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Jewish Scripture is a key to understanding Jesus – document says

Pontifical Biblical Commission Publishes a New Text

VATICAN CITY, (Zenit.org) - A new Vatican document says it is not possible to understand Christianity fully without reflecting on divine revelation as contained in the Jewish Bible.

Moreover, the text, published by the *Pontifical Biblical Commission*, affirms that it is mistaken "to use as a pretext for anti-Judaism" the "warnings" that the Christian Bible addresses to Jews.

Likewise, the document recognizes that "in the past, errors were committed by unilaterally insisting on the discontinuity" that exists between the Jewish Bible (*Old Testament*) and the Christian Bible (*Old and New Testaments*).

The 200-page study, entitled "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," was published by the Vatican Press. At present, it is not on the Vatican's Web page.

"This is a total novelty," Chief Rabbi Joseph Levi of Florence told the Italian press. Rabbi Levi is especially pleased with the objective of the document: to manifest officially "the amazing force of the spiritual ties that unite the Church of Christ with the Jewish people."

The *Biblical Commission*, presided over by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is composed of 20 leading biblicists. The members were appointed by John Paul II at the cardinal's suggestion.

In introducing the study, which began in 1997, Cardinal Ratzinger invites Christians to recognize "the Jewish reading of the Bible as a possible reading." In other words, such a reading might be of great help in important questions, such as the Messiah.

"The Jewish Messianic Expectation is not vain," the document states. "It can become a strong stimulus for us to maintain the eschatological dimension alive," that is, the Christian expectation of Jesus' return at the end of time, it says.

"Like them, we also live in expectation," the document continues. "The difference is in the fact that for us the One who will come will have traces of that Jesus who has already come and who is present and active among us."

The new publication "hopes to foster love toward the Jews in the Church of Christ," following the "abominable crimes" of which they were object during World War II.

In "light of the Scripture, the rupture between the Church of Christ and the Jewish people should not have happened," the document affirms.

The newly published document is divided into chapters. The first one, which is fundamental, states that the *New Testament* recognizes the authority of the *Old Testament* as divine revelation, and cannot be understood without being intimately related to it and with the Jewish tradition that transmitted it.

The second chapter examines more analytically how the writings of the *New Testament* accept the rich content of the *Old Testament*, referring to its fundamental topics in light of Jesus Christ.

The third chapter records the extremely varied attitudes on the Jews reflected in the *New Testament*, something which also occurs in the *Old Testament*.

From the *New York Times*:

Vatican Says Jews' Wait for Messiah Is Validated by the *Old Testament*

Melinda Henneberger

VATICAN CITY, Jan. 17 - The Vatican has issued what some Jewish scholars are calling an important document that explicitly says, "The Jewish wait for the Messiah is not in vain."

The scholarly work, effectively a rejection of and apology for the way some Christians have viewed the *Old Testament*, was signed by the pope's theologian, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

The document says Jews and Christians in fact share the wait for the Messiah, though Jews are waiting for the first coming, and Christians for the second.

"The difference consists in the fact that for us, he who will come will have the same traits of that Jesus who has already come," wrote Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

At least one Jewish scholar said the new document is a marked departure from "Dominus Iesus," a study of the redemptive role of Jesus that was released last year in Cardinal Ratzinger's name and that fanned disputes between Catholic and Jewish scholars.

The new document also says Catholics must regard the *Old Testament* as "retaining all of its value, not just as literature, but its moral value," said Joaquín Navarro-Valls, the pope's spokesman. "You cannot say, 'Now that Jesus has come, it becomes a second-rate document.'"

"The expectancy of the Messiah was in the *Old Testament*," he went on,

"and if the *Old Testament* keeps its value, then it keeps that as a value, too. It says you cannot just say all the Jews are wrong and we are right."

Asked whether that could be taken to mean that the Messiah may or may not have come, Dr. Navarro-Valls said no. "It means it would be wrong for a Catholic to wait for the Messiah, but not for a Jew," he said.

The document, the result of years of work by the *Pontifical Biblical Commission*, goes on to apologize for the fact that certain *New Testament* passages that criticize the Pharisees, for example, had been used to justify anti-Semitism.

Everything in the report is now considered part of official church doctrine, Dr. Navarro-Valls said.

The Rev. Albert Vanhoye, a Jesuit scholar who worked on the commission, said the project sees Scripture as a link between Christians and Jews, and the *New Testament* as a continuation of the *Old*, though divergent in obvious ways.

A number of Jewish scholars and leaders said they were pleased but stunned and would have to take some time to digest fully the complicated, 210-page study, published in French and Italian.

"This is something altogether new, especially compared with the earlier document from Ratzinger that was so controversial," said Rabbi Alberto Piattelli, a professor and leader of the Jewish community in Rome.

"This latest declaration is a step forward" in closing the wounds opened by that earlier document, Rabbi Piattelli said. "It recognizes the value of the Jewish position regarding the wait for the Messiah, changes the whole exegesis of biblical studies and restores our biblical passages to their original meaning. I was surprised."

Prof. Michael R. Marrus, dean of graduate studies at the University of Toronto, who specializes in the history of the Holocaust, was also complimentary. Professor Marrus was among the Jewish members of a panel studying the Vatican's role in the Holocaust, but the group was disbanded after disputes between Catholic and Jewish scholars.

"This is important," he said, "and all the more so because it comes from Cardinal Ratzinger, who is not considered the most liberal spokesman for the church. It represents real and remarkable progress on the Catholic-Jewish front," even as the dispute over the Catholic Church's wartime history seems to be hardening, he added.

At least initially, the only voices of dissent were on the Catholic side, where some traditionalists said they felt the church under Pope John Paul II had done altogether too much apologizing already.

Vittorio Messori, a Catholic writer and commentator, said he respects the pope but "his apologies leave me perplexed."

"He's inspired and has his reasons," Mr. Messori said, "but what's dangerous in these apologies is that he seems to say the Church itself has been wrong in its teaching," rather than just some within the Church.

The oddest thing about the document from the Jewish perspective is that it was so quietly released. It has been in bookstores here since November, but as a small book titled *The Jewish People and the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, it drew no notice until the Italian news agency ANSA printed a small report on it Wednesday.

Tullia Zevi, a longtime Jewish community leader and commentator here, said: "The widespread opinion on the document is that it's trying to question the validity of past attitudes of the Church, and seems an attempt to move us closer together. So why was such an important document kept secret?"

One possibility, she said, was that the Church was trying to avoid criticism within its own ranks. Vatican officials, however, say it was not announced because it was seen mainly as a theological study intended for other theologians.

The Vatican is governed by tradition and habit, and is thus quite able to keep silent about even important new policies. In December, for example, word emerged without fanfare of new rules on the treatment of priests accused of pedophilia.

Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Sant'Egidio Community, a left-leaning Catholic group with a history of mediating international conflicts and promoting religious dialogue, said he was most impressed by the depth of the new document.

"This should be reassuring" to Jews, he said, "especially because these last years have not been easy."

He said the document in no way backtracks from "Dominus Iesus" ("The Lord Jesus"), but does represent a significant shift.

"In the past, we've talked about an ancient, common heritage," he said. "But now, for the first time, we're talking about our future waiting for the Messiah and the end of time."

Waiting together?

"No," Mr. Riccardi said. "But waiting close to each other."

From the *Associated Press*:

Praise for Vatican Paper on Jews

Candice Hughes, *AP* Writer

ROME (*AP*)

A leader of Rome's Jewish community praised a new Vatican document that says Christians should respect the Jewish wait for a messiah, but questioned Friday why its release was kept quiet. The document says both Christians and Jews share the wait for a messiah, although Jews are waiting for the first coming and Christians for the second. "The Jewish wait for the messiah is not in vain," it says.

Tullia Zevi, an Italian Jewish leader who lives in Rome, said the document, part of an ongoing attempt by the Vatican to improve relations with the Jews, “is very noble in a certain sense. It carries weight.”

But the Vatican did nothing to herald the publication of the document, the work of its most important theologian, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. It appeared in Rome bookstores as a small volume called *The Jewish People and the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. “It is very interesting it was kept in the cooler,” Zevi said. “People are questioning why.”

The document is viewed as a departure from “Dominus Jesus,” a declaration issued by Ratzinger last year that challenged the idea that “one religion is as good as another.” That declaration raised criticism from some Jewish and other non-Catholic scholars, and Zevi and others speculate that while the new document was meant to help mend relations, the Roman Catholic Church kept it quiet because it feared dissent within its own ranks. The Vatican denies that. “There was no intention to hide it,” said a Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Ciro Benedettini.

Zevi said the publication was a positive development in the often strained relationship between the Vatican and Jews, but one that would take some time to be absorbed by religious scholars and communities. “It will be interesting to see what the various strands of Judaism and Catholicism will take out of it,” she said. “It took a long time to be born and will take a long time to grow up.”

The book – so far published only in French and Italian – was produced by the *Pontifical Commission on Biblical Studies*. There was no word on when it would be officially released by the Vatican press office. Both Jews and Christians believe in the coming of a messiah to save the world. Christians believe Jesus Christ fulfilled the promise once and promised his followers he would return a second time and take them to heaven.

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