

Introduction

AFTER READING THE SECOND Vatican Council's declaration on the Jewish people, *Nostra Aetate* Sec. 4, my students often remark that nothing strikes them as remarkable or noteworthy. Of course the Jewish people are not under a curse or guilty of the death of Christ. Of course Jesus was Jewish. The positive language about the Jews—that Jewish people remain dear to God; that God's calling and election of these people cannot be revoked; that the Church sprang from the Jewish people—represents for them the standard Christian view of Judaism.

Few Christians realize that the core ideas behind this view of Judaism were assembled piece by piece in the shadow of the Third Reich, by a small number of theologians and activists who wrote against antisemitism, both before and after the horror of the *Shoah*. As John Connelly has shown, the ideas in *Nostra Aetate* emerged out of a Christian theological struggle against Nazi racial antisemitism in Central Europe in the years just before the Holocaust.¹ John M. Osterreicher and Karl Thieme, among others, fought to prevent the synthesis of Catholicism with Nazism during the rise of the Third Reich, and advocated for the Vatican to speak out against antisemitic violence. As the theologians engaged in this dangerous struggle, they were forced to question traditional Christian arguments invoked by the Nazis, such as that Jews were under a divine curse for deicide and that Judaism was an obsolete religion superseded by Christianity.

The crucial figure in the struggle was Karl Thieme, a Protestant convert to Catholicism, and the “main architect” of the new vision of the Jews.² Through a heated exchange with Martin Buber in 1948, Thieme came to recognize that what was needed to overcome antisemitism was the rejection

1. Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*

2. *Ibid.*, 212.

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of its theological source, namely, the Christian perception of Jews as a carnal and degenerate people.³ Thieme thought the root of this idea was the Christian teaching that fleshly Israel was a people “God willed only in the past but no longer; now, God willed the true spiritual Israel, the Church.”⁴

Thieme challenged this traditional teaching by drawing upon the Apostle Paul’s words, in the letter to the Romans, that Jews remain dear to God *despite* unbelief in Christ; that Jews retain a special dignity because God has elected this people, and given them the Law and promises. The breakthrough idea was that a Jewish person, not only as an individual but precisely *as a Jew* can be pleasing to God. “Precisely for the Jews according to the entirety of divine revelation certain promises continue to be in force, so that one can assume that even in distance from Christ the Jewish people enjoys special guidance and special grace.”⁵ Thieme was able to assemble these ideas about the Jews and make the argument that God, even after the passion of Christ, willed that Jews continue to exist, according to the flesh, and unto the end of time. Eventually, the “architect” of *Nostra Aetate* would appeal to this reading of Paul to uproot the traditional Christian idea that “fleshly” Israel was obsolete.⁶

Thieme’s positive affirmation of the Jewish people met theological resistance. Theologians and New Testament scholars responded with appeals to Galatians and Hebrews, and claimed that the Jews’ role in history as the chosen people was made obsolete and that the New Covenant had replaced the Old Covenant.⁷ Jews *were* Israel according to the flesh while the Church represented the true, spiritual Israel. Nevertheless, Thieme’s vision would be integrated into *Nostra Aetate* Sec. 4, and promulgated at the last session of the Second Vatican Council, in 1965.

In the decades that followed the Council, the Vatican not only developed *Nostra Aetate*’s teaching on the Jews but did so while pointing out traditional Christian teachings that must be set aside.⁸ In 1985, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews insisted that the Jew-

3. Ibid., 201.

4. Ibid., 213.

5. Ibid., 205.

6. Ibid., 185.

7. Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 225.

8. For an overview of the Catholic Church’s implementation of *Nostra Aetate* see Cardinal Kurt Koch, “Building on *Nostra Aetate*.” For an analysis of the development of teaching from 1965 to 1985 see Eugene Fisher, “The Evolution of a Tradition,” 241.

ish people are a “permanent reality,” and ongoing “witness” to the God of Israel.⁹ “The history of Israel did not end in 70 A.D. It continued, especially in numerous Diaspora which allowed Israel to carry to the whole world a witness—often heroic—of its fidelity to the one God.”¹⁰ The Commission did not want its affirmation to be understood with reference to the Augustinian teaching that Jews unknowingly witness to the truth of Christianity by observing their religious customs.¹¹ Rather, the Commission demanded Christians set aside this doctrine: “We must in any case rid ourselves of the traditional idea of a people *punished*, preserved as a *living argument* for Christian apologetic. It remains a chosen people . . .”¹²

Over the last decade, scholarly comment upon Thomas Aquinas’s theology of the Jewish people began to reflect the concerns expressed in *Nostra Aetate*. One way this has happened has been by means of a term, “supersessionism.” Scholars now use “supersede,” as well as supersessionism, as labels that identify an inadequate or problematic Christian understanding of Judaism. While the term supersessionism does not appear in *Nostra Aetate*, the question of the presence of supersessionism in Aquinas’s thought can be traced directly to the systematic dialogue between Catholic and Jewish scholars that emerged in the decades after *Nostra Aetate*.

In 1982, the Orthodox Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod and the late Rev. Clemens Thoma (1932–2011), a priest in the Society of the Divine Word, contacted the Secretary of the Commission for Relations with the Jews, Bishop Jorge Mejía, with the intention of remedying what they perceived as a lack of attention to theological questions in Catholic-Jewish relations.¹³ Wyschogrod and Thoma shared the belief that Catholic-Jewish dialogue was too influenced by political concerns and ought to be grounded upon theological research. Their contact with Mejía resulted in a trip to Rome to meet with the Vice-President of the Commission for Promoting Christian Unity, Bishop Ramon Torrella.

9. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “Notes 1985.” Fisher has also noted that the 1985 Vatican Notes emphasize this point. Fisher, “The Evolution of a Tradition,” 6.

10. “Notes 1985,” VI # 1.

11. Augustine, *Against Faustus*, 12.11; 16:21; 12: 23. See also Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law*, 59–65; Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, 276–77.

12. “Notes 1985,” VI # 1. Whatever its deficiencies, Augustine’s argument is arguably an improvement over the *adversus Iudaeos* tradition. See Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*.

13. Thoma and Wyschogrod, *Understanding Scripture*, 4.

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The meeting resulted in the formation of an academic consultation of Catholic and Jewish scholars. The consultation was sponsored by the Institute for Jewish-Christian Relations of the American Jewish Congress, and the Institute for Jewish-Christian Research of the Theological Faculty of Luzern, which acted in collaboration with the Vatican. The consultation was held from January 16 to 18, 1984, in Luzern, Switzerland, and reflects the concern of Wyschogrod and Thoma to move theological questions related to the interpretation of Scripture to the center of the dialogue. The consultation was devoted to “The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in Judaism and Christianity”—to what Wyschogrod referred to as “topics central to the two faiths.”¹⁴

Wyschogrod’s own contribution to the consultation was entitled “A Jewish Reading of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Old Law.” It was published three years later in the 1987 volume entitled, *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretation*.¹⁵ In this essay, Wyschogrod argues that Aquinas’s teaching that Jewish observation of the “ceremonial Mosaic Law” (circumcision, Sabbath, dietary laws) after the passion of Christ is obsolete and a mortal sin (or “dead and deadly”) is an obstacle for the new era of Jewish-Christian relations.¹⁶ In Wyschogrod’s view, the teaching that Jewish observances have become obsolete and sinful after the passion implies that God no longer desires for Jewish people to exist. For the existence of the Jewish people through time depends upon its obedience to Torah; if God desires that the latter cease, he must desire that the former cease as well. But if God desires that the Jews no longer exist then it follows that the Jews do not remain dear to God; that God has rescinded the promise that the Jews remain his beloved people to the end of time.¹⁷

Wyschogrod’s essay raises a question of paramount significance concerning the relationship of Aquinas’s theology to the new era of Jewish-Christian relations. Indeed, Wyschogrod’s essay suggests that Aquinas’s teaching on Jewish observances after the passion of Christ undermines the theological foundation of *Nostra Aetate*’s teaching on the Jews.

14. *Ibid.*, 4.

15. Wyschogrod, “A Jewish Reading of St. Thomas Aquinas,” 125–38.

16. *Ibid.*, 138.

17. Wyschogrod, “Israel, Church, and Election.”

The question of supersessionism in Aquinas's theology has elicited deep disagreement among scholars.¹⁸ On the one hand, scholars argue that Aquinas avoids supersessionism. On the other hand, scholars argue Aquinas is the standard-bearer of a supersessionist Church. The first and only reply to Wyschogrod's essay appeared more than a decade later, with the publication of Matthew Levering's 2002 study, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*.¹⁹ Levering's book was, in part, a response to Wyschogrod's essay. In his reply, Levering claims that Aquinas "avoids supersessionism." However, as I demonstrate at length in chapter 2, Levering ultimately sidesteps Wyschogrod's claim that Aquinas's teaching on Jewish observance of the Law after Christ suggests that God desires that the Jewish people disappear from the world.

Two other limitations plague the current discussion. One limitation is the confusion of the term supersessionism with antisemitism, or indeed a failure to clearly define the term supersessionism at all. This confusion is due to a general lack of attention to systematic theological reflection about the term supersessionism. A second limitation stems from a lack of attention to Aquinas's biblical commentaries. Wyschogrod and other scholars who have commented upon whether Aquinas's theology is supersessionist have focused chiefly on the *Summa theologiae*. With the exception of a few studies of parts of Aquinas's commentary on Romans, scholars have overlooked his commentaries on Paul's letters to the Galatians, Hebrews, and Ephesians, which include some of Aquinas's most extended reflections on the subjects of Israel and the Church. The neglect of Aquinas's commentaries on Paul's letters represents a significant gap in the current discussion.

This study attempts to remedy these deficiencies by adjudicating conflicting claims in the discussion over whether Aquinas's theology is supersessionist. Providing an answer to Wyschogrod's critique is crucial, not only for Thomists and Catholic theologians, but for all Christians who might assume that, after Christ, Jewish religious practices are obsolete. According to Wyschogrod, the traditional teaching that Jewish observances are obsolete ultimately amounts to saying that God does not keep God's promises and, therefore, that God cannot be trusted. If this is correct, Wyschogrod's criticism of Aquinas impacts not only Thomistic studies but a whole set of

18. The scholars in the discussion using the term supersessionism include Mark Kinzer, Steven C. Boguslawski, Matthew Levering, and Bruce Marshall. I treat each of their views in the second chapter.

19. Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*.

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assumptions about what might be called, the standard Christian interpretation of Christ's fulfillment of Jewish Law.

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In the chapters that follow, I show that the question of supersessionism in Aquinas turns on his understanding of Jewish observance of the Law after the passion of Christ, and specifically, on whether such observance can have a positive theological significance, or whether it is always and necessarily "dead and deadly." I argue that while Thomas' most commonly articulated view is that Jewish observance of the ceremonial law is discontinued after the passion of Christ, he also advanced views that set this into question, and thus represents a premodern precursor to Thieme's positive interpretation of postbiblical Judaism.

Chapters 1 and 2 are devoted to clarifying the term supersessionism. As noted, lack of clarity regarding the meaning of the term is a major problem that plagues the discussion over whether Aquinas's theology is supersessionist. In chapter 1, I examine use of the term outside the sphere of Thomistic studies per se. I recover the theological meaning by drawing upon the work of the French-Jewish historian of antisemitism Jules Isaac, and the Christian systematic theologian R. Kendall Soulen. I argue that Soulen's work points contemporary theological discussions on supersessionism to what is perhaps an underappreciated proposition of Isaac on the traditional Christian teaching that Christ's fulfillment of Jewish Law also entails its obsolescence or expiration.²⁰

In chapter 2, I examine use of the term supersessionism among scholars who address the thought of Aquinas. I explain what Michael Wyschogrod, Matthew Levering, Mark Kinzer, Bruce Marshall, and Steven Boguslawski mean when they use the term "supersessionism," and discuss whether their use of the term is coherent. I demonstrate that the lack of precision with regard to the language of supersessionism and/or the failure to attend to Aquinas's most relevant works renders scholars' conclusions regarding Aquinas's susceptibility to the charge of supersessionism premature. I also show that the question of the status of the "ceremonial Mosaic

20. "Proposition 9: Jesus was born and lived 'under the Law,' did he intend or announce its abrogation? Many writers hold that he did, but their statements exaggerate, distort, or contradict the most important passages in the gospels." Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel*, 49.

Law” after the passion of Christ is the crux of the matter in the debate about whether Aquinas’s theology is supersessionist.

In the third chapter, I set the stage for an examination of Aquinas’s view of the observance of the ceremonial law in “some of his greatest theological works,” Aquinas’s commentaries on Paul’s letters.²¹ By drawing upon Aquinas’s first inaugural sermon at the University of Paris, and the Prologue he attaches to the beginning of his commentaries on Paul’s letters, I demonstrate that Aquinas’s commentaries contain some of the most extended reflections on Israel and Church in general, and the observance of the ceremonial law in particular.

In chapters 4 through 7 I examine Aquinas’s view of the observance of the ceremonial law after the passion of Christ in the four commentaries on Paul’s letters that contain the most material on this subject (Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Hebrews) in order to determine whether such observance can have a positive theological significance, or whether it is always and necessarily “dead and deadly.” In other words, is there any sense in which these rites serve as a spiritual benefit for Jews now?

In the eighth chapter, I compare my analysis of Aquinas’s views of the ceremonial law in his Pauline commentaries with his view of the theological status of the ceremonial law after the passion of Christ in the *Summa theologiae*. Scholars are increasingly attempting the task of comparing key themes in Aquinas’s biblical commentaries with those same themes in the *Summa theologiae* in an effort to produce clearer pictures of Aquinas’s theology. I follow this development in Thomistic studies and aim to provide a more comprehensive picture of Aquinas’s thought on Jewish Law after the passion of Christ in his commentaries on Hebrews, Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and the *Summa theologiae*.

This study can be considered as one part of a broader trend of growing attention to the significance of Aquinas’s biblical commentaries for understanding his theology.²² The study aims to uncover Aquinas’s view of the ceremonial law in these commentaries with attention to contemporary concerns of the new era of Jewish-Christian dialogue initiated, in part, by *Nostra Aetate*. The contemporary discussion indicates that a fuller picture of Aquinas’s views on the ceremonial law after the passion of Christ is necessary for adjudicating claims that Aquinas’s theology is or is not

21. Pius XII, “An Address to the Faculty and Students of the Roman Athenaeum Angelicum,” in Baglow, “*Modus Et Forma*,” 26.

22. Wilhelmus G. B. M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 2–3.

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supersessionist. As Jean-Pierre Torrell has observed, “If we wish . . . to get a slightly less one-sided idea of the whole theologian and his method, it is imperative to read and use in a much deeper fashion these biblical commentaries in parallel with the great systematic works.”²³

SAMPLE

23. Torrell, *Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, 55.