

## **The Other as Oneself Within Judaism: A Catholic Interpretation**

**By Peter Admirand**

### **Abstract**

How does a Christian try to describe the Other within Judaism to a group consisting of mostly Muslims? This was my task recently at an Abrahamic interfaith event inadvertently scheduled on Passover. In what follows, I focus in particular on how the Sages interpret the Egyptians of Exodus in the context of Passover. As a Catholic theologian who knows the great risk in such an endeavor, I also account for my hesitations and purpose. Ultimately, I see attempts like these as a means for Christians to become more Christ-like, here through analyzing Jewish interpretations of the Other while aiming to represent Jewish views justly and candidly.

### **Introduction**

Context—especially in inter-religious dialogue—is essential. At an inter-religious event in Dublin sponsored by a Muslim organization, the planners were hoping to have Muslim, Christian, and Jewish voices to emphasize the unity of the Abrahamic faiths. Unfortunately, the event had been scheduled during *Pesakh* (Passover). Hence, there would not be a Jewish speaker nor, likely, any Jewish individuals in the audience. It was also too late to change the date once the conflict had been discovered.

As a Catholic theologian involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue and teaching various courses on Judaism in Dublin, I was asked to give a talk—not, of course, pretending I was Jewish, but as much as possible, incorporating a Jewish element. So, a Catholic theologian attempted to present Jewish views towards the non-Jew to a predominantly Muslim audience.

My attempt was a mutual exercise of what Perry Schmidt-Leukel (borrowing from Piet Schoonenberg) calls *auto-interpretation* and *hetero-interpretation*. The former refers to our self-understanding of our own faith while the latter refers to our understanding of another's faith. Ideally, inter-religious dialogue is a face-to-face encounter where one's address to the Other and being addressed by that Other come together in a mutual space of truth-seeking, tolerance, and fellowship. As David Tracy writes: "For there is no genuine dialogue without the willingness to risk all one's present self understanding in the presence of the other," (Tracy 1990, 72). Its aims are transformation, purification, and clarity—even if such clarity involves murkier notions

of truths, paths, and salvations—and reaps more questions than answers (Admirand 2009). As part of the dialogical process, I come to know better my own faith, the faith of the Other, my interpretation of that faith, and the Other's interpretation of my faith. Vulnerability, courage, and patience are some of the key attributes needed in ample supply. As Schmidt-Leukel writes: "...if interfaith dialogue should serve a better mutual understanding, every partner in dialogue must not only strive for a good understanding of the other's auto-interpretation but of the other's hetero-interpretation as well. In other words, the point is to understand *how* the other perceives *oneself* and *why*," (2001, 8-9).

Aware of the problems of speaking for an Other, I still accepted this opportunity as a challenge to present my interpretations of Judaism towards the non-Jew to an audience who may be skeptical or negative towards Judaism. As a Catholic highly aware of the Christian failure to embrace, protect, and learn from the face of the Jewish Other, I also saw this as a small act of *teshuvah* though adamant that mine is a Christian voice not speaking for any Jewish person—only attempting to present my understanding of the multiform voices of Jewish tradition(s). Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it was an opportunity then to assess Christianity's calling to embrace the Other, and recent challenges to Christianity that have arisen through Jewish-Christian dialogue. It was, indeed, a means to become more Christ-like. Hopefully, for my part, I can present the Jewish view—or views—clearly and justly.

### ***Pesakh***

The Jewish festival of *Pesakh* (Passover), often called the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, was, according to the biblical scholar James Kugel:

celebrated in an unusual way: every family in Israel was commanded to make an all-night feast of a roasted sacrificial lamb or goat, called the *pesah* and every last bit of its meat had to be finished before dawn. No bone in the animal's body could be broken during the eating. That night, and for the next seven days, no regular bread could be eaten—in fact, all such bread and leavening needed to be removed earlier from every house...The *pesah* sacrifice was so called, in other words, because it sounded like the verb meaning: 'pass over': G-d had *passed over* the Israelite houses at the time of the last plague (2007, 318-9).

While the focus of this feast is usually on G-d's liberating action (The Qur'an adds: "We afflicted Pharaoh's people with dearth and famine so that they might take heed" ("The Heights" 7:130), it is also fitting to use the story to reflect upon the Other—the not me or

the not us. Sometimes this Other is a neighbor or simply a stranger; sometimes it is an enemy; sometimes it is a strange combination of all three, as *The Keys to my Neighbor's House*, the haunting volume of justice and genocide in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, depicts.

Rooted in the Book of Exodus, though, *Pasakh* celebrates the angel of the Lord (or G-d) passing over the houses of the Israelites, whose inhabitants had splashed the blood of a lamb on their lintels. But the Egyptians were not so lucky. There was much wailing that night as the first-born Egyptian sons were smitten, even “the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the cattle” (Ex. 12:29). It was a plague so severe that the Pharaoh was finally eager to send the Israelites away for “there was no house where there was not someone dead” (Ex. 12:30).

The Israelites had initially sought and found shelter in Egypt through Joseph and his connection with one pharaoh. But friendships and connections fade with time; and the Other turned stranger turned helper turned friend became oppressor.

While not mentioned in the Qur'an, there is a fascinating hadith in the compilation of Sahih Bukhari (born in 810 CE):

Narrated Ibn'Abbas:

The Prophet came to Medina and saw the Jews fasting on the day of Ashura. He asked them about that. They replied, “This is a good day, the day on which Allah rescued Bani Israel from their enemy. So, Moses fasted this day.” The Prophet said, “We have more claim over Moses than you.” So, the Prophet fasted on that day and ordered (the Muslims) to fast (on that day).<sup>40</sup>

Of significance here is the reverence for the actions of G-d in liberating the Israelites and the honor ceded to Moses by the Abrahamic faiths.

In reflecting on Passover, it is fitting, perhaps, to think of ‘the enemy’ in the hadith—the Egyptian, more specifically, in the biblical account—especially focusing on the first-born sons (let alone the cattle) who played no role in oppressing the Israelites. According to the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, “Biblical image of Egypt means ‘idolatry,’” (1997, 208). And yet, “the Egyptian” – the Other – is also beloved of G-d in the Bible and in some remarks of the Sages.<sup>41</sup> In Isaiah 19:19-21, we read: “. . . when the Egyptians cry out to the Lord against their oppressors, he will send them a savior and champion to

<sup>40</sup> “Introduction to Translation of Sahih Bukhari”. Trans. M Muhsin Khan. USC, Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement.

<http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/bukhari/031.sbt.html#003.031.222>. Accessed 28 January 2010.

<sup>41</sup> For a concise account of the Other in Rabbinic literature, see Hayes, 2007: 243-269.

deliver them. For the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians shall acknowledge the Lord in that day and they shall serve Him.” There is also a well-known passage from the Bavli: “When the Egyptian hosts were drowning in the Red Sea,’ say the Rabbis, ‘the angels in heaven were about to break forth into songs of jubilation. But the Holy One, blessed be He, silenced them with the words, “My creatures are perishing, and ye are ready to sing!”’ (Tractate *Sanhedrin* 39b).

Here we get a glimpse into a G-d of justice and mercy, a union rarely without conflict and a sense of loss. In the Bible (and the Qur’an) these attributes are delicately and precariously linked. In Leviticus 19:15, we hear: “You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor”. And yet, the Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits notes some of the tensions of a G-d who is impartial and yet seeks to protect the poor and oppressed, as in the biblical passage of Deuteronomy 10:18, which speaks of a G-d “who regards no person” while the verse immediately adds: “He does execute justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the stranger, in giving him food and raiment”. Thus, “to seek justice is to relieve the oppressed” (2003, 133). At the same time because judging is so closely linked with ethics, impartiality under the law remained the key rule.

As creator of all, G-d loves all. We hear in the Tractate *Haggia*: “What does the Divine Presence say when anyone suffers? My head is heavy; My arm is heavy. If that is how the Holy One, Blessed be He, is distressed for the blood of the wicked, how much more so [is he distressed] when the blood of the righteous is shed,” (Solomon, 2009, 298). G-d does not celebrate when the Red Sea engulfs the Egyptians and their chariots. G-d reminds the Israelites that the Egyptians are also G-d’s people. And yet, the Sages’ interpretation did not end here. In the section from Tractate *Sanhedrin*, it is noted that G-d will not rejoice; but others may.<sup>42</sup> More problematically, another rabbinic tradition argues that G-d told the angels to cease singing because the Israelites were still in trouble—not because Egyptians were perishing. One could say that both the universalistic and insular tendencies are present in Judaism, as will be discussed below.

## **A Hidden or Pervasive Light? Religious Pluralism and Judaism**

It is fitting to acknowledge that two polar threads have been present in Judaism: a notion of Israel as a “light unto the nations” called to reveal G-d to everyone, and what

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<sup>42</sup> In Tractate *Sanhedrin* 39b, we read: “Said R. Jose b. Hanina: He Himself does not rejoice, yet He causes others to rejoice.” See *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein. [http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin\\_39.html#PARTb](http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_39.html#PARTb). Accessed 28 January 2010. See Shemot (Exodus) Rabbah 23:7 for the interpretation citing G-d’s concern for the Israelites at the Red Sea and not the Egyptians as well.

has been self-described by some Jewish scholars as an insular, tribal outlook. Michael Kogan, for example, calls this tendency “Judeomonism” (2007, xiii). Against this inward tendency, Jewish tradition also espouses the Noahide law or covenant, which lists G-d’s teaching of seven prohibitions to all peoples. This covenant is different from G-d’s specific (and more demanding) covenant through the Torah, which is said to contain 613 laws. As Norman Solomon writes:

The concept of Noahide law carries significant consequences for Jewish theology: it means that the essential Jewish ‘mission’ is not to convert Gentiles to Judaism in its fullest form, but to lead them to implement the Noahide commandments. . . and it allows for a positive evaluation of other religions, provided they endorse the Noahide commandments (505-6).

Thus, while dissenting voices can always be found, there is a resilient Jewish tradition that seeks to reach out and respect the Other as a child of G-d and acknowledge that G-d also calls and loves that Other. Such a tradition is especially relevant when discussing the issue of religious pluralism.

While many of us believe the truth claims of our own religion, how do we interpret and evaluate the truth claims of the Other? For some (whether Jews, Christians, or Muslims), truth claims are only full or final in the context of one’s own faith; outside—“beyond the pale” as it were—is falsity, idolatry, or perhaps charitably, “partial truth”. In Roman Catholicism, such an exclusivist view was contained in the outdated notion that “outside the Church there is no salvation”. Vatican II—and particularly (the flawed but still fruitful) Declaration *Nostra Aetate*—helped to make great strides toward a more inclusive position. However, work still needs to be done, particularly after recent disturbing setbacks in Jewish-Catholic relations.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> From the initial attempt to reinstitute an excommunicated Bishop who had denied the Shoah; to the confusing move by the US Catholic Bishops in revising one sentence in the U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults (opening a range of questions including whether Christians should overtly and systematically seek to convert Jews), to the persistent and seemingly unnecessary rush to propel sainthood upon a very controversial (and uninspiring) wartime pope; such actions have understandably caused sadness and alarm to our Jewish brothers and sisters, and many Christians as well.

The original sentence in the catechism referred to above had been: “Thus the covenant that G-d made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternally valid for them.” It was replaced with a Pauline passage: “To the Jewish people, whom G-d first chose to hear his word, ‘belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ’” (Rom 9: 4-5). The problem is not with the Pauline quote but in the statement that was removed, which interestingly opposes John Paul II’s teaching that the

Tragically, a militant interpretation reigns in some Christian circles, narrowly marshalling Jesus' (apparent) call for universal baptism (Mt 28:19) without embodying the essence of discipleship and love towards all. Christian mission should predominantly concern itself with being Christ-like and seeking the meaning of true discipleship. While semantically similar, being Christ-like is far more important than the label of "Christian." It is the key to any sense of mission and dialogue as witness. It is to balance the call to evangelize in Matthew with the more penetrating (but difficult) statement in Mark: "Those who are not against us are for us," (9:40). Interestingly, the Catholic liberation theologian Jon Sobrino has written of "no salvation outside the poor" insisting upon all faiths to adopt a preferential option for the poor; an endeavor that reaches across a wide swath of various believers and non-believers (2008, 150). As the Qur'an warns: "No! But you show no kindness to the orphans, nor do you vie with each other in feeding the destitute. Greedily you lay your hands on the inheritance of the weak, and you love riches with all your hearts," ("The Dawn" 89:15). For Christians, responding to social injustice in partnership with the poor and oppressed is to approach what it means to be Christ-like.

Against an exclusivist view, an inclusivist one will want to claim that G-d—or in "kabbalistic terminology the *Ayn Sof*—the Infinite beyond human comprehension" (Cohn-Sherbok 2004, 125; see Unterman 2008, 8-10) — is present in other faiths, but in the guise or mechanism of one's own tradition, even if the other does not know it as such. Thus a Buddhist may be an "Anonymous Christian" while rabbinic sources describe select foreign peoples as "anonymous monotheists". Christine Hayes, in her article, "The 'Other' in Rabbinic Literature" refers to the term "venerators of heaven (*yir'ei shamayim*) in reference to gentile sympathizers of one sort or another" as depicted in Palestinian rabbinic sources (2007; 255-6). Others go further. Cohn-Sherbok notes:

In the medieval period such writers as Rabbenu Tam applied this rabbinic conception of symbolic intermediacy to Christian believers. In his opinion Christianity is not idolatry since Christians are monotheists despite their belief in the Trinity. Other writers, such as Judah Halevi, formulated an even more tolerant form of Jewish inclusivism: for these thinkers Christians as well as Muslims play an important role in G-d's plan for humanity spreading the message of monotheism (2004, 121).

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Jewish covenant had never been revoked. See: <http://www.georgiabulletin.org/world/2009/08/27/US-4/>. Accessed 28 January 2010. For a pithy analysis of this Pauline passage, see Fredriksen, 2008: 8-9.

A pluralist view may argue for there being multiple truths or one truth contained in various ways among multiple sources. In this context and in the ongoing debate on the merits or problems of religious pluralism, one also can read a wide-range of views from various Jewish groups and thinkers. Even where there is disagreement, there have been some hopeful signs of candid dialogue.

Such honesty is particularly evident in the volume *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Drawing Honey from the Rock*, where Jewish scholars Alan Berger and David Patterson examine a range of issues and problems within Jewish-Christian dialogue and then invite three Christian scholars to respond. As David Gushee, one of the Christian participants notes, “[This book] is the most direct and no-holds barred critique of Christians and Christianity that I have read from a Jewish perspective,” (Berger and Patterson 2008, 188). Berger and Patterson’s interpretations, accusations, challenges and truth-claims towards Christianity will leave few Christian readers without demanding clarification or wanting to respond. To be clear, Berger and Patterson highlight Judaism’s openness to other paths (Ibid., 60), and ask: “...where in any Christian eschatology is there room for salvation that remains outside of Christianity?” (Ibid., 60). Such openness, however, remains questionable with comments like: “Therefore, it seems, traditional Christian theology is, in part, defined by an anti-Judaic stance: It *has* to be anti-Judaic in order to be Christian,” (Ibid., 113). Anti-Judaic tendencies are the cancer of Christianity; not its essence.

Berger and Patterson also highlight the radical difference between the role(s) of the Messiah among Christians and Jews, and contra *Dabru Emet*,<sup>44</sup> raise doubts that the same God is invoked among both groups:

Here one truly begins to wonder whether Christians and Jews worship the same thing when they speak of God. Jews, for example, do not worship a Triune God who can impregnate a virgin and become incarnate in a human being. And they do not conceive of a Messiah who must be tortured and slaughtered, according to the will of God, as a redemption or a price for the sins of humanity (Ibid., 111).

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<sup>44</sup> While not necessarily representative of the millions of Jews around the world, *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*, published by a number of prominent rabbis and Jewish intellectuals from a range of Jewish groups, remains a key contemporary expression of a Jewish response to the post-Shoah Christian and churches who are striving to eradicate anti-Judaic expressions, actions, and beliefs. For the document, see: <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1014>. See also: Tikva Frymer-Kensky, 2000).

Although Christian respondents like John Pawlikowski and John Roth rightfully challenge Berger and Patterson's questionable interpretations of Christianity (Ibid., 191-6), the quotations above provide ample material for clarification and mutual learning. However, some comments do border on the Judeo-centric. As Roth remarks: "There's a tone in this book that seems to suggest, 'Jews win, Christians lose,'" (Ibid., 193).

Dan-Cohn Sherbok, advocating John Hick's Copernican revolution in the area of religious pluralism, writes: "With a shift from inclusivism to pluralism, there is no longer any need to interpret other religions from a Judeo-centric standpoint; rather, with the Divine at the center of the universe of faiths, Jewry can acknowledge the inevitable subjectivity of all religious faiths, including those contained in the Jewish heritage," (132). Cohn-Sherbok's statement, while far from satisfactory in relation to one's unique religious identity, still has much merit. Traces of human, fallible subjectivity lay at the margins (or even centers) of much religious doctrine and dogma and to pretend otherwise has often had dire consequences (Admirand 2008, 302-17). Nevertheless, I prefer the pluralist model as advocated by other Jewish theologians like Michael Kogan and Rabbi Irving Greenberg, whose arguments seems to embody more of what I deem to be core biblical and rabbinic Judaism while remaining open to the non-Jewish Other like me.

### **Greenberg and Kogan's Contributions to Interfaith Dialogue**

Rabbi Irving Greenberg and Michael Kogan both maintain a belief in the particular Jewish experience of G-d and the Jewish biblical covenant, but also are articulate and passionate voices for Jews to face and acknowledge the truth claims of non-Jews. In Michael Kogan's *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity*, he writes: "Judaism is a faith that already contains elements of pluralism, for while Judaism views itself as the true faith of the Jewish people, it does not insist on a world in which everyone is Jewish," (2008, 232). Note that Kogan is not going to renounce core beliefs that contribute to his Jewish identity, but nor will he claim that his tradition has a monopoly on truth claims and theological beliefs and arguments. In the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue and the possibility of a viable Christian covenant with G-d through Christ, Rabbi Irving Greenberg also concisely contends: "My argument is quite simple. Christianity had to start within Judaism, but it had to grow into its own independent existence if justice was to be done to the particularity of the covenant". Addressing the fact that a majority of Gentiles—and not Jews—followed Christ and that nascent religion, Greenberg adds:

I can only suggest that the resurrection signal had to be so marginal, so subject to alternate interpretations, and the incarnation sign so subtle, as



to be able to be heard in dramatically opposing fashions – one way by the band elected to start the new faith and another way by the majority of Jews called to continue the classical covenantal mission (2004, 194).

Such an argument, similar to Kogan's (and looking back, to Franz Rosenzweig) accentuates the belief that Christ came for the Gentiles—to bring the Word of G-d and to open the Covenant to the non-Jew. Christians did not replace Jews; nor have Muslims replaced Christians and Jews (Kogan, 13).

Kogan highlights Judaism's distinguished line of figures who have validated the presence of G-d in many of the beliefs and practices of the Other. He quotes Rabbi Menachim Ha Me'iri (1249-1315) who radically included Christians and Muslims as part of "Israel" through his interpretation of the "Talmud, specifically *Shabbat* 156a, 'Israel is not subject to the stars.'" Because Muslims and Christians also do not look to the stars and astrology for prophecy or spiritual guidance, then they are linked with Israel (*ibid.*, 75).

For Kogan, moreover, Judaism "believes in a universal ethic but not a universal theology. While holding there is one G-d, Jews expect that different peoples will conceive of divinity in widely different ways," (233). Thus, calling Jews to acknowledge the validity of the Christian covenant is to "lead us beyond the Jewish-Christian dialogue to a consideration of other religions: to Islam, the third of the Abrahamic faiths, and beyond, to religions outside this tripartite division," (*Ibid.*, 233).

Such an agenda is, of course, risky and threatening. It is so much easier to rest one's restless heart in one's own religious doctrine and revelation. It is so much more comforting to convince oneself of the superiority of one's faith without leaving oneself open and vulnerable to the possibility that the Other may have much to teach, or even correct us, and that G-d is also present and living in that tradition. As Greenberg writes: "In principled pluralism, practitioners of absolute faiths do not give up their obligations to criticize that which is wrong (or what they believe to be wrong) or that which leads to less than full realization of truth, found in other faiths," (207-208). Nor does one renounce or minimize the distinctive elements of each tradition to appease the Other. Participants in interfaith relations respect each other by kindly and humbly expressing (when appropriate) the core of their faith. The aim, as noted, is mutual transformation, hoping to grow in grace, mercy, and the knowledge of our interconnectedness.

### **Conclusion: What Cannot be Passed Over**

In the Exodus tale from which Passover derives, G-d frees the Israelites from their bondage. The cost, however, is high. But in the Bavli, G-d also tells the angels not to sing

when the Egyptians “are perishing.” A space to be open, and perhaps, to love the Other, is maintained.

In any conflict of thoughts between two believing and religiously-different others, one is challenged to respect one’s beliefs, the religious views of that Other, and most importantly, the G-d who seeks to liberate us from oppression. By overcoming the hubris of claimed certainty, moreover, we can pass over any violent clash to forge a path that can truly reflect G-d’s image in all of us.

Not surprisingly, in examining the Jewish view of the Other, I uncovered ample material to help Christians like me become Christ-like in a more meaningful way. As I was naturally drawn to Jewish accounts that validated my religious perspective, it is not surprising that non-Christians react with sadness and distress when Christian views deny the validity of their faiths.

Hopefully, this awareness testifies to a just reading of some aspects of Jewish tradition. If not, then I pray that one has the patience to instruct me further and that I have the courage to embrace theological vulnerability, without which, most of our inter-religious attempts would be in vain.<sup>45</sup>

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