Points of Departure

Clemens Thoma
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The abundant literature on the Christian-Jewish conversation cannot hide the fact that, up to the present, the conversation has been no more than a stammer. The core of the difficulty is not so much the extreme complexity of the Jewish religion and Jewish way of life—for Christians, Hinduism may be considerably harder to understand. Even the burden of almost two thousand years of hostility—fed, in part, by Christian sources—cannot be the only cause for the slow progress of the dialogue. The greatest obstacle for us Christians is, rather, our inability to contrast Christianity and Judaism clearly, to mark them off, one from the other. Only in a few instances is the difference unmistakable—for example, in the acknowledgment of Jesus as Messiah, the question of circumcision, and the laws of ritual purity. Even at the time of Christianity’s beginnings, these tenets were drawn into the whirl of polemics.

The Statement of the Second Vatican Council on the Jews is a well-balanced and significant synthesis of the best Christian literature on the people of Israel in recent years. With it, the Church wished to do more than simply condemn that unchristian anti-Semitism which uses a superficial and twisted understanding of the New Testament as its arsenal. She was also concerned with dissociating herself from a shallow enthusiasm for Jews and Judaism which easily turns into disappointment and unkindness. Only a sober and unbiased atmosphere makes serious thought and conversation possible. The discussion of the Council on the place to be given to the Statement (a discussion much commented on); the fact that it was finally made a part of the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions; finally, the feeling that the Statement does not quite fit there—all these questions indicate a certain perplexity among Christians in the face of Judaism.
I make no claim here of giving a commentary on the Statement that is valid from every point of view. Only in passing, would I like to point to the seam that joins the Declaration’s discussion of Islam to that of Judaism. After the Council’s genuine, face-to-face dialogue with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, the Statement of the Christian attitude toward the Jews begins with a self-examination of the Church (“Probing the mystery of the Church . . .”). In this, we have another glimpse of a problem already mentioned: Christianity’s deep bond to Judaism, and this in spite of weighty differences that are central to the two faiths!

Considering the Council texts, one could put the puzzle this way: Whenever Christians wish to enter into conversation with Jews, they are uncertain whether to prepare for a dialogue with another partner or for a presentation of their Christian stance; whether to look on Judaism as mysteriously one with the Church or not. This leads to the anxious question: Can a Christian ecumenical view ever do justice to Judaism in its long historical development—an autonomous development that took place independently of Christianity—as well as in its present concrete existence with its manifold concerns?

Before any Christians can enter into conversation with Jews, they must first grasp the full meaning of the two concepts: Old Testament, New Testament. The Christian-Jewish dialogue must not be understood as a mere endeavor in the service of humaneness and brotherliness. It is rather an earnest, ever renewed encounter with our common salvific past, even though our interpretation of it differs. This can be fruitful for the future only if scholarly elucidation of the two Testaments goes hand in hand with creating a wedge in the long-standing wall of Christian prejudice. Such an analysis may make the Christian dilemma with regard to Judaism more evident. It may also demonstrate at what point Christians begin to go astray and on what course they can and must look for solutions. The pivot of the Christian conversation with Jews lies in a true understanding of the Scriptures of Old and New Testaments, as well as in the recognition and acceptance of the historical developments that could, and in fact did, derive from both. In this study, we can only make a few sketchy suggestions.

1 IN THE patristic era an interpret the Old Test, to modern historicoc Christian heads that the will be misunderstood particularly Jewish are held various traditions, often by, find expression in Israelis nor the Jews original in religious as cant and singular abilit of the oriental-pa creed.

A Christian may not ing eyes of a religious teach him to fit his fait! historical statements ne result in violating the Chris a result in violating the Chris n. No less shou 1. See P. Grelot, See: E 497–499; G. von Rad, Th 423–424; Th. C. Vieze 2. See O. Ploeg, ThoRowley, Apokalyp, ibra 5 Einsiedeln, 1965).
In the patristic era and during the Middle Ages, Christians liked to interpret the Old Testament by means of allegory and type. Thanks to modern historiocritical research, it has been hammered into Christian heads that the Old Testament is a truly oriental book. It will be misunderstood unless tones that are typically Semitic or particularly Jewish are heard. The Old Testament is not all of one piece; various traditions, often not connected with, even contradictory to, each other, find expression therein. It further reveals that neither the Israelites nor the Jews of Old Testament times were autarchical or original in religious as well as sociopolitical activities. Their significant and singular ability consisted, rather, in adapting the many traditions of the oriental-pagan world to the reality of their Covenant and creed.

A Christian may not approach the Old Testament with the dissecting eyes of a religious scientist. Historicocritical science will better teach him to fit his faith in revelation into the Old Testament. Neither historical statements nor heilsgeschichtliche pronouncements ought to be given in attempting to find, either through intuition or through a construct, a sensus plenior of Christian or Jewish coloring. This may result in violating the character of the Old Testament. For the Christian, its reading and exegesis begins with respect for each acting group or personality. The spiritual horizon of the restored priesthood in the postexilic era must be understood and appreciated for its own worth and meaning, just as much as the eschatological lay groups of the same period, even though at first glance neither group impresses us as very modern. Nor must a Christian—yielding to his immediate inclination—be so exclusive as to devote his interest only to the oldest texts which, allegedly, breathe the highest originality and spirit of freedom. No less should the body of the Old Testament be distorted

by turning only to the optimistic texts with their profound trust—the doctrine of the Covenant (Dt 6–9), for instance, the comforting message of Isaiah 40–50, or the sapiential teaching of Proverbs. Even those writings with a more pessimistic and critical stance (Jeremiah, Lamentations, Job, and Ecclesiastes) are important revelatory matter.

As is evident from the history of Christian exegesis, nearly all the extremely subjective selections from, and interpretations of, rabbinical literature led to a denigration of the postexilic era by students of so-called late Judaism. Based on this fundamentally untheological approach, it was taught that, since the time of Esdras and Nehemiah, Judaism had fallen into a state of legalistic, institutionalized rigidity—indeed, paralysis. Hence, the New Testament was considered the only justified continuation of the Old Testament. It was held that obstinacy was already inherent in the formalism and legalistic piety of “late Judaism.” From there, it was but a short step to Christian antisemitism. Yet, devotion to the Law, sacred to Judaism, is fully in accord with the Old Testament; thus, Judaism is fully legitimate and in harmony with the Hebrew Scriptures.

Judaism’s justification by the Old Testament must be supplemented, and shielded against overly hasty Christian claims, by admitting that not all Old Testament statements are oriented toward the New. There are three particular aspects in which the Old Testament may not be considered as preparatory for the New:

1. The Old Testament tells much more than the New about religious and secular life, about humaneness, political power, law, worship, human love, and so on. Van Ruler rightly states that, in this respect, “we must emphatically speak of a greater value of the Old Testament when compared with the New.”

2. There are Old Testament values that perish in the New because their original meaning is lost in polemics. Here, we must again mention devotion to the Law, the Law that in the Old Testament stands clearly in a context of grace and that is essentially a way of life which

sheltered Israel against polemic against them. Schilfmeier. He calls this polemic against the truly prophet. He rightly says: “Paul. His intense, emphatic, polemical make misinterpretation, and the kinsmen of the truly prophet.

3. We are apt to make mistakes, in the sense that it is still experienced, not quite know where.

In facing the problem, we are apt to speak of covenants, in the sense wrong. From the Old Testament’s salvation—this is not in all respects correct. The Old Testament mentions a covenant, whereas the Old Testament’s Covenant
Points of Departure 163

sheltered Israel against outside, that is, pagan, influences (see Ps 120 [119]). Here we must face the thorny problem of the Apostle’s polemic against the Law in the third chapter of the Letter to the Galatians. He calls the Law a makeshift solution and hence provisional because of the sinfulness of the people of the Old Covenant and the kinsmen of his own time who resisted the Gospel. In interpreting this chapter, one should keep the heat of battle in mind and the truly prophetic zeal of the Apostle. As John M. Oesterreicher rightly says: “Paul’s view of the Law has often been misunderstood. His intense, emphatic, and passionate language, his preference for the graphic make misinterpretations easy for those who do not share his temperament and zeal.”

3. The Old Testament is strangely uncertain about, and open toward, what has not yet happened and is still expected. There is not only one promise—the messianic promise—but quite a number of promises which are, moreover, widely contradictory. “Consequently, the Old Testament is fragmentary, a torso, not merely in the sense that it is still expecting something, but also in the sense that it does not quite know what it expects.”

In facing the puzzling relationship of Old and New Testaments, we are apt to speak simply of continuous or discontinuous developments, in the sense of an evolutionary plan. But to do so would be wrong. From the beginning of the Old Covenant—or, rather, the old covenants—the people of God, in each new historical situation, took its own salvific past into ever new account. Unreflecting transmission was never considered a legitimate way of fulfilling and realizing the

6. See particularly Galatians 3:23–29. See also N. Lohfink, Das Siegeli ed am Schilfmee r (Frankfurt, 1965), pp. 151–173. A similar, if more reserved, position toward the Old Testament is expressed, e.g., in the words of the Johannine Christ: “Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven” (Jn 6:32).


8. A. A. van Ruler, op. cit., p. 43.

9. To contrast the Old Covenant with the New does not quite correspond to reality. The New Testament proclaims but one Covenant, that manifest in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament, however, speaks of several covenants which are not in all respects consistent with one another. The most important old covenants are: the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Moreover, the Old Testament mentions a new covenant which is not simply identical with the New Testament’s Covenant in Christ (Jer 31:31–34; Ez 37:21–28).
Covenant. Each new starting point was a link to the past, a possibility of coping with the present, as well as a venture into a future as yet unopened.

Whenever the Old Testament revelation common to Jews and Christians is the subject of their conversation, the conversation is stratified and full of problems. Yet, it can be carried on without much encumbrance, for it is in the nature of the Old Testament revelation to be overflowing, to be open on all sides, and to be incomplete.

II

RELYING on the witness of the New Testament, it is the Christian's conviction that the person and work of Jesus the Christ comprises in a unique way, and gathers into one, the events and expectations of the Old Covenant. The majority of present-day scholars agree in accepting the heart of Jesus' proclamation to be the message of the nearness of God's reign. I cannot possibly recount here the entire context of the New Testament tidings. For the purpose of the Christian-Jewish dialogue, it is enough to consider the New Testament in its connection with the Old and with the Judaism of its time, and to show it briefly as a signpost for the era that followed it.

In proclaiming His message, Jesus built from the ideas, achievements, and afflictions of His countrymen. The finds of Qumran, Nahal Cheber, Murabba‘at, and Masada make it increasingly clear how wrong those scholars are who wish to locate the movement Jesus created at the spiritual periphery of the Judaism of that time, for instance in a hellenized atmosphere. The New Testament bears considerably more genuinely Jewish features than many an exegete wishes to acknowledge. Only he who does not take cognizance of the ample inter-

testamental literature:

His time and people, and the character of His message.

A genuinely prophetic person interprets the Christ event. They do not refer to the God and concerns, not the Spirit. They refer to the expectations which, even the subsequent to the promises of restoration, characteristics of early authorities who rejected from their vantage point the Testament hagiographies.

It was only after the externally simple life for the Jew.

We may compare the of Jesus of Nazareth, and life must have to a strikingly high for the future the Christ event that, at their first, declared that God's world and to, the gentiles. They

10. See A. A. van Ruler, op. cit., p. 37.
12. After the discovery in cave 11 of Qumran of a midrash presumably from the beginning of the first century A.D., and in which the Old Testament figure of King Melchizedek is accredited with preexistence and quasi-divine qualities, David Flusser wrote: "We are now in a position to gain an insight into the spiritual atmosphere out of which Christianity developed... The example of Melchizedek proves, therefore, that the time was ripe for the birth of Christianity, not in the

13. See P. Grelot, Etwas über Die Werden und Entfaltung...
Points of Departure

The past, a possibility into a future as yet common to Jews and Christians, the conversation is carried on without much Testamen revelation to be incomplete. It is the Christian's the Christ comprises in and expectations of the scholars agree in accept­message of the nearness to the entire context of the Christian-Jewish testament in its connection, and to show it briefly from the ideas, achieve­nings of Qumran, Nahal increasingly clear how wrong away Jesus created at time, for instance in a years considerably more wishes to acknowl­ience of the ample inter­

testamental literature will exaggerate the distance between Jesus and His time and people, and assert the absolute newness or chiefly Greek character of His message.

A genuinely prophetic impulse made the New Testament hagi­phraphers interpret the Old Testament from the vantage point of the Christ event. They thereby encountered true Old Testament utterances and concerns, not through historical criticism, but by a grasp full of the Spirit. They responded, in particular, to those eschatological ex­­

policies—Der Stand der For­midrash presumably from the Old Testament figure of King quasi-divine qualities, David insight into the spiritual The example of Melchizedek of Christianity, not in the

Hellenistic world and surely not in the pagan world, but in the Land of Israel, where Jesus and his first disciples lived” (D. Flusser, “Melchizedek and the Son of Man,” Christian News from Israel, XVII [1966], pp. 28–29).

Christians, not by adherence to the Mosaic law, but by faith and baptism (see Ac 15).

The New Testament not only speaks out against Jews who repudiated Jesus, the Messiah, but also against those who were seized by eschatological excitement. Many Christians—followers of apocalyptically inclined men of those days—believed that the ultimate fulfillment of the ages was imminent. For their sake, it was stressed that Christ's gift of salvation was a seed implanted in man's innermost being and that none knew when the all-encompassing cosmic, and hence visible, messianic salvation in power and glory would break forth. The delay of the Parousia had to be endured in vigilance and faith (see, among other passages, Mk 13:32-37; Rom 8-11; Ap 10-12).

The situation of Christian-Jewish dialogue with regard to the New Testament is marked by the fact that the latter is rooted directly in the Judaism of that day and indirectly in the Old Testament. Yet, the New Testament's prophetic elan led the people of God along novel paths. Who can say that these facts do not provide sufficient points of departure for a Christian-Jewish conversation? It is of the essence of the New Testament—as it is of the Old—to be incomplete, to be open toward and uncertain of the future.

The New Testament breathes completeness, compactness, and certainty only in relation to the unheard of past, still alive. The sacred authors had seen "the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star" (Ap 22:16). This event was sufficient, indeed overflowing, so that an unclear future could not frighten them. They knew that at the end of all earthly drama God would reign without restraint, fully and absolutely (see Lk 21:25-33; 1 Cor 15:28).

It would be anachronistic to carry on the Christian-Jewish dialogue exclusively on the basis of the Old and New Testaments. Christianity has neither come to a standstill nor is it fully realized in all its dimensions. In the course of their history, Christianity and Judaism have seen progress in various areas and have fallen into sin. The true meaning of the prophetic elan will not shine through in most decisive of all biblical times, in the manifestations of its understanding of Judaism and persecution of the Old Testament; the very efforts in the name of Judaism's position marked by suffocative Zionism imperiled again.

From all that be evident that Christian-Jewish and hostility can exist in respects where the Jews. There are three dangers that may severely damage power, and sector.

Were a Christian too small to engage Jews. If he, new, he may resemble a castle that happens to give a complete view; it is always embossed makes communication.


A third danger
The true measure of Judaism—and no less that of Christianity—will not shine forth unless it is seen against the background of the most decisive events that have become its destiny since the end of biblical times, and unless one plunges into the most significant manifestations of its intellectual and religious developments. For the understanding of Judaism, we must take into account the many expulsions and persecutions the Jewish people had to endure; the practical realization of the Old Testament in daily life, as demanded by Mishnah and Talmud; the various messianically motivated attempts at renewal; efforts in the nature of religiophilosophical investigations to determine Judaism’s position within a world that is Christian, secularized, or marked by suffering; liturgical forms and folk customs; modern political Zionism and the land of Israel, regained in our times and now imperiled again.

From all that has happened between Christians and Jews, it should be evident that a mere piling up of knowledge will not create a Christian-Jewish conversation. Almost two thousand years of rivalry and hostility can be overcome only if Christians seek to change in all respects where they have behaved toward Jews in an unchristian way. There are three false attitudes Christians are apt to fall into which may severely obstruct the dialogue: loquacity, thinking that feeds on power, and sectarian impatience.

Were a Christian to join a group of tourists and go to Israel with but little knowledge of the two Testaments, his horizon would be too small to engage in genuine intellectual and religious dialogue with Jews. If he, nevertheless, enters into conversation with full force, he may resemble a rash, chatty Swiss who visits the ancestral Hapsburg castle that happens to be in his country, and thereafter makes bold to give a competent opinion on the whole Hapsburg dynasty. Loquacity is always embarrassing; if the topics of conversation are serious, it makes communication impossible.

Even more important than avoiding chatter is turning from religious triumphalism. The Church is not the mistress but the sister of the Synagogue. In speaking with her sister, she can legitimately appeal to the New Testament only if she admits that she represents Christ but imperfectly.

A third danger that may choke Christian dialogue with Jews is
sectarian impatience! It is manifested by Christians who keep the Sabbath, who allow themselves to be circumcised, or who perform similar marginal experiments in order to compel Jews to a conversation and to witness to their own belief in the imminent return of the Christ.

In a way, Christian political Zionism belongs to this category. Although in Theodor Herzl’s time its efforts on behalf of Jewish political Zionism were great,\(^\text{14}\) it is hardly a genuinely Christian concern from the viewpoint of the New Testament (see Jn 18:36). A more theoretical form of sectarian impatience is the attempt to compensate for an unmastered Christian-Jewish sense of past and present with exaggerated ideas of the future. One seeks to read into Romans 9–11, for instance, why and how Christianity and Judaism will achieve complete integration and unity. Such conclusions overstep the limits of Christian hope because no one can know when and how God will make His promises come true. Concerning the time and way of a universal eschatological reconciliation, the words of Paul are hardly more intelligible than earlier prophetic utterances (see Ez 40:1–4; 43:1–9; 47:1–12; Zach 14:6–21).\(^\text{15}\) Let us not forget that all these efforts and devices harbor the danger of religious syncretism. It is very much to the credit of postbiblical Jewish history that, in the long run, Jewish faithfulness has always proved stronger than any attempts at hobnobbing by syncretists.

In the land of Israel, particularly, one is made to feel how justified all warnings are against conceit, striving for power, and impatience. In the course of centuries, the country was used as an experimental station for ideologies and power politics. There were many who thought that there they could rush the coming of heaven’s kingdom. The crusader’s city of Acre, and, no less, the fortress of Masada impressively remind the visitor of such endeavors. How much that began as an ideal ended in secular power struggles or despair, while the kingdom of God was borne by the silent witnesses, within the land and without.

\(^{14}\) See C. Duvernoy, *Le Prince et le Prophète* (Jerusalem, 1966), where the significance for Herzl’s work of the Christian Zionist, W. Hechler, is described.


UNLESS we Christians immobility, we have...
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UNLESS we Christians prefer to fall back into the former state of immobility, we have no choice but to prepare ourselves for a forum with Jews. Dialogue and cooperation are not only a necessity of the hour but a grave historical responsibility no one can escape. If the continued co-existence of Christians and Jews is to be meaningful, our relations must not follow a generalized, predetermined road. This is true, not only because of the threat against all things religious in today's world, but even more so because of the very real fact that what Christians and Jews have to give one another is no cheap religious commodity but rather something most precious and substantive. Christians cannot comprehend the Old and New Testaments without having constant recurrence to Jewish tradition. Unless they orient themselves again and again by the testimony of Jews to the God of Israel, the mighty Lord of history, they are in danger of pursuing empty propaganda among the nations, instead of a genuine Christian mission that rests on holy witness. Finally, Christian hope for the return of Christ degenerates into mere enthusiasm (in the Knoxian sense) and spiritualistic esotericism if its union with love and with faith is rent and its roots in Jewish religio-political expectations destroyed.

Only by realizing that the Christian-Jewish dialogue is like an arduous walk on a mountain ridge can Christians mentally and religiously assimilate all that they encounter in present-day Judaism, be it familiar or strange, encouraging or disappointing. They must bear in mind that Israel as a factor of salvation history is represented in Judaism differently from the way it is in Christianity. They must bear in mind that Jews wander in a twilight of symbolism and presentiment of the eternal, a twilight different from the one Christians live in. This becomes evident when matters that, to a Christian mind, more or less carry the imprint of the worldly and unimportant are considered by Jews as primary religious concerns. We must not forget that, in its strong orientation toward historical reality and in its appreciation of worldly goods—both of them marks of a life that cannot be subsumed entirely under the category of "the religious"—Judaism is a true heir of the Old Testament. We Christians must learn to see these
attitudes as values. The quintessence of the Old Testament and of Judaism is not simply religion or theology, or several theologies, but God's active presence in the midst of His people (see Is 45:14).

The character of Christianity is Jewish. Again and again, it must prove its own interiority by communion with the Old Testament and with Judaism. No longer should a Jew be alarmed if and when a Christian adduces Judaism as a support for his faith and love. Whenever a Christian does this, Jews, too, will find the dialogue with Christians important and interesting.

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