

Paul J. Griffiths
Israel: A Christian Grammar

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), soft cover, xvii + 242pp.

DAVID M. NEUHAUS, SJ

neuhausj@gmail.com

Jesuit Institute of South Africa, Johannesburg, 2092, South Africa

Undoubtedly one of the complex contemporary issues in Catholic thought is to enunciate a theology of Judaism that is in line with the ongoing reformulations of Catholic teaching on Jews and Judaism since the Second Vatican Council. The traditional “teaching of contempt” has given way to an ever-deepening “teaching of respect.” However, the theological implications of this Council are still being explored. The unicity of salvation through Jesus Christ, the catholicity of a Church made up of Jews and Gentiles, and the role of the Jewish people in salvation history after the coming of Jesus remain much debated subjects.

Griffiths’ book is a provocative attempt to bring coherency to Catholic theological discourse on Jews and Judaism which is up to date with the Church’s magisterium since Vatican II. The book is phrased in a language that is unusual to say the least. Indeed, he calls the book a grammar and as such it stretches and reformulates discourse so that it might say what is coherent, persuasive, and true. Relying on striking metaphors derived from musical terminology, the author attempts to fully integrate the intuitions that have developed since the publication of paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*.

The book consists of eleven chapters and four brief excurses. As befits a grammar, the author begins by defining the vocabulary. Toward the end of the first chapter, he writes, “The world after the fall is a tattered garment, becoming more tattered by the day; and the god is there to reweave it, to make it whole, and therefore holy, again. Israel is the god’s principal instrument for that. That is what she is for” (14). The rest of the book attempts to hold on to this basic theological datum while describing how Christ’s coming impacts both Jews and Christians, now united, Griffiths says, as Israel. Griffiths, echoing the Church’s magisterial teachings, envisions an eschatological reconciliation at the heart of the Israel of God. He says, “Israel remains at the end internally differentiated; and the surprise and delight of the Jews in finding Jesus is matched and reciprocated by the surprise and delight of the Christians in acknowledging the Jews as more capable of the god than themselves” (137). The first seven chapters of the book sketch out the theological grammar. The last four chapters of the book outline the actions implied by

the grammar. These chapters deal with the prickly issues of the mission to the Jews, how to integrate Jewish believers in Jesus into the Church, how to deal with intermarriage, and finally how to more fully represent the post-Christian Jewish tradition in the Church.

A summary of the book's premise appears toward the end of the book in one long sentence: "Jews and Christians together constitute Israel; they worship the same god; they are of the same lineage; they have the same purpose; Jews are the god's particular intimates, held closer and more lovingly than Christians; the Church has seriously and systematically damaged the Synagogue; for non-Jewish Christians, Jews are their closest intimates outside the Church, toward whom penitential and sacrificially loving behaviors are, for the long time being, the most appropriate" (222). Four striking characteristics of Griffiths's grammar can be discerned here.

1. **The people of God, Israel, today is made up of Synagogue and Church.** This premise is strongly bound up in the post-Vatican II understanding of the fidelity of God to God's election of Israel. Paul writes in Romans, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29). Though notably absent in centuries of teaching preceding the Council, this verse is omnipresent in the Church's magisterium since then (starting with paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*).

2. **The Synagogue is closer to God than the Church.** This is strikingly phrased: "The Synagogue is Israel's poem, while the Church is Israel's paraphrase" (112). In one of the most striking chapters in the book, chapter 6, entitled "Israel's Propinquities," the author goes through the elements that manifest the Synagogue's intimate closeness with God, closeness that the members of the church from the nations can only envy. These elements include flesh and body, and language and place.

3. Griffiths insists on taking this insight to its logical conclusion, determining that **members of the Synagogue should not be proselytized as they are not strangers to Israel.** Furthermore, if Jews do come to believe in Jesus, they do not need baptism as understood by the Church for they are already joined to the flesh that is Jesus's. Even more radically, toward the end of the book he writes that the Church "has no need to persuade the Synagogue of Jesus here below, and every need not to. What she (the Church) knows is Jesus and he is a great good to know. But she is confident that she has more to learn about the god of Jesus Christ than knowing Jesus can teach her; she is confident as well that at the heart of what she has yet to learn about that god is what the Synagogue already knows" (216). Interestingly, he comments that members of the Synagogue who do become members of the Church are closest to God. "They are of all the god's intimates, the closest and the most beloved" (160). He strongly insists that a member of the Synagogue who has entered the Church must be strongly encouraged to keep his or her Jewish identity.

4. He evinces a **deep historical consciousness regarding the Church's lack of standing** to intervene in the life of the Synagogue except in a penitential way. This claim is detailed throughout the book without mincing words. Members of the Church have done great damage to the Synagogue. Griffiths insists that now the

Church must adopt an overwhelmingly positive attitude to the Synagogue that promotes its welfare always and everywhere.

In conclusion, I raise here three issues that I hope will be taken up in further writing and theological reflection on this subject:

1. Is this reflection fully Catholic? The theological premises are founded on a well-known history of violence against the Jewish people linked to the history of the Church in Europe. How would Catholic theologians from Africa, Asia, or Latin America respond to the language about the standing of the Synagogue in relation to the Church?

2. Furthermore, the very neat distinction between Israel (made up of Synagogue and Church) on the one hand and the Gentiles on the other hand also seems to be more problematic when the Church is not seen as uniquely European. The Church has opened up to a relationship with myriad others, developing a teaching of respect for them too. Does the Church have standing with Muslims or with the traditional religions of Asia, Africa, and the Americas any more than she does with the Synagogue?

3. More pointedly, Griffiths clearly has an awareness of the situation in Israel / Palestine and the difficult religious questions raised by it. It would be fascinating to have a Catholic Palestinian reflection on Griffiths' grammar in the name of rendering these insights ever-more Catholic.

It might be hoped that Griffiths provokes many others to take up his challenge and thus revitalize work on the theological challenges aroused by the new approach to Jews and Judaism in the Catholic Church.