



Biblical studies and contemporary anti-Semitism

The focus of this year's Day of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue

Lisa Palmieri-Billig* | 01.02.2018

Ever since 1970, January 17 has been observed as the annual "Day for deepening and developing the dialogue between Catholics and Jews" (approfondimento e sviluppo del dialogo tra cattolici ed ebrei). On this day, Catholic Churches and institutions all over Italy organize encounters with Jewish representatives.

The first public dialogue 29 years ago focused, appropriately, on "The Jewish roots of the Christian faith and the necessity for dialogue (la radice ebraica della fede Cristiana e la necessità del dialogo)." This month, after ten consecutive years of exploring Cristian and Jewish interpretations of the Ten Commandments, the theme was on **Catholic and Jewish interpretations of the "Book of Lamentations"** called "Ekha" – meaning "Why?" in Hebrew. It is one of five "Meghillot" or Scrolls and is considered part of a genre of Jewish literature known through the centuries as "Kinot" or "Lamentations, elegies, dirges", as explained by Rome's Chief Rabbi, Dr. Riccardo Di Segni in his speech at the Pontifical Lateran University's commemoration of this Day. "Ekha", according to more modern interpretations, concerns theodicy, or a theological and philosophical meditation on the everlasting question of why a good God permits evil and suffering in this world.

Jerusalem itself is the subject of The Book of Lamentations. Ekha is an outcry of deep sorrow and mourning for the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. followed by the exile of the Jewish People, and of the Second Temple, 5 centuries later, in 70 C.E. The text is read as liturgy on the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, a recurrence referred to as "'Tisha B'Av" or "The 9th of Av".

At the Pontifical Lateran University, Rabbi Di Segni illustrated the observance of this day of mourning with images of prayers in candlelight and packed synagogues. According to Di Segni, this day of fasting and prayers continues to reflect the enduring centrality of Jerusalem to the Jewish psyche, while mourning is extended to include the tragedy of the Shoah and other massacres in Jewish history including pogroms, the Crusades, the 1492 expulsion of Jews in Spain, etc..

He pointed out that part of the significance of this text to Catholic-Jewish understanding lies in a sentence that is very similar to a well known quote from the Christian Gospels. It states that a man afflicted with misfortune should "...offer his cheek to him who is striking it..." (vv. 28-30.) These words bear an amazing affinity to the Gospel's recommendation (Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29) to "turn/offer your other cheek to him who is striking you". Similar statements can also be found in other, even more ancient parts of the Hebrew Bible such as in Isaiah (50:6): "I offered my back to him who was striking me and my cheeks to him who was scratching them; I did not hide my face from shame and insult."

Replying to a question after his speech at the Lateranense (Pontifical Lateran University) regarding what main elements separate Christianity from Judaism, Rabbi Di Segni stated that **the most unsurmountable obstacle for Jews is the Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ and all the religious practices that follow from this article of faith.**

As Bishop Pierre Duprey, a pioneer of the Christian - Jewish dialogue once said, **"Our two religions are both separated and united by Jesus the Jew"** - a paradox that gave rise to persecutions and hate-filled anti-Semitism throughout the centuries. Today, says Bishop Ambrogio Spreafico,

President of the Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, reciprocal attention to dialogue and study as recommended by the Ecumenical Council is **“fundamental, not only to our (Christian) relationship with Judaism but also to the very understanding of our faith in Jesus of Nazareth who was Jewish in all respects.”**

Recalling the 1965 Vatican II document “Nostra Aetate”, the basis of the transformed relationship between Catholics and Jews that aimed at eradicating anti-Semitism in all its forms, Bishop Spreafico stated, **“Anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish prejudice which today is often linked to anti-Zionism, is by no means dead.”** To illustrate his point, he reported that a recent survey recorded 382,000 antisemitic posts every 83 seconds on the web. “I don’t think that those who posted them are all atheists!” he concluded.

The Christian perspectives on “The Book of Lamentations”, were presented among others, by two outstanding Catholic leaders of the Christian-Jewish dialogue: Piero Stefani, President of SAE (Secretariat for Ecumenical Activities) whose reflections, together with those of Rabbi Di Segni, are contained in the CEI (Italian Episcopal Conference) booklet distributed as a guide to this year’s celebrations, and the Biblical scholar, Maria Brutti who spoke alongside Di Segni at the Pontifical Lateran University event.

They pointed out how this liturgy has recently been used by Catholics in mourning services for different contemporary world tragedies, and that the sophisticated literary syntax of the document (also noted by Rabbi Di Segni) with the 22 letters of the Hebrew language used to introduce each of the 22 chapters, is an effective vehicle for expression of an otherwise inexpressible intensity of suffering. Sadly however, the Book of Lamentations has also been manipulated by churches for centuries to promote Christian anti-Semitism by interpreting it falsely as a document of Substitution Theology.

An overview of landmarks in the 53 years since Nostra Aetate including the papal visits to Rome’s main synagogue and to Israel by John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, the publishing of fundamental documents by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, was presented by Fr. Norbert Hofmann (Secretary of the Commission) in his editorial for “L’Osservatore Romano.” Other birds eye glimpses over the past half century were offered by Prof. Giuseppe Pulcinelli (Rome Diocesan Director for Relations with Jews) during a discussion introduced by Msgr. Marco Gnani (delegate of the Diocese Office for Ecumenism) moderated by Prof. Felix Korner at the Cardinal Bea Center for Judaic Studies of the Pontifical Gregorian University, with Prof. David Meghnagi (Director of the International Masters program in Shoah Education of Rome Three University.) While acknowledging the great progress made in the past decades, Prof. Meghnagi also **pointed to areas still evidencing anti-Semitic prejudice, such as the failure of Catholic “Holy Land” pilgrimages to include visits to Jewish Holy Sites, and Vatican diplomacy’s silence regarding the recent UNESCO motion that referred to these sites only by their Muslim names, thus obliterating their significance to the Jewish religion and heritage.**

“Between Jerusalem and Rome. Reflections on 50 Years of Nostra Aetate” – a declaration signed by the most prominent orthodox rabbis of Israel, the U.S. and Europe and the associations they represent (Israel’s Chief Rabbinate, the Rabbinical Council of America and the Conference of European Rabbis) received high attention. Drafted in 2015, it was presented to Pope Francis by a representative Jewish Orthodox delegation on August 31, 2017. Although other significant Jewish declarations on interreligious dialogue, including one signed by different Orthodox rabbis, had preceded that of last summer, they failed to create the same profound impact. The difference lies in the achievement of unanimous approval by the world’s most authoritative international Orthodox Jewish leaders.

The document includes reference to the two millennia of “teaching of contempt” by Christians, but also recognizes the fundamental steps towards reconciliation and atonement taken by the Catholic

Church in the past half century. Hopes are expressed that in consideration of our common heritage of moral values, we can join forces to work towards a better future...

Bishop Ambrogio Spreafico, in his eloquent introduction to the Italian Episcopal Conference's guide to this year's Day of Dialogue, emphasizes two aspects of 'Between Rome and Jerusalem': a Jewish commitment to make the Church's new attitude towards Jews and Judaism better known within Jewish communities and a Catholic commitment to more effective circulation of the Church's documents on dialogue with Judaism so that "antisemitism and antizionism be definitively banished from its theology, from teaching, prayer and also in the daily life and language used by the Catholic faithful."

"The hope", concluded Spreafico, "is that all, exegetes and theologians, catechists and teachers of the Catholic religion, priests and individual members of the laity, promote greater knowledge of what the Catholic Church has produced in these 50 years, because without mutual knowledge there can be no dialogue and without dialogue coexistence becomes difficult if not impossible. Dialogue is the only path to peace."

Editorial remarks

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