

Jesus the Jew, the Mystery of Christ, and Jewish-Christian Relations

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Introduction

How can Christians simultaneously affirm the enduring validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people and maintain Jesus Christ’s unique and irreplaceable role in salvation history? This central christological question in the Christian theology of Judaism arises from the profound tension between two key developments in contemporary Christian theology, particularly since the Second Vatican Council. On the one hand, the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations have increasingly recognized that God’s covenant with Israel was “never revoked,” as repeatedly stated by Pope John Paul II¹ and reflected in later documents, such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, nr. 123). This recognition implies the enduring theological and spiritual significance of the Jewish people and their ongoing relationship with God even without confessing the Jew Jesus as the Christ. On the other hand, a central tenet of traditional Christian doctrine is the unique salvific role of Jesus as the Christ, the decisive revelation and incarnation of God for all humanity (CCC, nr. 516-518). Historically, this doctrine has often been interpreted in a supersessionist manner, suggesting that Christ and the Church have replaced or subsumed Israel’s covenantal identity.² Today, while the Church no longer holds to supersessionist theology, the unresolved question remains of how to reconcile an affirmation of Judaism’s everlasting integrity with the core christological claims of Christianity.

In this essay, I propose that the approach of negative christology has the potential to provide new resources for addressing this theological dilemma. It challenges supersessionist assumptions and crude oppositional contrasts between Judaism and Christianity by emphasizing God’s ultimate incomprehensibility and

¹ For the first time in: John Paul II, “Address to Representatives of the West German Jewish Community,” November 10, 1980: “The first dimension of this dialogue, that is, *the meeting between the people of God* of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God, and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church.”

² Didier Pollefeyt, *Jews and Christians: Rivals or Partners for the Kingdom of God: In Search of an Alternative for the Theology of Substitution* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997).

the apophatic dimensions of Christ's identity beyond definitive categorization. A christology informed by negative theology would accent the irreducible mystery of Jesus's person and significance, creating space for a Christ who fulfills and elevates Judaism without negating it.³ Simultaneously, this apophatic approach resists reducing Christ to one figure within the broader story of Israel, as if the Church has no distinctive witness. The "negative" framing of his uniqueness as beyond limitation preserves his singular status. I hope to provide a new christological interpretive lens for imagining the enduring truth of the Jewish covenant and Christ's universal meaning in a dynamic and open-ended tension, not simple opposition.

The Slippery Slope from Fulfillment to Replacement Theology

In his 1999 book *Many Religions, One Covenant*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—later Pope Benedict XVI—grapples with this central theological question related to *Nostra Aetate* 4: "Do confession of Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of the Living God and faith in the Cross as the redemption of mankind contain an implicit condemnation of the Jews as stubborn and blind, as guilty of the death of the Son of God?" In line with *Nostra Aetate*, Ratzinger's answer is unequivocally "No!" His response to the question of the theology of Jewish-Christian relations reads: "Through him whom the Church believes to be Jesus Christ and Son of God, the God of Israel has become the God of the nations, *fulfilling* the prophecy that the Servant of God would bring the light of this God to the nations."⁴ This concept of fulfillment appears to encapsulate Ratzinger's and the Church's official stance toward Judaism today.

However, a deeper examination of Ratzinger's use of the idea of fulfillment, considering the quest to recognize God's "never revoked covenant" with the Jewish people, reveals significant ambivalence. On the one hand, he stresses that all nations become brothers and receivers of the promises given to the Chosen People, and "not one iota of it [the Old Testament] is being lost." The new perspective on Jesus does not imply "the abolishment of the special mission of Israel." On the other hand, the emphasis on the newness of Jesus implies that the Sinai covenant "within God's providential rule (...) is a stage that has its own allotted period of time."⁵ The Sinai covenant thus seems to have only a conditional and, as such, temporary significance. How is this compatible with the "never revoked covenant" idea?

In my analysis, the fundamental problem with the concept of fulfillment is that it logically cannot help but slide into a theology of substitution and replacement. This "slippery slope" becomes evident in Ratzinger's thought where the language of fulfillment theology shifts discretely into a theology of substitution at several

³ Didier Pollefeyt, "Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good is Bad: Religious Education in Catholic Schools Today," *Religions* 12(10) (2021).

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions, One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 18-19.

⁵ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 68.

crucial points. He writes in the same book: “God, according to the Prophet, will *replace* the broken Sinai covenant with a New Covenant that cannot be broken. ... The conditional covenant ... is *replaced* by the unconditional covenant in which God binds himself irrevocably.”⁶ Nowhere does Ratzinger explicitly distinguish “fulfillment” from “replacement.” On the contrary, “fulfillment” seems to equate with “replacement.” “Thus, the Sinai covenant is indeed superseded. But once the provisional has been swept away, we see what is truly definitive in it. So, the expectation of the New Covenant, which becomes clearer and clearer as the history of Israel unfolds, does not conflict with the Sinai covenant; rather, it fulfills the dynamic expectation found in the very covenant.”⁷

This theological approach raises numerous urgent questions: What role and significance remains for the first covenant in God’s salvific plan after its “fulfillment”? Are the Jewish people saved through Christ or in and through their own “never revoked covenant”? More concretely, do the Jews have to convert to Christ to enter God’s ultimate Kingdom? Is the Christian mission to convert Jews not then an unavoidable consequence of this position? Ratzinger acknowledges that this theology leads to a paradoxical conclusion, where “separation” and “reconciliation” between Jews and Christians are intertwined in a “virtually insolvable paradox.”⁸

An Eschatological Solution to the Jewish-Christian Paradox?

Many theologians have proposed an eschatological solution to resolve this paradox of Jewish-Christian relations, particularly the tension between affirming the enduring validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people and maintaining Christ’s unique salvific role. This approach, exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and others,⁹ suggests that the ultimate reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity will occur at the end of time, in the eschatological fulfillment of God’s plan.

The eschatological solution posits that, in the present age, both the Jewish covenant and Christ’s universal significance remain valid and necessary. The Church’s mission to the Gentiles and Israel’s ongoing witness to the one God are seen as complementary and mutually enriching, without requiring Jews to convert to Christianity. The complete reconciliation of these two paths is deferred to the eschaton when God will bring about the final consummation of history.

Such an approach envisions a future in which Jews and Christians will be united in their shared hope for the Messiah, recognizing Jesus as the Christ while affirming Israel’s enduring covenantal life with God. The eschatological solution aims to preserve Jewish and Christian identity in creative tension until the end of days.

However, this approach has been critiqued for merely postponing Christian triumphalism to the future. While it alleviates the tensions between Judaism and

⁶ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 63-64.

⁷ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 70-71.

⁸ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 40.

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology with Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1990).

Christianity in the present, it ultimately implies an eschatological supersessionism in which Judaism is subsumed into the Church's vision of final salvation. The Jewish "no" to Christ is relegated to a penultimate stage in God's plan, to be overcome at the eschaton. Critics argue that this fails to take seriously the Jewish people's self-understanding and their conviction that their covenant with God is itself a means of eternal salvation, not a preparation for eventual (eschatological) conversion to Christianity.¹⁰

Moreover, some worry that the eschatological approach, by deferring the resolution of Jewish-Christian tensions to an indefinite future, removes the urgency of grappling with these issues in the concrete present. It may inadvertently promote complacency or avoidance of the complex theological work needed to coherently affirm Jewish covenantal life and Christian commitment to Christ.¹¹ While the eschatological solution helpfully highlights the provisional and anticipatory character of both Judaism and Christianity, it risks perpetuating a "soft" form of supersessionism.

A Logos Christology as a New Way Out?

To address the paradox of Jewish-Christian relations and the tension between affirming the enduring validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people while maintaining Christ's unique salvific role, I proposed with Philip Cunningham a Logos Christology as a potential solution.¹² This approach draws on the eternal Logos, the divine Word, as present before history, throughout history, and in all of creation. The Logos is thus not limited to the incarnation of the Logos in Jesus Christ. We suggested that the Logos has been active in God's ongoing covenant with the Jewish people before and after the incarnation. From within our perspective as limited humans immersed in time, after the incarnation, everything the Logos does is done in unity with the glorified human being, the Jew Jesus of Nazareth. This affirms the enduring significance of the Jewish covenant as a means of salvation for the Jewish people through the activity of the eternal Logos in Judaism while also maintaining the unique and definitive revelation of the incarnated Logos in Christ for all peoples.

Interestingly, this approach can also be found, to some extent, in the most recent document of the Catholic Church on Jewish-Christian relations, "The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable" (2015). It states:

God revealed himself in his Word, so that humanity may understand it in actual historical situations. This Word invites all people to respond. If their responses

¹⁰ David Novak, *Talking with Christians: Musings of a Jewish Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹¹ Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

¹² Philip A. Cunningham and Didier Pollefeyt, "The Triune One, the Incarnate Logos and Israel's Covenantal Life," in *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships*, eds. Philip A. Cunningham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 183-201.

accord with the Word of God, they stand in right relationship with him. For Jews, this Word can be learned through the Torah and its traditions. The Torah is the instruction for a successful life and the right relationship with God. Whoever observes the Torah has life in its fullness (nr. 24).¹³

However, theologians who think in transcendent modes beyond human history and experience, drawing on classical Greek metaphysics, reject attempts to distinguish the Logos and Christ either after the incarnation or even in pre-incarnation times. For them, Christ Jesus is always cosmologically and intrinsically connected with the Logos. Thus, in his critique of Jacques Dupuis, Cardinal Ratzinger insisted on this intrinsic connection between the eternal Logos and the person of Christ, resisting any separation between them. He wrote,

It must also be firmly believed that Jesus of Nazareth, Son of Mary and only Savior of the world, is the Son and Word of the Father. For the unity of the divine plan of salvation centered in Jesus Christ, it must also be held that the salvific action of the Word is accomplished in and through Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of the Father, as mediator of salvation for all humanity. It is, therefore, contrary to the Catholic faith not only to posit a separation between the Word and Jesus or between the Word's salvific activity and that of Jesus but also to maintain that there is a salvific activity of the Word as such in his divinity, independent of the humanity of the Incarnate Word.¹⁴

This intrinsic, transtemporal connection makes it difficult for Logos Christology to fully resolve the tension between affirming the Jewish saving covenant with God and maintaining Christ's unique role in Christian salvation history. The limitation lies not with Trinitarian faith itself but with this specific attempt to solve the Jewish-Christian theological dilemma through Logos theology.¹⁵

In fact, nevertheless, Cardinal Ratzinger himself was not always as adamant as his correction of Jacques Dupuis on the role of the Logos might suggest. In the 2000 declaration *Dominus Iesus*, we read, "It is likewise contrary to the Catholic faith to introduce a separation between the salvific action of the Word as such and that of the Word made man. *With the incarnation*, all the salvific actions of the Word of God are always done in unity with the human nature that he has assumed for the salvation of all people."¹⁶ The expression "*with the incarnation*" leaves open how we have to understand the Logos *before* the incarnation and the birth of Jesus, which is precisely the space that Logos Christology in our view sought to explore.

¹³ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable" (2015), par. 24.

¹⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Notification on the book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* by Father Jacques Dupuis" (2001), nr. 2.

¹⁵ As John Paul II stated, "The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others" (*Fides et Ratio*, 1998, par. 49).

¹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration *Dominus Iesus*" (2000), nr. 10. Italics added.

Christ as the Living Torah

In the document “Gifts and Calling” mentioned above, the Vatican gives a new turn to the theological discussion by introducing the concept of Christ as the “Living Torah.”¹⁷ The following statement is perhaps the most advanced paragraph ever written in Church teaching on Judaism:

Christians affirm that Jesus Christ can be considered as “the living Torah of God.” Torah and Christ are the Word of God, his revelation for us human beings as testimony of his boundless love. For Christians, the pre-existence of Christ as the Word and Son of the Father is a fundamental doctrine, and according to rabbinical tradition the Torah and the name of the Messiah exist already before creation. Further, according to Jewish understanding God himself interprets the Torah in the Eschaton, while in Christian understanding everything is recapitulated in Christ in the end (cf. Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20). In the gospel of Matthew, Christ is seen as it were as the “new Moses.” Matthew 5:17–19 presents Jesus as the authoritative and authentic interpreter of the Torah (cf. Lk. 24:27, 45–47). In the rabbinical literature, however, we find the identification of the Torah with Moses. Against this background, Christ as the “new Moses” can be connected with the Torah. Torah and Christ are the locus of the presence of God in the world as this presence is experienced in the respective worship communities.¹⁸

Thus, the idea of Christ as the living Torah is a theological concept that attempts to bring Christianity and Judaism closer together by highlighting the connections between the person of Jesus Christ and the Jewish scriptures, particularly the Torah. The underlying premise is that Jesus, as the incarnate Word of God, is the embodiment or personification of the divine teachings and commandments contained within the Torah.

While this concept can be seen as an attempt to find common ground between Christianity and Judaism, it also raises critical considerations. One potential concern is whether this view truly honors the “never-revoked covenant” that continues to operate in Judaism, even today, without explicit recognition of Christ’s activity. If Christ is the Living Torah, does this not undermine the ongoing validity and relevance of the Mosaic covenant for the Jewish people? The notion of Christ as the living Torah may be perceived by Jews as a subtle form of Christian proselytism or an attempt to supersede the Torah with a Christian understanding of it. In this way, fulfillment theology remains at work: Jesus becomes the ultimate and perfect fulfillment of the Mosaic Law, embodying its spiritual and ethical teachings in his life and ministry.

¹⁷ Hans Hermann Henrix, “The Son of God Became a Human as a Jew: Implications of the Jewishness of Jesus for Christology,” in *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, eds. Philip Cunningham et al. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2011), 114–143.

¹⁸ CRRJ, “Gifts and Calling,” par. 26.

Revoking the Covenant and the Irrevocable Covenant

A revealing sidestep in this complex discussion was made with the publication of an academic article in 2018 in the international Catholic journal *Communio* by “Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI” under the title “Grace and Vocation without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise *De Iudaeis*.”¹⁹ The text has a preface by Cardinal Koch, president of the *Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews* since 2010, who emphasized that the article was not originally intended for publication. Koch framed the text: “it is not a magisterial act, but [the] personal theological opinion [of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI], which is why the essay has been published in a theological journal.”²⁰

The center of Benedict’s analysis is a “critical consideration” and “final judgment” of the phrase the “never revoked covenant.” Benedict XVI stresses that the formula did not belong to *Nostra Aetate* but was a later development. He agrees that this formula of the covenant as “never revoked” is, in a certain sense, part of the current teaching (*Lehrgestalt*) of the Catholic Church.²¹

At the core of his critical analysis are linguistic objections. The word “revoke” does not belong to the vocabulary of divine action. As used to describe God’s history with mankind, “covenant” in the Bible is not singular but occurs in stages. Beyond these formal objections, he argues that this formula does not bring the story’s real drama between God and man to the fore. Yes, God’s love is indestructible. But the covenant history between God and man also includes human failure, the breaking of the covenant, and its internal consequences: the destruction of the temple, the scattering of Israel, and the call to repentance, which restores man’s capacity for the covenant.²² The article ends with Benedict XVI’s conclusion: “The formula of the ‘never-revoked covenant’ may have been helpful in a first phase of the new dialogue between Jews and Christians. But it is not suited in the long run to express in an adequate way the magnitude of reality.”²³

In other words, Ratzinger the theologian wants to eliminate the “never revoked” formula from the Catholic Church’s teaching in the long term. The arguments with which Ratzinger tries to eliminate the concept are twofold. “Revoke” is not a category of God since God’s love is indestructible. From God’s perspective, it makes no sense to speak about a “never revoked covenant” since God never “revokes” covenants. On the other hand, human beings break covenants from time to time. This infidelity, according to Ratzinger’s statements, applies especially to Israel, but apparently not to the church. The covenant in Christ is final.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, “Grace and Vocation without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise *De Iudaeis*,” *Communio* 45 (2018): 163-184.

²⁰ Cardinal Kurt Koch, *Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI on Supersessionism and Covenant. Information about Self-Understanding: Not Calling into Question but Deepening the Dialogue with Jews*. <https://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/themes-in-today-s-dialogue/emeritus-pope/koch-2018aug14>. Originally published in *Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur, Ökumenische Information* 33 (August 14, 2018): I-IV.

²¹ Benedict XVI, “Grace and Vocation,” 181.

²² Benedict XVI, “Grace and Vocation,” 183.

²³ Benedict XVI, “Grace and Vocation,” 184.

In defending Ratzinger, theologian Jan-Heiner Tück underscores that the emeritus pope's contribution "does not claim an authoritative magisterial status," but rather "is as strong as the arguments he puts forth."²⁴ How strong, then, is Ratzinger's argument? His stress on the human habit of breaking covenants is one-sidedly applied to the covenant with the Jewish people, to relativize, weaken, and undermine the power of the first covenant. This pattern ignores that time and again, the Jewish people *re-established* that covenant in a living and loyal relationship to God, up until today. At the same time, Ratzinger fails to utter a single word about the ruptures created by Christians, the people of the second covenant. He fails especially to mention the suffering that Christianity has brought upon the Jews. This is no mere detail—not least because the history of anti-Judaism and the memory of the Holocaust were the very reasons for reconceptualizing a non-substitutionary approach to Jewish-Christian relations in *Nostra Aetate*.

Moreover, logically, is the idea that one cannot apply the formula "never revoked" to God a good reason to take it away from church teaching? If God never breaks a covenant, then there is no problem to speak of a "never revoked covenant." God's fidelity actually makes the idea stronger, not weaker. Benedict's qualms seem rather idiosyncratic, particularly in light of Pope Francis's reaffirmation of the "never revoked covenant" in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (par. 247). The emeritus pope's article shows that sixty years after *Nostra Aetate*, the church's theology of Judaism is not entirely settled and remains vulnerable to interpretations that do not overcome supersessionism.

Negative Theology

Given this analysis of the christological challenges in Jewish-Christian dialogue since the official "end" of supersessionism from *Nostra Aetate* onward, it becomes increasingly apparent that no existing Christian theology of Judaism today can comprehensively reconcile the uniqueness of Christ with the concept of the never-revoked covenant. This challenge resembles attempting to solve a paradox—an endeavor as seemingly impossible as squaring a circle. Over the past sixty years, virtually every conceivable solution has been proposed, yet each encounter significant theological hurdles. As we've seen, the eschatological solution merely postpones the problem to an indefinite future. The idea of two parallel, unrelated paths to salvation undermines the uniqueness of Christ, while a Logos Christology as solution for the paradox encounters difficulties with traditional Trinitarian doctrine, and Christ as Living Torah risks making Christ the culmination point of Judaism. Revoking the "never-revoked covenant" is morally and theologically untenable in today's context and Church teachings.

We face a crossroads at this juncture: Should we accept supersessionism as inevitable or even legitimate in Christian theology? The notion that Christianity is

²⁴ Jan-Heiner Tück, "Benedikt XVI -- ein Wegbereiter des Antisemitismus?" *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, August 1, 2018

inherently supersessionist contradicts *Nostra Aetate* and the Catholic Church's retreat from actively missionizing Jews. Moreover, how do we proceed "after Auschwitz," cognizant of the dangerous potential inherent in supersessionist schemas? Or should we acknowledge our human limitations in solving this theological conundrum? At this critical juncture, I propose introducing the framework of negative Christology as a novel, complementary, or corrective approach to this complex issue.

Negative theology, also known as apophatic theology, represents a profound and enduring approach to understanding the divine that has shaped religious and philosophical thought for millennia. At its core, negative theology asserts that the nature of God or ultimate reality is fundamentally beyond human comprehension and expression.²⁵ Rather than making positive assertions about "what God is," this approach focuses on "what God is not," recognizing the ultimate inadequacy of affirmative statements to capture the essence of the divine.

The roots of negative theology can be traced back to ancient philosophical and religious traditions, including Neoplatonism, early Christian mysticism, and certain strands of Jewish and Islamic thought. Influential thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maimonides, and Meister Eckhart have contributed significantly to developing and articulating apophatic approaches to theology.²⁶ In the Christian tradition, negative theology has played a crucial role in maintaining God's mystery and transcendence while acknowledging the human desire for divine knowledge. It serves as a counterbalance to more rationalistic or dogmatic approaches to theology, reminding believers of the divine nature's ultimate ineffability.

The key principles of negative theology include the recognition of God's transcendence, the practice of the *via negativa* ("the path of negation"), and the emphasis on apophasis (the "unsaying"). These principles work together to prevent the idolatry of (theological) concepts and foster an attitude of epistemological humility in the face of divine mystery. Negative theology's significance lies in its ability to maintain a sense of wonder and awe in religious experience. By acknowledging the limits of human understanding, it creates space for contemplation, mystical experience, and openness to diverse interpretations of religious truth.

From Negative Theology to Negative Christology

The transition from the broader concept of negative theology to its specific application in Christology represents a complex theological move. 'Negative Christology' emerges as an applied branch of apophatic thought, focusing on the nature, identity, and significance of Jesus Christ within the Christian tradition. This transition involves grappling with the unique challenges presented by applying

²⁵ Johannes Steenbuch, *Negative Theology: A Short Introduction* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2022).

²⁶ Nahum Brown and Aaron Simmons, *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave, 2017).

apophatic principles to studying a figure who is both historical and, in Christian belief, divine.

Unlike negative theology, which often deals with abstract concepts of divinity, negative Christology must engage with the concrete historical reality of Jesus as a human being situated in a specific time and culture. This historical dimension adds layers of complexity to the apophatic approach, requiring careful navigation between the historicity and particularity of Jesus' life and the universality of his significance for the Christian faith. The doctrine of the Incarnation, central to Christian theology, presents both challenges and opportunities for negative Christology. On the one hand, the belief that God became human in Jesus invites positive statements about Christ's nature. On the other hand, the paradoxical nature of this belief—the infinite contained within the finite—aligns well with apophatic approaches that emphasize the ultimate mystery of divine action.

Principles and Applications of Negative Christology

Negative Christology applies the insights and methods of apophatic theology to the specific study and understanding of Jesus Christ. This approach seeks to maintain Christ's mystery and transcendence while acknowledging the limitations of human language and concepts in fully capturing his nature and significance. Negative Christology creates space for deeper contemplation and more flexible interpretations of Christian doctrine by emphasizing what cannot be definitively said about Christ.

Negative Christology encourages a mystical or spiritual interpretation of Christ's teachings. Rather than treating Jesus' parables and sayings as propositional truths to be systematized, this approach views them as invitations to contemplation and transformative encounters. It recognizes that the most profound meanings of Christ's words may lie beyond what can be captured in doctrinal statements or ethical prescriptions.

Another important aspect of negative Christology is the critical approach to Christological formulas. While respecting the historical importance of doctrinal statements about Christ's nature, this approach critically examines these formulations, recognizing their historical contextuality and limitations. It encourages ongoing reformulation and reinterpretation of Christological language, considering new contexts and insights. Negative Christology often embraces a form of Christological agnosticism, maintaining a stance of "learned ignorance" regarding the ultimate mystery of Christ's person and work.

Apophatic Traditions in Judaism

The apophatic tradition is not exclusive to Christianity but is also deeply present in Judaism, both in its ancient roots and contemporary expressions. This shared heritage provides crucial common ground for Jewish-Christian dialogue. One of the earliest and most influential Jewish thinkers to apply negative theology was Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher of the 1st century CE. Philo

utilized apophatic methods to safeguard God's transcendence, emphasizing the ineffability of the divine nature.²⁷

In medieval Jewish philosophy, the concept of negative theology found its most prominent expression in the work of Moses Maimonides (12th century). In his seminal work *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides emphasized that we can only describe what God is not rather than what God is. This aligns closely with the apophatic focus on the limits of theological language and human understanding of the divine.²⁸ The Jewish mystical tradition, particularly the Kabbalah, also incorporates strong apophatic elements. Kabbalistic texts frequently employ paradox and the concept of the unsayable to evoke the mystery of the divine realm.

In modern Jewish thought, apophatic concepts continue to appear. Abraham Joshua Heschel developed the concept of "radical amazement" toward God, which has distinct apophatic overtones.²⁹ Martin Buber explored the concept of the "Eclipse of God," which reflects negative theology's gesture towards the hiddenness and transcendence of the divine.³⁰ Perhaps one of the most striking examples of apophatic thought in Judaism is the treatment of the divine name itself. The tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God ("YHWH"), is considered unpronounceable in Jewish tradition, pointing to the ultimate unknowability of the divine.

Jesus Through the Lens of Negative Christology

Viewing Jesus through the lens of negative Christology invites us to approach his life, teachings, and identity with a sense of reverent unknowing rather than dogmatic certainty. This perspective emphasizes what Jesus was *not* rather than making definitive claims about who he was. Crucially, this approach must recognize that Jesus's actions and teachings occurred entirely *within* the diverse landscape of Second Temple Judaism, not in opposition to it. When Jesus challenged certain interpretations of Sabbath observance, temple practices, or purity laws, he did so as a Jewish prophet engaged in intra-Jewish debates characteristic of his time. His critiques echo those of biblical prophets who called Israel back to covenant faithfulness from within the tradition. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and other groups represented different positions within Judaism; Jesus's teaching represents another point on this spectrum, not a rejection of Judaism itself.³¹

In his actions, we see Jesus consistently defying expectations and eluding easy categorization, but always within Jewish categories. He associated with outcasts as

²⁷ Jean Danielou, *Philon d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Fayard, 1958).

²⁸ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Michael Friedländer (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1904).

²⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 46.

³⁰ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy*, trans. Maurice S. Friedman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952).

³¹ This point cannot be overstated: Jesus's prophetic critiques and provocative actions must be understood as positions taken within the rich diversity of Second Temple Judaism, not as rejection of Judaism itself.

prophets had done before. He performed acts of power yet refused to be labeled a mere wonder worker. He taught with authority but often through enigmatic parables that resisted simplistic interpretation. His teachings about the Kingdom of God were more evocative than prescriptive, inviting imagination rather than dogma. When asked directly about his identity, Jesus often responded obliquely or with questions of his own, resisting attempts to confine him within predetermined roles or titles.

The story of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) provides perhaps one of the richest narratives for exploring Jesus through negative Christology. The pivotal moment comes during the meal, as Jesus takes bread, blesses, and breaks it. In this eucharistic gesture, the disciples' eyes are opened, and they recognize him. Yet immediately, Jesus vanishes from their sight. This sequence encapsulates the tension in negative Christology between revelation and hiddenness, presence and absence. The moment of recognition coincides with Jesus' disappearance, suggesting that our grasp of Christ's reality is always partial, fleeting, and beyond full comprehension.

Negative Christology and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

The application of negative Christology to Jewish-Christian dialogue opens new possibilities for mutual understanding and reconciliation between these two historically intertwined yet often conflicting traditions. By emphasizing the limitations of human language and concepts in describing Christ, this approach creates space for more nuanced and respectful interfaith conversations, addressing historical tensions while maintaining the integrity of each tradition's beliefs.

One of negative Christology's most significant contributions to Jewish-Christian dialogue is its potential to deconstruct supersessionist claims. Traditional supersessionism assumes that Christians possess definitive knowledge about God's plans and purposes. Negative Christology challenges this by emphasizing the ongoing mystery of God's relationship with both traditions. It recognizes that no human formulation can fully capture the divine plan, leaving room for multiple valid forms of covenant relationship with God.

By approaching Messianic titles and expectations with humility and recognizing their ultimately mysterious nature, negative Christology allows for a more open-ended understanding of Jesus' role that doesn't necessarily conflict with Jewish Messianic expectations. This can create common ground for discussing the concept of the Messiah without either side feeling that their core beliefs are being invalidated.

The emphasis on shared apophatic traditions provides substantial common ground between Judaism and Christianity. Both traditions have mystics, philosophers, and theologians who emphasized divine incomprehensibility, the limitations of religious language, and the priority of experience over concept. This shared heritage suggests possibilities for common spiritual practice and theological reflection.

Negative Christology can foster dialogue around shared moral values and social concerns by focusing on Jesus' ethical teachings over metaphysical claims

about his nature. It allows both traditions to engage with Jesus' ethical legacy without becoming entangled in theological disputes about his ontological status.

Negative Christology's approach to scriptural hermeneutics can also contribute positively to interfaith dialogue. Recognizing the multivalent nature of religious texts and the limitation of any interpretation creates space for multiple valid readings of shared scriptures. This can help address tensions arising from conflicting exegetical traditions and foster a more collaborative approach to studying sacred texts.

Furthermore, emphasizing epistemological humility in negative Christology can contribute to a more inclusive view of religious pluralism. While maintaining Christ's centrality to the Christian faith, including core doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Trinity, this approach recognizes the limitations of human understanding in matters of ultimate truth. This can foster a more open and respectful attitude toward Judaism and other religious traditions, seeing them as valid forms of encountering the divine mystery.

Negative Christology can also help address historical trauma in Jewish-Christian relations. By challenging triumphalist Christian narratives and acknowledging the harm caused by certain theological formulations, this approach can contribute to repentance, forgiveness, and healing processes. It encourages Christians to approach interfaith dialogue with humility and openness to learning from Jewish perspectives.³²

Challenges to and Criticisms of Negative Christology

While negative Christology offers many potential benefits for theological reflection and Jewish-Christian dialogue, it also faces several challenges and criticisms that must be addressed. One common criticism is that an overly apophatic approach to Christology risks undermining the distinctiveness of the Christian faith. Critics argue³³ that by emphasizing what cannot be said about Christ, negative Christology might weaken believers' confidence in core Christian doctrines or dilute the uniqueness of Christ's role in salvation history.³⁴

Another challenge is the potential for negative Christology to be misinterpreted as a form of relativism or indifferentism. There's a risk that emphasizing the limitations of human understanding could be taken to mean that all religious claims are equally valid or that doctrinal differences are unimportant. However, this criticism conflates epistemological humility with ontological relativism.

³² Didier Pollefeyt, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018).

³³ Sarah Coakley, "What Does Chalcedon Solve and What Does It Not? Some Reflections on the Status and Meaning of the Chalcedonian 'Definition,'" in Stephen T. Davis & Daniel Kendall & Gerald O'Collins (eds.), in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 143-163.

³⁴ Lieven Boeve, "Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology," in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, eds. Terrence Merrigan and Jacques Haers (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 577-593.

Acknowledging that our knowledge of Christ is limited does not mean Christ himself is limited or that all religious claims are equivalent.

It might also be argued that if taken to extremes, negative Christology could lead to a form of theological nihilism where nothing meaningful can be said about Christ. This could potentially undermine the basis for Christian worship, devotion, and ethical action. However, proponents respond that negative Christology does not replace positive affirmations but provides their necessary complement and corrective.

Applying negative Christology in pastoral contexts also presents practical challenges. An apophatic approach might seem abstract or unsatisfying for believers accustomed to more affirmative and concrete theological language. Pastors and teachers may also face difficulties communicating these concepts in ways that are accessible and spiritually nourishing for diverse congregations.

Critics also raise concerns about whether negative Christology can maintain orthodox Christological affirmations. Can this approach affirm Nicaea's *homoousios*, Chalcedon's hypostatic union, and other doctrinal developments? However, negative Christology need not threaten orthodox formulations but can actually preserve their intent better than rationalistic interpretation. The councils themselves used apophatic language—Chalcedon's four negative adverbs—suggesting they aimed to preserve mystery, not solve it.

Respecting the Church's Witness to the Uniqueness of Christ

A crucial aspect of negative Christology that must be emphasized is its relationship to the Church's positive witness about Christ. While this approach emphasizes what cannot be definitively known about Christ and recognizes Jesus's thoroughly Jewish identity and context, it does not simply subsume Jesus within Judaism or deny the Church's distinctive witness to his significance. The Church maintains a robust witness to Christ's transformative and transcendent nature, even if this witness is expressed more in terms of mystery and openness rather than rigid, dogmatic formulations.

This approach recognizes both Jesus's continuity with the Jewish tradition and the elements of his life and teachings that his followers saw as profoundly unique. Negative Christology resists reducing Christ to "simply one figure within the broader story of Israel" while also avoiding the opposite extreme of completely severing him from that story. By holding these two realities in tension, negative Christology preserves a sense of the profound mystery Christians believe is embodied in Jesus.

The "negative" in negative Christology refers primarily to our mode of knowing and speaking, not to the reality of Christ himself. Christians continue to affirm the Incarnation, the Trinity, and salvation through Christ. What changes is the recognition that these affirmations gesture toward mystery rather than providing a complete explanation. This protects both divine transcendence and the genuine newness of what God has done in Christ.

Conclusion: Negative Christology as a New Hermeneutical Key

As argued throughout this essay, negative Christology offers a genuinely new approach to addressing the complex relationship between Christianity and Judaism. By embracing our understanding's limitations and acknowledging the mystery inherent in our theological and Christological formulations, negative Christology opens new possibilities for engagement with both our own traditions and those of others.

Negative Christology proves particularly helpful in the search for a new Christian theology of Judaism by offering a nuanced alternative to existing approaches. It avoids the pitfalls of supersessionism found in traditional Christian interpretations while addressing the limitations of recent attempts to reconcile Christian and Jewish perspectives. Unlike the eschatological solution, which defers the resolution of the theological differences to an unknown future, negative Christology encourages ongoing engagement and mutual understanding in the present. It moves beyond the concept of Christ as the living Torah, which can still be seen as appropriating Jewish tradition, and instead emphasizes the shared mystery at the heart of both faiths.

Furthermore, negative Christology provides a more satisfying response than the "two parallel ways of salvation" model, which can lead to a kind of theological relativism. Instead, it acknowledges the unique claims of both Christianity and Judaism while maintaining a posture of humility and openness to each other. By reframing our understanding of the "never revoked covenant," negative Christology allows for a deeper appreciation of God's ongoing relationship with the Jewish people without diminishing the significance of Christ for the Christian faith.

However, it is crucial to understand that negative Christology is not meant to replace or negate a positive Christology. Instead, I view negative Christology as a corrective hermeneutical key for positive Christology. In this way, we see a dynamic tension that prevents our theological formulations from becoming rigid or exclusionary. This approach doesn't destroy positive Christology but enriches it, making it more responsive to the complexities of human experience and the diversity of religious perspectives. Negative Christology acts within a positive christological enterprise as a constant reminder of the limits of our understanding, encouraging a posture of humility and openness in our theological reflections and interfaith encounters.

Moreover, the interplay between negative and positive Christology can deepen Christian faith by making it more vulnerable and authentic. Just as Christ made himself vulnerable to the world through the Incarnation, embracing negative Christology allows believers to acknowledge their own uncertainties and limitations when incarnating faith into life. This vulnerability, far from weakening faith, strengthens it by grounding it in an honest engagement with doubt and mystery. It fosters a more resilient faith in the face of challenges and is more capable of meaningful dialogue with others.

In Jewish-Christian relations, negative Christology provides a framework for respectful engagement that honors the integrity of both traditions. It allows Christians to maintain their core beliefs about Christ—including the Trinity and the

Incarnation—while remaining genuinely open to the enduring validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people. This approach creates space for authentic dialogue where both parties can learn from each other without feeling threatened or compromised in their own faith commitments.

Negative Christology's promise extends beyond resolving theoretical theological problems. It offers resources for healing historical wounds, building mutual understanding, and discovering shared wisdom for facing contemporary challenges. As Jews and Christians together confront issues of justice, peace, and human dignity in our world, negative Christology provides a framework for collaboration that honors difference while seeking common ground.

Ultimately, negative Christology invites both Christians and Jews into a shared posture of humility before the divine mystery that both communities serve. It suggests that our highest theological task may not be solving the "problem" of religious difference but learning to live creatively and faithfully within the tension of our distinct yet related witnesses to the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God whom Christians also know in Jesus Christ, even as that knowing remains shrouded in holy mystery.