



## **Spiritual Patrimony. 50 Years after *Nostra Aetate***

David Sandmel | 02.12.2015

Statement given at ICCJ's 2015 International Conference: "The 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*: The Past, Present, and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship".

The assignment for this paper, from the organizers of the conference is as follows: Jews and Christians have learned from the unprecedented atmosphere of dialogue that has arisen in the past decades. They have learned how to begin to talk to each other but also what questions theologically the new relationship poses to their respective traditions. So if *Nostra Aetate* were written today, after the intervening 50 years, how might it be different? Would it have the same starting points? Would it need to say things the original did not (or unsay things the original said)? What would it say about the future?

In my remarks I want to concentrate on how trends in biblical scholarship, and for that matter other areas of scholarly interest, since *Nostra Aetate* might have resulted in a different document. Hindsight, of course, is 20/20 vision, so there is a bit of artificiality to this exercise and my comments should not be seen in any way to diminish either the significance or the boldness of *Nostra Aetate* "in its day." In addition, I am well aware that some of the points I will make here have been addressed by subsequent Vatican documents or in the writings of popes and other Catholic theologians; indeed, I will cite some of them in few moments. In that regard, I view *Nostra Aetate* not so much as a document, but also as a process that continues to unfold in the Church, in part precisely as a result the kind of the dialogue and scholarship for which *Nostra Aetate* called.

### **Spiritual Patrimony**

Chapter four of *Nostra Aetate* begins by building a foundation for the Church's new relationship with Judaism on a certain perception of a "shared heritage" and acknowledgement of what the authors of the document considered the core commonalities that Christianity shares with Judaism.

*Nostra Aetate* states that there is a "bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock." And, "the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets." The Church considers itself to be included in Abraham's call. It has "received the revelation of the Old Testament" from the Jews and "draws sustenance from the root of the well-cultivated olive tree." From the Jews comes "the Christ according to the flesh," and "most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people."

In light of all this, the document concludes: "Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues." In other words, the reason the Church now seeks "mutual understanding and respect" with the Jewish people in particular as compared with other religious communities to which Church reached out through *Nostra Aetate*, is because of the shared "spiritual patrimony."

*Nostra Aetate's* concept of spiritual patrimony, however, is narrowly focused on things associated with the "Old Testament": Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and the "Old Testament" itself, which, it says, the Jews received and transmitted. There is, however, no explicit reference to the *Jewish context of early Christianity* as part of the spiritual patrimony. While it acknowledges that Jesus and the apostles were *Jews*, in terms of *Judaism*, the patrimony as described by *Nostra Aetate* appears to

be restricted to the Old Testament.

Does this model of Christianity's relationship to Judaism reflect the continued influence of the "teaching of contempt" on the writing of *Nostra Aetate*? According to *Nostra Aetate*, all that Judaism shares with Christianity can be found in the text of the Old Testament; the Judaism that Jesus and the earliest Christians lived and practiced is not mentioned. The idea that by the time of Jesus, Judaism has become a petrified, oppressive, legalistic - dead - religion was one of the tropes of the teaching of contempt. *Nostra Aetate* certainly does not say anything like this, but I think it is fair to ask if the omission of Jesus' Jewish context reflects that heritage.

This negative characterization of the nature of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity dominated Christian biblical scholarship at the time of the writing of *Nostra Aetate*, though there was a shift underway whose roots stretch back to the late nineteenth century, beginning with the works of Emil Schurer, then, in the twentieth century, John Travers Herford, George Foote Moore, Joseph Klausner and many others. These scholars argued that Jesus, the New Testament, and early Christianity could only be understood within the broader context of the Judaism within which it arose. The development of this new paradigm in scholarship picked up steam in the post-war era and after *Nostra Aetate*. I believe there are aspects of *Nostra Aetate* that reflect this influence as well. The fact that both these contradictory tendencies are found in one document should not surprise us.

Let me digress for a moment. There is, I believe, a certain symbiosis between Biblical scholarship and Jewish-Christian relations. Scholarship provides models of the past that undermine the traditional misunderstandings and misrepresentations of history that have shaped negative images of the other. At the same time, I believe the spirit of relationship and dialogue represented by - and called for in - *Nostra Aetate* as well as its overall positive approach to the Jewish people, helps to create an environment in which scholars have become aware of some traditional biases and are able to see new models that are not defined by a contemptuous worldview.

To return to my thesis, *Nostra Aetate*'s use of the term "Old Testament" as well as the idea that the Jews preserved the "Old Testament" for the Church is itself somewhat anachronistic. Neither the TaNaKh nor the "Old Testament" as they came to be known in each tradition existed before Christianity came into being. As we have learned from biblical scholarship, the establishment of both the Jewish and the Christian canons of the Tanakh/Old Testament occurs as part of the process through which both Christianity and Judaism defined themselves in the centuries after the crucifixion and the destruction of the Second Temple. Perhaps I am being too literal or pedantic here, but if it were written today, I wonder if *Nostra Aetate* would be more precise on this point.

The image of first century Judaism and the emergence of Christianity that is now the consensus in contemporary scholarship shows that the spiritual patrimony that Judaism and Christianity share goes well beyond the text and the teachings of the "Old Testament" and the prophets. Christianity in its earliest manifestations was a variety of Second Temple Judaism, thus Second Temple Judaism, I would argue, is part of Christianity's spiritual patrimony. So, for examples, ideas about the messiah and resurrection, just to name two that were so central to the message of the early church, are found in Second Temple Judaism, but not in the Old Testament, even if traditionalists in both communities insist that these ideas are found there.

Of equal importance, recent scholarship on the so-called "parting of the ways" has shown that the boundary between Judaism and Christianity remained fluid and porous at least into the fourth century and in some locations as late as perhaps the seventh century. Similarly, the new scholarship on Paul, represented by the work of Mark Nanos (among others), demonstrates that Paul's thinking was shaped by Second Temple Judaism as well. Thus what Christianity shares with Judaism includes much more than the biblical.

I should add here that the same goes for Judaism. *Nostra Aetate* seems to restrict the idea of “spiritual patrimony” to a distant past. In a similar vein, traditional Jewish views of history in which Christianity is an aberration that diverged from Judaism at the time of Jesus, or at best with Paul, also omit what we now know about the influence that a growing and increasingly powerful Christianity had on Jewish self-definition during the early rabbinic era.

In sum, we have learned from biblical scholarship, and from other fields, that the interconnectedness of Judaism and Christianity goes well beyond the bible and certainly continues into the first several centuries of the Common Era. Indeed, if there is a symbiosis between scholarship and Jewish-Christian relations, I would suggest that there is and continues to be a certain symbiosis between Judaism and Christianity. The centuries of living together, of mutual rejection, and of subtle influence, have and continue to shape how both Jews and Christians understand themselves.

If *Nostra Aetate* were being written today, I think it might present an expanded and more textured vision of spiritual patrimony that would include the legacy from Second Temple Judaism in both its Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek expressions. Indeed, it might well choose a different word to represent that relationship. Though “spiritual patrimony” is a felicitous phrase – and I believe intended to be positive – it may not be the most apt description of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Though less poetic, inextricable bond to one another may actually be a better descriptor than spiritual patrimony. This is something that the church has begun to recognize and to express. Here, for example, I would cite the famous words of Pope John Paul II, who said

“The Jewish religion is not extrinsic to us but in a certain way intrinsic to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and, in a certain way, it can be said that you are our elder brothers.

Similarly, two citations from *The Jewish People and their Scriptures in the Christian Bible* strongly suggest that, in the eyes of the church, there are things that Judaism and Christianity continue to share; the connection is not merely historic but is spiritually significant today:

The Jewish Messianic wait is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a strong stimulus to maintain alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. We, like them, live in expectation. The difference is in the fact that for us, he who will come will have the traits of that Jesus who has already come and is already active and present among us.

This same document also states:

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.

On the practical level of exegesis, Christians can, nonetheless, learn much from Jewish exegesis practised for more than two thousand years, and, in fact, they have learned much in the course of history. For their part, it is to be hoped that Jews themselves can derive profit from Christian exegetical research.

Finally, I want to cite the words of Pope Francis in his exchange with Dr. Scalfari:

What I can say, with the Apostle Paul, is that God has never stopped believing in the alliance made with Israel and that, through the terrible trials of these past centuries, the Jews have kept their faith

in God. And for this, we will never be grateful enough to them, as the Church, but also as humanity at large. Persevering in their faith in God and in the alliance, they remind everyone, even us as Christians that we are always awaiting, the return of the Lord and that therefore we must remain open to Him and never take refuge in what we have already achieved.

Jewish messianic expectations are not in vain. Jewish biblical interpretation is not only possible, but analogous to the Christian reading. And finally, Jewish suffering and perseverance in faith, not only during the Shoa, but also over “these past centuries” (some of that suffering inflicted by the Church itself, or if you prefer by sons and daughters of the Church) is a spiritual reminder for the church.

If *Nostra Aetate* were written today, it might well, and rightly, speak about the spiritual patrimony of the Old Testament/TaNaKh. But it would not stop there. In light of what we have learned from biblical scholarship, and from other fields as well, it would also speak of the significant impact of the Jewish religious thinking of the Second Temple period on the teaching of Jesus, Paul and early church. And it would acknowledge that Judaism has and will continue to influence the church’s self understanding as it deepens its knowledge and understanding of its own origins and history and as it continues to evolve in light of the new relationship with Jews and Judaism that began with *Nostra Aetate*.

While I have focused primarily on the Church’s relationship to Judaism, I have alluded to Judaism’s relationship to Christianity. This is an area that, for a number of reasons, is less explored, but not less important. Perhaps as we move into the next half century, we can find ways to explore this more fully.

Editorial remarks

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