

## **Renewing Orthodox Christian Faith, Worship, and Life through Jewish Dialogue**

The vital work of theological engagement with Judaism is ongoing across Christianity, including today within the Orthodox Church. Last year the Orthodox Theological Society in America established a working group of scholars to address aspects of anti-Judaism within the preaching, teaching, and worship of the Orthodox Church.

The group, which I have the honour of chairing, is called Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews, and we are mindful of the careful work needed to face up to nearly 20 centuries of prejudice that fundamentally distorts the gospel and Orthodox theology.

Along this path, however, participants in this theological dialogue are making joyful discoveries through engagement and deepened relationships with Jews. By learning more about Jewish history, faith, and practice, we are learning more *about ourselves* – rediscovering often-overlooked dimensions of our own theology and faith practice.

Today I will briefly explore three such themes:

(1) first, a recovery of the full narrative of God and Israel in the Scriptures – and a truer *christotelic* rather than a limited *christocentric* typology;

(2) secondly, a deeper understanding of Orthodox Christian liturgical and faith practices when viewed from Jewish perspective;

(3) and thirdly, the retrieval of a more vital sense of living patristic tradition reflecting the dynamic “Talmudic” approach to seeking truth, through dialogue and debate.

### **(1) Recovery of the Full Narrative of God and Israel**

Let us turn first to the Orthodox Christian understanding of the Scriptures (by which I mean what is often called the Old Testament). The Scriptures permeate Orthodox Christian experience — they are the basis of our liturgical services, the foundation of our patristic theology and mystical tradition. They are everywhere. And yet we so often reduce the Scriptures to a mere pattern-book of types and prefigurative images.

This is not a criticism of typology as such, or indeed of learning about Christ in the Scriptures. Jesus himself invites that lens of interpretation when he opens the Scriptures to his disciples after the resurrection, and says that they should find in there everything written about him in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms — that is to say, in *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, in what Jews call the Tanakh (the reference to the psalms here standing for the whole of the writings).

That is the invitation, but how do we do it? Not all typological and christological interpretations are created equal.

Sadly the most egregious way of going about this task remains the most widespread. That’s simply mining the Scriptures for predictions. Jesus says, go and find me in the Scriptures, so we find embedded in the texts a checklist of messianic prophecies to be decoded as proofs that he is the

messiah. We extract each datum from large dataset and we discard the rest.

Messiah born in Bethlehem, check. Born of a virgin, check. Tribe of Judah, check. There are checklists like this hundreds of items long. The context for these, the whole *story*, doesn't matter. And nevermind most of these were never messianic prophecies to begin with.

As Orthodox Christians, we might think we stand above such a primitive approach. But scarcely a step up from this sort of proof-texting is an entrenched view that Jesus is the true and concrete fulfilment of what had previously been only shadowy scriptural patterns and symbols. He says to search the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, so we read the Scriptures to sort the wheat from the chaff, to focus on the right stories and find the types that point to him. We're still not reading the whole narrative, but simply focusing our attention on selected texts and one-dimensional interpretations of them, and placing these passages on a regular rotation on our playlists. The Scriptures themselves are relegated to a lower stratum, the shadows to be made clear, the empty vessels to be filled up by their fulfilment in Christ.

This *christocentric* approach can be found early on. Look no further than Justin Martyr's second century *Dialogue with Trypho*. As a reasonably friendly dialogue — real or not — it is a beautiful document in many ways. But one of the things Justin says is that when Moses came down from the mountain and delivered the covenant to Israel, the people were meant to comprehend everything he said in a *spiritual*, not fleshly, way. In other words, no one was ever actually meant to circumcise or to offer animal sacrifice and so forth. These commandments were all meant to be

understood spiritually, but the people of Israel simply misunderstood and misapplied them.

Such a *christocentric* reading produces weak, even bad typology. Jesus came to fulfil something that was never actually concrete in the first place. It was just a symbol system, lines for him to colour in. Such weak typology not only provides a foundation for so many anti-Jewish tropes – spirit vs flesh, grace vs law, and so forth – but it impoverishes our understanding of the identity of Jesus.

Engagement in theological dialogue with Jews and hearing from them on the Scriptures enable us to strengthen our typology. If *all* Scripture is inspired by God, literally God-breathed (2 Timothy 3.16), then surely there's value in recovering and reading the full story of God of Israel, not simply sorting presumed wheat from chaff, but taking the entire narrative as important, and thus bringing the whole weight and meaning of the original narrative accounts to bear within the New Testament commentaries on the Scriptures and indeed our liturgical texts that depend so heavily on them.

And within that whole scriptural narrative, it turns out that God is consistent in his actions with his people Israel and with all creation. That's why patterns and types link stories, characters, events, and places across the scriptural texts. It tends to be the case, for example, that people are called up mountains to encounter God, who gives them some form of revelation, and commissions them. The basis of typology is God's faithfulness to his people.

In this stronger form of typology, Jesus isn't therefore the "antitype" summing up all types because he *replaces* all that went before, but because through his life, and words, and prophetic acts he becomes the ultimate *pointer* to the meaning of these recurring types in God's ongoing faithful creative and redemptive work. Jesus shows why Israel and its particular history are not negligible but the place where God has been constantly at work all along. Nothing was ever empty, it was always full.

In Paul's words to the Romans, Jesus is the *telos* of the Torah — not the "end of the law" as most translations put it — but the *telos*, the narrative purpose and climax of all the Scriptures, summing up and recapitulating and pointing back to the whole story of God and Israel.

Picking up on this narrative term *telos*, we can call this fuller narrative approach to the Scriptures *christotelic*, rather than *christocentric*.

For a *christotelic* approach think — *not* proof text, but — *hypertext*. In other words, with each of these typological associations, or these allusions or quotations from the Scriptures where it says in the gospel, "this happened in order to fulfil," we are not meant to just identify another check on a list, or indeed something that happened before that was shadowy then, but now is fulfilled. Rather, these are meant to be clicked on like we do on a website to open up the full narrative of what has been referenced. In this way we bring in the whole meaning of that story — in its full context, and within the diversity of interpretations with which it has already been traditioned, and continues to be traditioned within the people of God.

This works with every quotation, allusion, and narrative pattern or type, but let's consider briefly one example — Matthew's reference, in relation to

Jesus's healing ministry, to what is often called the "fifth gospel," the account of the suffering servant in Isaiah. "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matthew 8.17 and Isaiah 53.4). Viewing this as either a prophetic proof text or as something that may have happened before but is now *really* happening sell both Matthew and Jesus short.

Rather, it's a hypertext link to the entire narrative of the suffering servant. Admittedly, at first this doesn't get us very far, because reading Isaiah 53 and 54 sounds an awful lot like Good Friday, like an account of the passion of Christ.

But let's remember that Isaiah has a collection of four servant songs. And when we delve into the entire narrative, we hear clearly who the servant is: "You are my servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (Isaiah 49.3). The prophet represents the whole people of Israel collectively as the suffering servant. So now we have a contested interpretation. Is Isaiah speaking about some future Messiah figure or is it the whole people of Israel? Jews will opt for the latter, Christians for the former, and we're in an endless debate.

There's a wonderful book that A.J. Levine put out with Mark Zvi Brettler called *The Bible With and Without Jesus*, where they go through all these passages and show how Jews and Christians read them differently.

But my point is that such a book only exists because of our limited, reductive *christocentric* readings of the Scriptures. It wouldn't have been necessary if we Christians had realised we can learn most about Jesus by reading the Scriptures *alongside* Jews reading the Tanakh, alongside an ongoing rabbinic Jewish wrestling with Scriptural passages, finding new

meaning in them, down to our day. I believe, for example, that reflection by Jews on the suffering servant as the people of Israel through and after the Shoah teaches us yet more about the suffering servant, about Israel. And everything we learn from these multiple interpretations of the scriptural narrative ultimately enhances and deepens our understanding of who Jesus is.

## **(2) Jewish Light on Orthodox Liturgy and Life**

Another discovery from Jewish dialogue has been a deepened understanding of elements of Orthodox Christian liturgy and life when we have the opportunity to view them in Jewish perspective.

Consider, for instance, the importance of Saturday in the Byzantine rite, which parallels the Jewish Sabbath.

We still have Sabbath in the Christian east — Σάββατο in Greek, *Subbota* in Slavonic, *Sâmbătă* in Romanian, and so on. This nomenclature reflects the deep historical and theological connection between the Jewish Sabbath and the meaning of Saturday in Orthodox Christianity.

Yes, the principal day of worship for Jesus followers was transferred to Sunday, to the “Day of the Lord” (*Kyriake*), in honour of the resurrection and inauguration of the life of the age to come. It becomes the eighth day, the day of renewal and new creation.

But Saturday retains its liturgical and theological importance as the seventh day. Saturday is a *liturgical* day, meaning the Divine Liturgy, the central act of worship of the church, is always appointed to be served, even

during Great Lent when we do not celebrate the eucharistic liturgy on weekdays.

Likewise Saturday is never a *fasting* day – we abstain from certain foods during penitential seasons, yes, but we don't keep the strict fast – the practice of not eating anything until after Vespers on fast days (an injunction universally ignored) and we are allowed wine and oil, and by extension, the cooked foods which are excluded by the *xerophagy* (dry eating) to be adhered to on all fasting days.

The one exception is the Great and Holy Sabbath, Holy Saturday, which is appointed by the Typikon as a day of strict fasting and total rest. In the services of the church, it is celebrated as the *prototypical Sabbath*. At Mattins we sing:

Moses the great mystically prefigured this present day, saying: 'And God blessed the seventh day.' For this is the blessed Sabbath, this is the day of rest, on which the only-begotten Son of God rested from all his works. [...] He kept the Sabbath in the flesh; and returning once again to what he was, through his resurrection he has granted us the life of the age to come, for he alone is good and the friend of man.

There is no Divine Liturgy appointed for Holy Saturday and after the Mattins of the burial of Christ the services are to be said quietly in the narthex of the church or one's own cell.

What has this got to do with learning from Jews in our dialogue? Truth be told, this central importance of Saturday in Orthodox worship and life has

waned. Sabbath services — Friday evening vigils and Saturday morning Divine Liturgies — are only served in some large parishes or cathedrals.

So I hadn't had much experience of these myself. During the pandemic, however, when the number of people who could gather at services was restricted, our small mission parish went through more than a year of celebrating the Liturgy on Saturdays as well as Sundays. The difference in lived theology of a Sabbath liturgy compared to an "eighth day" resurrection liturgy is palpable.

The Saturday liturgical themes and practices actually overlap and intersect with Jewish Sabbath practice. In the Orthodox Church, the communal worship on Saturdays is dedicated to the commemoration of the departed, those *at rest*. Families gather to pray in communion with their departed loved ones; long lists of names are given for prayer; special foods, especially breads, are prepared and blessed; after services, graves are visited, where further memorials are made and picnic lunches shared with the community. Saturdays are also meant to be days of charitable acts and almsgiving and caring for the poor by sharing from our tables.

At least *traditionally* this is the case. In our frenetic life today, these practices are dying out, Saturdays have become ordinary working and shopping days. And most of those who retain the older practices couldn't articulate a particularly coherent Sabbath theology for why we do them.

We have much to recover in our own tradition from engaging with Jews and learning from them about ongoing faithful Sabbath observance. Picking up some of the language of Abraham Joshua Heschel, we might relearn Sabbath as sacred time for rest and reflection, of connecting anew

with the presence of God, as a time of joy and delight, as a God-given gift to humanity and an expression of human dignity, and as an opportunity for seeking social justice.

### **(3) Patristic Tradition in Talmudic Perspective**

The third theme I would like to explore briefly this morning is the way in which an appreciation for the Talmudic tradition of Rabbinic Judaism can help recover an Orthodox Christian understanding of the writings of the church fathers as a *living tradition*.

For too long, and especially under the influence of modernity, Orthodox Christians have employed an ideological method of interpretation that canonises every word of the fathers and liturgical tradition, a method that keeps truth firmly “in hand.” Orthodox Christians proudly state that they preserve their theological tradition “without addition or subtraction” — which sounds eerily like the kind of behaviour that gets you condemned in a gospel parable: “Look, master, it’s exactly the same as when you gave it me.”

But in truth, the writings of the church fathers comprise a vast and diverse collection, full of contextual theological reflections and counter-reflections, in which constant dialogue and debate unveil a method of truth “in process” — an understanding of truth as dialogue, always developing, and ultimately paradoxical — all of which has much in common with the rabbis’ spirit of free enquiry and unresolved debate in the Talmud.

Deuteronomy 20.19 says “man is like a tree of the field.” There’s a Hasidic interpretation of that verse saying that when a tree grows on its own, it’s

apt to grow twisted and bent. But when trees grow together in a forest, they grow up straight and tall. And the meaning of that is that it's only when we bring diverse perspectives together, differing points of view, when we contend for the truth, only then can we be moving together towards the fulness of truth in God.

We're all surely familiar how this process of contending for what's right works within the Talmud. Most often that's over *halakah*, over practical issues. But there are theological discussions too. I like the debate over the famous "two thrones in heaven" as depicted in Daniel 7, a subject of considerable speculation in Second Temple Judaism and the basis for a lot of New Testament imagery about Jesus.

The rabbinic debate in the Talmud over these "two thrones" reads in part:

Rabbi Akiva's view was one throne was for God and one for David. Rabbi Jose the Galilean protested to him: Akiva, how long will you profane the *Shekhinah*? Rather, one throne is for justice, and the other for mercy. Did he accept this answer from him or not? Come and hear! This is Rabbi Akiva's view: One is for justice and the other for charity; Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said to him: Akiva, what have you to do with *Haggadah*? Confine yourself to the study of *Nega'im* and *Ohaloth*. But one was a throne, the other a footstool: a throne for a seat and a footstool in support of His feet.

And so the debate and the discussion goes on. It's how the Talmud unfolds.

If we properly enter into our own patristic tradition, we find the same method at work, the same contending, the same sense in which each

father is in conversation with those fathers that went before. We just don't tend to view it that way. We read the texts — if we read them at all — separately and not in conversation the way the Talmud lays out the rabbinic debates.

Let me illustrate this with something as central to Orthodox Christian faith as the relationship between Jesus and God.

Our story begins with Justin — or rather, to finish the analogy, *Rabbi* Justin the Martyr — who said, “Jesus is God, so let us say that there are two gods, that Jesus is *another God*.”

Rabbi Heraclides replies, “We might say that there are two gods, but there is only *one power*.”

Rabbi Origen of Alexandria rebukes them, saying, “Hang on, we cannot speak of two gods.”

And so Rabbi Athanasius says, “Indeed, we don't speak of two gods, but we speak of one God, and one *ousia*, and one *hypostasis* of Son and God.”

And that formulation is what the Council of Nicaea enshrined as orthodoxy in 325. In fact, the rabbis at Nicaea would say, “If ever you should say that the Son is a different *hypostasis* from the Father, you will be *anathema*.”

You might think an ecumenical council would have the last word, but then those Cappadocian rabbis come along later in the fourth century, and they say, “No, no, we say the Son is a different *hypostasis* from the Father. One *ousia* and a different *hypostasis*.”

And they thus overturn the Nicene formulation. That which had been declared heresy by Nicaea is what Basil and Gregory and John Chrysostom affirm.

You see, the patristic tradition is a lot more interesting, complicated, and yes, Talmudic when you look at it closely. Taken on their own, each father becomes like a bent tree, a crooked tree. So if you took one quote from a father and made, say, a meme and put it on the internet, what are you doing? You're destroying the tradition. They must be read together, they must be read in conversation. Only then does Orthodox tradition emerge.

Even more importantly, when we find ourselves today with new questions, new wonderings or new challenges from the world, we cannot simply go back into that tradition and take out one text from one father and say, here is the answer. Because that would be to follow a bent or crooked tree. We need rather to enter into that same ongoing conversation.

Let me give you an example of this. Many of the early church fathers were not only convinced that rabbinic Judaism would end, but that it *should* end. St John Chrysostom was among those who was altogether convinced it was God's plan for Jews to disappear. And yet here we are in the 21st century, facing up to the ongoing reality of Judaism. Clearly some aspects of patristic teaching need a reconsideration. Perhaps some of what were previously minority trees may be drawn upon now to straighten the woods as a whole — I think of Augustine's insistence (*against* Justin and others) that Israel had all along rightly understood the concrete reality of the commandments and that God's grace was consistently one and the same in the Old and New Testaments. Paula Frederiksen's book *Augustine and the*

*Jews: A Christian Defence of Jews and Judaism* is highly recommended on this subject.

But how fitting that a reminder of our own living tradition should come from the Talmudic understanding of truth as an open-ended and ever-developing dialogue, as a heuristic process.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we are still in the early days of theological engagement between Orthodox Christianity and Judaism. There is indeed much work to be done in renewing Orthodox Christian faith in keeping with our ever-living tradition to ensure that our teaching, preaching, and worship are grounded in the fulness of God's truth and love.

But it has already been a joy to discover how, by engaging in dialogue with the Jewish community, Orthodox Christians can gain fresh insights into our own tradition, deepen our understanding of our liturgical practices, and retrieve valuable elements of faith and practice that may have gone neglected or unnoticed.