



Superiority without Supersessionism: Walter Kasper, *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*, and God's Covenant with the Jews

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Abstract

Nostra Aetate initiated a revolutionary shift in Catholic theology, opposing supersessionism and affirming that Jews remain in a salvific covenantal relationship with God. However, this shift raises for Catholics a deep tension regarding the value of this “Old Covenant” vis-à-vis the “New Covenant,” as this article illustrates using the statements of Walter Kasper and *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*. While speaking positively about the Old Covenant, both deem it essential to maintain the superiority of the New Covenant as universalistic, fulfilling the promises in the Old Covenant and transcending its limitations. The author demonstrates how they seek to reduce this tension by characterizing the two covenants as good and better covenants, rather than as bad and good covenants, thereby avoiding a lapse into supersessionism.

Keywords

covenant, Hebrew Bible, Jewish–Christian relations, Walter Kasper, Roman Catholic Church, supersessionism, Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews

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Over the last half century, Roman Catholic views of Jews and Judaism have been completely reevaluated. Beginning most prominently with *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, the Church broke with a long history of anti-Judaism and began to rethink traditional teachings.¹ In subsequent decades, there have been sophisticated and complex attempts to work out the implications of these changes, which include a rejection of the deicide charge, the positive recognition of the historical and theological ties between the two religions, and an affirmation of the legitimacy of Judaism and of the covenant established between the people of Israel and God. While some issues have rightly received little additional discussion (e.g., the deicide charge, seen near-universally as profoundly unjust and even hateful), others have prompted intense, sometimes divisive discussions both among Christians and between Christians and Jews.²

The most recent Catholic statement from the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ), "*The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*" (*Rom 11:29*): *A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic–Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of "Nostra Aetate,"* from 2015, is a major attempt to address some of the most prominent issues.³ The authors both review some of the past and, more importantly, seek to clarify that which has been much disputed or remains unclear. Even when not explicit, in their choice of topics and claims it is evident that they are engaging with—and sometimes seeking to resolve conflicts over—issues in an ongoing discussion. These include mission and conversion (37, 40–3), Christians and the Shoah (1, 6, 8), and interpretation of the New Testament (18, 20, 26–34, *et passim*). More fundamentally, they engage a topic

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1. *Nostra Aetate* (October 28, 1965), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (hereafter cited as *NA*).
 2. For a few recent studies (many more could be mentioned), see David Rosen, "Fifty Years since the Second Vatican Council," in *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish–Christian Relations*, ed. Gilbert S. Rosenthal (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 3–13; John Pawlikowski, "The State of the Global Catholic–Jewish Dialogue," *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations* 5 (2010): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v5i1.1574>; Philip A. Cunningham, "The Road Behind and the Road Ahead: Catholicism and Judaism," in *Catholicism and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23–42; Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015); Philip A. Cunningham et al., eds., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); David J. Bolton, "Catholic–Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45 (2010): 37–60.
 3. Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews, "*The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*" (*Rom 11:29*): *A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic–Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of "Nostra Aetate"* (December 10, 2015), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html (hereafter cited as *Gifts*).

that underlies nearly all of these other issues, the status of the Old (Jewish) Covenant.⁴ This is raised most directly by the official Catholic rejection of supersessionism⁵ and of the belief that the Old Covenant was canceled by God, to be replaced by the far superior New Covenant.⁶

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4. By framing it this way—referring separately to the “Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant”—I am not ignoring official Catholic claims that ultimately there are not two separate covenants; see Walter Kasper, Foreword to Cunningham et al., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, x–xviii, <http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/946-kasper2011mar20> (hereafter cited as “Foreword”).

However, Catholic authors also regularly speak of the “Old Covenant” and the “New Covenant,” referring to the Jewish and the Christian covenants as “two ways” (e.g., *Gifts* 25, 27). Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (writing before he became Pope Benedict XVI), for example, uses these terms but recognizes the tension: “the One Covenant is realized in the plurality of covenants [i.e., an Old Covenant and a New Covenant]. If this is so, there can be no question of setting the Old and New Covenants against each other as two different religions; there is only one will of God for men,” in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions, One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 56–57. The discussion about the number of covenants concerns the roles played by Jesus and God in the salvation of the members of these two separate but related religious communities. This is a different issue than the one I raise here, and this topic does not directly affect my argument, for I focus only on the authors’ references to two covenants.

Furthermore, in both the statements I study here and in other Catholic statements the term “Old Covenant” has a narrow range of meanings, usually the Hebrew Bible (especially covenant-making passages) or the special relationship more generally between God and Israel: e.g., *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) 2, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*); John Paul II, “Meeting with the Representatives of the Jewish Community in Mainz” (Mainz, Germany, November 17, 1980), <http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/297-jp2-80nov17> (hereafter cited as *Mainz*); *Gifts* 32. This lack of precision is generally not a barrier to understanding the claims that are made.

5. This is sometimes called replacement theology. Many Protestant churches have similarly rejected supersessionism; see Joseph D. Small, “In Our Time: The Legacy of *Nostra Aetate* in Mainline Protestant Churches,” in *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish–Christian Relations*, ed. Gilbert S. Rosenthal (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 77–95. Similar questions to those raised in this article could be raised in a study of Protestant statements.
6. The modern Catholic rejection of supersessionism is hinted at in *NA* 4 (e.g., “[God] does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues”) and stated more explicitly over the succeeding decades. A noteworthy example of this claim was made by Pope John Paul II in 1980 when he said that “the Old Covenant [was] never revoked by God” (*Mainz*). See also Philip A. Cunningham, “Official Ecclesial Documents to Implement the Second Vatican Council on Relations with Jews: Study Them, Become Immersed in Them, and Put Them into Practice,” *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations* 4 (2009): 1–36 at 5, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v4i1.1521>.

However, this decisive turn away from supersessionism raises a complex and controversial topic for Catholic theology: the religious value of the Old Covenant vis-à-vis the New Covenant. On the one hand, the authors of the most recent statement affirm and seek to advance the pathbreaking new positive assessment of the Old Covenant. They insist that Judaism, as a living faith, is defined by a covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and God that remains legitimate and even salvific. This relationship, whose roots lie in sacred Scripture, cannot be broken. On the other hand, they insist on the special status of the New (Christian) Covenant. It has unique qualities. These include, among others, its soteriological “efficacy,” its fulfillment of the biblical promises, and the breadth (indeed universality) of its spiritual benefits that extend to all humanity. These claims are essential to nearly all forms of Christian identity and certainly to mainstream Catholic theology and cannot be dispensed with. *Yet these two claims are in tension.* As I will illustrate below, post-supersessionist affirmations of the Old Covenant as such are undermined by claims for the superiority of the New Covenant (such as its universalism, its fulfillment of the promises in the Old Covenant, and its transcending the limitations of the Old Covenant).

This is not a new tension. For a few decades, Catholics and other Christians have realized that it is simply impossible to think about these two religions, especially in relationship to each other, without grappling with the tensions raised by the reassessment of the status of the Old Covenant. At stake are two fundamental, seemingly non-negotiable claims about the Old and New Covenants. In official Catholic statements on Judaism, this was first noted briefly in a 1985 statement from the CRRJ, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*.⁷ (Neither *Nostra Aetate* nor *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* directly address this topic.⁸) The *Notes* authors insist that the “particular” aspects of the Old Covenant (i.e., those concerning Israel alone) have their own legitimacy and validity. Nonetheless, this covenant, they say, only really “becomes clear . . . in the light of the complete fulfillment [in the New Covenant].” They frankly recognize the tensions these claims raise, in this case, when assessing the inherent and comparative status of the two parts of Christian Scripture: “From the unity of the divine plan derives the problem of the relation between the Old and New Testaments” (*Notes* 2:3; see also 2:7). They cast it in terms of a “problem,” a word they repeatedly use to characterize the theological challenge they face. They employ vague language of “fulfillment” without explaining how this

7. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html (hereafter cited as *Notes*).

8. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (December 1, 1974), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19741201_nostra-aetate_en.html (hereafter cited as *Guidelines*).

clarifies the relationship between the two covenants (2:3–8).⁹ This is a hint of an early approach to the tension.

Over time this tension has been expressed with increasing clarity and intensity. Both individual theologians and official spokespersons and statements make clear that changing views about the Old Covenant are difficult to reconcile with fundamental views of the New Covenant. When *Gifts* was released, there had already been extensive, sometimes divisive discussions about this topic in official Vatican statements and in scholarly literature.¹⁰ The authors are of course aware of this, and recognize they too must grapple with it. At the very start they write that the “unique status of this relationship [between Jews and Christians/Catholics]” raises questions about “the relationship between the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ and the affirmation that the [Old] covenant of God with Israel has never been revoked” (preface). This is an issue both important in itself and also relevant to many other issues (such as mission and conversion).

As Catholics, they do not start “from scratch,” but see themselves as contributing to a developing tradition, building upon and adapting earlier statements and views.¹¹ Above all, these include statements by Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the CRRJ from 2001 to 2010, whom they quote or paraphrase extensively and with whom they nearly always agree. His views are directly incorporated into *Gifts*, for he offers one of the most substantive and detailed Catholic (and perhaps Christian) approaches to many of the central questions in Jewish–Christian relations over the last few decades. In his writings starting in 2001 we find an extensive and sophisticated approach in Church statements to some of the most important outstanding questions. The reliance on Kasper in *Gifts* is understandable and cannot be overstated. Yet, surprisingly, there are no critical studies of Kasper’s thoughts on Judaism.¹²

9. Bolton, “Catholic–Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants,” 44.

10. See for example Eugene J. Fisher, “The Catholic Church and the Mystery of Israel: The State of the Question,” *Pontifical College Josephinum* 11 (2004): 14–25, <http://www.pcj.edu/journal/essays/fisher11-1.htm>; Bruce D. Marshall, “Elder Brothers: John Paul II’s Teaching on the Jewish People as a Question to the Church,” in *John Paul II and the Jewish People: A Christian–Jewish Dialogue*, ed. David Dalin and Matthew Levering (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 113–29; Marianne Moyaert and Didier A. Pollefeyt, “Israel and the Church: Fulfilment Beyond Supersessionism?” in *Never Revoked: Nostra Aetate as Ongoing Challenge for Jewish–Christian Dialogue*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Didier Pollefeyt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 159–83; Cunningham et al., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, xxii; Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom*, 208–19.

11. These are noted when relevant, including other Church statements and comments by Church leaders (especially popes, whose views on these issues are of course important).

12. Groppe and Cunningham have prepared useful surveys of Kasper’s thought, though both primarily summarize his claims; see Philip A. Cunningham, “Celebrating Judaism as a ‘Sacrament of Every Otherness,’” in *The Theology of Cardinal Walter Kasper: Speaking Truth in Love*, ed. Kristin M. Colberg and Robert A. Krieg (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014), 223–40; Elizabeth T. Groppe, “New Paths of Shalom in Christian–Jewish Relations,” in Colberg and Krieg, *The Theology of Cardinal Walter Kasper*, 203–22.

In this article, I begin with a study of Kasper's views and then turn to *Gifts*. Through a close, critical study of these writings, I argue that they both attempt to reconcile these serious tensions by offering a comparative assessment of the Old Covenant vis-à-vis the New Covenant. Even though they present the Old Covenant in strongly positive terms, they nonetheless compare it unfavorably to the New Covenant. They assess the former as in fundamental ways inferior to the latter *without resorting to supersessionism*.¹³ As I show, this is a major theological move, for it potentially offers a way out of the tension they and others face. Because their views are often presented indirectly and with ambiguity (for reasons discussed below), I both bring into view and demonstrate the significance of their theological contributions.

I want to emphasize that my project is entirely descriptive. I am not evaluating the persuasiveness or truth value of their claims, nor assessing positive or negative implications for Jewish–Catholic relations. Speaking as a Jew and as a scholar who is committed to an improved Jewish–Catholic relationship, there is much I find problematic, such as their critical judgments of the “Old Covenant” and their debatable or questionable interpretations of biblical passages or theological concepts. However, my purpose here is not to offer a (Jewish) critique but to illuminate a major trend that has largely gone unnoticed and that moves Catholic theology of Jews and Judaism to an important new stage.

Before looking at the statements, I propose two models for illustrating the relationship between the Old and New Covenants:

1. The *Pre-Nostra Aetate* Model: This traditional model, which they reject, posits a sharp contrast between the covenants: the Old Covenant is, to put it simply and succinctly in my own terms, a *bad* covenant (perhaps before and certainly after Jesus). It is illegitimate, invalid, and useless for the Jews.¹⁴ The New Covenant is a *good* covenant. It is salvific, holy, valid, etc.

13. If one does not reject supersession, the tension can be resolved. Notably, Cardinal Avery Dulles insisted that the Second Vatican Council “left open the question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today” in Avery Dulles, “The Covenant with Israel,” *First Things*, November 2005, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/11/the-covenant-with-israel>. See also Dulles, “Covenant and Mission,” *America*, October 21, 2002, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/408/article/covenant-and-mission>. This prompted vigorous responses; see for example Mary C. Boys, Philip A. Cunningham, and John Pawlikowski, “Theology’s ‘Sacred Obligation,’” *America*, October 21, 2002, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/408/article/theologys-sacred-obligation>; Cunningham, “Official,” 8–14.

14. To be precise, it is Jewish religious life within, and non-christological understanding of, the Old Covenant after Jesus that are bad, though polemical attacks on the failures of the Old Covenant itself (even by those opposed to Marcion) are ubiquitous throughout Christian history. This supersessionist model emerged very early, definitely by the second century if not earlier. Already in the New Testament, Ruether argues, we find claims that the Old Covenant is related to the New “as a shadow is to light,” and that the New Covenant is “related antithetically to the old covenant, rendering it obsolete,” in Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Minneapolis: Seabury & Winston, 1974), 100, 111. In addition to Ruether’s classic study, see Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1997).

2. The Kasper/*Gifts* Model: Instead of this earlier, traditional interpretation, they offer a new and different model, not based on a sharp contrast but comparative nonetheless. They compare the Old Covenant, seen as a *good* covenant, to the New Covenant, seen as a *better* covenant. They do this using numerous criteria in order to uphold essential claims for the New Covenant while avoiding supersessionism.¹⁵

The terms I use in these theological models of the relationship—*bad* and *versus good* (the first, traditional model, which they reject), and *good* and *better* (the present, post-*Nostra Aetate* model, which they affirm)—are obviously my own.¹⁶ Though blunt, they allow me to illustrate the developments in Catholic theology regarding the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. Their use of the second comparative model is what marks a major move in Catholic theology, for *it allows them to reconcile the two claims discussed above that are in tension with each other.*¹⁷

Importantly, I recognize that the views of Kasper and of the authors of *Gifts* are often not explicit, nor are their judgments made with such bluntness. My viewpoint is that which scholars of religion call “etic” (held by the scholarly outsider or observer) as opposed to “emic” (the viewpoint of the insider to the belief system or group, in this case Catholics). While I do not simply ignore what they seem to say they are or are not saying, I affirm the scholar’s role to comparatively and critically assess another’s views using generally accepted and logical categories of analysis.¹⁸ Specifically, I organize categorically and interpret their views even though they are sometimes hesitant or oblique in expressing them (see below). My contribution is to demonstrate the purpose, context, and implications of their views, which are highly significant for official Catholic theologies of Judaism but need explication and systematization. Of

15. For a provocative Jewish view of such a comparison, see David Novak, “The Covenant in Rabbinic Thought,” in *Two Faiths, One Covenant? Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other*, ed. Eugene B. Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 65–80. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, in an unpublished essay I received after an earlier draft of this article was completed, briefly makes some similar comparative arguments.

16. I use these terms in a descriptive sense (i.e., to explain their claims and how they address the issues before them), not in an evaluative sense (i.e., not reflecting my own judgment about their claims); see below.

17. For arguments that this tension has been ignored, see John Pawlikowski, “Developments in Catholic–Jewish Relations: 1990 and Beyond,” *Judaism* 55 (2007): 97–109 at 101–2; Bolton, “Catholic–Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants,” 59.

18. “The etic perspective is the observer’s subsequent attempt to take the descriptive information they have already gathered and to organize, systematize, compare—in a word, redescribe—that information in terms of a system of their own making,” in Russell T. McCutcheon, “Theoretical Background: Insides, Outsides, and the Scholar of Religion,” in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell Academic, 1999), 15–22 at 17. His general discussion of the scholarly debate on this topic is helpful.

course, I hope they would not disagree with my interpretations, for I do not intend to nor do I think that I force my interpretations onto theirs.

While an emic/etic methodology is now regularly used in scholarship,¹⁹ it is especially relevant to these Catholic statements, for the interpreter must grapple with the often elliptical and imprecise presentations of their views. This presentation style of sophisticated but allusive theological discourse on contentious and even painful topics sometimes hinders efforts at interpretation.²⁰ Despite their genuine commitment to improving Jewish–Catholic relations, their views of the Old Covenant, even if not supersessionist, are nonetheless likely to be resisted by Jews as disrespectful and even offensive. There is a strong precedent for such resistance. Repeatedly over the last few decades Jews in dialogue with Catholics have vigorously, even angrily, responded to Church statements.²¹ Those Catholics who are engaged in dialogue with Jews and write theologically about Judaism, above all the members of the CRRJ, express a noble commitment to maintaining such a relationship after millennia of estrangement and hostility. While I do not think Kasper or the authors of *Gifts* are being deceptive, I do think they resist drawing out the full conclusions of what they say.²² Some of their

19. Its roots lie in linguistics, but now this approach is applied to scholarly study in many fields.

20. There are numerous characteristics of these theological statements that complicate interpretation. For examples from *Gifts*, key terms are left undefined (e.g., “fulfillment”; “mission”); complex, sometimes competing ideas are compressed into single sentences; and negative formulations (e.g., “not without reason” [16]; “not infrequently” [39]) can obscure their point. They also consistently engage with (and sometimes quote) other Catholic statements without attribution; see below for their unattributed references to Kasper. I will note examples of this throughout, as well as others’ relevant views on certain topics.

21. Especially provocative are topics such as mission to the Jews and the Church’s behavior during the Shoah. Kasper notes multiple occasions when Catholic statements provoked anger among Jews. For example, the 2001 statement *Dominus Iesus* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was “painful for Jews”: Kasper, *Dominus Iesus* (address, International Catholic–Jewish Liaison Committee, New York City, NY, May 1, 2001), <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/641-kasper01may1-1> (hereafter cited as *Dominus*). Changes to the Good Friday Prayer led to Jewish “misunderstanding” and “emotional” (not “rational”) expressions of anger that were clearly distressing: Kasper, “Striving for Mutual Respect in Modes of Prayer” (published in *L’Osservatore Romano*, April 16, 2008), <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/651-kasper08apr16-2>.

22. I am not ignoring what they present as the tentativeness of their claims, for both Kasper and the authors of *Gifts* employ the language of “mystery” when facing the tension noted above. This term “mystery” has been used elsewhere, perhaps in a technical sense (e.g., *NA* 1, 2, 4), and is of course found in relevant places in Paul’s writing (e.g., Rom 11:25; cf. Rom 11:33). However, in the present context it may suggest something more basic, perhaps a sense that their answers are not fully satisfying or comprehensive in resolving all the soteriological or eschatological issues. For example, Kasper says, “Relations between the Jews and the Church is also a mystery that we can solve only in an eschatological way,” in Kasper, “The Theology of the Covenant as Central Issue in the Jewish–Christian Dialogue” (address, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, December 4, 2001), <http://www.ccrj.us/>

claims according to my second model would surely be unwelcome to Jews, even if they mark a near-revolutionary break with the first supersessionist model. However, I believe that an analysis of their views in terms of my comparative model supports my argument that they seek to reconcile two major claims that are in tension: supersessionism is unacceptable, and the New Covenant fulfills the Old Covenant, having a superior status and achieving superior goals. I hope to bring much-needed clarity to an often murky and imprecise discussion, for these statements do yield valuable information that allows us to understand their views of this important topic in Jewish–Catholic (and Jewish–Christian) relations.

Cardinal Walter Kasper

During the time he spent heading the Vatican’s CRRJ, Kasper significantly advanced Jewish–Catholic dialogue. His views, presented in speeches and writings, lie behind much of what is in the latest Vatican statement, as seen in ubiquitous allusions to his ideas and quotations of key words and phrases.²³ It is impossible to understand contemporary theological trends in Jewish–Catholic relations, and especially in *Gifts*, without considering his major contributions.

The End of Supersessionism: The Old Covenant is a Good Covenant

All discussions of Kasper’s views must begin with his foundational affirmation of the unique and continuing status of the Jewish covenant. This position did not originate with him, of course, but Kasper provides much theological support for it. In terms of the two models above, he rejects the first and affirms the second. The Old Covenant has value, for it is holy and still links the Jewish people to God (e.g., *Dominus*, Foreword).²⁴ This view of what he often calls the “Old Covenant” is an undeniably

dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/648-wk01dec4 (hereafter cited as “Theology”). The authors of *Gifts* say, “That the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery” (36). See further Gregor Maria Hoff, “A Realm of Differences: The Meaning of Jewish Monotheism for Christology and Trinitarian Theology,” in Cunningham et al., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, 202–20 at 203.

23. Kasper frequently repeats or reuses portions of his earlier statements in later statements, sometimes with small (usually insignificant) changes. I therefore do not discuss or even note every place an idea or term appears. Rather, I focus on the statements that include the fullest and most substantial presentations of his views and sometimes note parallels to other statements. His successor Cardinal Kurt Koch, who oversaw the writing of *Gifts*, likewise often repeats Kasper’s claims in his own statements, sometimes verbatim though without attribution.
24. See also Walter Kasper, “The Relationship of the Old and the New Covenant as One of the Central Issues in Jewish–Christian Dialogue” (address, Centre for the Study of Jewish–Christian Relations, Cambridge, UK, December 6, 2004), <http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/652-kasper04dec6-1> (hereafter cited as “Relationship”).

positive formulation. Though he similarly refers extensively to the “New [Christian] Covenant” (e.g., “Foreword”), he insists that the Old Covenant—despite Israel’s disobedience in history, and after the coming of Christ—“has not been overtaken and replaced” (“Relationship”). He “grants genuine integrity to the [two] covenants.”²⁵ The abiding qualities of the Old Covenant are richly described: “God is still inclined towards these his [Jewish] people in love and faithfulness, in mercy, judgement and forgiveness; he is with them and among them in the difficult hours and times of their history above all. As a member of his people, each Jew continues to stand beneath the promise” (“Relationship”). This is a dramatic break with the pre-*Nostra Aetate* first model, with its supersessionist rejection of value in the Old Covenant after Christ. His fulsome characterization here and elsewhere makes clear that there is much that is good in the Old Covenant.

For Kasper, it even has soteriological value. Quoting Paul, he emphasizes that through the Old Covenant “all Israel will be saved” (“Theology,” citing Rom 11:26). This is true not just in the past but up through the present and into the future. Were it not—that is, were God’s promises only temporary—God’s faithfulness would rightly be questioned. For example, Kasper insists that “the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God’s irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises” (*Dominus*). The implications of this are profound. The salvation now available through faith in Christ does not preclude this other, earlier way to salvation. Jews, having been the first to believe in the God now jointly worshipped by Jews and Christians, are not like those idolaters originally cut off from God. Christians need not introduce Jews to a new faith and a new god so they can leave their past ways behind: “Jews are not pagans, they do not repent of false and dead idols to turn to the true and living God” (“Foreword,” citing 1 Thess 1:9).²⁶ Rather, their current faith, resting on a good covenant with a faithful God, places them in a unique religious category because of this unique earlier covenant.²⁷

Not surprisingly, Kasper’s views of the Old Covenant are inseparable from his views of both God and Christ. Because there is no salvation apart from the work of Christ, Kasper insists that Christ cannot be absent even from this salvific covenant between Jews and God.²⁸ “God’s grace [present in the Old Covenant], *which Christians*

25. Bolton, “Catholic–Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants,” 45–46.

26. See also Walter Kasper, “The Jewish–Christian Dialogue: Foundations, Progress, Difficulties and Perspectives” (address, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel, November 21, 2001), <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/647-wk01nov21> (hereafter cited as “Jewish–Christian”).

27. See Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom*, 206; Ruth Langer, “‘Gifts and Calling’: The Fruits of Coming to Know Living Jews,” *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9797>.

28. On this claim see Peter Phan, “Jesus as the Universal Savior in the Light of God’s Eternal Covenant with the Jewish People,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity’s Sacred Obligation*, ed. Mary C. Boys (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 127–37; Philip A. Cunningham and Didier A. Pollefeyt, “The Triune One, the Incarnate Logos, and Israel’s Covenantal Life,” in Cunningham et al., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*

believe is the grace of Jesus Christ, is available to all. Therefore, the Church believes that Judaism ... is salvific for them” (“Jewish–Christian”).²⁹ From Kasper’s perspective, Christ, as universal savior, is necessarily bound up somehow in the salvation of the Jews. Such divine “grace” cannot be separated from Christ, even when unacknowledged by those for whom it is operative. The two covenants are not “totally independent entities” (“Relationship”), for his universalistic claims posit that both God and Christ are somehow present in and link the two covenants. Nonetheless, Jews, living within a good covenant need not convert to receive salvation from the one God of Christians and Jews, nor must they recognize the presence of Christ in their covenant. These two claims are highly significant, and contentious. It is not necessary here to engage the details of this claim. For my purposes, I want to note that such bold claims about the soteriological value of the Old Covenant can be explicable if seen in terms of the second model.³⁰

The Persistence of Superiority: The New Covenant is a Better Covenant

Kasper makes a second major claim. He believes that the Old Covenant stands in a comparatively inferior relationship to the New Covenant. Despite affirming the former’s ongoing holiness and legitimacy, Kasper deems the latter, Christian covenant a better covenant. The two covenants are not of equal status. The unique qualities of the New Covenant become clear when contrasted with the Old Covenant. This nuanced stance allows him to avoid supersessionism and to maintain a vital linkage between the two covenants while also defending the superiority of New Covenant.

Kasper’s judgment of superiority is based on various criteria. For example, he claims that the New Covenant is teleologically superior. At most, the Old Covenant, though good (in this case legitimate in both the past and the present), still only points toward that which it could not and cannot attain. In biblical times, the fundamental

183–201; Adam Gregerman, “A Jewish Response,” in Cunningham et al., *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, 221–28.

29. Emphasis added.

30. The soteriological value of the post-Jesus Jewish covenant has prompted much discussion; see Bruce D. Marshall, “Christ and Israel: An Unsolved Problem in Catholic Theology,” in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2013), 330–50 at 340; Groppe, “Theology” 212; Dermot A. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions: A Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 284–306; Bolton, “Catholic–Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants” 42–43; John Pawlikowski, “Reflections on Covenant and Mission Forty Years after ‘Nostra Aetate,’” *Cross Currents* 56 (2006–2007), <http://www.crosscurrents.org/Pawlikowski0406.htm>; Fisher, “The Catholic Church and the Mystery of Israel: The State of the Question” 121; John Pawlikowski, “A Christian–Jewish Dialogical Model in Light of New Research on Paul’s Relationship with Judaism,” in *Paul and Judaism: Crosscurrents in Pauline Exegesis and the Study of Jewish–Christian Relations*, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Didier Pollefeyt (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2012), 163–73 at 170–71.

relationship was manifest in a “sequence of various covenants with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Ezra” and others (“Foreword”). It continues through today, in God’s relationship with the Jewish people. However, its role is inherently limited: these manifestations of the Old Covenant in general hint at a superior “promise or anticipation” to come.³¹ Only with the New Covenant, made through Christ, did the “fulfillment of the Old Covenant” arrive. Though the term “fulfillment” is never clearly defined (see below), it is undeniably a comparatively better feature of the New Covenant. This covenant alone accomplishes soteriological goals, above all offering the “definitive yes and amen to all the promises of salvation.”³²

This unfulfilled “promise” of the Old Covenant, along with this claim of the “fulfillment” only effected by the New Covenant, is a prominent theme.³³ With this comparative judgment, Kasper assigns the Old Covenant a subordinate or inferior status to the New Covenant. This is shown in his scenario of a historical progression from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, with the latter more fully disclosing the divine will. This sense of progression is seen, for example, in the claim elsewhere that “what the Covenant [idea] is and what it means must be reinterpreted anew in each generation” (“Theology”). In this scenario, the Old Covenant, he says, was given various forms (“the deuteronomic, the priestly, the prophetic”) throughout history. Its purpose and meaning were understood in different ways, as it was interpreted differently in different circumstances. It was (and is) valuable and good, both inherently but above

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31. I write “in general” to clarify the usage of the term “covenant” in this and the next paragraph. While Kasper speaks of multiple covenants (with Abraham, Moses, etc.), these are what I call manifestations of the one Old Covenant, not additional separate covenants alongside the Old Covenant.
32. See also Walter Kasper, “Recent Developments in Jewish–Christian Relations” (address, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, England, May 24, 2010), <http://www.cjcr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/814-kasper-2010may24> (hereafter cited as “Recent”).
33. As is well known, the use of fulfillment language goes back to the New Testament itself (e.g., Matt 1:22; Luke 4:21; Acts 7:17; Rom 8:4). Modern Catholic statements, going back to the Second Vatican Council, use the term in a comparative sense: “[God’s covenant with Israel was] done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ, and of that fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God Himself made flesh” (*LG* 9); “We believe that those promises were fulfilled with the first coming of Christ” (*Guidelines* 2:1; see also 3:1); “Thus, the definitive meaning of the election of Israel does not become clear except in the light of the complete fulfillment (Rom 9–11), and election in Jesus Christ is still better understood with reference to the announcement and the promise (cf. Heb 4:1–11)” (*Notes* 9). For an understanding of fulfillment that differs from Kasper’s, one that does not clearly break with supersessionism, see Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 69–71. See also Mary C. Boys, “The Covenant in Contemporary Ecclesial Documents,” in Korn and Pawlikowski, *Two Faiths, One Covenant?*, 81–110 at 104–5; Hans Hermann Henrix, “The Controversy Surrounding the 2008 Good Friday Prayer in Europe: The Discussion and Its Theological Implications,” *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations* 3 (2008): 1–19 at 18, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v3i1.1483>.

all because it points to the “promise of a new eternal covenant.” With the passage of time, the New Covenant had to be revealed. This was a unique event, far surpassing that which came before in the Old Covenant. While the New Covenant too assumes various forms (“prophetic . . . priestly”), it “takes this [Old Covenant] history further.” Instead of merely pointing at the “promise” to come (as did the Old Covenant), the New Covenant now offers the “fulfillment of the promise.” This theological judgment that the New Covenant surpasses the Old is quite stark.

A similar presentation of this view of historical fulfillment appears in other statements. As above, Kasper grounds his claims for the superiority of the New Covenant in a theo-historical narrative that began but did not end with the Old Covenant. It is impossible to understand the New Covenant without situating it in “the history of the tradition and interpretation” of the Old Covenant (“Relationship”). Against a Marcionite view, he says it is only in terms of the original promises of God to the people of Israel that the New Covenant through Christ attains its own (superior) value. There is a vital continuity which makes this non-supersessionist comparison acceptable. Kasper finds a precedent for this, identifying a process he says already began in biblical Israel of reinterpreting the meaning and application of the Old Covenant. For Kasper this justifies yet one more (in this case final) reinterpretation of the original covenant idea, namely the establishment of the New (and better) Covenant.³⁴

However, while finding a Jewish/biblical precedent for reinterpreting the Old Covenant in new (i.e., Christian) ways, he simultaneously presents the New Covenant as marking a sharp break with this process. The New Covenant, with its “Christological focus,” is now “the final and definitive reinterpretation of the covenant which God has sealed with his people once and for all” (“Relationship”). This introduces a very different perspective. Alongside continuity (i.e., another reinterpretation of the covenant, like that done before), he posits discontinuity (i.e., such reinterpretation of the covenant must now cease).³⁵ This feature applies only to the New Covenant, not to the Old. This is not a failing of the Old Covenant or grounds for it to be denounced as invalid. Rather, it was tentative and incomplete, and had a limited and subordinate, but still good, role. Yet it was exclusively left to the better New Covenant to bring God’s previously disclosed promise “into force in its definitive form.”³⁶ In these few examples,

34. Ratzinger offers a similar view: “Only God himself could fundamentally reinterpret the Law and manifest that its broadening transformation and conservation is actually its intended meaning,” in Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 9.

35. Cf. Benedict XVI: “The paschal mystery of Christ is in complete conformity—albeit in a way that could not have been anticipated—with the prophecies and the foreshadowings of the Scriptures; yet it presents clear aspects of discontinuity with regard to the institutions of the Old Testament,” in *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), 1:40, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html.

36. Importantly, here and elsewhere Kasper views fulfillment not as eschatological or futuristic, but as already realized. This gives the comparison (and judgment) relevance in the present. This does not preclude statements sometimes qualifying claims of fulfillment, and an admission that not all the divine promises have been entirely realized: “With regard to

Kasper describes not a difference of degree (i.e., one covenant follows another, from Abrahamic to Christian, each with its own varied qualities) but rather a difference in kind (i.e., only one covenant reaches God's goal). This reflects the superiority of the New Covenant.

Kasper also refers to the "complex issue of the law" to argue that the New Covenant is better than the Old Covenant ("Relationship"). While as elsewhere he employs general fulfillment language to make such a comparison, in this case his specific critique relies on his critical claims about Torah observance when done according to the Old Covenant. On the one hand, he certainly speaks favorably about this good aspect of Jewish religious identity (e.g., he cites Ps 119, which praises the Torah). On the other hand, he criticizes its prominent role in the Old Covenant, for there are inherent shortcomings to the Torah. Referring to Paul's conception of the Torah, he says God's promises should not be "delimited by a law which is restricted to Israel" (citing Rom 3:21-26; Gal 3:13; 4:4-5). Rather, God's goal was to give all humanity "access to the covenant," something that, Kasper says, is yearned for by Christians and Jews alike.

More sharply, Kasper directly incorporates into his own argument Paul's harsh comments about Torah observance in Second Corinthians and Galatians. Rather than critique them, he explicitly draws upon Paul's terms "Old Covenant" and "New Covenant" to argue that "one [the former] functions as the letter which kills while the other [the latter] is the spirit which gives life" ("Relationship," citing 2 Cor 3:6, 14, 17). Likewise, Kasper says the Old Covenant initiated at Sinai "brings slavery," while the New Covenant "brings freedom" (citing Gal 4:21-31).³⁷ In both examples, Kasper applies Paul's statements, made in a first-century context of bitter disputes, to the contemporary Old Covenant.

Compared to other statements, his use of Paul's letters supports an unexpectedly harsh view. Kasper employs these Pauline tropes, positing a clash between the supposed legalism of Judaism and the spiritually enlightened Christian interpretation.³⁸ Far from critiquing such biblical claims, Kasper views them as "fundamental for

the church therefore, there remains an as yet unfulfilled balance of the prophetic promise" ("Relationship"). Already much has been accomplished spiritually with the coming of Christ and the gatherings of believers, even if the final emergence of God's kingdom awaits an "eschatological consummation." Groppe's discussion of Kasper is incomplete because of her exclusive focus on the futurist and eschatological meaning of fulfillment, for example; see Groppe, "Theology," 212. I appreciate Philip A. Cunningham's helpful discussion of the topic of realized and futuristic eschatology in Kasper's thought.

There are precedents for such an attempt to balance these two claims. For example, "Salvation and liberation are already accomplished in Christ and gradually realized by the sacraments in the Church. This makes way for the fulfillment of God's design, which awaits its final consummation with the return of Jesus as Messiah, for which we pray each day" (*Notes* 17). See also Bolton, "Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants," 58.

37. Ratzinger makes a similar point regarding 2 Cor 3; see Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 56-57.

38. Ratzinger, citing the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, rejects such claims about Judaism as a caricature, in *Many Religions*, 30. See also Boys, "The Covenant in Contemporary Ecclesial Documents," 86.

further developments” in Jewish–Catholic relations. Despite his use of these passages from Paul, he sees no threat to his general support for a comparative, non-supersessionist approach to the two covenants. They are not diametrically opposed nor does “the new covenant simply abolish the old and declare it null and void.” Perhaps surprisingly at this point, he still insists that there is much that is good in the Old Covenant itself, even with these prominent failures. It is “holy and just and good” (quoting Rom 7:12). Most importantly for his comparison, there is continuity with the New Covenant, though not because of the commandments required by the Old Covenant per se. Rather, it demonstrates God’s fidelity *despite* the commandments required by the Old Covenant.

This makes the Old Covenant, with its commandments that can sanctify Israel alone, comparatively inferior to the New Covenant, which accomplished God’s goal for humanity. That is why the “legal form of the [Old] covenant [was] conditional and for a limited time” (“Relationship”). The New Covenant was given in order to transcend these weaknesses and to enable the promises to attain their intended “universality.”³⁹ Kasper thus minimizes and even criticizes the Sinaitic covenant or views it as ultimately irrelevant for this goal, instead privileging non-legal covenants, such as the Abrahamic one.⁴⁰ The greatest of these is the New Covenant, which dispensed entirely with the supposedly particularistic requirements of the Torah. Christ finally “fulfilled the law for us once and for all ... He is thus the goal and the end of the law.”

Unexpectedly, the meaning of the term fulfillment, despite its frequent and prominent usage, remains ambiguous.⁴¹ Kasper largely defines it in comparative terms. It “is not the replacement (substitution)” of the Old Covenant (“Foreword,” “Recent”). Importantly, this characterization of the New Covenant allows him to avoid the supersessionist judgment that the Old Covenant has been abrogated. At the same time, he is able to present the New Covenant as better than it in different but often vague ways.

Interestingly, Kasper grounds his argument for the comparative superiority of the New Covenant, and especially its supposedly universalistic qualities, in the Hebrew Bible. He supports his claim out of sacred Scripture that is (from his perspective) shared by Jews and Christians. This allows him to avoid an imposition of an exclusively Christian standard, for his interpretation of the divine will is based on his interpretation of the call of and covenant with Abraham and his descendants in Genesis.

39. Cf. Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 36, 41.

40. Cf. Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 56.

41. On Catholic usage of the term both generally and in *Gifts*, see Moyaert and Pollefeyt, “Israel and the Church: Fulfilment Beyond Supersessionism?”; Donald Senior, “Rome Has Spoken: A New Catholic Approach to Judaism,” *Commonweal*, January 3, 2003, https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/senior.htm; Boys, “The Covenant in Contemporary Ecclesial Documents,” 105; Edward Kessler, “Reflections from a European Jewish Theologian” (paper presented at the Press Conference on “*The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29): *A Reflection*, Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Rome, Italy, December 10, 2015), <https://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/analysis/crj-2015dec10/1366-kessler-2015dec10>.

This of course has great significance for Jews too. Citing promises to extend God's blessings to the nations in the patriarchal narratives and elsewhere (e.g., "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" [citing Gen 12:3]), Kasper says the Old Covenant could not do this.⁴² That is why a New Covenant "directed toward all the peoples" was always meant to be revealed ("Relationship"). Christ had to come to "rescind the exclusion of the Gentiles and give them access to the covenant." Only in this way could God's fullest vision for humanity, that which was first yearned for under the Old Covenant itself and by the Jewish people, be achieved. His interpretation is not meant to be restricted to Christians, for he argues in terms of and from a source that should ostensibly be acceptable to Jews too, namely, the Hebrew Bible. The nuance of his argument should not be missed: a comparison between the two covenants is legitimated and strengthened by his use of a criterion he finds in the Hebrew Bible, rather than an exclusively Christian criterion imposed on the Old Covenant.

In other statements as well he claims that divine promises in shared Scripture are only fulfilled in the New Covenant. When the church "spread universally among the nations," the biblical promise that the nations would accept "monotheism [and] the Ten Commandments ... [came] true" ("Foreword").⁴³ The New Covenant, which expands the original covenant community beyond Israel, manifests God's eternal will expressed originally in the Old Covenant yet has to transcend it on account of its supposed particularity.

He thus demonstrates that these goals, while found in the Old Covenant, were accomplished only by the New Covenant.⁴⁴ They were not later Christian additions to the divine plan. Again, were this the case, it would be manifestly unfair to judge the Old Covenant for failing to meet them. On the contrary, the goals of the New Covenant are shared by both covenants (and both peoples) but accomplished in only one. After Christ, the New Covenant brought the promises of God in the Old Covenant to fruition, "concentrating on its essence and accomplishing the universality implicit at [the Old Covenant's] inception" ("Relationship"). That which was hoped for by those under the Old Covenant but never reached has now already been reached through Christ. These deepest hopes—to religiously influence and transform the entire world—could only find their completion under the New Covenant.

Kasper sometimes formulates this in controversial terms. The success of the New Covenant in "fulfilling" promises in shared Scripture cannot be ignored even by the people of Israel "without denying a part of itself"—that is, without denying that such fulfillment was hoped for in their own Old Covenant ("Relationship").⁴⁵ The Old Covenant is good and has much to commend it, for it presents admirable specific goals: that "Jewish monotheism, the Ten Commandments, and its messianic hope [should be] exported to the world." Nonetheless, these were only reached "by way of

42. He also cites Gen 17:4.

43. See also "Recent."

44. Note that these goals are not eschatological; he speaks of what has already been accomplished.

45. To support this claim, he refers to the views of the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig.

Christianity.” This is a shared hope: “on this [New Covenant] pathway fundamental faith constructs of Judaism have been universalized.”

To summarize Kasper’s views, I want to return to the two claims in tension that were introduced above. Kasper consistently insists that his comparative critiques of the Old Covenant do not undermine the remarkable shift in Catholic views of Judaism that have occurred and which he supports. Supersessionism finds no support in his statements. Yet alongside his praise for the Old Covenant appear claims of the superiority of the New Covenant. It is a better covenant, for it is more effective in accomplishing the divine plan, more in line with God’s requirements for humanity, and more faithful to the biblical vision shared by Jews and Christians. This argument is explicable in terms of the second model of good and better covenants and effectively reconciles these tensions.

“The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable” (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic–Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of “*Nostra Aetate*” (2015)

This Catholic statement is a recent and major contribution to Jewish–Catholic relations. While it was formally issued by the CRRJ, its drafters also included representatives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The CRRJ had long sought to present some type of statement, ideally for the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* in 2005, though there were years of delay. The current statement, whose drafting began in 2013 and with the support of Pope Benedict XVI, therefore arrives three decades after the *Notes*. The intended readers are Catholics. However, the authors assume it will be read by Jews, and assuredly would welcome this, especially because they wrote it with a hope of “enriching and intensifying the theological dimension of Jewish–Catholic dialogue,” a dialogue that must include Jews (Preface).

The authors critically address and evaluate some of the most prominent trends in Catholic thought about Jews and Judaism from the last few decades. However, they do not simply look backward. More significantly, they emphasize the effect they hope the statement will have: “The following reflections aim at looking back with gratitude on all that has been achieved over the last decades in the Jewish–Catholic relationship, providing at the same time a new stimulus for the future” (Preface).⁴⁶ This statement is thus intended to be a contribution to a vibrant ongoing project. Not surprisingly, the topics are largely familiar to those raised in the wake of *Nostra Aetate*, including the

46. More on the writing, status, and purpose of the statement can be found in the Preface and in Norbert Hofmann, “On the Birth of the Document” (paper presented at the Press Conference on “*The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29): A Reflection, Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Rome, Italy, December 10, 2015), <https://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/analysis/crrj-2015dec10/1364-hoffman-2015dec10>. In particular, Hofmann notes that the authors consulted with Jewish scholars during the drafting process.

relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.⁴⁷ However, the statement is noteworthy for its sustained engagement with current theological issues and a willingness to address some that are complex and even divisive (such as those noted in my introduction).

The authors are thoroughly indebted to Kasper both for general ideas and for specific points, though he is never quoted by name. Yet it is clear that his views, expressed in speeches and essays over a decade, have great influence and largely undergird the CRRJ's first theological statement in three decades.⁴⁸ These views, which he sometimes said are his own rather than those of the Church,⁴⁹ are also given a far higher status through their inclusion in *Gifts*, in essence taking on an official status they lacked previously.

The End of Supersessionism: The Old Covenant is a Good Covenant

Parallel to my application of the model of good and better covenants to elucidate Kasper's views, I here apply the same model to this recent statement. I also demonstrate their efforts to reconcile the same tensions raised by the new view of Judaism after *Nostra Aetate* with their comparative claims for the unique status of the Christian covenant. They too sharply break with what I call the bad-good contrast that was the widespread and traditional belief of many Christians. In their words, Christians previously viewed the New Covenant "not only as the fulfillment of the Old but at the same time as a replacement for it" (*Gifts* 30). This traditional model of the relationship between the covenants is rejected by the authors of *Gifts* repeatedly and firmly: "The covenant that God has offered Israel is irrevocable ... The New Covenant can never replace the Old" (27; cf. 33, 35, 37, and 39). Revocation would betray the message of the New Testament and undermine trust in the faithfulness of God: "'God is not man, that he should lie' [about having committed to an irrevocable covenant with the Jews] (Num 23:19; cf. 2 Tim 2:13). The permanent elective fidelity of God expressed in earlier covenants is never repudiated (cf. Rom 9:4; 11:1-2)" (27). Unlike the

47. These specific terms are used throughout, e.g., 8, 18, 23, 27, and 32.

48. For a very useful detailed presentation of earlier Catholic statements that the authors of *Gifts* quote from, were influenced by, or likely refer to (including Kasper and Koch [who, as noted, often repeats Kasper's views]), see Philip A. Cunningham, "The Sources Behind 'The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable' (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of 'Nostra Aetate,'" *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12 (2017) 1-39, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9792>.

49. This is explicit in an address; for example: "It should be borne in mind from the outset that I do not speak on behalf of the Vatican; I am used to thinking with my own head, and so I risk my own head and speak only on behalf of myself," in Walter Kasper, *The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: A Crucial Endeavour of the Catholic Church* (address, Boston College, Boston, MA, November 6, 2002), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/card-kasper-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20021106_kasper-boston-college_en.html.

supersessionist shift of divine favor from one people to another and one covenant to the other, the authors affirm that both covenants remain valid.

The authors consider the implications of their present affirmation of the goodness of the Old Covenant. Though an earlier covenant, it has a special status for Israel and its ongoing relationship with God. This is manifest in numerous ways. For example, Israel has a continuing religious role in the world: “This [Jesus’ coming] however does not mean that Israel as the people of God has been repudiated or has lost its mission (cf. ‘Nostra aetate,’ No.4)” (32). Rather, “God entrusted Israel with a unique mission, and He does not bring his mysterious plan of salvation for all peoples (cf. 1 Tim 2:4) to fulfillment without drawing into it his ‘first-born son’ [the Jews] (Ex 4:22)” (36). The Old Covenant has its own soteriological value. Far from being cut off from salvation, Jews remain in a vibrant and saving covenant: “That the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically unquestionable” (36; see also 25). This raises complex questions, they admit, but it is a fundamental claim.⁵⁰

After Jesus, Christians can have a covenant with God as well, though without displacing Jews: “the orientation for both [Jews and Christians] consists in a unique relationship with God (cf. for example, the covenant formula in Lev 26:12, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’)” (27). The authors thus highlight ways that both covenants perform similar roles. They offer “two ways by which God’s people [Jews and Christians] can make the Sacred Scriptures of Israel their own” (25). Despite their differences, both communities apprehend “the presence of God in the world ... in the respective worship communities” (26; cf. the quote by Pope Francis in 24). These are bold affirmations, covering what the authors see as multiple aspects of Jewish religious identity. They illustrate my claim that the authors view the post-Jesus Jewish covenant as good, offering to Jews some of the benefits the New Covenant offers to Christians.

The Persistence of Superiority: The New Covenant is a Better Covenant

Despite this positive assessment of the Old Covenant, the authors introduce a complex comparison that is similar to Kasper’s and that at least partially reconciles the deep tensions raised by the rejection of supersessionism. They insist the Old Covenant and the New Covenant are not of equal status. Their positive assessments, noted above, do not fully capture the relationship between the two. On the contrary, the New Covenant is not only based on and grounded in the Old Covenant but is superior to it. This is partly chronological: the Old Covenant is of course earlier, and the New Covenant, arriving afterward, accomplishes more. This distinction between the covenants is absolutely essential to their views, and also sometimes murky, for it is only vaguely expressed and coexists with the positive assessments noted above. That is, the authors simultaneously praise the Old Covenant but insist the New Covenant surpasses (but

50. On soteriology in the statement, see Langer, “Gifts,” 8–9; Philip A. Cunningham, “Gifts and Calling: Coming to Terms with Jews as Covenantal Partners,” *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1–18 at 3–6, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9796>.

does not thereby annul) it in numerous ways. Praise for the good Old Covenant thus sits sometimes awkwardly alongside their comparatively higher praise for the better New Covenant.

This comparative judgment is adumbrated repeatedly. They make numerous claims that the New Covenant “fulfills” the Old Covenant. Before looking at examples, we should note that the term, despite frequent usage,⁵¹ is not clearly defined, just as in Kasper’s statements.⁵² However, this is not as much of a hindrance to understanding as it might seem in light of the authors’ attempts to reconcile the tensions raised by their views. Logically, their use of fulfillment language is, like Kasper’s, comparative. It indicates that there is some lack in the Old Covenant that needs to be satisfied or some incompleteness awaiting completion, which can be done only through the New Covenant.⁵³ The authors thus view the fulfillment available through the New Covenant (and other attributes; see below) in comparative and not just inherent terms.⁵⁴ For example, they write, “The Church does not replace the people of the God of Israel, since as the community founded on Christ it represents in him the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel” (23). The biblical promises originally given to Israel are here assessed comparatively, and have a different status after Christ and the emergence of the New Covenant than they had before. Something new has been accomplished or achieved. The same holds true for God’s soteriological plan, which first included the Jews and then later incorporated Gentile followers of Christ, as noted earlier (but with a different emphasis): “God entrusted Israel with a unique mission, and He does not bring his mysterious plan of salvation for all peoples (cf. 1 Tim 2:4) to fulfillment without drawing into it his ‘first-born son’ [Israel] (Ex 4:22)” (36). A progression of some kind over time has occurred. With the appearance of Jesus, it reached a point never achieved under the Old Covenant. Again, while this says little of substance

51. It appears nine times, not including incidental or unrelated usages (e.g., 14).

52. See William Madges, “Covenant, Universal Mission, and Fulfillment,” *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1–13 at 10, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9798>.

53. My terminology here (“lack” and “incompleteness”) and elsewhere clearly illustrates my etic viewpoint. These are not terms they use.

54. Edward Kessler, invited to speak at a Vatican event celebrating the release of the statement, expresses his discomfort with fulfillment language: “Discussion of covenantal theology is witnessing a resurgence in contemporary conversations between Christian and Jewish scholars and I welcome the new document’s assertion that ‘the New Covenant for Christians is therefore neither the annulment nor the replacement, but the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Covenant.’ However, please allow me to express a warning: fulfillment easily slides into replacement and substitution theory is alive and well in the pews. As a Jewish partner in the dialogue, I welcome further reflection on what fulfillment means in terms of relations with Judaism and how we can ensure the transformation in relations is not limited to the elite, but extends from the citadels of the Vatican to the pews of the Church as well as from the Offices of the Chief Rabbis to the floors of our synagogues”; see Kessler, “Reflections from a European Jewish Theologian.” See also Elena Procario-Foley, “Fulfillment and Complementarity: Reflections on Relationship in ‘Gifts and Calling,’” *Studies in Christian–Jewish Relations* 12 (2017): 1–12 at 3–6, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9800>.

about the nature of the fulfillment, such a comparative judgment itself is common and also significant: “From the perspective of the Christian faith, he [Jesus] fulfils the mission and expectation of Israel in a perfect way” (14). Claims of perfection, not surprisingly, indicate a comparatively (indeed, uniquely) high value to that which Christ accomplished, especially in light of the Old Covenant.⁵⁵

In these and other examples, the authors of *Gifts* argue for some sort of added value to the New Covenant vis-à-vis the Old Covenant. Terms such as “fulfillment” represent non-neutral differences between the Old and New Covenants. Their views should therefore be understood in terms of the good/better model. They do not denounce the Old Covenant or believe that its unfulfilled status renders it a bad covenant. Unlike in the supersessionist model, they deny that the Old Covenant, despite “not having achieved such a fulfillment [as the New Covenant, does not mean the Jews] can no longer be considered to be the people of God” (23). Their lesser covenant is not worthless or invalid. On the contrary, it is good, for it is from God and has value, even after Christ. The Jews remain God’s people, even as members of the better New Covenant have now become God’s people too.⁵⁶

In the statement there is a hint at what fulfillment might mean: the extension of the blessings of the Old Covenant beyond the people of Israel. In an exception to the authors’ practice of not defining key terms (as is the case with Kasper), they briefly highlight the boundary-breaking quality of the New Covenant. It has an “openness for all who respond faithfully from all the nations (cf. Zech 8:20–23; Psalm 87)” (27), thereby transcending the limitations of the Old Covenant. The biblical citations here are important. While originally offering a vision of a future (perhaps eschatological) gathering of the Gentiles in Jerusalem (e.g., “peoples [plural in Hebrew] shall yet come” [Zech 8:20]), the citations are here used to make a point about the present achievement of such a goal—“establishing . . . a new dimension of meaning” in the Old Covenant. One need not wait for the end of days for this to occur.⁵⁷ Furthermore, by finding evidence of this hope in the Bible that is shared by both religions, it is not seen as a Christian imposition from outside the Hebrew Bible. Rather, it is one grounded in a shared sacred text, which legitimates a comparison between them regarding how the two covenants incorporate or fail to incorporate Gentiles.

The nations too can now partake in the blessings originally limited to members of the Old Covenant. While this broader purpose was ultimately intended by the Old Covenant, it was not until the New Covenant that this goal came to pass: “The promise [to the Jews] has been fulfilled [so] that all peoples will pray to the God of Israel as the one God” (35, citing Isa 56:1-8). This desirable goal is not opposed to the Old

55. There are other examples of such claims: “The New Covenant for Christians is therefore neither the annulment nor the replacement, but the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Covenant” (32); “the New Covenant which Christians believe in can only be understood as the affirmation and fulfillment of the Old” (33).

56. On the authors’ view of the role or mission, if any, of the people of the Old Covenant after Christ, see Madges, “Covenant,” 7–8.

57. On the realized eschatology in the statement, see Cunningham, “Gifts and Calling,” 12–14.

Covenant, and indeed was inchoate in it. It was not, however, formerly accomplished by it, giving the New Covenant a comparatively superior status.⁵⁸

It should be clear that the authors do not always compare the two covenants. Non-comparative descriptions are sometimes found alongside (one might even say in tension with) comparative descriptions. In some cases, the authors say the covenants are simply different: “The term covenant, therefore, means a relationship with God that takes effect in different ways for Jews and Christians” (27). This alone gives no indication of superiority or inferiority. Likewise, discussions of newness and even of complementarity are not necessarily evaluative or comparative: “The New Covenant can never replace the Old but presupposes it and gives it a new dimension of meaning, by reinforcing the personal nature of God as revealed in the Old Covenant” (27). One finds here not criticism of the Old Covenant as such, but rather a complementary role. Pope Francis is quoted in this regard. He wrote of “a rich complementarity which allows us [Jews and Christians] to read the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures together and to help one another to mine the riches of God’s word” (13, quoting *Evangelii Gaudium* 249; see also 31). In this case, the two covenants share and serve the same goal.

With equanimity the authors even take note of a deep divide regarding Jesus’s status between Jews and Christians. The two religious communities’ disagreements over such a fundamental issue are not cast in terms of right and wrong. On the contrary, while Jews do not agree with Christians, their opposition is sympathetically presented: “That this Kingdom of God has come with [Jesus] as God’s representative is beyond the horizon of Jewish expectation” (14).⁵⁹ In these few cases, the authors portray two

58. The claim that God’s relationship with the people of Israel was intended to bring blessings to all the nations is grounded in promises to Abraham in Genesis. Interpretations of the original meaning of this claim differ, though the authors here draw on ideas present in Catholic statements by popes and others. For example, Pope John Paul II spoke of “God’s promise to Abraham and the spiritual fraternity which it established: ‘In your descendants all the nations shall find blessing’” (quoting Gen 22:18); see John Paul II, “Meeting with the Representatives of the Jewish Organizations of the United States Of America” (address, Miami, FL, September 11, 1987), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870911_organizzaz-ebraiche.html. In his note at Jerusalem’s Western Wall, John Paul II wrote of the “God of our Fathers, [who] chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the nations”; see John Paul II, “Prayer of the Holy Father at the Western Wall” (speech, Jerusalem, Israel, March 26, 2000), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/travels/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20000326_jerusalem-prayer.html. To a Vatican audience, he spoke of the Church’s rootedness in Israel, “a people who build their faith on the promise God made to Abraham: ‘You shall be the father of a multitude of nations’” (quoting Gen 17:4); see John Paul II, “General Audience” (address, Vatican, April 28, 1999), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_28041999.html.

59. This resembles a remarkable earlier statement from the Pontifical Biblical Commission about Jews’ disbelief. While Christians believe that “the Old Testament finds its goal in Jesus, this is a retrospective perception whose point of departure is not in the text as such, but in the events of the New Testament proclaimed by the apostolic preaching. It cannot be said, therefore, that Jews do not see what has been proclaimed in the text, but that the Christian, in the

covenants and two communities, with different and even clashing perspectives. More positively, this notion of complementarity, while not much developed in *Gifts* (or elsewhere, including in Pope Francis's writings), has promise as an approach that avoids comparative judgments.⁶⁰ However, this perspective is not equally represented, and introduces its own tensions.⁶¹ More often the good/better model discussed here applies.

Conclusion

As is characteristic of official Catholic statements on Judaism, these authors not only thoroughly engage with previous teachings but emphasize continuities between their views and those that were expressed earlier. This reflects a pattern of situating new developments within an extant tradition, albeit one that is sometimes fluid. Kasper and *Gifts* generally continue the trajectory begun in *Nostra Aetate*. More significantly, I have shown how they have gone beyond it and beyond previous Catholic statements. I hope to have demonstrated their major effort to reconcile the serious theological tensions raised by new Catholic views of Judaism. Earlier Catholic statements failed to do this, leaving the relationship between the Old and New Covenants an “unresolved dilemma of a Catholic theology of Judaism.”⁶²

I argue that Kasper directly faced the complex implications of the post-*Nostra Aetate* shift not just for the Old Covenant but also for the New Covenant. By replacing a pre-*Nostra Aetate* comparative model of bad and good covenants with a new model of good and better covenants, he, and later the authors of *Gifts*, reduce the dissonance between two fundamental claims: opposition to supersessionism and affirmation of the superiority of the New Covenant. Though neither state this explicitly, perhaps for reasons of deep sensitivity discussed above, this is a major change. Furthermore, their approaches to this fundamental issue can help us to better understand other, related issues (such as mission and conversion, that is, entry into the New Covenant).

As noted at the start, I do not here offer a critique of these statements. That would be a welcome next step, and could be undertaken from a variety of perspectives (e.g., exegetical, theological, or interreligious; Catholic or Jewish). For example, one might ask how the authors interpret biblical texts; if their descriptions of the Old Covenant (and of Judaism generally) are accurate or would be acceptable to Jews; if their claims have broader implications for Catholic theology; if their study leads to greater “self-understanding” among Catholics (and perhaps Jews) (14); and if this

light of Christ and in the Spirit, discovers in the text an additional meaning that was hidden there,” in Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (May 24, 2001), 21, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.

60. For a sophisticated study of complementarity using gender theory, see Procaro-Foley, “Fulfillment,” 6–12. I thank Hans Hermann Henrix and Philip A. Cunningham for their insights regarding complementarity.

61. The authors even note that complementarity itself does not resolve or make moot, but rather prompts, difficult questions about the relationship between the two covenants (32).

62. Bolton, “Catholic–Jewish Dialogue: Contesting the Covenants,” 45.

statement provides a “new stimulus for the future” deepening of the Jewish–Catholic relationship (Preface). These are vital topics, and worthy of study. I hope that my analysis brings needed clarity to some of the views about a fundamental issue in an often complex and murky theological trajectory. It should allow us to appreciate the creative and consequential responses these authors offer in rejecting one model of the relationship between the two covenants and adopting another. Such clarity is essential for any type of critique.⁶³

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