



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 21: Supersessionism

Astride the portals of many medieval cathedrals, one may find depictions of Ecclesia and Synagoga - the former representing Christianity, the latter Judaism. Usually depicted as two women, Ecclesia is shown as upright and proud, often carrying a chalice and a staff topped with a cross. Synagoga, on the other hand, is downcast, often blindfolded, her staff broken, the tablets of the law slipping from her hand. In an age when most people in Europe were illiterate, the visual images of Ecclesia and Synagoga were important teaching tools for the masses. These dueling depictions offer a graphic illustration of the doctrine known as Christian supersessionism. This view asserts that by rejecting Jesus, the Jews lost their status as a covenantal people, and their covenant with God has been superseded or replaced by Christians and Christianity.

Supersessionism, arises not from the differences between Christianity and Judaism, but from the source they share in common - namely, the Biblical scriptures. Christianity sees in those scriptures prophecies that are fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, Christianity sees itself not so much as a new religion, but as Judaism's successor. Hence the terms supersessionism, also known as fulfillment theology or replacement theology.

While Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, it did so at a time when Judaism itself was at an historical inflection point. The Romans had conquered Judea and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. For the Jews, this national tragedy necessitated a transition from a Temple-based religion to one built on Biblical and rabbinic texts. But for the early Christians, the destruction of the Temple was seen as a confirmation that their understanding of the biblical texts was correct. God had transferred the elected status from all Jews to the followers of Jesus.

In time, what began as a new way of interpreting a common heritage hardened into a conflict between rival faith communities and theological outlooks. Since the coming of Jesus was seen by Christians as the fulfillment of the Bible's messianic prophecies, the refusal of the Jews to acknowledge it as such constituted --not the perspective of a different religion -- but the

obstinate obstruction of the new reality. In this emerging Christian view, the Jews had not only been replaced in their position as God's elect people, but they also had, through that obstinacy, forfeited their right to interpret their own scripture.

Christianity's message of universalism magnifies the challenges posed by Jews and Judaism for Christian theology. Unlike Judaism, which is a particular faith for a particular people, Christianity extends its message to all humankind. The Jews' rejection of that message is thus seen as rejection of Christian salvation. The mere continued existence of the earlier religion constitutes a rejection of Christianity and thus a threat to its supersessionist self-definition.

The challenge that supersessionism poses for Jews and Judaism, however, became problematic and dangerous when Christianity acquired political power. Then it could use that power to oppress, suppress, expel, and coerce, as it indeed did during much of Christianity's period of dominance in Europe. This linking of supersessionist theology and political hegemony led to a long and dark history in antisemitic persecutions throughout the European continent.¹

Emerging Enlightenment philosophy in 18th and 19th century Europe began to change this lamentable chapter in Jewish-Christian relations. And the enormity of the Holocaust drove home the evil of a theology that blithely inculcates Jew hatred. An emerging pluralism at the end of the 20th century softened supersessionism's harshest edges and made its most blatant expressions odious.

In 1965, under the leadership of Pope Paul VI, the Second Vatican Council published *Nostra Aetate* (Latin for "In Our Time"), an historic shift in the Church's teachings on Jews and Judaism and an effort to foster dialogue within the Jewish community and other non-Christian religious groups. Since then, there have been additional efforts to create greater understanding between Catholics, Jews, and other faith communities.

One fruit of this ongoing dialogue is an array of new metaphors that Christian and Jewish scholars use to describe the relationship between their respective faith traditions. One familiar metaphor is Paul's image of Gentile Christians as branches grafted onto a tree with Jewish roots. Those who use this imagery usually intend it as a compliment, indicating the commonalities between the two traditions, and the debt the younger owes to the older. It should be noted, however, that some Jews might object to their tradition being consigned to a subterranean role, or that their root-stock should ultimately bear someone else's fruit.

There are other metaphors that have become popular in Christian-Jewish interfaith dialogue--parent and child, elder and younger siblings, first and second blessings, and partners awaiting the ultimate redemption of the world. In addition, scholars and artists have worked together to develop new visual representations of Judaism and Christianity. They include "Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time," a sculpture at Philadelphia's St. Joseph's University that was blessed by Pope Francis during his 2015 visit to the United States.

¹ For further information, please watch the "Antisemitism 101: An Introduction" and "Antisemitism 201: Myths and Modern Times" videos in the "Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic" series.

Jewish-Christian dialogue ultimately rests on both sides' willingness to live with their differences and work together in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*. For Jews, it means appreciating that supersessionism is an understandable consequence of the self-definition of early Christians as heirs of the Mosaic tradition, and their need to establish the theological legitimacy of the emerging Church. For Christians, it means accepting that Jewish continuity is an implicit rejection of their messianic beliefs and pondering the theological challenges of a view that God has a covenantal relationship with Jews and others as well as Christians. If these are difficult compromises to make, perhaps there is enough in their shared tradition to give hope that, in God's time, the noblest aspirations of both communities will be fulfilled.

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