

Seton Hall University

From the Selected Works of Rabbi Asher Finkel, Ph.D.

November 10, 2005

Jewish Perspective

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Jewish Perspective

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This paper was presented by Asher Finkel at the 40th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* Conference at St. Michael's College on November 10, 2005.

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I. Achievements: Past and Present of Jewish-Catholic Encounter Facing the Future

Almost two millennia of confrontation, vilification and recrimination marked the relationship of the offspring Christianity and its mother religion, Judaism from the first century. Now, a new chapter of the encounter has opened since Vatican II with a papal declaration on the relation of the Church to Judaism and to non-Christian religions. A meaningful dialogue of mutual respect was pursued that led to the apologetic reconciliation and positive reorientation to the common Biblical tradition of Jews and Christians. The encounter has now changed from past relationship of disputation and intolerance to seeking understanding from the ground of faith in canonical Scriptures and the historical tradition. Both are eager to explore their roots and to remove wrongful misrepresentation of the past with a watchful eye on the recent devastating events that were impacted by antisemitism on the Christian continent of Europe.

After all, the negative development towards Jews in exile was anchored in the anti-Judaic attitude of Christianity, with its deicidal charge, blood libels and enmity. The supersessionist doctrine of the Church has claimed that God withdrew the covenant from the Children of Israel. Now, the *Nostra Aetate* declaration by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, has formulated a binding position that acknowledges the special link with the Jews of Abraham's stock. They enjoy a common spiritual heritage, that is rooted in their Biblical covenant with seven heavenly gifts (Rom 9:3-5), which the Church respects and seeks to share. The Church "deplored all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews." The deicide charge accorded to them over the centuries is wrong and offensive, for the Church recognizes "the cross as a sign of God's universal love and not of hate."

What has led to this significant change can be attributed to four basic determinants, two from the global perspective and two from the particular relationship to the Jews. After World War II, a global concern for human freedom and rights has emerged, to be driven by pragmatism of the modern culture with its strong liberalizing and universalistic elements. Christianity that is rooted in the Biblical summation of the dual commandment of love seeks by its papal voice to respond forcefully to the terrible atrocities and genocidal policy by past governments in European lands. Second, the World War II has ended in atomic explosions that opened the door to global destruction by modern science and nuclear technology. The Church recognizes that the apocalyptic vision of Biblical prophets can be realized catastrophically, and all nations including the Jews who share this tradition must face each other in seeking understanding and peace. We are all God's children, whose name is *Shalom* (peace). Only the pursuit of peace can remove the evil decree of atomic war.

The particular aspect of the Church's relation to Jews, after the Holocaust, was overwhelmingly shock by the consequences of Hitler's war against the Jews in Christian Europe. Past centuries of theological anti-Semitism has led to the slaughter of a million and a half innocent children, who were butchered simply because they were born Jewish. The racial laws of Nazi Germany were antithetical to the Church teachings but they were embraced by Christian people who participated in the elimination of six million human beings only because of their race and religion, as the children of Israel. By official policy and popular view that Jews are evil and cancerous to society, they were removed from their occupations, stripped from all their possessions and led to their death in a violent and efficient manner. The Church needed to face itself in public declaration of Teshuvah (Repentance), as she finds what occurred in the past offensive and antithetical to Biblical values and the truth.

Second, following the Holocaust the remnant of Jewish survivors returned to the promised land of Israel. This country was populated by Jews under the British mandate, with the promise of Prime Minister Balfour that designated Palestine a Jewish homeland. It enjoyed the world approval after World War I and was recognized by the U.N. after World War II an independent state within the partitioned area. For the Jews in diaspora, they saw in this development the historical opportunity for the beginning of their redemption by the Biblical promise. This event challenged the Christian view of the wandering Jew and moreover the Arabic protest to the Jewish claim as unhistorical and imperialistic. However, the Jews of exile were gathering in this unsettled, infested and deserted land since the Turkish period from different parts of the world. In their commitment, they rebuilt their homeland while absorbing over two million refugees from Islamic and European countries after their independence. They withstood the invasion of seven Arab nations, who sought to eliminate the Jewish state. This aim is clearly expressed in the Palestinian manifesto, when the Arab partitioned area of Palestine was under Jordanian rule. Major countries recognized the independence of Israel but how the Church related to this state is crucial to the Jewish people, their Biblical faith and shared destiny. As the elder brother within the scheme of salvific history, Christian recognition and support are most valued by the Jewish State, as the Vatican and the late Pope John Paul II demonstrated in recent years.

At present, there are marked shifts in the global and particular determinants that must be addressed in the Jewish-Catholic encounter as they face Islam. In recent decades, the world witnessed the emergence of Islamic terrorism and suicide bombs. At first it was directed mainly at the Jewish state and the Jewish people by Palestinian radicals under Arafat. The world ignored it as the work of freedom fighters against the mighty Jewish forces, ironically as David facing Goliath. Eventually, the terrorist acts were aimed at America as the great Satan and even in Islamic lands radical elements challenge their opponents with acts of terror and suicide. Moreover, there is a global concern when a radical Islamic country seeks to attain nuclear power. Even a "*fatwah*" is issued now to permit the use of atomic weapons; alongside a call of "*Jihad*" which was issued earlier against the Jewish State. Surely, there are many Muslims who do not condone these actions but the threat remains. A clerical Shi'ite government of Iran is now on the threshold of atomic challenge. In that manner, the Islamic world will seek to address the American and Israeli arsenal.

Purposely, the current Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently has told four thousand students in an auditorium at Teheran that Israel "must be wiped off the map" (*N.Y. Times*,

October 27, 2005). This threat is not mere politico-militant rhetoric but rather it reflects a mindset of the Islamic clerical state. Similarly, Hamas' charter calls for the destruction of Israel as does the Palestinian manifesto in various clauses. The religious leaders call for "*jihad*" as supported by "*fatwah*" and by the preaching of the imam. Their vision is a world without Zionism, namely Jews living independently in their promised land. This mindset led Muslims of different countries to target Jews and the religious sites even in Europe.

Indeed this political development affects deeply the Jewish-Catholic encounter on their road to *shalom*. For the Islamic countries, their media and writings are filled with antisemitic propaganda that even incorporates the material that was generated in the past by Hitler and other antisemites in the European countries against Jews. The Christian continent of Europe today is inundated with Islamic anti-Judaic material that gave rise to antisemitic actions alarming the Jews there after the Holocaust. Islamic propaganda portrays Israel as a pariah, apartheid state. Israelis are aggressive and oppressive to innocent Palestinians and their refugees. The Jewish claim to the land from Biblical time is rejected as false, and revision is urged in Western writings. Only Palestinian Arabs are the true natives of this land as they are usurping the identity of the Jewish people in Biblical times. Even Jesus of Nazareth born to a Jewish Mother is called a Palestinian.

The present challenge to Jewish-Catholic encounter is how information is generated via the media and publications that come to impact the world. Educational institutions and modern scholarship are affected seriously by this development. We must consider how far the encounter between Jews and Christians can move to arrest and rectify this situation. The American Jewish Committee will soon detail how in thousands of U.S. elementary and secondary schools, teaching programs include pro Islamic and anti American propaganda. This material enters the systems via federal program Title VI of Higher Education Act to meet global challenges. Programs are funded by Saudi Arabia, as also directed to Universities. Textbooks promote Islam and criticize severely the Jewish State. After all the Saudis are the radical Wahbistic Muslims in their orientation. It is the call of the hour for Jewish-Catholic encounter to enter into a serious dialogue with Islamic scholars and teachers of moderate orientation. What is learned from the particular encounter of Jews and the Church can now serve as a model for the conflict resolution that separate the Biblically oriented people from Islamic believers in the Quran.

Ezekiel's prophecy (chs 38, 39) of ultimate war of Gog and Magog in the end of days will occur over the claim to the holy mount of Jerusalem. This prediction seems to suggest a contemporary development when the Christian world and the Jewish State will face the Islamic forces due to the call of *Jihad*. It was Don Isaac Abarbanel who offered this account of what the prophecies of Ezekiel and Zachariah (ch 14) hold for humanity. He penned it at the time of the Jewish expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula by the Christian monarchs in 1492. What is foretold is prefaced in Ezekiel 38:17 with the admonition: "Thus said the Lord YHWH, this is what I spoke in years past via my servants, the prophets of Israel, namely the two (the Masorah reads "*shenayim*" (two) in lieu of "*shanim*" (years) who prophesied in those days to bring upon them." Ezekiel and Zachariah lived at the time of the destruction of the first Temple in 587 B.C.E. and its rebuilding in 515 B.C.E., respectively. Not only humanity's evolvment towards a final conflict is presented but moreover a geological catastrophe, demonstrating God's intervening power at that time. A massive earthquake will devastate the land of Israel, due to the volatile

fault of the Syro-African rift. This major earthquake will directly affect the city of Jerusalem with its Temple Mount, as described by Zachariah 14:4, “when God’s feet will stand upon the Mount of Olives facing Jerusalem from the east.” It will cause a shift in the topography of the holy mount that will expand the area after the entire region will be refilled following the split. Masorah reads “*venistam*” (it will be filled) in lieu of “*venastem*” (they will flee), the opening word of 14:5. Such disasters have occurred in the past, including the time of Julian the Apostate when Jews were seeking to rebuild their Temple and the Church viewed the earthquake as the heavenly sign in their favor. Now the Geophysical Institute of Israel is carefully watching the seismographic account that is foretelling a great disaster to come from this year on to fifty years. There is a unanimous agreement among the experts that Israel and the world may face such a crisis, bordering on the religious claim to the mount, and we are not even better prepared than New Orleans for evacuation (*Jerusalem Report*, October 17, 2005).

At least the religious should take this warning seriously and it offers the urgent opportunity for a serious dialogue. Jewish-Catholic encounter achieved a significant change in the area of scholarship and education to prepare the world for the way of peace and altruistic concern. Their dialogue represents the Greek wording of *dialogein*, namely to talk with each other in respectful discussion, common sharing of Biblical values and the deep concern for apocalyptic development. Dialogue is not “*duo logoi*,” to meet one another with two monologues as talking at each other. Islamic teachers and scholars are currently guided by the doctrine of “*tahrif*,” i.e. they view the Biblical tradition as corrupt and misrepresentation of the truth. They only rely on the Quranic text and the *Hadith* without viewing the fuller picture. For they need to see Muhammad’s teaching in the context of Jewish and Christian tradition of his days. This is the phenomenological comparative approach, which study will yield common elements and values that the three faiths show. All words of contempt and typifications, as they appear in the Quran, should be reviewed from this engagement with the Biblical oriented tradition. After all the “*suras*” appear with reference to a development from Mecca to Medina in Muhammad’s life, and the *Hadith* with its selection of material by the method of *isnaad* should be examined alongside it. After all the cousin of Muhammad’s wife, Khadijah, was a Christian, and Muhammad’s youngest wife was a daughter of a rabbi. The *Sirat of Ishak*, describing the life of Muhammad, was composed by a Jewish convert who included in his account many early rabbinic traditions. The “*Israiliyyat*” tradition should be reviewed honestly to the benefit of a serious encounter of Judaism and Islam.

Serious contemporary dialogue moved the Church to review the antisemitic expressions in the Gospel, as well as the typification of Jews in his days and in the later development. Parochial education was scrutinized by concerned priests and nuns that led to the removal of such negative views from their religious literature and curricular lessons. The contemporary scholarship moved towards the historical understanding of Jesus the Jew, even as a rabbi, who was sympathetic towards the rabbinic tradition of Hillelitic Pharisees. Judaism of the First Century, before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple, was reexamined from the earliest rabbinic sources and recent discoveries. The common pool of values and religious expressions from Biblical writings and the later Jewish and Christian writings now serve the scholars and teachers to produce a new climate for the modern encounter. After World War II, the Catholic Church was issuing papal declarations and new studies about the Jews and their sacred scriptures, which culminated at the end of the century with a publication by the Pontifical

Biblical Commission headed by the current Pope. At the same time a Jewish body of scholars and rabbis produced the statement of *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth) on Christians and Christianity.

The very issue of how Judaism viewed Christianity in the past was raised. Christian scholars questioned why orthodox Judaism sees Christianity as idolatry. However they failed to take note the distinction between religious Jewry from Medieval times in Islamic countries and in Christian Europe. The former did not know Christianity from actual association but only from Islamic depictions. It viewed a Trinitarian faith as contrary to the absolute unity of God. However, medieval rabbinic scholars in Christian Europe, such as the Tosaphists in France, the Meiri of Italy and R. Moshe Isserlis of Poland, were directly acquainted with Christian faith and their theological views. They maintained that Christianity is a theistic religion that is guided by the Jewish canon. The Torah, at first, describes a Noahide code of seven principles that speaks of a faith in the heavenly Father who created the world and guides it. (Such an instruction was given to Paul by James at the Jerusalem council in 48 (Acts 15). The faithful gentile can direct his prayer to Him through an intercessor; the “Apostolos” as Jesus is depicted in the Letter of the Hebrews (ch 3:1). However Judaism enjoys a covenant written in the laws of the Torah, which restricts their relationship for prayer to God only, as the source of Justice (King) and Mercy (Father) without intercession. Whereas Christianity enjoys a covenant written in the blood of Jesus, their intercessor who opens the “gate of salvation” to all people in God’s image. Maimonides at the end of his rabbinic code (Mishneh Torah , Hilkhhot Melakhim chs 11, 12 the uncensored text) states that Christianity opened such a gate to humanity to be guided by the value system of the Biblical canon. Interestingly, he also refers to Islam promoting monotheistic faith for humanity and thereby the three faiths under messianic leadership will bring the final salvation to the world in the process of history.

The distinction between Judaism and Christianity is a matter of religious focus in the Biblical faith. Christianity is Christocentric in its expression while Judaism is Torahcentric in its orientation. Both share a common ground of faith in the Creator- Provider, as well as in the salvific history that culminates in the messianic coming. [The Christians view it as a second advent but the Jews await his coming as the Son of Joseph first, to be followed by the Son of David. Messiahship is the common ground of their eschatological hope but the identity of the Messiah becomes the issue. We shall then both wait and see.] Jewish and Christian religions are guided ethically by the principle of “*imitatio*,” to walk in God’s way and they both believe in the resurrection. They view marriage as a sacrament and their family life in partnership with God, as they relate to God as the heavenly Father. They are committed to the dual principle of love, in relation to God and in relation to the fellow person who is in His image. Thus, a common ground of values is shared by the Biblically oriented people who promote freedom and dignity of the person, universal peace and the works of altruistic lovingkindness. Our dialogue should be limited to the advancement of these normative concerns of social, political, legal, educational and axiological systems of the Biblically oriented tradition. We need not explore theological constructs and christological insights that come to reflect the unique expression of a distinct theistic faith. In a similar way, when we encounter Islam we need not to explore the nature of prophecy and its reception of divine truth, but rather the common elements that seek to maintain the value system of people in God’s image, their freedom, dignity, equality and the works of loving kindness.

Both covenantal traditions are facing in modern times a secular world of thought that views life without God's presence. Life is sacred but it is not attributed to the Biblical view that the human being is made in God's image, nor other Biblical values as absolute. Spiritual fulfillment can be attained by meditative practice and by altering the state of consciousness. Relativism determine human conduct and ethical behavior. Use of language to communicate ideas can be manipulated and repeated by the media and computer technology. Revisionism prevails and alternative lifestyle is the vogue. At the same time there is a pronounced quest for a return to Biblical faith and tradition, to spirituality and mystical studies. One needs to seek a phenomenological understanding of the religious texts and not to rely on the literary and cultural examination in their comparative study. As we face the future in dialogue, we need to disassociate from a radical or fanatical views that are rooted in literalistic and deterministic approaches. From a Jewish-Catholic dialogue that seeks common ground of understanding within the Biblically oriented configuration, one can advance to a triologue with the book religion of Islam that enjoys Biblical parallels, and even with other nations whose religious traditions promote spirituality and altruistic values.

The very course of the dialogue is taken to advance the ways of peace (*darke shalom*) that lead to wholeness (i.e. *shalom*) in all our relationships that generate the value system of human experience. There are but four areas, namely the transpersonal (between person and God), the interpersonal (between person(s) and person(s)), the subpersonal (between person and nature) and the intrapersonal (between person and self). This is the Biblically oriented goal for humanity to enter into a new transformed era in the end time. At present, in light of the dialogue there are many who state that their aim is to advance "*tikkun olam*" (repairment of the world). This notion of "*tikkun*" is relativized to political and social concerns that seek to advance personal agenda of given ideology for the betterment of humanity. However, humanity needs to perfect its ways in all areas of engagement that result in a wholesome transformation with no war and conflict in the era of true peace for all.

II. My Involvement and Contribution

My academic journey began as an orthodox rabbi with a doctorate from Tuebingen University in Comparative Religion. The published dissertation dealt afresh with Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees from the early sources of Rabbinic and Christian writings. It established that the Pharisees were not a monolithic body of rabbinic authority, but they were members of two opposing schools. Jesus' harsh debate was directed towards the stricter school of Shammanites, in the majority at that time. He seems to side with the liberal school of Hillelites as the minority group. Fortunately, following the war with Rome, the School of Hillel headed by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai consolidated the rabbinic teachings eventually incorporated into the Mishnah. The providential circumstance in history gave rise to rabbinic tradition parallel to Jesus' position on the dual commandment of love as the principle of the Biblical value system.

I was invited to Seton Hall University by Msgr. Oesterreicher to join my esteemed Catholic colleague, Fr. Lawrence Frizzell, D. Phil. from Oxford University, to establish a graduate Department of Jewish-Christian Studies. In response to the U.S. Bishops Guideline for Higher Education, we were the first to design and implement a graduate program advancing the critical

understanding of the Judaeo-Catholic encounter from its roots until today. As a result, institutions of higher studies and universities adopted a similar approach and a new era has dawned that probe common areas of Jewish-Christian studies, the history and the writings, as well as Holocaust Studies and the issues of modernity. Our language courses lead to the study of the mindset of the spoken language in its historical setting. Our approach is to deal with the dynamics of our tradition and the value system of Biblical world thought.

One of our early graduates was Sr. Rose Thering of the Dominican Order, whose life work was to build a bridge between Jews and Christians. Previously she had examined the material of Catholic parochial schools with reference to antijudaic formulations. Her study eventually affected the way the Church teaches the relationship of Jews in their schools. Now both lower forms of education and higher institutions have entered the new understanding of their encounter, as it is also advocated and promoted by the Vatican. The very stumbling stones of the past are removed and the presentation of Jesus the Jew, in the historical context, can be advanced. The very approach of phenomenological examination I have introduced to explore the depth meaning of the texts, in key areas, such as the sabbatical and Jesus' preaching, the prayer of Jesus, Yavneh's prayer and early Christianity, Hallel and kerygma, Midrash and the synoptic Gospels as well as Biblical, Rabbinic and Early Christian ethics, departures from Jerusalem, Millennial historiography. In addition, I offered a new approach to the early movements in light of the Dead Sea Scrolls on Peshet and dream interpretation as well as the oracular interpretation of Scriptures as reflected in Temple Scroll and the Pesharim.

Recently I have introduced the unexcavated material of proto Masorah, as it shapes the ancient Hebrew text of the Bible as canonical Scriptures. The original compositions were transmitted by the scribes over a millennium until the classical Masoretic time of the Tiberian school, whose Leningrad manuscript is presented in Biblia Hebraica of Stuttgart. However, the early dynamics of structure, wording and arrangement with particular features on the scroll were mostly ignored by the contemporary scholarship. A wealth of ideas and values governing the text is now available that puts into question how Biblical scholars examined the Hebrew text only by surface reading and comparative analysis.

My contribution was and still is to advance freshness in our scholarly encounter, so we can draw our insights from the Biblical configuration of faith that is captured by a dynamic mindset of this unique composition. Once we share in the common pool of understanding, our common hope for humanity's wholesomeness can be realized. The world will be filled with the ultimate knowledge of God's presence "as the water covers the sea" and only then "no nation will carry weapons against another nation and they will not pursue war anymore." The very prophecy of Isaiah (2:4, 11:9) will be fulfilled by human transformation through Biblical values of *shalom*.

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