



MARY AND JUDAISM IN JEWISH-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE

Since the close of Vatican II the dialogue between Catholics and Jews has developed to the point where there are national workshops in the United States beginning with the first in Dayton, Ohio in 1973. This movement started on the grassroots level and has now included many Christian denominations in addition to the Catholic persuasion. In many of the more local gatherings the topic of Mary has been approached and usually presented by a Catholic. The topic has sparked interest when Mary is seen as a faithful Jewish woman of the first century. Fidelity to the biblical texts in the New Testament or, as the dialogue calls them, the Christian Scriptures, has been a hallmark of these presentations. When Jewish members offer examples of how they look at Mary, they hearken back to their own heroines and matriarchs like Rachel, Esther, or Sarah.

As Christians we have come to know the Jewishness of Jesus better because of His birth from a Jewish woman, Mary of Nazareth. She offers us the human context, which is at the heart of Jesus' Jewishness. Today a Jew or Jewess is known by the fact that the mother is Jewish. It is no different for Jesus of Nazareth who was born of Mary. In one of the seminars given on Mary the following remark was made by one of the Jewish women: "I want to write down some of my reflections after participating in a most stimulating seminar on Mary, the disciple of Jesus. I had no trouble perceiving her as a disciple. And I was very happy to have your clarification of exactly what is meant by disciple. I shared with you the question, 'Did the *chassidim* (pious dedicated Jews) borrow back the custom of following after the *rebbe* (rabbi) or is this still a hangover from early Rabbinic life? When one is in Israel one feels transported back to medieval Poland when the *chassidim* come streaming out of Mea Shearim (a street in Jerusalem's orthodox sector) in groups following after their own *rebbe* in white *capote* and *shtreimel* (hat with brim). After this weekend that we studied together, I will always be reminded of Jesus, too, when I see them but with one important difference - his followers included women too ... I could empathize with the person of Mary -- you painted her as strong, like Deborah; fiercely maternal, like Rebecca; loyal, like Ruth; beautiful, like Rachel; patient, like Sarah (also pretty fiercely maternal); fervent in her religious ardor, like Miriam; faithful to the Lord, like Hannah."

This Jewish dimension of Jesus is important for both Catholics and other Christians to understand the human qualities of Jesus. Mary is the person who gave birth to Him into the law of Judaism (Gal. 4:4-5). Her relationship to Him, her Son, was deepened by a daily process of a new relationship which Jesus called her to experience, that of discipleship. As Christians we, too, are called to discipleship each day. Each Gospel gives us a different aspect of discipleship and Mary's role within it. I think these various images of Mary can help each of us relate to the paradigm of discipleship; Mary of Nazareth is the first disciple of Jesus who enables us to experience the process of becoming a disciple at any stage of the call in which we find ourselves. Like those present at Cana, we, too, can hear her saying to us: "Do whatever he tells you." (Jn 2:5)

The Hebrew Scriptures are often the main subject in Jewish Christian dialogue. As time goes on and confidence in each other is built, the topic turns also to the New Testament. This is a breakthrough on the part of the Jewish members, many of whom have never read a page of the New Testament. Problems immediately surface when the group comes to the Passion Narratives and the Gospel of John in particular. The anti-Jewish, anti-Pharisee presentations by the evangelists do cause heated discussion about these texts. Here it is important to know the historical development of the Gospels in three stages including the last stage of the evangelists who were writing for churches that had left Judaism and its laws and feasts by the year 80 A.D.

year 60 A.D.

We frequently need to interpret the texts in the light of modern scholarship in order to present them in such a way that they are not offensive to the Jewish members of the dialogue and of our communities. The study of the Scriptures together is one of the leading areas for dialogue with Jews and Christians. It is also through such diligent study that reform of our Passion Plays is taking place. Characteristics of the Jewish people and their leaders are being made to conform to what they really were in the first century rather than the biased presentation of them through Christian perspectives that are not true to the ethos and history of the early Jewish community and people who surrounded Jesus. Just as Catholics have removed offensive words in the Liturgy of Good Friday in the solemn petitions, so too, must the Scriptures be presented in the light of critical historical study. The truth will set us free. Jews have a threefold basis for saying who they are and these three entities are sacred to them: namely, the Land, the People, and the Torah or their Bible, the Tanach. It took till the end of the twentieth century for the Vatican to recognize Israel as a legitimate state. This deeply hurt our Jewish brothers and sisters. Respect for their sacred three enables them to look at the Catholic position on Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterial Teaching and the Protestant on Scripture alone, grace and faith alone as guiding principles in understanding our respective religions.

Vatican II has the following on our relations with the Jewish people:

The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy deigned to establish the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree into which have been grafted to the wild olive branches of the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 11: 17 -24). Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross, Christ, our Peace, reconciled Jew and Gentile, making them both one in Himself (cf. Eph.2: 14-16).

Also, the Church ever keeps in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen, "who have the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenant and the legislation and the worship and the promises; who have the fathers, and from whom is Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:4-5), the son of the Virgin Mary.

The Church recalls too that from the Jewish people sprang the apostles, her foundation stones and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ to the world. Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred Synod wishes to foster and recommend the mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies, and of brotherly dialogues. (Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate*, 4).

A more extensive treatment of the relationship of Mary to her Jewish people is presented in Vol. 2 *Mary of Galilee: Woman of Israel - Daughter of Zion*. By Bertrand Buby SM, Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1994. See especially the description of Mary as a Jewish Woman of the first century in chapter 2.

– Bertrand Buby SM

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