

Understanding the Divide Between Judaism and Christianity

What Happened Centuries Ago?

Why does it Matter Now?

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I want to focus my brief remarks on two texts – one very recent and one from the New Testament — both texts, in very different ways of course, that were trying to bridge the divide between Judaism and Christianity. The modern text I have chosen is an official Vatican statement. When in doubt, it is sometimes helpful for we Catholics to take refuge in official statements! But this, I think, is a very good statement. I am referring to the 2002 statement of the Pontifical Biblical Institute entitled: **The Jewish People and Their Scriptures in the Christian Bible**. The topic of this statement was explicitly requested by Pope John Paul II — hoping thereby to complete the array of official Vatican statements on the relationship of Judaism and Catholicism. As I am sure all of you know, the development of the Catholic position on this subject since Vatican II has been little short of revolutionary.

A couple of things to note about this statement:

- It is focused on relation of the Christian and Hebrew scriptures but in doing so it also addresses some of the broader issues about the reasons for the divide and the meaning for today that is the concern of our discussion.
- Also, this text is addressed to the Catholic community as an internal instrument of education for the church; it is not a statement addressed as well to a Jewish audience, although of course they may read it with interest.
- The statement is a long one—nearly two hundred printed pages—so I could not do justice to its full content but there are a few key points it makes that I think are important for our conversation.

1. First of all, it affirms what should be self-evident but isn't to a lot of Christians—namely that the Christian Bible owes an extraordinary debt to the Jewish Scriptures—mainly of course the Old Testament which is shared in large part with Judaism but also the New Testament

itself. Its methods of interpretation, its guiding symbols, institutional structures, forms of piety, and many theological motifs are drawn from and can be understood only in the light of Jewish history and Jewish faith. These are not peripheral motifs, either: Christian notions of God, of creation, of salvation history, of covenant, of the moral life, our theology of history—to name a few. It should be noted that this dependence on a Jewish context for comprehending Christianity is not simply a fact from the past but an ongoing reality.

2. Secondly, the Biblical Commission's text repeatedly emphasizes that the Christian Scriptures and explicit Catholic teaching maintain the enduring validity of Judaism as a living community of faith and therefore the validity of the Jewish interpretation of Scripture—one that in many ways is evidently different from the Christian reading but nevertheless remains valid for Judaism. Jews surely do not need to be reassured about the validity of their own biblical interpretation from a Vatican text but for some Christians it is an important—and probably still surprising – statement to hear.

One interesting example of the mutual validity of related but different interpretations between the two traditions is the way the text notes both the similarity of Jewish and Christian messianic expectations. After noting that messianic expectations in Judaism at the time of Jesus were not uniform or even necessarily dominant, it goes on to say that although Christianity and Judaism are obviously divided over the interpretation of Jesus as the Messiah, nevertheless, the two faith traditions have some common ground. Allow me to quote the statement directly at this point. It warns against overemphasis on the “discontinuity” between Judaism and Christianity concerning eschatology:

“What has already been accomplished in Christ must yet be accomplished in us and in the world. The definitive fulfillment will be at the end with the resurrection of the dead, a new heaven and a new earth. Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. 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. 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.” (p. 49, par. 5).

3. Finally, the Biblical Commission text addresses the historical circumstances surrounding the divide that is the topic of our conversation. It recognizes that there was a rupture between the two communities caused by various factors, not least of which was a radically different understanding of the identity of Jesus—for Christians the messiah and, more than that, the normative revelation of God—but for Jews the figure of Christ, however recognizable his Jewish character and provenance, ultimately

having no religious authority whatsoever. Likewise, the text notes, both communities—post-70 or what some call “formative ‘Judaism’” and post-70 Jewish Christianity—were undergoing profound transformations in the wake of the Jewish revolt. The resulting tensions of that period also brought strain and indeed hostility to the mutual relationships between Jewish Christianity and the dominant non-Christian Judaism. I will defer some of this to my brief comments on Matthew’s Gospel which, I believe, stands astride this crucial transition period.

Yet, the Commission’s text maintains, this rupture—however painful and bitter—does not represent a definitive break between Judaism and Christianity. As it notes: “In the past, the break between the Jewish people and the Church of Christ Jesus could sometimes, in certain times and places, give the impression of being complete. In the light of Scriptures, this should never have occurred. For a complete break between Church and Synagogue contradicts Sacred Scripture.” (p. 195). It is crucial, the statement maintains, that the whole picture be kept in mind. What defines the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is not just the issue of Christology but the whole spectrum of what it calls “vigorous spiritual ties” between our two communities.

The fact that the New Testament affirms that God’s plan of salvation is fulfilled in Jesus Christ obviously puts Christianity in serious disagreement with Judaism. Thus, paradoxically, the New Testament both affirms its attachment to the Old Testament revelation and its disagreement with the synagogue. But this need not be seen as “anti-Jewish sentiment”. Because, the text notes, “it is a disagreement on the level of faith, the source of religious controversy between two human groups that take their point of departure from the same Old Testament faith basis, but are in disagreement on how to conceive the final development of that faith. Although profound, such disagreement in no way implies reciprocal hostility.” (p. 199) This ongoing relationship means, as the text concludes, that . . . “an attitude of respect, esteem and love for the Jewish people is the only truly Christian attitude in a situation which is mysteriously part of the beneficent and positive plan of God.” (p. 199).

This kind of perspective that sees Christianity and Judaism maintaining an important, indeed profound, relationship even while committed to very different religious views is one reason to argue against the metaphor of “divorce” to describe the relationship between Jews and Christians, either at the point of the divide in the early centuries of this era or at the present time. Like a divorce, admittedly, the divide between Jews and Christians can be and has been painful, hostile, bitter—an outcome fed and complicated because of the closeness of the two former partners. But unlike divorced partners, Judaism and Christianity share a common spiritual “DNA” that continues to exist

even after the divide. Christianity cannot be defined or understood without Judaism. And Judaism, even if it were to wish otherwise, has to reckon with Christianity as a religious movement born in Judaism and bearing its vital signs. And, too, the relationship is not symmetrical. Christianity emerged from biblical Judaism—biblical Judaism did not emerge from Christianity. This latter relationship is somewhat tempered in that both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity could be seen, as in fact some scholars do, as parallel yet differing emergents from biblical Judaism in the vortex of the first century. If we must use metaphors to try to understand our relationship then I think familial metaphors of blood relationship are truer to the mark: Christianity and Judaism are siblings, even if estranged. And Judaism is the elder brother.

Understanding the relationship of Christianity and Judaism in these kinds of terms can not only lead to a more mutually respectful relationship between our two communities, it can also help Christian interpreters to understand the New Testament texts in a new light. To briefly illustrate this, I turn to the second text I mentioned, the Gospel of Matthew.

There is a paradoxical cast to Matthew's Gospel. On the one hand it portrays Jesus in more emphatic Jewish tones than any of the other gospels. Jesus' Jewish genealogy begins Matthew's gospel narrative. In Matthew's infancy narrative the child Jesus and his family recapitulate the defining moments of Jewish history—threatened at birth by a despot, fleeing to Egypt under the protection of Joseph a dreamer, called out of Egypt in a new exodus, and forced to live in exile in Nazareth. Matthew's Jesus resists the allure of Satan in his inaugural desert test by quoting Deuteronomy and at the beginning of his public ministry declares that he is intent on fulfilling all justice (3:15). Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by stating that he has not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to bring them to fulfilment (5:19). Throughout the Gospel Matthew strains to show that Jesus' teaching is in conformity with the law and that his messianic mission is restricted to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Yet despite these and other characteristic touches that show a profound love and respect for Jewish piety and the Jewish Law, the hostility of the Matthean Jesus to the religious leaders rivals that of John's Gospel. While directing his disciples to respect the teaching authority of the scribes and the Pharisees "who sit on Moses seat," Jesus goes on to condemn them for their lack of integrity and their hypocritical failure to follow their own teaching. In a text infamous for its later use in the cause of anti-Semitism, the passion story of Matthew climaxes with the religious leaders persuading the crowds to condemn Jesus and taking responsibility for his death while Pilate (and his wife) washes his hands to declare he is not guilty of shedding this innocent blood. In the final scene of the Gospel on a

mountain top in Galilee, the disciples are sent to the nations to make disciples and to spread the teaching of Jesus.

Most traditional interpretations of this Gospel have viewed it in stark terms as an exposition of the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people and as the rationale for a break with Judaism and a turning to the Gentile world. But more recent interpretation—aware of the complexity of the relationship between Judaism and early Christianity—have significantly altered this reading. It is not certain at all that Matthew's Gospel represents a definitive break with Judaism. Matthew's predominantly Jewish Christian community probably still thought of themselves as faithfully Jewish, not in spite of but because of their allegiance to Jesus as the Messiah. From a sociological point of view, Matthew's Jewish Christians were a deviant or dissident group, in tension with the dominant majority of the Jewish community but still within the wider orbit of Judaism itself. Matthew's community hardly thought of itself as "Christian" over against being "Jewish". Drawing on a tradition of sharp polemical rhetoric found in the Bible and Judaism itself, Matthew's community excoriates the Jewish religious leaders and blames them for persuading the majority of their Jewish brothers and sisters from belief in Jesus.

At the same time, there is evidence in the gospel of a struggle on another front, namely between Jewish Christians who were wary of the growing influx of Gentiles into the community and those in the community who were less constrained about a mission to the Gentiles. Characters in the gospel such as the Magi who find the child Jesus by reading the stars, the Centurion whose faith in Jesus' healing power deeply impresses Jesus, and the Canaanite woman who refused to accept Jesus' rebuffs in order to insure her daughter's healing are harbingers of the fact that beyond the lifetime of Jesus the community's membership would include increasing numbers of Gentiles. Thus in Matthew's Gospel it is the Risen Christ who authorizes the mission to the nations (28:16–20). Antioch, in fact, would be a key jumping off point for the mission to the Gentiles as indicated in the Acts of the Apostles. At the same time—although it is a point of debate in Matthean scholarship—I think that Matthew's community had not decided to turn away from their Jewish neighbors who had not yet accepted Jesus as their messiah.

Thus Matthew is not an anti-Jewish Gospel but stands astride the tension point and the growing divide we are discussing. Probably situated in Antioch on the Orontes, Matthew's community was immersed in the tensions stated in Acts and in Paul's letter to the Galatians where the Jewish Christian community was trying to find its way—trying to remain faithful to their Jewish heritage and at the same time to face an unanticipated future involving the Gentile world. It is entirely possible that the evangelist's anticipation of that future would prove mistaken. In Matthew's Gospel it is more a matter of Gentiles

coming in—the Magi, the Centurion, the Canaanite woman—than it is a matter of the community *going out*. Matthew may have expected that the Gentiles joining the community would immerse themselves in the practices of Judaism dear to the evangelist and his fellow Jewish Christians. But ultimately that synthesis would fail and Gentile Christianity would, over time, turn away from its Jewish heritage and repel those fellow Christians who had remained Jewish.

In that sense our conversation this evening is part of an effort needed to bring a long and tortured relationship full turn, not attempting to dissolve the fundamentally different visions each community—Judaism and Christianity—has of God's future but at the same time recognizing the profound spiritual and historical kinship that inexorably binds us together.

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