



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION**

Friday, 11 April 1997

1. Your Eminence, I cordially thank you for the sentiments you have just expressed in presenting to me the Pontifical Biblical Commission at the beginning of its mandate. I cordially greet the old and new members of the Commission attending this audience. I greet the “old” members with warm gratitude for the tasks already completed and the “new” members with special joy inspired by hope. I am pleased to have this opportunity to meet you all personally and to say again to each of you how much I appreciate the generosity with which you put your competence as exegetes at the service of the Word of God and the Church’s Magisterium.

The theme you have begun to study at this plenary session is of enormous importance: it is, in fact, fundamental for a correct understanding of the mystery of Christ and Christian identity. I would first like to emphasize this usefulness, which we could call *ad intra*. It is also inevitably reflected in a usefulness, so to speak, *ad extra*, since awareness of one’s own identity determines the nature of one’s relations with others. In this case it determines the nature of the relations between Christians and Jews.

2. Since the second century A.D., the Church has been faced with the temptation to separate the New Testament completely from the Old, and to oppose one to the other, attributing to them two different origins. The Old Testament, according to Marcion, came from a god unworthy of the name because he was vindictive and bloodthirsty, while the New Testament revealed a God of reconciliation and generosity. The Church firmly rejected this error, reminding all that God’s tenderness was already revealed in the Old Testament. Unfortunately the Marcionite temptation is making its appearance again in our time. However what occurs most frequently is an ignorance of the deep ties linking the New Testament to the Old, an ignorance that gives some people the impression that Christians have nothing in common with Jews.

Centuries of reciprocal prejudice and opposition have created a deep divide which the Church is now endeavouring to bridge, spurred to do so by the Second Vatican Council's position. The new liturgical Lectionaries have given more space to Old Testament texts, and the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) has been concerned to draw constantly from the treasures of Sacred Scripture.

3. Actually, it is impossible fully to express the mystery of Christ without reference to the Old Testament. Jesus' human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. And this does not mean only a physical belonging. By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented on, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them then in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions.

Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people's long history. When he began to preach and teach, he drew abundantly from the treasure of Scripture, enriching this treasure with new inspirations and unexpected initiatives. These — let us note — did not aim at abolishing the old revelation but, on the contrary, at bringing it to its complete fulfilment. Jesus understood the increasing opposition he had to face on the way to Calvary in the light of the Old Testament, which revealed to him the destiny reserved for the prophets. He also knew from the Old Testament that in the end God's love always triumphs.

To deprive Christ of his relationship with the Old Testament is therefore to detach him from his roots and to empty his mystery of all meaning. Indeed, to be meaningful, the Incarnation had to be rooted in centuries of preparation. Christ would otherwise have been like a meteor that falls by chance to the earth and is devoid of any connection with human history.

4. From her origins, the Church has well understood that the Incarnation is rooted in history and, consequently, she has fully accepted Christ's insertion into the history of the People of Israel. She has regarded the Hebrew Scriptures as the perennially valid Word of God addressed to her as well as to the children of Israel. It is of primary importance to preserve and renew this ecclesial awareness of the essential relationship to the Old Testament. I am certain that your work will make an excellent contribution in this regard; I am delighted with it and deeply grateful to you.

You are called to help Christians have a good understanding of their identity, an identity that is defined first and foremost by faith in Christ, the Son of God. But this faith is inseparable from its relationship to the Old Testament, since it is faith in Christ who “died for our sins, *according to the Scriptures*” and “was raised ... *in accordance with the Scriptures*” (1 Cor 15:3-4). The Christian must know that by belonging to Christ he has become “Abraham's offspring” (Gal 3:29) and has been grafted onto a cultivated olive tree (cf. Rom 11:17-24), that is, included among the People of Israel, to “share the richness of the olive tree” (Rom 11:17). If he has this firm conviction, he can no longer allow for Jews as such to be despised, or worse, ill-treated.

5. In saying this I do not mean to disregard the fact that the New Testament preserves traces of obvious tension between the early Christian communities and some groups of non-Christian Jews. St Paul himself testifies in his Letters that as a non-Christian Jew he had proudly persecuted the Church of God (cf. Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:6). These painful memories must be overcome in charity, in accordance with Christ's command. Exegesis must always seek to advance in this direction and thereby help to decrease tensions and clear up misunderstandings.

Precisely in the light of all this, the work you have begun is highly important and deserves to be carried out with care and commitment. It involves certain difficult aspects and delicate points, but it is very promising and full of great hope. I trust it will be very fruitful for the glory of God. With this wish, I assure you of a constant remembrance in prayer and I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you all.

© Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana