

# STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

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## “After 40 Years, *Nostra Aetate*’s Christological Implications”

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## 1. Statements in *Nostra Aetate* on the Christology of the Cross and of the Incarnation

If you go back from the present-day Christological discussion in the context of Christian-Jewish dialogue to the text of the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, §4, you might be surprised at how brief the Christological statements in this text are. Its ecclesiastical orientation is stronger. And yet, Christology is central to *Nostra Aetate*, §4. Thus, the basic ecclesiological tendency is anchored in Christology. *Nostra Aetate* reminds the reader: "Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself (cf. Eph 2:14-16)." Immediately after this central statement of a Christology of the cross, there is one on Christ's Incarnation: "The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: '...theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh' (Rom 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary." This reference to a Christology of the Incarnation has its own place in the history of how *Nostra Aetate* has been theologically effective. But in *Nostra Aetate* itself the other Christological statements are in the area of a Christology of the cross, as, for example, when it says a few sentences further on: "True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. Jn 19:6); still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today." And the Council's very important lament over all hostile manifestations against Jews is again grounded in a Christology of the cross: "Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-

embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows."<sup>1</sup>

*Nostra Aetate's* statements as regards a Christology of the cross have played an important role in the proclamation of the Council document within the Church, and thus also in its exhortatory reception.<sup>2</sup> However, in discussing the topic of Christology, Catholic-Jewish dialogue since the Council has found the most remarkable statements in its Christology of the Incarnation. Along with that, there have also been discussions around aspects of a messianic Christology.

## 2. The Question around Jesus Christ as Messiah

The deepest difference in faith becomes apparent when faced with the strongest link between Christians and Jews. The Christian belief in Jesus Christ, according to which the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is not only the promised Messiah, but over and beyond that, is affirmed and proclaimed as the Son of God, equal to God, seems to many Jews to be something radically un-Jewish. ...The Christian must understand this, even though he himself

<sup>1</sup> Vatican Council II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), October 28, 1965; [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html). German: "Zweites Vatikanisches Konzil, Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen 'Nostra aetate' vom 28. Oktober 1965," in *Die Kirchen und das Judentum*. Band I: *Dokumente von 1945 bis 1985*, eds. Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Hermann Henrix, eds., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Paderborn-München: Bonifatius – Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001 [hereafter: *KuJ* I]), 39-44, 42f.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. documents in *KuJ* I: 48-53, 54f., 65, 78, 101, 121, 135, 152, 167, 172, 277 and more.

sees in the dignity of Jesus as Son of God no contradiction to monotheism.<sup>3</sup>

This is how, in their 1980 declaration on the relationship of the Church to Judaism, the German bishops described the link of communion between Judaism and Christianity and its opposite where Christian faith in Jesus Christ is concerned. In so doing, they gave two titles to Jesus Christ: Messiah and Son of God.

Christian-Jewish disagreement centers on these two Christological titles, though they do not have equal weight. The difference in the understanding of the Incarnation is more fundamental because of the varying weight given to the messianic theme in the Jewish and Christian traditions. But theology and dialogue nevertheless do deal with the theme of the Messiah.

#### A. The Theme of the Messiah in Theology and Dialogue

During the first two decades after *Nostra Aetate*, one could get the impression that people were shying away from the theme of the Messiah both in Christian theology and in Christian-Jewish dialogue. Aside from work done by exegetes who were interested in history, hardly anyone dealt with the topic. It is surprising to see that this has changed over the past two decades. We can even speak of a boom in topics around the Messiah and Messianism. An international Jewish-Christian discussion is taking place. Here, we have to be content with only a few observations.

With his book, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism*, the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner in 1984 reopened the discussion in the United

<sup>3</sup> Die Deutschen Bischöfe, "Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zum Judentum vom" in *KuJl* (April 28, 1980): 260-280, 275.

States. Three years later he co-edited an extensive anthology published under the surprising title, *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*. Coming from various starting points, Jewish and Christian authors drew a highly diverse and disunited picture of Judaism, starting in about 180 BCE until 70 CE. They ended up with historical reconstructions that have consequences for theological understandings: a unified Judaism that was recognized as normative did not exist any more than did one coherent idea or even teaching about the Messiah. The ideas concerning the Messiah were not clear enough to allow one to speak of one consistent teaching on the Messiah. There were also forms of Judaism that did not have any messianic ideas. Because of this vague result, it was also not possible to come to a more clear idea of expectations, hopes and models that would have culminated in a messianic understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. With all their various individual positions, the North American Jewish and Christian authors generally agree that they do not see the Jewish expectations of a messianic nature at that time converging on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the European context, a comparable intensive discussion of Jewish messianic hope and Christian belief in Christ followed soon after.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Jacob Neusner, Jonathan Smith, William S. Green, and Ernest Frerichs, eds., *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Jürgen Moltmann, *Der Weg Jesu Christi: Christologie in messianischen Dimensionen* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1989); *Concilium* 29 (1993) Heft 1: Themenheft "Messias und Messianismus"; E. Stegemann, ed., *Messias-Vorstellungen bei Juden und Christen* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1993); *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 8 (1993) Der Messias; Clemens Thoma, *Das Messiasprojekt: Theologie Jüdisch-Christlicher Begegnung* (Augsburg: Pattloch, 1994); N. P. Levinson, *Der Messias* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1994); K. Kjaer-Hansen, ed., *Tod eines Messias: Messiasgestalten und Messiaserwartungen im*

## B. "Jewish Messianic Expectation is Not in Vain" – A Weighty Theological Note in an Official Document

So present-day Christian theology is no longer shying away from the Messiah. This is also true as regards the important May 24, 2001 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. The Commission speaks of what is messianic in the belief in Christ in a way which provokes both theology and Christian-Jewish dialogue to deepen their reflection on the messianic theme. The document contains statements and passages that make one sit up and listen. These include its basic thesis, that the Old Testament is indispensable for Christianity because it is in itself of "tremendous value": "The Old Testament in itself has great value as the Word of God" (§21). The assertion that there exists a Jewish and a Christian Tradition of interpreting and of reading the Old Testament, neither of which has the right to challenge that of the other, also causes one to sit up and listen. In this context, there is one statement that is one of the most exciting statements of the past few years: "Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain" (§ 21).<sup>5</sup>

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*Judentum, Neuhausen* (Stuttgart: Haenssler, 1996); Daniel Cohn-Sherbok, *The Jewish Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997); R. Mayer, *Was Jesus der Messias? Die Geschichte der Messiasse Israels in drei Jahrtausenden* (Tübingen: Bilam, 1998); Oskar Skarsaune, "Altkirchliche Christologie - jüdisch/unjüdisch?" *EvTh* 59 (1999): 267-285; J. Ebach, "Messianismus und Utopie" *Kirche und Israel* 15 (2000) 68-85; H.-J. Fabry and K. Scholtissek, *Der Messias: Perspektiven des Alten und Neuen Testaments* [Die Neue Echter Bibel – Themen 5], (Würzburg: Echter, 2002); Hans Hermann Henrix, *Judentum und Christentum: Gemeinschaft wider Willen?* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2004), 134-156.

<sup>5</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, May 24, 2001, at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_200212\\_popolo-ebraico\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_200212_popolo-ebraico_en.html). On the German discussion, see e.g.: Chr. Dohmen (Hg.), "Das jüdische Volk und seine Heilige Schrift in der

According to this document issued with the approval of the president of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Jewish messianic expectation not only has its objective, it also has its reason, its meaning, its authority, and its relevance as not being in vain. Jewish messianic expectation is viewed very positively by the Church. In view of the history of theology, that is extraordinary.

The statement certainly has the messianic expectation of the Old Testament in mind, but ultimately it aims at the post-biblical messianic expectation of the Jewish people. For immediately after the sentence just quoted, the text continues: "It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation" (§21). In the expression, "Like them, we too," Jews and Christians are seen as contemporaries. The Commission's document has its eye on the post-biblical, current, present and contemporary expectations of Jews and Christians.

By reaching this clarity, one of the document's basic goals is realized: it does not only reflect on the Sacred Scripture of the Jewish people (the "Old Testament") and on the Christian Bible (as the unity of the Old and the New Testament) in their historical relationship to one another – as literary texts that became normative when the formation of the canon was completed – but also on literary texts that are read by individuals and their communities. To a large extent, Jews and Christians read the same text, but in their "looking back," they discover emphases and aspects that the others had not read and understood in the same way. There is a closer relationship between the text and the reading community than is generally perceived, and a dimension of

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christlichen Bibel" in *Eingebunden in das Volk Gottes: Blickpunkte zum Dokument* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2003).

meaning develops that is not present at the level of the text taken by itself. Therefore, the document also speaks of post-biblical Jewish and Christian understandings, interpretations or “ways of reading” the Bible as complementing one another: on the one hand, the Jewish interpretation of the Jewish Bible made up of Torah, Prophets and Writings, on the other hand, the Christian interpretation of the Christian Bible made up of the Old and the New Testament. For in the following paragraph the document says:

Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion. Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible (§22).

Jewish messianic expectation, which the document portrays as not being in vain, is part of this Jewish way of reading, which developed parallel to the Christian history of interpretation. The Jewish way of reading or its tradition of commenting is not a digression or distortion of an original meaning, but rather a possibility that develops organically out of Israel’s Bible. Possibility suggests plausibility, appropriateness and legitimacy. However, still more is said about the Jewish way of reading: it is not a random commenting on biblical grounds, but rather the fruit and expression of a faith that responds positively to the biblical revelation. All this is true of Jewish messianic expectation as it is to be found in rabbinic writings, and in later commentaries and traditions.

This positive characterization recognizes very clearly that the Jewish people with its own messianic expectation say ‘No’ to the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth. For in the same §22,

the document gives a negative answer to its own question as to whether, after the Shoah, Christians have to read the Jewish Bible “like the Jews.” It gives conclusive reasons for this: “For to read the Bible as Judaism does necessarily involves an implicit acceptance of all its presuppositions, that is, the full acceptance of what Judaism is, in particular, the authority of its writings and rabbinic traditions, which exclude faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God” (§22). In plain speech that means that the Jews do not believe in the Messiah Jesus. But how can Christians then think positively of the Jewish messianic expectation? Are we dealing here with a Christian contradiction? The tension is obvious. The document seems to offer something to lessen this tension when it states: “Like them, we too live in expectation,” and it immediately adds the sentence: “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). So the lessening of the tension consists in the fact that present Jewish messianic expectation excludes faith in Jesus as Messiah, but in the *parousia* when the Lord comes again, their ‘No’ will be overcome and they will come to acknowledge the One who is returning. Here, the tension seems to be limited. But this raises a problem which theology must reflect upon.

For the Pontifical Biblical Commission, it is very clear that the rabbinic writings and the later Jewish traditions firmly exclude until the present “faith in Jesus as Messiah” (cf. §22). The document does not take away this tension when it explicitly states its Christological understanding and repeatedly develops it messianically, especially in the section on “The son and successor of David” (§62-64). However, it does not increase the tension in the messianic-Christological understanding in such a way as to speak of a fundamental Christian-Jewish difference from which all other differences spring. It is acquainted with the fact that in Jewish understanding, messianic expectation does not rate

as the fundamental key to understanding: “Although messianic hope continued to be part of the traditions of Judaism, it did not appear in all currents as a central and integral theme, even as a special indicator” (§62). In contrast to this, the New Testament and with it the Church fundamentally and essentially recognizes “in Jesus of Nazareth the promised Messiah, awaited by Israel (and by the whole of humanity): it is he, therefore, who fulfils the promise” (§63). Since messianic expectation is not as fundamental and essential for Judaism as it is for Christianity, we are faced here with an imbalance, an asymmetry in the Christian-Jewish relationship: on the one hand, the fundamental and essential Christian belief in the Messiah, and on the other hand, the messianic expectation that is not seen by all Jews as being central. Nevertheless, there is a Jewish messianic expectation. And of this the document says: “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain.” The document knows of the tension between the Church’s belief in Christ and the Jewish messianic expectation. It does not fail to recognize the nature of the contradiction. It is clearly the task of theological discussion to continue reflecting on this tension.

### C. The Issue of the Messiah in Historical Comparison and Theological Reflection

The sentence, “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain” is a direct contradiction of a thesis that was repeated for centuries in Christian theology and proclamation. Christian-Jewish confrontation persistently dealt with the Messiah topic. Ever new efforts were made to point out to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah who was promised in Israel’s Bible. The only explanation for the lack of success in these efforts was that the Jews were obstinate and stubborn. That led to a progressive vilification of the Jewish messianic expectation. It was said that this expectation was not only in vain and foolish; in addition, the Messiah expected by the

Jews was understood to be the Antichrist. In the disputations of Barcelona in 1263 or Tortosa in 1413-1414, the Messiah topic became a weapon in Christian hostility towards the Jews.<sup>6</sup>

Still today, there are participants in theological discussion who hold biased positions as regards the messianic issue. There are voices that understand the Messiah merely in connection with national, political and externally assessed ideas of rescue, liberation or redemption, which only concern this world and Israel. Consequently, these people refuse to see the mission and understanding of Jesus as being messianic. In this, the Commission’s document is completely uninhibited and remains independent in face of a position which rejects the concept of Messiah as not being of the New Testament, as un-Christian and an inappropriate concept as regards Jesus, or which calls it obsolete. In contrast to historical and also present-day anti-messianic positions, the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document is marked by an openness which reckons with fuzziness, disparate or also peripheral ideas in Judaism’s messianic expectations after the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE. For these do not at all mean that there was nothing in the Old Testament to give rise to a messianic idea, which consolidated in post-biblical times. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document implies in many passages, there is in Israel’s Bible a development of the messianic idea, which gradually became more differentiated.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans Hermann Henrix, *Judentum und Christentum*, 21-82; St. Heid, “Frühjüdische Messianologie in Justin’s ‘Dialog’,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 8 (1993): 219-238; Günter Stemberger, “Die Messiasfrage in den Christlich-Jüdischen Disputationen des Mittelalters,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 8 (1993): 239-250.

In analyzing and evaluating these developments, a theologian and scholar in the area of Judaism like Clemens Thoma from Luzerne comes to the conclusion: If during the Second Temple period the idea of the Messiah developed in a very complex process towards ...

... a figure sent to Israel by God during the decisive time for the definitive future, having varying royal, priestly and prophetic characteristics, then this also has consequences for how one speaks about the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth. Since before the New Testament there was no *typical* Messiah in all of early Judaism, it is also not possible to say that Jesus was an *untypical* Messiah. At most one can say that he was a Messiah who had not yet been designed in this concrete way... The New Testament's belief in a Messiah is a specific form of early Jewish messianism.<sup>7</sup>

The PBC document outlines this as follows:

Christian faith recognizes the fulfillment, in Christ, of the Scriptures and the hopes of Israel, but it does not understand this fulfillment as a literal one... In the mystery of Christ crucified and risen, fulfillment is brought about in a manner unforeseen... Jesus is not confined to playing an already fixed role – that of Messiah – but he confers, on the notions of Messiah and salvation, a fullness which could not have been imagined in advance; he fills them with a new reality... The messiahship of Jesus has a meaning that is new and original (§21).

As regards the messianic texts in the Old Testament, there is “prefiguration and dissimilarity” (§21) or “a fullness of meaning that could not be hitherto perceived” (§64).

<sup>7</sup> Clemens Thoma, *Das Messiasprojekt*, 134.

A fulfillment of expectations which contains not only corresponding elements but also ones that are unpredictable, that could not be guessed before, that give an incredibly new meaning – such a fulfillment does not give any right to demand belief as an inevitable consequence of the expectations. Of course that is said with a view to history, during which Christians again and again made such demands of Jews. Present-day Christian theology, which tries to uncover the messianic contents of belief in Christ in accord with the Commission's document, must keep in mind the terrible history of Christian hostility towards the Jews, during which the concept of the Messiah became a weapon. A Christian theology that is aware of the historical burden may then say:

A continuation of the Christian proceedings, in which Israel is “accused” of unbelief, when ... the impossibility of being Jewish and as such of accepting to think of Jesus as the Messiah is excluded. Christian theology must come to terms with the fact that the Messiah Jesus does not make demands of the Jewish powers of imagination, but rather it demands that Christians prove this by the Spirit and power... This together moves us to think of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, as a hope which we owe to Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Is there a bridge between Christian belief in Christ and Jewish messianic expectation? Jewish-Christian consensus cannot be demanded. The Christian should hear with respect the Jewish hope, which reckons with a coming Messiah. But over and beyond that, can he/she also come to a relationship that appreciates this Jewish messianic expectation, even if it includes a ‘no’ to Jesus Christ? The

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Das Christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus, dem Juden: Eine Christologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1991), 2: 217.

Pontifical Biblical Commission's document answers this affirmatively because it sees the Church of God in proximity to the Jewish people. Should the fact that God's covenant with Israel has never been revoked (cf. §42), that God's love for Israel continues (cf. §31-32), that God's fidelity to the election of Israel is irrevocable (cf. §33-36), as well as Jewish fidelity to God's covenant and the Jewish love for the divine Name, of which the great prayer of intercession in the Catholic Good Friday liturgy speaks,<sup>9</sup> not bear its own weight, also in view of Jewish messianic expectation? Is the Jewish messianic expectation not blessed by the God of Israel? In accord with the total orientation of the Commission's document, we will want and will be able to answer these questions affirmatively. God's gifts to Israel continue to bring salvation to Israel; the Jewish messianic expectation is blessed by God.

However, the Pontifical Biblical Commission does link its positive acknowledgment of the Jewish messianic expectation to the hope that this expectation will overcome its 'no' to Jesus as Messiah in the *parousia* and will come to acknowledge the returning Christ. In the tension between present-day Jewish messianic expectation and Christian belief in Christ, is it allowed for theological opinion to go further and ask: could it be that the possibility of a pluriformity or polarity of truth is speaking here – for example in the sense of Ps 62:12: "One thing God said; these two things which I heard..."? Do our questions place us in a tension already within our Christian faith and hope? And would this tension consist in the fact that Christian faith holds on to the messianic return of Jesus Christ and at the same time acknowledges positively the Jewish messianic expectation? The Christian is not waiting for anyone other than Jesus Christ who will return, and at the same time he/she respects the Jewish messianic expectation as an act

of fidelity to the God of Israel. In this way, the undenied faith in Christ does not see God's blessing as simply turning away from the Jewish messianic expectation when, with its 'no' to Jesus Christ, it protests against the experience and suffering of an unredeemed world. Do we have to place the solution of this tension into the mystery of God's plan of salvation? There exist questions of faith which cannot be answered conclusively and simply; at times they lead to a duality of attempts at answering, the tension and opposition of which cannot be mediated or solved. Clearly, the Christ-Messiah issue is one such question.

### 3. No Incarnation in Judaism? On the Christian-Jewish Difference and Proximity in Faith in the Incarnation of the Son of God

It has been noted: messianic expectation is not as fundamental and essential to Judaism as it is to Christianity. Because of the different weights given to the messianic issue in the two traditions, it is not surprising that the central disagreement in the Jewish-Christian dialogue of our time does not lie in the title of Messiah, but rather in Jesus Christ's other title, that of Son of God, and with that the question regarding God in the narrower sense. Christian-Jewish disagreement is centered on the understanding of God and more specifically on the theme of Incarnation, the Incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, the Orthodox Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod said: "The most difficult outstanding issues between Judaism and Christianity are the divinity of Jesus, the Incarnation, the Trinity, three terms which are not quite synonymous but all of which assert that Jesus was not only a human being but also

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *KuJ* I, p. 57

God. Compared to this claim, all other Christian claims, such as Jesus as the Messiah, become secondary at most.”<sup>10</sup>

#### A. Jewish Criticism of the “Idea” of Incarnation and Its Nuances

Present-day Christian-Jewish dialogue, which has progressed to the issues around God and the Incarnation, has given rise to various Jewish responses without softening the severity of the dissent. Several arguments and ways of thinking can be distinguished in the Jewish objection against the Incarnation of the Son of God. One important objection is on the level of (religious) philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas, coming from the specific premises of his philosophy as well as from his understanding of revelation, looked at the value of the “idea” of the Incarnation (of the Son) of God and thought: God’s presence in the world’s time would be “too much” for God’s poverty and “too little” for his glory, without which his poverty is no abasement. The Jewish philosopher denies that God in his duration can become a “presence” in time and in the world. He holds on to God remaining “Otherness that cannot be assimilated, absolute difference to everything that manifests itself.” Consequently, he speaks of “God’s original priority or original ultimate validity as regards the world, which cannot receive and shelter him;” thus he

“cannot... become incarnate,” cannot “enclose himself in an end, a goal.”<sup>11</sup>

Taking another approach, Jean-François Lyotard sees the teaching of the Incarnation as turning God’s transcendence into an object and as a destruction of the prohibition to make images. When the Word has become clear and distinguishable “in God become man,” God’s being God is made harmless; one no longer has to listen for the “voice” in a constant search, and instead one has given space to the seeing of an image.”<sup>12</sup>

Another critique argues *a posteriori*: Judaism cannot accept the Incarnation of the Son of God because it does not hear this story, because the Word of God as it is heard in Judaism does not tell this story and because Jewish faith does not testify to it.<sup>13</sup> So from the point of view of Tradition, the Incarnation is not a Jewish topic of discussion. That is why, already in the 1930’s, Martin Buber spoke of the absence of God’s incarnation as being something specifically Jewish: “The absence of an incarnation of the God who reveals himself to the ‘flesh’ and who is present to it in a reciprocal relationship” is “what ultimately separates Judaism and Christianity. We ‘unify’ God by professing his

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise. Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, R. Kendall Soulen, ed. (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 166; Michael Wyschogrod, “Inkarnation aus Jüdischer Sicht” *EvTh* 55 (1995): 13-28, 15; Eugene B. Borowitz, *Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980), 31ff; Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Das Christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus*, 1991; J. Kirchberg, *Theologie in der Anrede als Weg zur Verständigung zwischen Juden und Christen* (Innsbruck/Wien: Tyrolia, 1991).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, “Menschwerdung Gottes?,” in *Zwischen uns. Versuche über das Denken an den Anderen* [Translated from the French by Frank Miething] (Wien: Carl Hanser, 1995), 73-82, 77ff.

<sup>12</sup>Jean-François Lyotard and E. Gruber, *Ein Bindestrich: Zwischen “Jüdischem” und “Christlichem”* (Düsseldorf: Parerga, 1995).

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Michael Wyschogrod, “Warum war und ist Karl Barths Theologie für einen jüdischen Theologen von Interesse?” *Evangelische Theologie* 34 (1974): 222-236, 226; Michael Wyschogrod, *Gott und Volk Israel: Dimensionen Jüdischen Glaubens* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 105; J. Leibowitz mit M. Shashar, *Gespräche über Gott und die Welt* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1990), p. 74; Peter Ochs, “The God of Jews and Christians,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder/Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), 49-69, 59.

unity in our living and our dying; we do not unite ourselves to him. The God whom we believe, to whom we are given in praise, does not unite with human substance on earth.”<sup>14</sup> A final criticism argues that, as seen by Jews, the fruit of Christian belief in the Incarnation was historically bad.<sup>15</sup>

In Catholic theology, Jewish criticism of the Incarnation of the Son of God is certainly listened to attentively.<sup>16</sup> When theologians reflect on the possibilities and limits of a Christian reception of these objections, they do so not least of all with reference to the Council of Chalcedon’s (451 C.E.) understanding of Christ and to so-called Chalcedonian hermeneutics. The Council of Chalcedon saw the relationship of “humanity” and “divinity” in Christ as being not mingled and at the same time not separate: in the human countenance of Jesus of Nazareth the divine Word, the divine Son. In Jesus, what is human and what is divine are not mingled with one another and they may not be separated from one another. This conciliar guideline remains important when Christian theology tries to respond to Jewish criticism as regards the incarnation of the Son of God. The famous formula says:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ... this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten

<sup>14</sup> Martin Buber, “Die Brennpunkte der Jüdischen Seele (1930),” in *Der Jude und sein Judentum: Gesammelte Aufsätze und Reden*, Martin Buber, (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1993), 196-206, 205.

<sup>15</sup> See Clemens Thoma, *Die Theologischen Beziehungen zwischen Christentum und Judentum*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 111; Zwi Werblowsky, *Juden und Christen am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Unpublished manuscript of November 5, 1999, pp. 2-5).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. among others the anthology: J. Wohlmuth, ed., *Emmanuel Levinas – Eine Herausforderung für die Christliche Theologie*, (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998).

– in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the “properties” of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one “person” and in one “hypostasis” (DH 301f.).<sup>17</sup>

The American-Jewish document, “*Dabru Emet* [Speak Truth]: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” (2000) sparked a relevant inner-Jewish argument. The document begins its series of theses with the theocentric statement that “Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creator of heaven and earth” and that “through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.”<sup>18</sup> This thesis was welcomed by many Christians, whereas it met in part with sharp Jewish criticism.<sup>19</sup> Thus for example, the noted Orthodox scholar, David Berger, expressed the opinion that it might be customary to emphasize that Christians adore the

<sup>17</sup> Cf. <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/history/creeds.chalcedon.txt>.

<sup>18</sup> “*Dabru Emet*. A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” at: [www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-lements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/jewish/dabru\\_emet.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-lements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/jewish/dabru_emet.htm); German: Nationalprojekt jüdischer Gelehrter, “*Dabru Emet*: Eine jüdische Stellungnahme zu Christen und Christentum vom 11 Sept 2000,” in: Hans Hermann Henrix and Wolfgang Kraus (Hg.), *Die Kirchen und das Judentum*. Band II: Dokumente von 1986 bis 2000 (Paderborn/Gütersloh: Bonifatius – Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001 (in *KuJ* II), 974-976, 974.

<sup>19</sup> For an understanding of this important Jewish document see the volume of commentaries: Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al., eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (2000); as well as the contributions by Hans Hermann Henrix, Michael Signer and Leon Klenicki in *Fenster zur Welt: Fünfzig Jahre Akademiearbeit in Aachen*, ed. Hans Hermann Henrix, (Aachen: Einhard, 2003), 284-321; and R. Kampling and M. Weinrich, eds., *Dabru Emet – Redet Wahrheit: Eine jüdische Herausforderung zum Dialog mit den Christen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003).

God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, the creator of heaven and earth, but “it is essential to add that worship of Jesus of Nazareth as a manifestation or component of that God constitutes what Jewish law and theology call *avodah zarah*, or foreign worship – at least if done by a Jew.”<sup>20</sup> In adding this last part, Berger is alluding to the Talmudic position according to which “non-Jews outside of the Land of Israel are not considered to be idol worshippers. They are only staying with the customs of the fathers” (bHullin 13b). However, with that he is indirectly characterizing Christian worship of God as idol worship or foreign worship. In so doing, David Berger falls in line with a medieval Jewish position, which further developed the Talmudic understanding of Christianity and which normally forms the unspoken background for present-day Jewish contributions to the discussion around God.

During the early Middle Ages, authors within Judaism used the Hebrew concept *shittuf* to give a name to their impression that the Christian worship of Jesus Christ as equal Son of God introduced a non-divine element into God himself. Halakhically, or according to religious law, the concept *shittuf* can be understood as a term that is friendly towards Christians. With that name, the authors expressed that, from a Jewish point of view, Christianity was not idol worship or idolatry (*avodah zarah*), which would have meant that contact with its members was prohibited; rather, it was *shittuf*. As such, it was seen as introducing into God an element of mingling, by which something was joined to God, associated with God, united to God, thus obscuring the clear revelation of the one and only God.<sup>21</sup> The concept of *shittuf*

reflected Jewish uneasiness with the Incarnation (of the Son) of God, which was so impressively expressed in our day by Emmanuel Levinas. His objection should be heard in relation to the concept of *shittuf* and should be taken into consideration as regards a Christology based on “Chalcedonian hermeneutics”.

#### B. A Profile of Christian Belief in the Incarnation

When Christians say in faith, “We believe in the Incarnation, that the Son of God became flesh or became human in Jesus Christ,” they mean: we consider an event in the history of the world, that did not fall to earth like a meteorite, but that came towards us within a specific history of the world and of God with the world, that is to say, within the encounter between the people of Israel and the God of Israel, and that contributed towards forming that history. Christian faith dares to say: the event of the Incarnation of the Son of God is a fact that brought about change, not only in history, but to history itself. This is expressed in the Gospel according to John in the climactic sentence in New Testament theology: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” This double statement in John 1:14 must be taken entirely seriously: the Word’s becoming flesh is just as important as its living among us. The testimony about the Word becoming flesh says what “was already said in the testimony about God ‘pitching his tent’ and his name ‘in the midst’ of Israel. It doesn’t mean anything else, both mean the

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190, and Clemens Thoma, “Die Jüdische Liturgie und die Kirche,” in *Jüdische Liturgie: Geschichte - Struktur - Wesen* [Quaestiones Disputatae 86], ed. Hans Hermann Henrix (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), 122-136, 128ff; “Schittuf” in *Lexikon der Jüdisch-Christlichen Begegnung*, Jakob Josef Petuchowski and Clemens Thoma, (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 359-362. From a Jewish point of view, the concept of *shittuf* is discussed by: Michael Signer, “Trinity, Unity, Idolatry? Medieval and Modern Perspectives on *Shittuf*,” in *Lesarten des Jüdisch-Christlichen Dialoges. Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Clemens Thoma*, ed. Silvia Käppeli (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), 275-284.

<sup>20</sup>David Berger, “*Dabru Emet*: Some Reservations about a Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” at: <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/sites/partners/ccjr/berger02.htm>.

<sup>21</sup>For an understanding of the concept of *shittuf* see: Clemens Thoma: *Christliche Theologie des Judentums* (Aschaffenburg: Pattloch, 1978),

same thing.”<sup>22</sup> The first half of the verse says in a “Christian” way what the second half says in a “Jewish” way. During the course of the Church’s history, biblical language was transformed into other categories of speech, so that “Jewish” categories are in the end expressed “philosophically.” The belief that God, the creator of everything in heaven and on earth, descended through the Son and that his Son and Word became flesh and human, is very foreign to the Jewish understanding of God. Israel, in whose midst the event of becoming flesh and human occurred and from whose midst it went out towards the nations, did not, on the whole, speak *in this way* about God’s proximity, even though it had and has deep and intimate insights into God’s proximity. The majority of the Jewish people did not hear *this*, because the Word of God as it understood it did not tell it this.

### C. Jewish Knowledge of God’s Self-Abasement

Up to today, the Jewish people have intimate knowledge of God’s self-abasement. God’s proximity in the Exodus from Egypt and during the people’s desert wandering has become the foundational pattern for God’s presence with his people in history and its disasters. There are many testimonies that speak of divine humility, even *kenosis*, that is to say, self-abasement or self-emptying: God decided to descend down to the abasements of human beings and to live in their misery. According to medieval understanding, God’s being touched by the lot of his people goes so far that in Israel’s exile, God himself suffers exile.<sup>23</sup> However, the inseparable

<sup>22</sup> Thus in Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Das Christliche Bekenntnis zu Jesus*, 115f.

<sup>23</sup> On corresponding statements in Jewish traditional writings see: Joseph Maier, “Anthropomorphismen in der Jüdischen Gotteserfahrung,” in *Kosmische Dimensionen Religiöser Erfahrung*, ed. Walter Strolz, (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1978), 39-99; Jakob Josef Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut*, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978), 84-97; Hans Hermann Henrix, “Machtentsagung

link between the God who comes down and the God on high is characteristic: “Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, you also find his humility. This is said in the Torah, it is repeated in the Prophets, and it comes again a third time in the Writings” (bMeg 31a).<sup>24</sup> Jewish testimony to the infinite God’s presence with his people and among human beings is so rich that one can speak of more than “structural relationships in the Christian and the Jewish understanding of God.”<sup>25</sup>

As regards this Jewish-Christian relationship in professing the proximity of God, the Orthodox Jewish scholar Michael Wyschogrod did not shy away from choosing a phrase to characterize Judaism, which at first glance sounds like an antithesis to what Buber said about the “lack of incarnation”: The God of Israel is a God

... who enters into the human world and who, by so doing, does not shy away from the parameters of human existence, including spatiality. It is true that Judaism never forgets the dialectics, the transcendent God... But this transcendence remains in dialectic tension with the God who lives with Israel in its impurity (Lv 16:16), who is the Jew’s intimate companion, whether in the Temple of Solomon or in the thousands of small prayer rooms...

Gottes? Ein Gespräch mit Hans Jonas im Kontext der Theodizeefrage,” in *“Landschaft aus Schreien”: Zur Dramatik der Theodizeefrage*, ed. Johannes Baptist Metz (Mainz: Grünewald, 1995), 118-143, 124ff.

<sup>24</sup> On the exegetical as well as philosophical interpretation of this *kenotic* tradition, see: Emmanuel Levinas, “Judaisme et Kénose,” *Archivio di Filosofia* LIII (1985) No. 2-3: 13-28; and Emmanuel Levinas, “Vom Beten ohne zu bitten. Anmerkung zu einer Modalität des Jüdischen,” in *Damit die Erde menschlich bleibt. Gemeinsame Verantwortung von Juden und Christen für die Zukunft*, eds. W. Breuning and H. Heinz (Freiburg: Herder, 1985), 62-70.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Clemens Thoma, *Das Messiasprojekt*, 106ff., or Reinhard Neudecker, *Die vielen Gesichter des einen Gottes: Christen und Juden im Gespräch* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1989).

Thus, Judaism is incarnational – if we understand this concept as meaning that God enters into the human world, that he appears in certain places and lives there, so that they thereby become holy.”

According to Wyschogrod, there are no reasons “within the essence of the Jewish idea of God” that exclude *a priori* God’s “appearance in human form.” If Jews asserted this and spoke of “a logical impossibility”, “a philosophical scheme” would be set up “in place of the sovereign God.” But no “biblically oriented, responsible Jewish theology” could accept that.<sup>26</sup> According to this position, the idea of the incarnation in general is not antithetical to Judaism.<sup>27</sup>

So does this cancel the Jewish objection to the Christian belief in the incarnation? No. Rather, the Jewish objection becomes more trenchant. The reason for rejecting this belief is not a philosophical idea, but rather, what is criticized with biblically-oriented, anthropomorphic language is the fact that what befits the Jewish people as a whole in Christianity is ascribed to an individual from this people. That is where Judaism and Christianity differ. In Wyschogrod’s own words:

Christianity concretized this tendency (of God’s to enter incarnationally into the human world), it brought it to a head in one specific incarnation in such a way that the Jewish tendency towards spatiality thereby takes on a bodily form. Whereas in Judaism the dialectic between transcendence and immanence is always maintained quite clearly, the aspect of immanence is perhaps expressed more strongly in Christianity – even if we have

<sup>26</sup>Michael Wyschogrod, “Inkarnation,” 22. See also his *Gott und Volk Israel*, 21, 42, 62, 79, 91, 105, 125, 185-188.

<sup>27</sup>Picking up Wyschogrod’s thought: Elliot R. Wolfson, “Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et al, 239-254.

to keep in mind that the theology of the Trinity completes the incarnate Son with a transcendent Father.<sup>28</sup>

Even though it is explicitly acknowledged that the Christian understanding of God maintains the transcendent aspect, the point of distinction between Christianity and Judaism lies in the concentration and specification of one particular Jew. Wyschogrod brings his thought to a head: Christianity, which after the destruction of Judeo-Christianity became the Christianity of the Nations, “concentrated its attention more and more on Jesus.” In so doing, it lacked

... a central theological insight... Expressed simply, I am talking about the axiom that God chose the Jewish people as a whole, and that, even though he called prophets, kings, saviors and priests from among his people... they were all significant only inasmuch as they came from Israel and returned to Israel as members of the nation that God had chosen and to which he had sworn that he would not reject it. If we take the Hebrew Bible seriously, there can be no individual, no matter how important and prominent he might be, whose relationship with God is one-sided, meaning that the people of Israel is not the decisive purpose served by this relationship.<sup>29</sup>

When Christians attribute to the one Son of the Jewish people that which Jews believe to be the incarnational destiny of the whole people in the sense of being called to serve as the place of God’s indwelling, this is not accepted by Jews nor is it acceptable to them. Jewish speaking about an incarnational dimension could at first glance considerably diminish the significance of the difference between Judaism and Christianity. “Nevertheless, the difference remains

<sup>28</sup>Michael Wyschogrod, “Inkarnation,” 22ff.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 24ff.

significant; perhaps it becomes even more significant than it was before."<sup>30</sup>

Among the Jews involved in present-day dialogue, Wyschogrod is the person who most noticeably takes the incarnational thinking in Christian theology seriously and tries to make it fruitful for his own understanding. He does not want to stop at the disagreement.

Perhaps I have the urge to find meaning in this fight that has lasted for almost two thousand years, and that this has made me tackle this mystery anew over and over again with the goal of understanding it better, of diminishing its naked reality, yes, almost even its arbitrariness. In so doing, what drives me is probably first of all the feeling that Christianity is in a certain sense a part of greater Judaism. For Judaism, Christianity is not simply another religion. If it were, Judaism would be indifferent to Christianity's teaching of the incarnation, or this fact would at least not be so important. But as it is, because Christianity is in a certain sense the Judaism of the pagans, the teaching of the incarnation is very important.<sup>31</sup>

Here, at the center of the Jewish-Christian dissent regarding the question of God, we stand before the dialectic of difference and proximity as described by a Jew.<sup>32</sup>

#### D. A Christian Attempt to Respond to the Jewish Perspective and an Alternative Understanding

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>32</sup> On the idea of the incarnational in present-day Jewish discussion, see: Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Judaisms and Incarnational Theologies: Mapping out the Parameters of Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 39 (2002): 219-247.

What can a Christian say in response to Jewish criticism of the Christian belief in the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ and to the Jewish incarnational self-understanding? The answer will not be philosophical but theological. We can begin with what Wyschogrod said. It was not the victory of a philosophical idea, but rather the free decision of the sovereign God of Israel to take up his dwelling in the one Son of the Jewish people, Jesus of Nazareth, in such a way that we can no longer speak of God without including his relationship to this Son, and in naming God's taking up of his abode, we cannot come up with a better concept than that the Word or the Son of God became flesh. Here we should again remember the double statement in Jn 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." According to Johannine understanding, the testimony concerning the Word that was made flesh says the same as the testimony regarding God's living in Israel. This was the testimony given from the midst of Israel to the Christians from among the Nations, as the free deed of the God of Israel to the Son of the Jewish people, Jesus of Nazareth.

In view of Levinas' statement that the Incarnation is too much for God's poverty and too little for God's glory, the Christian answer consists in the simple and philosophically defenseless counter question: but what if the God of Israel was pleased to enter into a proximity, which in fact does seem to be too much for divine poverty, and to dare a presence that seems to be too little for God's glory, without which his poverty is no abasement? That this is how it is, is what Christian belief consists of. If we reflect on this responsibly, it prohibits any triumphalism, as for example the claim that our counter question expresses the better belief as compared to the Jewish one, or the greater hope or deeper love over against that of the Jews. Whether or not it is, all that will be seen at the end of our lives – or for all of us at the end of history – when our faith will be weighed by the Lord of history. May our faith not be timid but humble,

without claiming to be better, without being polemical towards another faith.

Levinas' critical interjection against the idea of "a God man" is part of the uneasiness that found expression in the Middle Ages in the concept of *shittuf*. This concept arose out of the impression that Christian worship of Jesus Christ as the equal Son of God introduced an element of mingling into God himself. Michael Wyschogrod expressed the Jewish concern when he said:

There is a good reason for the severity of the Jewish rejection of the incarnation. No matter how close God comes to humankind in the Hebrew Bible, no matter how much God is included in human hopes and fears, he still remains the eternal judge of the human being, whose nature is to be in the image of God (cf. Gn 1:26f.), but who may not be mingled with God... In the light of this, the statement that a human being was God can only give rise to most profound concern in the Jewish soul.<sup>33</sup>

Christian theology will not be able to satisfy this Jewish criticism and concern. But it can develop a sensitivity towards it by not interpreting the relationship between the human and the divine natures in Jesus Christ with concepts expressing mingling, fusion and symbiosis.

It seems to me that the application of the idea of *shittuf* expresses an insight of faith that in fact touches on the insight of faith professed by the Council of Chalcedon when it emphasized the one and same Christ "in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other," and that the Council

<sup>33</sup>Michael Wyschogrod, "Ein Neues Stadium im Jüdisch-Christlichen Dialog," *Freiburger Rundbrief* 34 (1982): 22-26, 26; Michael Wyschogrod, "Christologie ohne Antijudaismus?" *Kirche und Israel* 7 (1992): 6-9.

then reinforced by adding: "The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union" (DH 302). In Walter Cardinal Kasper's Christology, which Pope John Paul II held in very great esteem, Kasper emphasized that Chalcedon unambiguously held on to the statement "that God and man do not form a natural symbiosis. In the Incarnation, God does not become a principle within the world; he is neither made into a spatial reality nor into one of time. God's transcendence is upheld as much as is the human person's independence and freedom."<sup>34</sup> Chalcedon expressed a sensitivity that does not do away with the Jewish concern, but that does indicate something that is objectively related: it does not mean some being in between that is formed by mingling the divine and the human, but rather, the one and same Christ "in two natures that are not mingled."

#### E. The Incarnation of the Son of God as Becoming a Jew

Michael Wyschogrod connected his comments against the Christian understanding of the Incarnation with the demand that Jesus not be separated from the Jewish people. In fact, that did happen often enough and it still happens when the Incarnation is spoken of in a way that makes the Son of God in Jesus Christ into a "human being *in abstracto*, in general and in a neutral way." The Son of God, God's Word, became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth; he did not become a human being *in abstracto*, in general or in a neutral way. Rather, he became Jewish flesh, a Jew, the son of a Jewish mother, and as *such* he became a human being concretely. *Nostra Aetate*, §4 indicated this when it recalled the words of Paul "about his kinsmen: '... from them is the Christ according to the flesh'..., the Son of the Virgin Mary." This implicitly makes a theological statement: the Incarnation of the Word, of the Son of God occurred in his

<sup>34</sup>Walter Kasper, *Jesus der Christus*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Mainz: Grünewald, 1981), 280.

becoming a Jew. “That is anything but ‘a provision in passing and by chance.’”<sup>35</sup> The fact that the Son of God became a Jew is a foundational fact in Christian theology. Theology is only gradually coming to the recognition that the concreteness of the Incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ has to be taken seriously.

Over the last two decades, statements by the magisterium have spoken of this. Thus the Vatican’s *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* of June 24, 1985, begins thinking about the Jewish roots of Christianity with a Christological reflection:

Jesus was and always remained a Jew, his ministry was deliberately limited ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (*Mt* 15:24). Jesus is fully a man of his time, and of his environment – the Jewish Palestinian one of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared. This cannot but underline both the reality of the Incarnation and the very meaning of the history of salvation, as it has been revealed in the Bible (cf. *Rom* 1:3-4; *Gal* 4:4-5)... Thus the Son of God is incarnate in a people and a human family (cf. *Gal* 4:4; *Rom* 9:5). This takes away nothing, quite the contrary, from the fact that he was born for all men (Jewish shepherds and pagan wise men are found at his crib: *Lk* 2:8-20; *Mt* 2:1-12) and died for all men (at the foot of the cross there are Jews, among them

Mary and John: *Jn* 19:25-27, and pagans like the centurion: *Mk* 15:39 and parallels).<sup>36</sup>

The Vatican document teaches us to consider the reality of the Incarnation in a very concrete way. If this is done, one automatically comes to the Jewish-Palestinian milieu of the first century and becomes aware of the family and people of Jesus of Nazareth.

No less a person than Pope John Paul II reflected deeply on the concrete reality of the incarnation of the Son of God in his many statements concerning the relationship of the Church to Judaism and of Christian faith to Israel. On April 11, 1997, he received the Pontifical Biblical Commission in audience, and in his address he spoke of the New Testament’s inseparable link with the Old Testament. In attempting to underline the necessity of the Old Testament, he talked about Jesus’ human identity. In saying that Jesus became a Jew, he offered a kind of short formula of the Incarnation of the Son of God:

Actually, it is impossible fully to express the mystery of Christ without reference to the Old Testament. Jesus’ human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. And this does not mean only a physical belonging. By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented on, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them then in prayer and as an inspiration for his

<sup>35</sup>Hans Hermann Henrix, “Ökumene aus Juden und Christen: Ein Theologischer Versuch,” in *Exodus und Kreuz im Ökumenischen Dialog zwischen Juden und Christen*, eds. Hans Hermann Henrix and Martin Stöhr [Aachener Beiträge zu Pastoral- und Bildungsfragen 8] (Aachen: Einhard, 1978), 188-236, 194.

<sup>36</sup> At: [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_19820306\\_jews-judaism\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html); German: Kommission für die religiösen Beziehung zum Judentum, “Hinweise für eine richtige Darstellung von Juden und Judentum in der Predigt und in der Katechese der katholischen Kirche vom,” 24 Juni 1985, in: *KuJ* I, 92-103, 98.

actions. Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people's long history. ... To deprive Christ of his relationship with the Old Testament is therefore to detach him from his roots and to empty his mystery of all meaning. Indeed, to be meaningful, the Incarnation had to be rooted in centuries of preparation. Christ would otherwise have been like a meteor that falls by chance to the earth and is devoid of any connection with human history. From her origins, the Church has well understood that the Incarnation is rooted in history and, consequently, she has fully accepted Christ's insertion into the history of the People of Israel.<sup>37</sup>

It was clear that this theological concreteness was important to the pope, for he soon came back to the idea. In preparing for the Jubilee Year 2000, the pope explicitly asked the historical-theological commission organizing the millennial celebrations to tackle the problem of the roots of anti-Judaism within Christianity when making an ecclesial examination of conscience. In his address to participants in the internal Vatican consultation on October 31, 1997, he considered the relationship of the Church of Christ with the Jewish people. He not only reinforced his understanding of the continuation of Israel's election and of the Jewish people as "the people of the covenant", but also said:

The Scriptures cannot be separated from the people and its history, which leads to Christ, the promised and awaited Messiah, the Son of God made man. The Church ceaselessly confesses this fact, when in her liturgy she recites the psalms each day, as well as the canticles of

<sup>37</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address to Members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, April 11, 1997; see: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1997/april/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19970411\\_pont-com-biblica\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1997/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19970411_pont-com-biblica_en.html). German: Johannes Paul II., "Ansprache an die Vollversammlung der Päpstlichen Bibelkommission am 11 April 1997," in: *KuJ* II, 102-105, 103f.

Zechariah, the Virgin Mary and Simeon (cf. Ps 132:17; Lk 1:46-55; 1:68-79; 2:29-32). That is why those who regard the fact that Jesus was a Jew and that his milieu was the Jewish world as mere cultural accidents, for which one could substitute another religious tradition from which the Lord's person could be separated without losing its identity, not only ignore the meaning of salvation history, but more radically challenge the very truth of the Incarnation and make a genuine concept of inculturation impossible.<sup>38</sup>

If one turns to the most difficult issue in the present-day Christian-Jewish relationship and dialogue, one has to face the Jewish critique of the Christian "idea" of the Incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ. Based on this critique, the Christian belief in the Incarnation can be shown more clearly. And at the same time the question arises, whether in the deepest disagreement in the understanding of God, there is not also an element of proximity and unity, even of something Jews and Christians have in common. This really does come about, both as regards the kinship of faith in God's descent as self-abasement and in the directive to Christians to remain receptive to the possibility of reinforcing the connectedness when interpreting their profession of faith in the Incarnation of the Son of God. That is a comforting experience in the theology and dialogue of our time. It was set in motion through the Second Vatican Council. The Christological implications of its declaration *Nostra Aetate* have proven to be exceptionally fertile. And the impulses it gave for theology are still having an effect.

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, Address to a Symposium on the Roots of Anti-Judaism, Oct. 31, 1997, see: [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1997/october/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_spe\\_19971031\\_com-teologica\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1997/october/documents/hf_jpii_spe_19971031_com-teologica_en.html); German: Johannes Paul II., "Ansprache an die Teilnehmer des vatikanischen Kolloquiums über die Wurzeln des Antijudaismus im christlichen Bereich am," 31 Oktober 1997, in: *KuJ* II, pp. 107-109, 108f.