



Whoever Meets Jesus Christ Meets Judaism

Pope John Paul II, 1980

Creating a New Paradigm in Religious Education: Reading the Bible in its Jewish Context

Two statements in the booklet, *Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations*, produced by the Institute for Catholic Education and distributed in the information kit from CPCO, drew my attention: “A discerning believer formed in the Catholic faith community [is one] who actively reflects on God’s Word as communicated through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.” and “respects the faith traditions...of all people of good will.”

How is that goal being achieved in Ontario classrooms? One example in the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board is demonstrated by Sarah Calvert, a CPCO member and vice-principal at Guardian Angels Catholic Elementary School in Brampton. She organized a Bat Kol-sponsored workshop for religion teachers at her board offices last February, as the season of Passover and Easter was approaching. The presenters included Prof./Sr. Maureen Fritz of Bat Kol Institute Jerusalem with Institute alumna, Patricia O’Reilly of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).

“My husband is Jewish, and I have had the opportunity to attend Seders each year,” Calvert said. “As Catholics I wanted us to celebrate a Seder that honoured both of our traditions. We needed to look at how it was celebrated by Jesus. That is why I felt that Dr. Fritz’s presentation would be beneficial for us.” It was typical of many positive comments from participants who were looking for new teaching ideas.

The importance of Christianity’s Jewish roots being prominently treated within the curriculum is reinforced by Johannes Cardinal Willebrands’ statement, “...the Jews and Judaism should not

occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis. Their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated.”¹ Last fall wearing a black *kippah* (skull cap) Toronto Archbishop Thomas Collins spoke about “the church and the synagogue in the new century” in Beth Tzedec synagogue, the largest Jewish conservative congregation in Toronto. “We have been together on this journey for 2,000 years,” he said during the celebrations for the Jewish festival of *Sukkot*. “We have a long history, but often a sad history.” Jews and Christians have differences in faith, but both are “brothers and sisters in God’s presence.”²

The wave of awareness and recognition of opportunities is sweeping our culture. “Revolutions are happening all around us,” said a key line on Time magazine’s front cover on March 24, 2008. It followed the magazine’s headline, *10 Ideas that are Changing the World*. Number 10 on their list was, “Re-Judaizing Jesus,” and reported the news that “scholars are now re-reading the Gospels through the eyes of a Jew: Jesus.” That may be news to many of

its readers, but there is at least one Christian organization which has been doing that for many years - Bat Kol Institute of Jerusalem.

“This [idea] is seismic,” the magazine went on. “For centuries, the discipline of Christian Hebraics consisted primarily of Christians cherry-picking Jewish texts to support the traditionally assumed contradiction between the Jews - whose alleged dry legalism contributed to their fumbling their ancient tribal covenant with God - and Jesus, who personally embodied God’s new covenant of love.”

“Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither.”

From the Vatican document,
The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible

“But today seminaries across the Christian spectrum teach, as Vanderbilt University New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine says, that ‘if you get the [Jewish] context wrong, you will certainly get Jesus wrong.’”

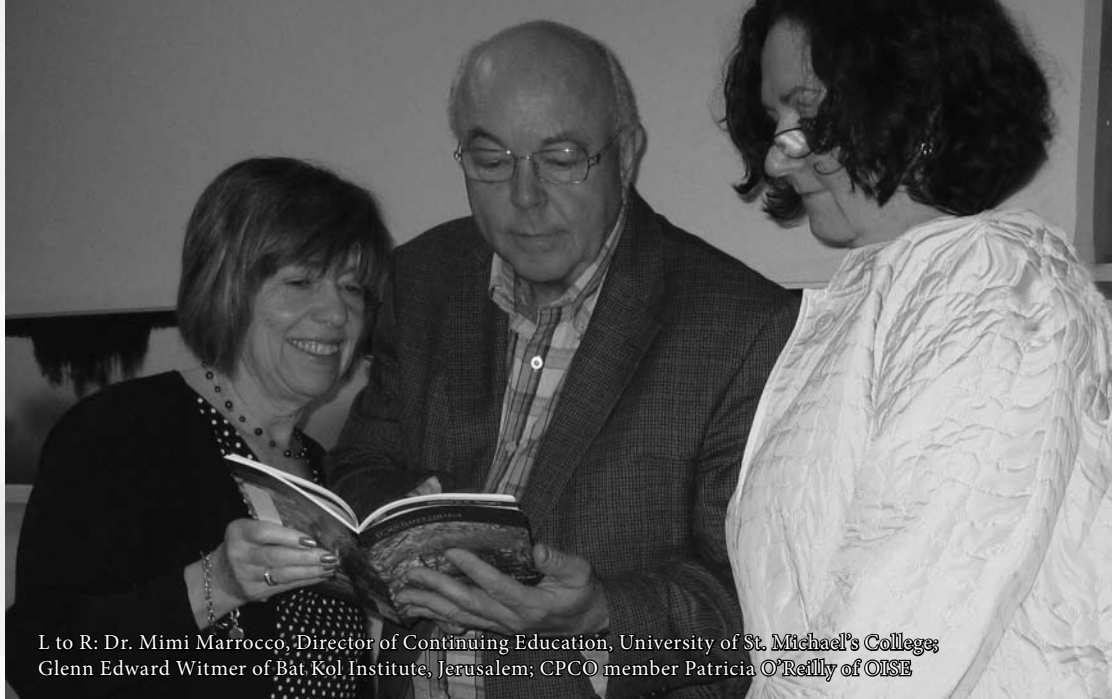
Heady discussions such as these have prompted Bat Kol Institute to expand its teaching resources for Catholic educators in Ontario through the development of new courses based on the imperatives and subsequent documents of *Nostra Aetate*, concerning the Church’s relationship to the Jewish people. In November 2008 a new Bat Kol two-year certificate program in Scripture Studies: *The Gospel in their Jewish Context* will be offered through the continuing education division of the University of St. Michael’s College (USMC). The program includes participation in the Bat Kol conference in Toronto on February 28, 2009 with Archbishop Collins and Union Theological Seminary professor, Dr. Mary C. Boys, as keynote speakers. Participants who complete the certificate program may request a bursary on registration for study in Jerusalem in July 2010.³

A number of initiatives have followed the initial Vatican documents after *Nostra Aetate*: liturgical renewals, resolutions, and apologies for past wrongdoings and erroneous teachings. But there was a clear need to change catechetical and clerical education programs and to re-school teachers and preachers of scripture on all levels of church ministry and service.

Bat Kol Institute was one of the first to respond to the *Nostra Aetate* imperatives with new educational initiatives for teachers. Co-founded in Toronto in 1983 by Srs. Maureena Fritz and Anne Anderson (Professor Emerita and Acting President of USMC respectively), the Institute has been centered in Jerusalem since 1989 with new study programs for teachers offered since 2001. It continues to be energized by successive statements of papal leadership:

Jesus was and always remained a Jew; his ministry was deliberately limited ‘to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Mt. 15:24). Jesus is fully a man of his time and his environment - the Jewish Palestinian one of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared.

Some 300 teachers and ministers from five continents have already participated in the new graduate-level study program taught in Jerusalem, now available also to educators in selected centers around the globe, with Toronto institutions taking a

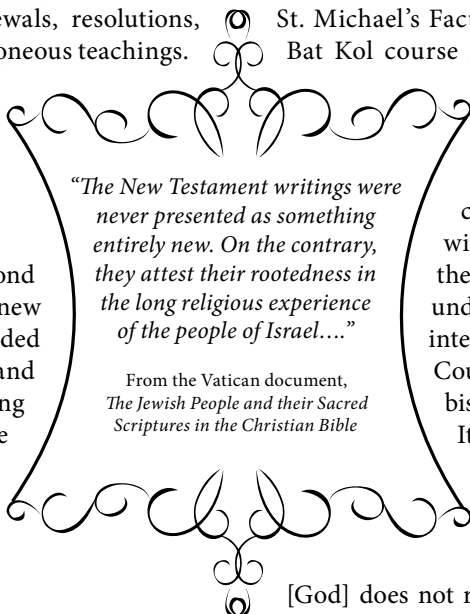


L to R: Dr. Mimi Marrocco, Director of Continuing Education, University of St. Michael’s College; Glenn Edward Witmer of Bat Kol Institute, Jerusalem; CPCO member Patricia O’Reilly of OISE

lead in the levels of courses available. In an intensive month of study in July each year, this Jerusalem program includes courses in the Gospels within their Jewish context, Midrash, Hasidic texts, Jewish Spirituality, Rashi, Biblical Geography and the Spirituality of the Land, along with visits to key archaeological and biblical locations for on-site teaching. These courses are accredited by a number of universities around the world including the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome and the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto. St. Michael’s Faculty of Theology will offer a graduate-level Bat Kol course in July 2009, *The Book of Genesis: I-Thou Encounters*, taught by Prof. Fritz.⁵

Bat Kol is an international association of Christian women and men who are committed to the study of the word of God within its Jewish context; they then incorporate these studies into their Christian self-understanding in a manner that respects the integrity of both traditions. At the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* was affirmed by the bishops, and promulgated on October 28, 1965. It was a landmark document connoting a change of heart on the part of the Church towards Jewish people. One of its key statements was, “The Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for [God] does not repent of the gifts he makes nor the calls he issues” (*Nostra Aetate*, #4).

Bat Kol exists to foster Jewish Studies, defined as study of the Word of God (*Torah*) within its Jewish milieu, using Jewish sources, ancient and modern, with the help of Jewish and Christian scholars. More than half a dozen Jewish lecturers are included on Bat Kol’s faculty. The reason for this approach is that “Christianity is rooted in Judaism as a plant is rooted in the earth; it cannot live apart from the soil in which it is planted,” as one Vatican document states.



“The New Testament writings were never presented as something entirely new. On the contrary, they attest their rootedness in the long religious experience of the people of Israel...”

From the Vatican document, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*

One of the key Vatican documents, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* states, "In both Testaments, it is the same God who enters into a relationship with human beings and invites them to live in communion with him." In 1999 Pope John Paul II said, "There is much that Christians and Jews share together, and it is vital now that Christians should learn more of that common heritage." Pope Benedict XVI added, "What ought to emerge is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament."

OISE instructor and CPCO member Patricia O'Reilly, a frequent Israel tour leader and Bat Kol alumna said recently:

In February of this year Fr. James Mulligan asked the question, 'Is there a core group of Catholic educators who see their work as living out their baptismal commitment and are able to tell that story, sharing their faith with students?' My experience studying at Bat Kol enriched my understanding of sacred scriptures and Church tradition as it informs our Catholic faith story.

O'Reilly works with Bat Kol to develop courses and workshops in Ontario, and organizes study tours to Israel to provide practical experience and opportunities for renewed biblical understanding and spirituality for top teachers. She will lead another tour in July 2009 then stay on to study at the Institute again. "Bat Kol is a rare resource for Catholic educators," she added.

The call is clear for teachers of religious education and world religions in our schools today. The challenge is how to introduce the paradigm change into the existing program, one which "actively reflects on God's Word as communicated through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures." Bat Kol is providing a new paradigm.

Glenn Edward Witmer was a teacher with the Scarborough Board of Education, publisher for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC Enterprises and is currently President of Bat Kol Institute in Jerusalem. He can be reached at admin@batkol.info. An 8-minute video clip about Bat Kol Institute can be viewed at www.batkol.info.

¹From the post-Nostra Aetate document, Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church.

²Reported in The Catholic Register, October 5, 2007. The Archdiocese of Toronto website has a link to Bat Kol Institute under Partners: <http://www.archtoronto.org>.

³For information about the Conference and Continuing Education course registration, e-mail poreilly@oise.utoronto.ca.

⁴From the post-Nostra Aetate document, Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, No. 20.

⁵A study of fascinating personalities in the Book of Genesis through Jewish sources such as Talmud, Midrash, and Martin Buber's philosophy of I-Thou, using lectures, film, and traditional Jewish havrutah study (in pairs).



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