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## Kinship Recalled

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# KINSHIP RECALLED

MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE INSTITUTE  
CELEBRATE THE BOND  
BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

edited  
BY JOHN M. OESTERREICHER



The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies  
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY  
South Orange, New Jersey 07079

KINSHIP RECALLED

Talks by Fr. John Gilchrist  
Mrs. Nelda Goergen, R. Asher Finkel  
and Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher  
October 23, 1983

## INTRODUCTION

"It was a moving experience," a Jewish participant remarked of an interreligious service, held by the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, the afternoon of Sunday, October 23, 1983. "An inspiring hour," observed one of the Catholic worshippers. On that Sunday, friends of our Institute had joined in prayer and song to celebrate two important dates.

On October 28, 1965, Pope Paul VI had promulgated the Declaration on the "Church's Relationship to non-Christian Religions," whose heart is the Statement on the Church's Bond to the Jewish People. As he promulgated that Declaration, the Pope exclaimed: "The Church is alive. Here is the proof, here her breath, her voice, her song. Jews must be shown our reverence and love at all times." I will always remember the warmth with which he gave this document to the Catholic world to act upon.

In two short years, we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of that moment of greatness. To prepare ourselves for this anniversary and to recall the new encounter of Christians and Jews that began 18 years ago, also to celebrate the 31st year of the Institute's existence and work, we met for that interreligious service of gratitude, hope, and joy I mentioned before.

The pivot around which the prayer service revolved was the profession: "Hear, O Israel! the Lord our God is Lord alone!" Hymns gave the service special appeal. The first was a Yemenite plea: "Lord, you are the Master and I the servant. Who should have mercy on the Servant if not the Master?" The second was St. Francis' "Canticle of the Sun."

Four brief talks, two on the Conciliar document and two on the meaning of the *Shema* highlighted the two events. The Speakers were Father John J. Gilchrist, pastor of Our Lady of Fatima, North Bergen, and Mrs. Nelda Goergen, Coordinator of Religious Instruction at Maple Shade, N.J., Rabbi Doctor Asher Finkel, Chairman of the Graduate Department of Judaeo-Christian Studies, and I, as the Director of the Institute.

The moderator for the day and leader of the service was Father John Morley, associate professor of the Department of Religious Studies and Minister to Seton Hall's Priest Community. Mr. Robert Abels Mrs. Dolores Cunningham, Mrs. Mary Engelberger, Father

Lawrence Frizzell, Mrs. Jimmie Josephson, and Father James Sharp held particular roles in the worship service. All participants mentioned in the last two paragraphs are linked, in one way or another, to the Institute.

The four talks are recorded in the pages following. (I am sorry I cannot add a copy of the Interreligious Service. It may be ordered from the Institute for a mailing and handling charge of one dollar.)

The most telling comment made on the celebration was that of a Jewish woman, up to then unknown to me. When the service had ended, I went to the back of the room in which we had met to greet the people. As I greeted her, she rolled up her sleeve to show me the number that Nazis had tattooed on her arm at Auschwitz. She then said: "A service of love like this one is the true answer to this mark."

John M. Oesterreicher

#### JOURNEYING TOGETHER

I have been invited to speak on my understanding of the Conciliar Declaration of the Church and the Jews and its relevance to my life. I have also been admonished to limit my remarks to ten minutes. I rather feel like Hillel or Shammai who were both asked by a non-believer to explain the whole of Torah while standing on one foot. Since I am neither so abrupt as Shammai, nor as wise as Hillel, I shall take a middle course. I shall try to encapsulate two periods of time: first, the Pre-Vatican II attitude of my seminary days; second, the present-day emotions of a Catholic priest touched by the new encounter between Christians and Jews.

We who were trained for the priesthood during the pre-Vatican II era were, if nothing else, absolutely certain that ours was the right faith and that at the proper time all things would be brought to fulfillment in Christ. The theology imparted to us was carefully worked out. Each teaching was labeled with such marks as "clearly defined as part of the faith", or "belonging to the faith", or least, "close to being of the faith". Our moral code, like our credal system, could be contained in the two volumes of the textbook by Noldin and Schmidt. While there were areas of controversy, even they were carefully delineated. Canon Law, Ascetical Theology, and Church History, all buttressed an unquestioned certitude of belief in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

Our interest in the Jews was, at best, a good-will brotherhood -- at worst, a patronizing sympathy. After all, we assumed that Judaism like the Old Law, died at the death of Christ on the cross, and being dead was death dealing, at least by the time the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed.

Judaism and its customs were only valuable to help us fill out our knowledge of the Jewish Jesus. By studying Judaism, we could know and understand His life and His world (including His enemies, of course) in a more complete way. We could also meditate more perfectly and pray more fervently for the Jews not believing in Christ.

In the late forties and early fifties there was another problem. We had just learned of the six million Jewish victims of Hitler's hatred. But, it must be remembered that we too, had seen fathers, brothers, and friends go off to die in the war.

We had saved the world from Hitler. We certainly were not responsible for his massacres, but we had sympathy for the survivors of the Holocaust. We felt no guilt.

To be honest, there was one more difficulty. We knew that we were in a death struggle with atheistic communism. The precautions and threats of this evil confronted us daily; each time we prayed the rosary we were reminded of it. And underneath the surface, we experienced doubt. Were the Jews of Russia and their relatives in this country on our side or on the side of the enemies of Christ? If we studied contemporary Judaism, it was in order to know where "they" stood. And to say the least, the state of Israel was not popular.

The second Vatican Council reshaped us who are the Church. Let me touch on some of those changes.

As for our creed and code, we had been taught that our theology was like a brick house. The problem with a brick building, however, is one of interlocking elements. If you remove one brick, soon all the others become loose. That took place.

The historical - critical method of biblical exegesis has, in effect, transformed many of our ideas about Jesus and the early Church. Many of our givens were now propositions to be studied, analyzed, and, perhaps, to be seen in a new light.

For me, therefore, the Conciliar Statement and the Institute of Judaean-Christian Studies have been a large part of a new journey of faith. Because of my position as a priest, many people listen to my words, and believe what I say on the issues that pertain to life, reality, and our eternal destiny. I have no other alternative but to re-examine all I profess. I cannot be a blind guide.

My studies and contacts with men of scholarship -- priests, rabbis, and laymen, have led me to a greater sense of security. I believe far more completely that Jesus is God's Word spoken and manifested to the world. But, I also believe that I can never understand the Word, unless I hear and see Him as the fullness of God's promise on Mt. Sinai. To be one with Christ, I must stand one with His tradition. I can never be fully a Christian, unless I am truly and spiritually a son of Abraham.

Further, the entire history of the Catholic-Jewish relationship over the years has become part of me. It is a legacy rich in both joy and tears. My Church has had moments of inexpressible rapport with the Jews -- and sad to say, many,

many moments of sheer horror and cruelty. That history, good and evil, is now part of my personal make-up.

I feel the bonds that bind me to my Jewish brethren of all times. It is a tie forged by the lives of millions who lived before me, and these bonds can never be broken.

Lastly, I have come to understand my Jewish brethren much better. My associations with them, because of this Institute, have led me to understand more fully, to dialogue, and even argue more freely with people I now call family.

A Gentile woman once said, "Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ru 1:16).

Ruth spoke in physical terms. I speak spiritually. Your people, O Israel, is my people. Your God, O Israel, is my God. Henceforth, we journey together.

John J. Gilchrist

## A PARABLE OF LOVE

I am the mother of five children, each one dearly loved, each given the best I have known in instruction, care, and example. But, there is a definite difference between my relationship with my older, and that with my younger children. The older ones fret that I am too easy with the younger; the requirements I exacted from them, they maintain, I have not exacted from the others. My younger children claim that they were cheated of much family history, much of the interaction between their parents -- who were younger then -- and the earlier offspring.

There is a kind of competition between both sets of children that is, I suppose, natural and inevitable. As a parent, I regret but can understand sibling rivalry. What I could not accept would be the assertion by one group that they are dearer to me, more worthy of my loving care, and more deserving than the other one to inherit whatever my poor estate may consist of. I can conceive of no way to divide my love for my children. How could either of them believe in my love, credit it at all, trust its consistency, were I unfaithful to the others?

I may have overstated my personal experience and forced the parabolic character of my parental love. Yet, it was the awareness of my love being the parable of love divine that brought about my conversion. My spiritual life was first awakened in reading Jewish history, savoring how the Jews experienced God. In a very real sense, my turning to God was to the God of Israel as He reveals Himself in Jewish history and Jewish Scriptures. Yet, I had been born to a Christian family, not a Jewish one, a fact I had to credit to God's providence. With new eyes, I began to examine Christianity as I had Judaism, to discover in what way I could find God in the person of Jesus Christ.

The fact that, as I was on the brink of a personal conversion to Christianity, it was to the Roman Catholic Church that I was drawn, rather than to the Protestant Church of my fathers, I also credit to God's providence. The persons who showed me what it meant to be a Christian, at a time when I was eager and receptive, were Catholics.

I began life as a Southern Baptist, progressed to a love affair with Judaism that will last a life time, and have finally become a practicing, rejoicing Roman Catholic. I have made

my personal decision, have bound my existence to God through, with, and in Jesus Christ. Yet, I have experienced God, loving and active, in the lives of my Southern Baptist brothers and sisters, and in the lives of my Jewish brothers and sisters.

I claim no deeper theological insight than this: It is one and the same God we worship; He is the God of judgment and of mercy, the God of wrath and of love. One and the same God speaks in the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures.

Eighteen years ago, the Second Vatican Council published its statement on the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish People. That statement is more than a mere acknowledgement of the bond between Jews and Christians.

These are some of its precious words which I quote from Monsignor Oesterreicher's translation:

The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God, in that loving-kindness words cannot express, deigned to conclude the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which the wild shoots of the Gentiles have been grafted (Rom 11:17-24).

In acknowledging that she draws nourishment from the root of that noble olive tree onto which the Gentiles were grafted as wild shoots, the Church reveals an intimacy with, and a respect for, Judaism that go much deeper than most of us have ever appreciated.

In words so profound and true that they read like poetry, we experience love and esteem for the Jewish people as we read:

Theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the patriarchs and from them is the Christ according to the flesh (Rom 9:4-5).

How does this statement, proclaimed 18 years ago by the Bishops of my Church, affect me as a Christian and as a teacher of the faith; and how might it affect you and all who are inclined to live in the peace and justice that lead to brotherhood?

The Council summons Catholics and invites Jews to explore possibilities of learning from one another, of talking to one another as members of one family, neither in competition nor with an eye to changing one another, but rather to deepen and enrich their own lives and their lives together.

I myself, however, find more than a summons in the Conciliar Statement. Trying to express what is in my heart, may I relate a story told me by a public-health nurse, a friend of mine. She had been sent to the home of a blind couple. Husband and wife, graduates of schools for the blind, were gifted people. They had children, two and four years of age, who had normal vision, and whom the blind parents raised successfully with little assistance. They had no family nearby and usually were quite self-sufficient. Recently, the husband underwent surgery; my friend had been sent to administer his therapy and help him in all health matters.

At a given moment, his wife entered the sickroom the way a blind person does, gently reaching out and touching first this and then that, moving forward a certain number of steps, then touching again, verifying her location in the room. Right behind their mother came the two small children, entering the room exactly as their mother had done, first touching, then moving forward, then touching again. Even though they had normal vision, the children were imitating their mother.

I think it a safe assumption that you and I have been blessed by the witness, the example of significant persons in our lives who have made it possible for us to conceive of, and to choose brotherhood rather than competition, alienation, or conflict. We are not self-made men and women. God has already invested a great deal in our formation, and He has done this, according to His own style, through other persons who served as our models.

The affirmation of the Second Vatican Council on the Church and its Bond with the Jewish People is not only a summons, but also an injunction, like that of Jesus when He said, "Let him hear, who has ears to hear" (Mt 11:15).

We are called to speak and act in the way brothers and sisters do. They differ significantly but love and respect each other. On this great and happy day, as we recall the proclamation of the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* by Pope Paul VI, let us, therefore, re-dedicate ourselves in prayer, in praise, in song, to our family business.

Nelda L. Goergen

## GOD IS ONE

*Shema Yisrael*, "Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God the Lord is one" (Dt 6:4). This Jewish proclamation of many centuries has influenced the theologico-philosophical discussion on the nature of monotheism, the belief in the purity and uniqueness of a transcendental Being. I shall not dwell on the God idea of the philosophers, rather shall I reflect on the affective meaning the proclamation bears for the worshiping community. God is not a metaphysical question to be demonstrated by reason and argument; He is a living, dynamic Reality. His very Being is free from creatureliness but He is the One from whom all creation springs and for which He has continuous concern. Through the daily act of proclaiming God's reality, the worshiper is affected in his or her attitude and behavior.

First, there is the receptive act of God's kingdom, which embraces and binds the worshiper in his daily life. The Jewish worshiper lives with a full awareness of God's kingship over all existence. The emphasis in the *Shema* recitation is on the first words, the proper hearing by the worshiping community. This means a receptive acknowledgment of God's authority, a grateful awareness of providential blessings, and a deep desire for a universal recognition of the One, true God. Therefore, the *Shema* proclamation is liturgically accompanied by the doxological response: "Blessed be [God's] name, whose glorious Kingdom [exists] forever,"<sup>1</sup>

Second, there is the meditative act of God's unity, which challenges the worshiper and demands of him or her that they aspire for the way of *Shalom* (wholesomeness), and live with a deep sense of following the example of God, whose very nature is *Shalom* (perfection). The emphasis here is on "God is one". The worshiper is required to be fully attentive to the recitation, as he focuses on the very meaning of "one". He concentrates on all spatial directions and on all temporal designations as they converge and become one. Thereby, the worshiper can sense God's reality to be beyond the dimensions of time and space. The rabbis define the experience: "God is the place of the entire world, but the world with its dimensions is not God's place."<sup>2</sup> God is, thus, both near and far. He is addressed in prayer as "our Father in Heaven". On the one hand, He is like a Father who expresses intimate love for his creatures and on



the other hand, He remains far off in heaven, beyond the earthly dimensions.

"God is one" becomes the impetus for the worshiper to unite all distinctions within the human reality of time and space in order to free himself or herself to a reality beyond earthly bounds. The same is to be experienced in the human response to providential presence. Human history is affected both by God's wrath and His love. On the one hand, all creation obeys the harshness of God's creative laws. There are floods, earthquakes, drought and the life affecting human existence. On the other hand, humanity can correct its ways by becoming the constructive partner of God in creation, thereby eliciting His compassion. These basic categories of "judgment" and "love" are viewed as opposites in the human experience. In God, however, they flow from his oneness. They affect us differently but remain in harmony within God. For the rabbis, "Elohim" designates judgment, whereas "Lord" depicts love. Thus, to proclaim "Lord our Elohim is one God" comes to express the unity of attributes.

This affective sense of God's unity is reflected in the final petition of peace in Jewish prayer. "The One who makes peace above, please make peace for us." The rabbis explain its meaning by the use of angelomorphic language.<sup>3</sup> God brings harmony between two antithetical forces in the heavenly realm. He makes peace between Gabriel, the angel of wrath and power, and Michael, the angel of mercy and illumination. With such a paradigmatic view of God's realm, the community desires peace below. The oneness of God becomes the very expression of Shalom to be desired by the human community in its imitation of God. The words of Isaiah that "the lamb shall dwell with the lion" reflect the biblical vision for universal peace to which the community aspires. It strives for a world in which both "justice" and "love" prevail harmoniously, as both these attributes are complementary aspects of God in his moral government of the world.

"God is one" then becomes an eschatological pronouncement. It challenges the particular worshipping community to strive towards peace as a prelude to the universal reality of the Isaian vision. Israel acknowledges "the Lord is our God", but recognizes that God's reality is open to the entire world. "God is one" will become the ultimate experience of all peoples. As Zechariah foresaw it (14:9): "On that day, the Lord will be one and His name one." The Jewish proclamation expresses an eschatological hope to share with all humankind the Sinaitic experience in encountering God's presence through the words: "I am the Lord your God".<sup>4</sup> From this perspective,<sup>5</sup> the Christian community, too, proclaims the reality of God's Kingdom and invites

the world to acknowledge God's presence. On the day when the world acknowledges God's presence, the eschatological hope in "God who is one" will be fulfilled for all.

Asher Finkel

1 Compare the tradition in Palestinian Targum Gen 49:2 with a peculiar reading: "Pay heed: God ('el) of Israel is your Father" instead of "God is father to ('el) Israel."

2 Genesis Rabba, Sidra 68, and Pesiqta Rabba, Sidra 21.

3 *Pereq HaShalom* (the Hebrew treatise on peace), ed. Etan Levine, *Augustinianum* 14 (1974), par 8.

4 Compare the elaborated Kedushah (Sanctification) of the Sabbath service. Shema is followed by an eschatological appeal. Kingship and Redemption are linked. See J. Heinemann, *Prayer is the Period of the Tannaim and the Amoraim*, 3rd ed. 1982.

5 Compare Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhoth Melakhim*, last chapter (uncensored text).

## THE UNIQUENESS OF THE GOD OF ISRAEL

The Hebrew poet who gave us Psalm 27 pleads in verse 4:

One thing I ask of the Lord,  
this do I seek:  
To abide in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord,  
to contemplate His temple.

Here an Israelite, surrounded by foes, beset with affliction, seeks God's presence, confident that the Lord will shelter him. His is a prayer that every Jew of whatever historical period can make his or her own, that every Christian of whatever clime or color can repeat. Indeed, the psalm portrays a common human aspiration. To search for Him, who is Israel's and our "rock and shield" (Ps 18:3) is part of every man's and woman's dignity.

Yes, to search for God is a sign of our nobility, while it is evidence of God's majesty as well as His generosity that He lets Himself be found. An even more awesome proof of His grandeur is His search for everyone who bears a human face. In fact, it is the uniqueness of "the Holy One of Israel" (Is 1:4) that He draws to Himself us who have been fashioned "in His image" (Gn 9:6). Søren Kierkegaard depicts this mystery in a peerless image:

No one goes so far astray that he cannot find his way to You, You who are not only like a spring that lets itself be found, You who are like a spring that itself seeks the one who thirsts or has gone astray -- something that has never been said of any fountain.

God's quest for human beings is woven through the whole of Scripture, beginning at the very cradle of humanity. The poetic visions of the ancient Hebrews have given us the joyful story of the creation of Adam and Eve as well as the sad one of their fall from grace. When Adam realized that sin had changed him and his world, he hid, we are told, behind a tree in the garden of Eden. We are further told that the Lord asked him: "Where are you?" (Gn 3:9) That question was not an inquiry about Adam's location, rather was it one after the state of his soul: "Look what your sin has done to you."

Time demands that I move quickly. Hence I turn to the Gospels. The search for all those who are lost is a luminous mark of Jesus' ministry. His heart is at one with the heart of the God of Israel, the God who cares! Thus, He proclaims: "The Son of Man has come to seek and save what is lost" (Lk 19:10). Or: "It is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick. I have come to call sinners, not the self-righteous" (Mk 2:17). And again: "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:24).

Some of Jesus' parables, too, resound with God's love for those who are on the brink of missing their destiny. These are first of all the parables about things lost: a sheep gone astray (Lk 15:4-7; Mt 18:12-24), a coin that had vanished after it fell to the ground (Lk 15:11-32), and a son who turned his back on his father and on his father's ways (Lk 15:11-32). But these parables are not so much about this or that loss; they rather speak of a woman's anxiety because she lost a coin, a shepherd's worry for a missing animal, and a father's concern about his rebellious son. These everyday emotions are made to reveal the heartbeat of the One True God, to describe His humanity, His quest for you and me. Only of the God of Israel can one say that He is the totally Other and, at the same time, like a human Lover, though in an eminent sense.

Still other parables Jesus told celebrate the love of Israel's God for sinners desirous of a new life; for evildoers held in contempt by their fellows; for people who lived on the fringes of the community, and for men and women whose existence was considered insignificant. One of these parables is "The Two Debtors." They had the rare experience of having had their bountiful creditor cancel their obligations (Lk 7:41-45). Another is called "The Laborers in the Vineyard." Here an openhanded employer paid the same wage to those hired early as well as those called to work late in the day (Mt 20:1-15). And there is finally the story of "A Pharisee and a Publican." These two stand for a man pleased with himself because he lived by the Law and for another who had broken the Law but begged God's forgiveness for the wrongs he had done (Lk 18:9-14). We must never forget that these parables, particularly the last one, speak not solely of some of Jesus' contemporaries. They portray you and me.

Jesus not only preached the gospel of God, the magnanimous, pardoning Father, He lived it: He sought the company of those the "world" despised. Hence He was called "Friend of tax-collectors and sinners" (Mt 11:19). To be sure, what makes the God of Israel -- the God of Jews and Christians -- unique is not merely love, but a love that transcends all human standards and experiences.

No wonder, then, that Saint Paul calls the One God "Father of mercies, God of all consolation" (2 Cor 1:3), and that he speaks of Him as "the God who makes the dead live, and summons into being things that had not been". (Rom 4:17).

John M. Oesterreicher