

⁸ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 112.

⁹ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 112.

¹⁰ Ben-Johanán, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 115.

integrates other aspects into a holistic picture, while not losing sight of the main issue which in this case is “a new understanding between Christians and Jews.”¹¹

With regard to Ratzinger’s exegesis of the historical Jesus and his related discussion of Jewish-Christian relations, Ben-Johanan sees a direct connection with Ratzinger’s reflections on modern secularism. Her analysis seems to me to be on target:

This was Ratzinger’s crucial point: by virtue of his divine authority, Jesus could perform a liberating act and create an amended secular world, grounded in universality and communality among humans and between them and God. To do so, a continuity between the Torah of Israel and the Torah of Christ had to be maintained, because that continuity was integral to his authority. However, this continuity was not everything: the law had to be detached from the social order and spiritualized, so as to free humans from the risk of a totalitarian theocracy... The church, in other words, lies in the middle between Judaism and secularism and seeks to hold both their hands, to open up a liberated secular space, where Judaism saw only holiness bound by specific legal and social systems, without letting that space be completely cut off from the absolute, which gives it its boundaries and validity.¹²

I am much less impressed by the overly negative judgment of Ratzinger/Benedict’s contribution as a whole. If such a case is to be made, it should be explained how the Israeli president Shimon Peres could say that under Benedict’s pontificate the relations between the church and Israel were “the best since the birth of Christ.”¹³ Likewise, Israel Singer, secretary general of the World Jewish Congress, said that Ratzinger had in two decades “changed the two-thousand-year old history of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.”¹⁴ These quotes are found in Peter Seewald’s 2020 biography of Benedict XVI, which also provides Benedict’s perspective to some of the controversial points raised against him.

What would be the building-blocks of a more positive overall view of “Ratzinger and the Jews”? For Peter Seewald, Christian-Jewish relations were “a constant in Ratzinger’s life and work.”¹⁵ Early on, there is his abhorrence of Nazism, his love for the God and the Bible of Israel, his participation at Vatican II which formulated *Nostra aetate*, and his friendship with the *Integrated Community*, a Catholic community favouring dialogue with Jews. Later, through John Paul II and as Prefect of the CDF, Ratzinger became involved in international Catholic-Jewish dialogue and the process of establishing diplomatic ties between the Holy

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Preface,” “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” The Pontifical Biblical Commission, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html#PREFACE.

¹² Ben-Johanan, *Jacob’s Younger Brother*, 121–122.

¹³ Quoted in Peter Seewald, *Benedict XVI: A Life. Professor and Prefect to Pope and Pope Emeritus 1966-The Present* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), 374.

¹⁴ Quoted in Seewald, *Benedict XVI*, 391.

¹⁵ Seewald, *Benedict XVI*, 391.

See and Israel. He oversaw the production of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) which took up the teaching that the Old Covenant has never been revoked (CCC 121). He participated in a 1994 meeting in Jerusalem, organized by Rabbi David Rosen, where he presented a theological reflection, later published in *Many Religions, One Covenant* (1997). As pope, Benedict XVI invited Jews to his inauguration Mass and memorably visited them on his first trip in Cologne (2005), on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land (2009), and in the synagogue of Rome (2010). He also visited Auschwitz (2006). *Contra* Ben-Johanan's assessment of a "public relations disaster," the former Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, Yosef Neville Lamdan, said the Pope's trip to Israel was "a success."¹⁶ Hans Hermann Henrix adds Professor Shlomo Avineri, the Jewish World Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League to the list of positive reviewers of this trip.¹⁷

Having established a more positive backdrop, let us now look at the three instances where Ratzinger failed, in Ben-Johanan's words, to "clear the waters he himself had muddled."¹⁸ First, *Dominus Iesus* (DI) was a document authorized but not authored by Ratzinger, aimed mainly at proponents of soteriological pluralism and meant primarily as guidance for Catholic bishops. Ben-Johanan recounts DI's interesting reception history, including Walter Kasper's clever interpretations, and the document's "reverberations" in the US, with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) offices comically zigzagging in an attempt to remain faithful both to doctrine and to dialogue. However, I would say the whole episode has very little to do with "Ratzinger and the Jews" as such, for Judaism was not the focus of DI, and DI was not a personal theological work of Ratzinger.

The second controversy concerns the new Good Friday Prayer for the Jews, composed by Benedict XVI in 2008 for the 1962 Missal, whose wider use he had allowed in *Summorum Pontificum* (2007). Ben-Johanan lists some of the criticisms made against the prayer and finally speculates as to why Benedict XVI composed a new prayer (suggesting Benedict must have felt "uneasy with the *Novus ordo* version"¹⁹). It is unfortunate that we do not get to hear Benedict's own perspective, as given in *Last Testament*:

It was like this: we know the new Good Friday prayer, and it is accepted by everyone. But we had since then, even with John Paul II, taken into the Church a few groups with the old liturgy—the Fraternity of St Peter, for example. There were also a few communities of religious, and communities of the faithful, that celebrated with the old liturgy, including the old Good Friday Liturgy, a fact which was really not reckoned with. So I was surprised that nothing had been done about it. I was of the opinion that one cannot let that go on, that even those using the old liturgy must change at this point in time. One had to

¹⁶ Quoted by Hans Hermann Henrix, "Benedict XVI and the Jews: A Relationship under suspicion?," *Israel Affairs* 16, no. 4 (2010): 552.

¹⁷ Hans Hermann Henrix, "Benedict XVI and the Jews," 552.

¹⁸ Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 140.

¹⁹ Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother*, 139.

have a form of the prayer created that fitted with the spiritual style of the old liturgy, but which was at the same time consonant with our modern understandings of Judaism and Christianity... There is absolutely nothing contained in it which justifies the accusations that are perpetually rehashed in Germany... Until then the old intercession was prayed, and I replaced it with a better one for this circle of people. But they didn't want anyone to understand that.²⁰

The essential points here are the “spiritual style of the old liturgy”—which the 1970 prayer would not fit—and the fact that the 2008 prayer is to be compared with the 1962 prayer, which it replaced, not the 1970 prayer, which it did not.

What about the third and final case, the 2018 *Communio* article, which Ben-Johanan (rightly) guesses was published at the request of Cardinal Kurt Koch, the head of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews? Ben-Johanan frames this as Benedict's inability to maintain a low profile, bursting head-on into the most sensitive areas of Christian-Jewish dialogue with “theological reproof,” “polemicizing with both Jews and fellow Catholics at the same time.” She further states Benedict XVI was “tempted” to “reopen old wounds” and that the intervention made him appear “as a threat to Christian-Jewish reconciliation, an obsolete traditionalist, even an anti-semitic.” I think these are all highly inappropriate terms to describe the article and Benedict's motives. It was received very differently by Chief Rabbi of Vienna, Arie Folger, with whom Benedict subsequently exchanged letters, met, and co-authored a very interesting book.²¹ Benedict's explanation, apparently unknown to Ben-Johanan, would have been available in Seewald's biography:

I had written my “Remarks” on the subject of Christianity and Judaism as an internal paper and sent it to Cardinal Koch, who was responsible for the matter of Judaism in the Roman Curia. I expressly said that the text was not for publication. After long consideration Cardinal Koch wrote to me saying he thought the text was so important that it ought to be published now, and asked me for permission, which I gave him. Perhaps I should have said no, for the sake of my own peace and quiet. But the spectacle of the reactions from the German theologians was so absurd and malicious that it's better not to speak about it.²²

It is striking how annoyed Benedict XVI was at German theologians in the aftermath of both the Good Friday Prayer and the *Communio* article; he rarely uses such strong language (e.g. “absurd and malicious”). In his “Correction” (2018) sent to *Herder Korrespondenz*, he called Michael Böhnke's interpretation of his *Communio* article as a call to proselytism “grotesque nonsense” and “a completely false

²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Last Testament: In His Own words. With Peter Seewald* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 198.

²¹ Benedetto XVI (in dialogo con il rabbino Arie Folger), *Ebrei e cristiani*. A cura di Elio Guerriero (Milano: San Paolo, 2019).

²² Seewald, *Benedict XVI*, 538.

insinuation.”²³ Commenting on the reactions to the Good Friday Prayer, Benedict said that “certain people in Germany have always attempted to bring me down. They knew that this is easiest where Israel is concerned, and then they concocted these lies, saying God knows what was in this prayer. I have to say I think this is outrageous.”²⁴ And finally, in the context of the criticism of the *Communio* article, he said: “The actual reason for it—that people want to silence my voice—I’d rather not analyse.”²⁵

I will also refrain from analyzing whether German theologians had some dark motivations or whether Benedict was overreacting, or both. One thing we know is that Benedict was generally unhappy with the state of the Church and Theology in his native Germany. He was more “triggerable” by his German compatriots than by others. But I would suggest that Benedict was exceptionally hurt on the topic of Israel precisely because he loved both the Jews and his Catholic faith so much. This is best illustrated in the Richard Williamson affair, which Ratzinger calls “the stupid Williamson case.”²⁶ The lifting of the traditionalist SSPX bishop’s excommunication tragically coincided with a Swedish TV interview in which Williamson had denied the holocaust. Just imagine the pain of Pope Benedict, a committed anti-Nazi and a shepherd trying to do his best for the unity of his flock, when the world suddenly came to see him as legitimizing holocaust denial. When asked about moments of spiritual darkness, Benedict answered that he did pray to the loving God, “especially when one thinks of the Williamson situation—to get me out of this situation and to help me.”²⁷ In his subsequent letter to Catholic bishops (2009), he wrote:

A gesture of reconciliation with an ecclesial group engaged in a process of separation thus turned into its very antithesis: an apparent step backwards with regard to all the steps of reconciliation between Christians and Jews taken since the Council—steps which my own work as a theologian had sought from the beginning to take part in and support. That this overlapping of two opposed processes took place and momentarily upset peace between Christians and Jews, as well as peace within the Church, is something which I can only deeply deplore... I was saddened by the fact that even Catholics who, after all, might have had a better knowledge of the situation, thought they had to attack me with open hostility. Precisely for this reason I thank all the more our Jewish friends, who quickly helped to clear up the misunderstanding and to restore the atmosphere of friendship and trust which—as in the days of Pope John Paul

²³ “Pope emeritus Benedict: Dialogue with the Jews, not mission,” *Vatican News*, 27 November, 2018, available at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2018-11/pope-emeritus-benedict-dialogue-with-te-jews-not-mission.html>.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Last Testament*, 198.

²⁵ Seewald, *Benedict XVI*, 538.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Last Testament*, 237.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Last Testament*, 4.

II—has also existed throughout my pontificate and, thank God, continues to exist.²⁸

Another point that I found noteworthy in Ratzinger's comments about his German critics were the words according to which the German theologians "knew that [bringing him down] is easiest where Israel is concerned." Behind these words lies the awareness of the recent change in Catholic theology with regard to the Jews, the nearly unsolvable tension between the old dogmatic requirements of faith in Christ and baptism for salvation and the new conviction that the Old Covenant has never been revoked or replaced and that the Jews are not excluded from salvation, even if they do not accept Jesus Christ. This brings us to the *Communio* article and the subsequent dialogue between Benedict and Rabbi Folger. I would now like to share some of the main constructive points gathered from this exchange.

In his piece published in *Jüdische Allgemeine*, titled "Danger for the dialogue?" Folger writes about Benedict XVI's article: "Various commentators are very annoyed by this, which is incomprehensible to me. What do we expect from a pope? Do we actually expect Christians to accept Judaism as a legitimate detour around church doctrine?"²⁹ Folger's response led to a correspondence and even a cordial private meeting between the Pope and the Rabbi. In his foreword to the book edited by Elio Guerriero, Folger praises Benedict for understanding why Jews cannot accept Jesus as Messiah (he did not bring peace). Folger also stresses Benedict's formulation according to which in the State of Israel and the return of the Jews to the Land one can see a sign of God's enduring covenant love. At the same time, Benedict says that the modern state cannot be seen as the fulfilment of the biblical "promise of the land," which is spiritualized in the Epistle to the Hebrews and other early Christian literature. Finally, Folger appreciates Benedict's statement according to which Christian-Jewish unity is impossible in human history—it is reserved for God to accomplish at the end of time. For Folger, this means that dialogue excludes trying to convert the other. He is aware, though, that Benedict would like to go deeper into theological and Christological dialogue. As a religious Jew and a disciple of disciples of Joseph Soloveitchik, Folger is reluctant. Nevertheless, he states that the very fact of writing a preface to a book co-authored with a Pope Emeritus, containing a theological confrontation, is going in the direction willed by Benedict.

Indeed, it is interesting to see how keen Benedict was on theological and even Christological dialogue with the Jews even until the end. Even in his "Correction" sent to *Herder Korrespondenz*, Benedict said that the Church need not missionize the Jews, who already know the unknown God, but what is necessary is "dialogue on whether Jesus of Nazareth is 'the Son of God, the Logos.'" I am surprised that

²⁸ Benedict XVI, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Remission of the Excommunication of the Four Bishops Consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre," 10 March, 2009, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20090310_remissione-scomunica.html.

²⁹ Arie Folger, "Danger for the dialogue?," July 19, 2018, available at <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-today-s-dialogue/emeritus-pope/danger-for-the-dialogue>.

in Benedict I have not found a strong awareness of the fact that for most Orthodox Jews, Christology represents idolatry and thus something that one cannot even go near. I had to learn this from Ben-Johanan, though in retrospect it seems almost self-evident (cf. the Islamic concept of *shirk*). Usually, understanding and laying out the other's position is one of Benedict's strong points, but maybe not here. It seems Benedict was not overly familiar with the pertinent Orthodox Jewish literature, some of which Ben-Johanan has translated for us for the first time. But we can understand all the more why Benedict thought Rabbi Jacob Neusner's book was "by far the most important book for the Christian-Jewish dialogue in the last decade"—precisely because it took up the Christological topic, so close to Benedict's heart.

Finally, I would like to evaluate, based on what we've learned, Ratzinger's position on Catholic-Jewish dialogue in light of my previous research. In my article "Mission impossible? Pope Benedict XVI and Interreligious Dialogue" I looked at the development of Ratzinger's thought on the nature and aim of interreligious dialogue.³⁰ In the 1990s, he said that mission and dialogue intertwine and that the purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth. Against this backdrop, his more recent distinction between mission and dialogue with regard to Jews seems a bit artificial. Or perhaps it is just more nuanced. In fact, during his pontificate Benedict XVI developed, in dialogue with Marcello Pera, the idea that dialogue should not question or negotiate fundamental choices, such as the Yes or No to the divinity of Christ or a Triune God. Therefore, the aim of dialogue is not to convert the other. However, Benedict never renounced his insistence that dialogue must aim at drawing nearer to the truth. One can explain one's convictions to the other and thus make one's faith more understandable. Presumably, this is what he means by dialoguing with Jews about Jesus as Messiah and Logos, but I cannot help thinking that as a believing Christian he would also wish for his Jewish interlocutors to come to faith in Christ as Messiah and Lord. He would probably say yes, but this is not a direct aim of the dialogue but rather a matter left to the grace of God. It also seems to me that Benedict believed that Christ will be revealed to the great majority of the Jews only at the end of history, or at death.

This brings me to the next issue, the sensitive question relating to salvation. In my article "Joseph Ratzinger's Soteriological Inclusivism" I showed that Benedict XVI was an optimistic restrictivist inclusivist, which means that he believed that the majority of humankind would finally be saved, not through the various religions as such but thanks to the mediation of Christ and his Body the Church, as well as a purifying post-mortem encounter with Christ who in himself is the fire of what Catholics call "purgatory."³¹ In terms of the subject—the individual to be saved—some kind of an openness to God is ultimately sufficient: only those totally closed to God will be excluded. Wherever Ratzinger develops this theology, he never

³⁰ Emil Anton, "Mission Impossible? Pope Benedict XVI and Interreligious Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (December 2017): 879–904.

³¹ Emil Anton, "Joseph Ratzinger's Soteriological Inclusivism," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (April 2018): 170–190.

speaks of the Jews as an exceptional category, and I am inclined to think that one cannot insert them into it as such, except in the sense that the Jewish religion makes the true God more readily available than most other religions. In other words, Ratzinger was probably optimistic about the salvation of most Jews, but not based on a covenant of their own that would be valid for Jews only. It does not sound feasible to say that Jews *en masse* would be saved simply because they are ethnic Jews, irrespective of whether they believe and how they live. Nor does it seem that Ratzinger believed those Jews would be saved who were “good Jews,” i.e. as observant of the Torah as possible. He also saw the danger of religion becoming an obstacle to one’s openness to God (which can happen to Catholics as well). For Ratzinger, the decisive factor was the “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” the movement of the heart or turning towards the true God, seeking his face.