

Dissertation (HHP6902): Reflective Report

My engagement with questions of covenant, fulfilment, and the history of Jewish–Christian relations predates the present dissertation. A pivotal moment occurred in my second-year undergraduate module Theology and Inter-Religious Encounter (HPRS5902) with Dr Angus M. Slater, in which I wrote an essay entitled *Supersessionism and Jewish–Christian Inter-Religious Encounter: Historical Theological Perspectives and Contemporary Implications*. This study demonstrated that Christian self-understanding has long been shaped by reading Israel’s Scriptures and covenantal promises as fulfilled in Christ—a theological hermeneutic that underpins Christian supersessionism and, correspondingly, elicits the Jewish view that Christianity represents not fulfilment but a departure from the covenant. It was this realisation that provided the impetus for the present project. As I engaged more deeply with the reciprocal dynamics of Jewish and Christian self-understanding—in particular, how Christianity has construed its identity in relation to Israel, and how Jewish interlocutors have responded to Christian theological claims—the coherence of my dissertation question began to emerge.

Tracing the interplay between covenantal identity, diaspora, and Christian ecclesiology made clear that gestures towards rapprochement remain entangled in doctrinal tensions rooted in the theological structures that both traditions inherit. Engagement with post-Holocaust theology and conciliar re-evaluations sharpened my awareness of the unresolved theological questions that continue to shape Catholic–Jewish relations. As my research progressed, this insight underwent repeated refinement: early attempts to frame a broad panorama of Jewish–Christian relations gradually yielded to a more historically and doctrinally focused inquiry, producing a sequence of thesis drafts (see Appendix A) that developed from a genealogical study of supersessionism¹ to a historically anchored focus on *Nostra aetate*,² and finally to the present question of the document’s inherent limitations and unresolved tensions.³ This process of refinement has led to a more focused inquiry concerning the extent to which *Nostra aetate* and the wider conciliar project could realise the

¹ ‘How has Christian supersessionism evolved across the history of Jewish–Christian relations, and in what ways have centuries of diasporic existence, the Holocaust, and Vatican II partially reconfigured a doctrine that continues to underlie modern constructs such as the concept of a “Judeo–Christian” tradition?’ See Appendix A.1: Research Question and Thesis Formulation (Version 1).

² ‘To what extent does *Nostra aetate* constitute continuity or discontinuity with traditional Catholic teaching on Judaism’s covenantal status, and how far does it revise or preserve the supersessionist structures inherited from the Church’s past?’ See Appendix A.2: Research Question and Thesis Formulation (Version 2).

³ ‘What doctrinal, historical, and hermeneutical constraints limited *Nostra aetate*’s capacity to effect the deeper theological reconfiguration of Catholic–Jewish relations envisaged by both Catholic reformers and Jewish interlocutors, and to what extent did its rejection of dual-covenant theology render a fuller reconciliation structurally impossible?’ See Appendix A.3: Research Question and Thesis Formulation (Version 3).

reconciliation that they envisioned, given the theological structures that they inherited.

This dissertation thus represents a convergence of earlier undergraduate study, an increasingly systematic engagement with historical and theological sources, and a gradually refined methodological approach. Research has revealed how profoundly Jewish–Christian relations are shaped by long-standing interpretative frameworks: the Christian conviction that the Church fulfils Israel’s promise, and the Jewish conviction that Christianity represents not fulfilment but a departure from the covenant. Early reading of the Church Fathers and the medieval tradition has suggested that supersessionism was never merely a historical prejudice but an interpretative structure integral to Christian theological self-understanding; Augustine’s doctrine of witness—which construes the continued existence of Jews as providential testimony to Christian truth⁴—consolidates a framework that has endured well into modernity. Conversely, engagement with David Novak,⁵ Dan Cohn-Sherbok,⁶ and the authors of *Dabru Emet*⁷ has revealed the extent to which Jewish self-understanding emerges both in fidelity to its own covenantal identity and in contrast to Christian theological claims. Further reading of James Parkes has deepened this insight, showing how each tradition has interpreted the other

⁴ Augustine describes the dispersed Jews as ‘by their own Scriptures a testimony to us that we have not forged the prophecies about Christ’, adding that ‘in spite of themselves, they contribute by their possession of these books, while they are dispersed among all nations, wherever the Church of Christ is spread abroad’ (p. 278). He further remarks that God has not destroyed Israel ‘because if they had only been in their own land . . . the Church which is everywhere could not have had them as witnesses among all nations’ (p. 279). See Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Volume II, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), XVIII.46, pp. 278–280.

⁵ David Novak observes that medieval Jews ‘saw Christianity as a distortion of the original covenant . . . that Israel alone had preserved in faithfulness to God’, regarding Christianity not as fulfilment but as ‘disintegrating rather than developing the covenant’. See David Novak, *Jewish–Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 15.

⁶ Dan Cohn-Sherbok affirms that Israel’s covenantal identity rests on its divinely appointed vocation, observing that ‘[t]hrough its election Israel has been given an historic mission to bear divine truth to humanity’ (p. 168), and that rabbinic tradition upholds ‘the belief that God chose the Jews from all peoples’ on account of their acceptance of the Torah (p. 169). See Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ‘Covenant in Judaism and Christianity’, *The Way*, 40.2 (2000), 168–180 (pp. 168–169).

⁷ *Dabru Emet* declares that ‘God established a covenant with the people Israel’, grounding Jewish identity in its own enduring vocation, while also recognising that ‘Jews and Christians interpret the Bible differently on many points’, and insisting ‘that difference will not be settled by one community insisting that it has interpreted Scripture more accurately than the other’. National Jewish Scholars Project, *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity* (2000) <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/dabru-emet> [accessed 23 November 2025].

through the lens of its own theological history.⁸

Study of the historical backdrop to *Nostra aetate* has proved indispensable. The medieval papal protections—above all the *Sicut Judaeis* tradition, originating with Pope Calixtus II and reaffirmed repeatedly⁹—reveal a structural tension in which Jews were afforded safeguards unparalleled among other non-Christian groups, yet these protections presupposed a subordinate theological position within Christian salvation history. Pope Gregory I's insistence on upholding the legal protections afforded to Jewish communities—while simultaneously circumscribing their civic and religious autonomy—reflects the interdependent dynamic of protection and restriction that characterised the medieval Christian encounter with Judaism.¹⁰ Engagement with the canons of Lateran IV has further clarified that the political and civic limitation of Jews in medieval Christendom was not incidental but constituted a deliberate juridical expression of Christian theological self-understanding.¹¹ This is supported further by the work of Richard L. Rubenstein, whose post-Holocaust theology

⁸ James Parkes notes that Jews 'put forward rival interpretations' to Christian teaching—challenging Christian readings of Scripture on the Trinity, prophecy, and covenant—while Christian preachers issued 'frequent warnings against Jewish interpretations'. See James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1964), p. 172.

⁹ The doctrine was reaffirmed by Popes Alexander III (1159–1181); Celestine III (1191–1198); Innocent III (1198–1216); Honorius III (1216–1227); Gregory IX (1227–1241); Innocent IV (1243–1254); Alexander IV (1254–1261); Urban IV (1261–1264); Gregory X (1271–1276); Nicholas III (1277–1280); Martin IV (1281–1285); Honorius IV (1285–1287); Nicholas IV (1288–1292); Clement VI (1342–1352); Urban V (1362–1370); Boniface IX (1389–1404); Martin V (1417–1431); and Nicholas V (1447–1455).

¹⁰ Jacob Rader Marcus asserts that Gregory the Great's policy towards the Jews was 'an attempt to crystallise the status of the Jew as it had evolved under the Christian Roman emperors', combining legal protection with clear limitations. See Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book, 315–1791*, rev. edn (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), p. 124.

¹¹ Canon 69 of the Fourth Lateran Council explicitly forbids Jews from holding public office, declaring it 'absurd that a blasphemer of Christ exercise authority over Christians', and ordering that any Jew appointed to such a position 'shall be denied the commercial and other intercourse of the Christians' until he relinquishes the office. See Canon 69 of the Fourth Lateran Council in H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (St. Louis, MO; London: B. Herder Book Co., 1937), p. 291.

argues that medieval patterns of Christian dominance helped to shape the theological conditions in which modern anti-Judaism emerged.¹²

As I turned to Vatican II, I became increasingly aware of the complex theological, diplomatic, and geopolitical dynamics that shaped *Nostra aetate*: ressourcement theology, the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*, the renewed scriptural hermeneutic of *Dei verbum*, and the wider political circumstances surrounding the drafting of the schema on the Jews. Karma Ben-Johanan's *Jacob's Younger Brother* has proved particularly insightful in highlighting the tensions confronted by the drafters¹³—the difficulty of addressing supersessionist assumptions without unsettling core Christian affirmations, the challenge of articulating a theology of Judaism that neither diminishes Christology nor reiterates inherited errors, and the wider diplomatic pressures of the post-war world. Engagement with Gavin D'Costa's studies on post-conciliar Christology and covenant has further revealed the doctrinal limits within which Catholic theology must operate when approaching relations with Judaism.¹⁴

Progress to date has been shaped significantly by Dr Jessica M. Keady's early supervision. After discussing the importance of structuring the project through self-imposed internal deadlines, I created a detailed semester plan (see

¹² Richard L. Rubenstein emphasises the long history of Christian theological hostility towards Jews, observing that 'the terrible significance of the accusation of deicide cannot be overstressed', since 'the cry of "Christ-killer" has, more often than not, accompanied the instigation of anti-Semitic violence' (p. 10). Although he acknowledges that Nazism was 'an anti-Christian explosion which departed utterly from Christian morality', he insists that it nevertheless remained 'dialectically related to Christianity' (p. 47). Thus, 'the classic villains of Christianity, the Jews, became the prime objects of extermination of the anti-Christian Christians, the Nazis' (p. 48). Elsewhere, he reflects that a close reading of Christian tradition alongside the events of the Holocaust inevitably prompts the question 'whether there is something in the logic of Christian theology, when pushed to a metaphysical extreme, which ends with the justification of, if not the incitement to, the murder of Jews'—a question that 'neither the Christian nor the Jew can avoid' (p. 48). See Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis; New York; Kansas City: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 10, 47–48.

¹³ Karma Ben-Johanan remarks that revising Catholic teaching on the Jews 'was not easy for the institutional church to turn its back on ancient theological traditions' and that the so-called Jewish document (*Decretum de Iudaeis*) 'quickly turned out to be one of the most controversial issues in Vatican II'. See Karma Ben-Johanan, *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 28.

¹⁴ D'Costa concludes that applying Vatican II's affirmation of Israel's irrevocable covenant to Rabbinic Judaism 'raises more questions than are answered' and forms a doctrinal foundation from which 'many complex issues' naturally arise (p. 188). He further notes that '[t]he Old Testament promises regarding the land as part of the covenant are not invalidated by the New Testament, although much work lies ahead in Christologically integrating these claims within Catholic theology' (p. 189). Although he describes his conclusions as 'modest findings and fragile arguments', he contends that they indicate a trajectory suggesting how the Church might develop its doctrinal teachings about Jewish people by learning from the Jewish people themselves, both in their responses to Catholic theology and—more importantly—in their faithful obedience to God, through which 'the Church is also slowly discovering her own nature' (p. 190). See Gavin D'Costa, *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 188–190.

Appendix B) outlining research periods, drafting blocks, and chapter targets. This plan has enabled me to maintain steady progress alongside my concurrent module and has provided a practical structure that supports both effective time management and the conceptual organisation necessary for shaping the dissertation as a whole. Within this structure, I have compiled a preliminary bibliography (see Appendix C), produced extensive notes on both primary and secondary materials, and developed an initial chapter outline. This organisational work has defined the parameters of the dissertation, ensuring that substantive drafting will be completed before Semester 2, when the demands of two additional modules will limit the time available for anything beyond selective editing, minor redrafting, and finalising the introduction and conclusion.

Methodologically, this dissertation requires an historically attentive and theologically analytical framework. The history of supersessionism demands fidelity to doctrinal development—tracing how Christian self-understanding has evolved through Scripture, tradition, and historical context—while Jewish-Christian relations require sensitivity to the formation of Jewish identity within the contingencies of diaspora and theological dispute. The dialogical posture encouraged by Novak, Cohn-Sherbok, and the authors of *Dabru Emet* has guided me towards an approach that respects the integrity of each tradition, whilst examining the points at which their claims both converge and diverge.

My preliminary bibliography spans patristic sources, medieval legislation, post-Holocaust theologians, historians and commentators of Vatican II, and contemporary scholars, establishing the historical and theological framework for the inquiry. Engagement with this breadth of material has already made it increasingly clear that *Nostra aetate*, though transformative, has its aspirations somewhat impeded by doctrinal and historical limitations.

In conclusion, this preparatory work has successfully narrowed the scope of the project, refined its guiding questions, and established the theological framework within which the dissertation will now proceed into its writing phase.

Appendix A

A.1: Research Question and Thesis Formulation (Version 1)

Title:

Supersessionism and the Diaspora: Tracing Jewish–Christian Relations from the Early Church to the “Judeo-Christian” Tradition

Research Question:

‘How has Christian supersessionism evolved across the history of Jewish–Christian relations, and in what ways have centuries of diasporic existence, the Holocaust, and Vatican II partially reconfigured a doctrine that continues to underlie modern constructs such as the concept of a “Judeo-Christian” tradition?’

Structure:

- Introduction
- Three chapters (approx. 2,500 words each)
- Conclusion

Overview:

This dissertation traces the development of Christian supersessionist doctrine from the early Church Fathers through medieval Christendom and into the twentieth century. The Holocaust and Vatican II represent a partial reconfiguration, rather than a decisive rupture, and the modern appeal to a “Judeo-Christian” tradition functions as a rhetorical construct designed to neutralise or sublimate the enduring tensions of this history.

Aims:

- To address the central theological and historical issue of supersessionism and the way in which it has shaped Jewish–Christian relations across centuries
- To integrate theological texts with historical praxis (law, social policy, diaspora life, etc.)
- To situate Jewish responses (Maimonides, medieval polemics, etc.) as equal partners in shaping the trajectory, rather than simply as respondents
- To contribute to debates about the meaning and limits of the “Judeo-Christian” tradition in the modern West

Key Questions:

- How did early Christian supersessionist theology shape legal and social practices towards Jews in medieval Christendom, and in what ways did Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides and polemicists articulate theological responses?
- To what extent did the Holocaust and Vatican II mark rupture or continuity in the supersessionist tradition, and how have post-Holocaust Jewish and Christian theologians sought to reimagine covenantal identity?
- How has the modern construction of a “Judeo-Christian” tradition obscured the historical realities of supersessionism and diaspora, and what alternative frameworks do Jewish theological perspectives offer?

A.2: Research Question and Thesis Formulation (Version 2)

Option 1: *Nostra aetate*

- What claims about continuity or discontinuity with earlier Catholic teaching can be substantiated within the scope of this dissertation?
- To what extent does the document represent a development rather than a rupture in Catholic theology?
- How far do earlier papal protections—especially those associated with Gregory the Great and the *Sicut Judaeis* tradition—prefigure *Nostra aetate*’s repudiation of anti-Semitism?
- Why were such explicit safeguards afforded to Jewish communities in ways not extended (at least by name) to other non-Christian groups?
- What theological and political concerns shaped the thinking of the drafters themselves?

This dissertation traces the medieval and early modern inheritance behind the conciliar text, identifying both lines of continuity and the points at which Vatican II sought genuine reorientation.

Option 2: The Inevitability (?) of Supersessionism

- Is some form of supersessionism intrinsic to Catholic theology?
- Could *Nostra aetate* meaningfully repudiate supersessionism without compromising core doctrinal commitments?

This dissertation examines scriptural, patristic, and magisterial sources to evaluate whether supersessionist structures are intrinsic to Catholic theology or capable of substantive reform.

Option 3: Claims of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel of John

- Should "the Jews" be translated as "Judeans" rather than as an ethnic or theological category?
- How do contemporary Jewish and Christian scholars interpret the Gospel's polemical language?
- Does Johannine rhetoric constitute a theological obstacle for post-Vatican II reconciliation?

This dissertation analyses the contested category of "the Jews" in Johannine literature and assesses its implications for contemporary Jewish-Christian relations.

Option 4: The Viability or Inviability of Dual-Covenant Interpretations of Romans

- Are dual-covenant readings theologically viable within Catholic parameters?
- Does Romans permit an account of enduring Jewish covenantal election that avoids supersessionism?
- What limits are imposed by magisterial teaching, particularly *Dominus Iesus*?

This dissertation evaluates competing interpretations of Paul's theology of Israel in Romans, assessing whether a dual-covenant framework is reconcilable with Catholic doctrine.

Option 5: Does Augustine Conflate Concupiscence and Original Sin?

- Does Augustine conflate concupiscence and original sin?
- Does this contribute to later Christian portrayals of Judaism as bound to "flesh" rather than "spirit"?

This dissertation traces how Augustine's anthropology shaped later Christian depictions of Judaism by examining whether his account of concupiscence, the flesh, and the law established a theological framework that contributed to supersessionist and anti-Jewish typologies in the Western tradition.

Current Working Question:

'To what extent does *Nostra aetate* constitute continuity or discontinuity with traditional Catholic teaching on Judaism's covenantal status, and how far does it revise or preserve the supersessionist structures inherited from the Church's past?'

This dissertation examines the historical, doctrinal, and political developments that shaped *Nostra aetate*—including the tradition of medieval papal protections—and evaluates the intentions of its drafters in light of the supersessionist structures inherited from the Church's past.

A.3: Research Question and Thesis Formulation (Version 3)

Research Question:

'What doctrinal, historical, and hermeneutical constraints limited *Nostra aetate*'s capacity to effect the deeper theological reconfiguration of Catholic–Jewish relations envisaged by both Catholic reformers and Jewish interlocutors, and to what extent did its rejection of dual-covenant theology render a fuller reconciliation structurally impossible?'

Overview:

This dissertation considers whether *Nostra aetate* was—from the outset—structurally limited in what it could accomplish. Although the document unequivocally denounced anti-Semitism and inaugurated a new era of Catholic–Jewish engagement, it did so without overturning core doctrinal commitments—particularly the Church's affirmation of the universal salvific necessity of Christ and the ecclesial fulfilment of Israel's promises. This inquiry examines whether the perceived insufficiencies of the declaration—as identified by Jewish thinkers and post-conciliar theologians—reveal a deeper tension between the Church's Christological convictions and Jewish understandings of covenant, election, and the theological genealogy of anti-Semitism.

Aims:

- To evaluate whether meaningful repudiation of supersessionism is possible without contradicting fundamental aspects of Catholic doctrine
- To analyse how scriptural interpretation (especially in John's Gospel and in Paul's Letter to the Romans) constrains or enables new theological approaches to Judaism
- To assess the historical and doctrinal inheritance (patristic exegesis, medieval canon law, Augustine's witness doctrine, the Good Friday reproaches, papal protections, etc.) that shaped conciliar deliberations
- To examine why the Council avoided a dual-covenant framework, and what this avoidance reveals about the structural limits of Catholic self-understanding
- To interpret Jewish critiques of the document—particularly the argument that *Nostra aetate* did not go far enough because it retained the theological root of anti-Judaism

Key Questions:

- Was *Nostra aetate* ever in a position to abolish supersessionism, given the Church's fidelity to the New Testament and its historic doctrinal inheritance?
- Does the Gospel of John's use of "the Jews" constitute an unavoidable theological obstacle to post-conciliar reconciliation, or can it be reinterpreted as "Judeans" in a way that satisfies Jewish and Christian scholarship?
- What is the theological cost of rejecting dual-covenant interpretations of Romans 9–11, and why would their adoption have appeased many Jewish concerns but potentially destabilised Catholic doctrine?
- To what extent does *Dominus Iesus* demonstrate that the structural constraints present at Vatican II remain determinative for Catholic teaching on Judaism?
- Can Catholic theology remove what many Jewish thinkers identify as the root causes of Christian anti-Judaism without undergoing a doctrinal revision that would compromise its Christological foundations?

Scripture:

- Johannine polemic ("the Jews"), questions of translation ("Judeans"), and its reception in Jewish and Christian scholarship
- Romans 9–11 and competing interpretations: fulfilment, irrevocable election, and dual-covenant possibilities/limits

History:

- The shaping of Jewish self-perception under Christendom (diaspora, marginalisation, Augustinian witness doctrine, etc.)
- The Good Friday reproaches, medieval liturgical tradition, and the theological anthropology underpinning accusations of "flesh" versus "spirit"

Doctrine:

- The Church's self-understanding as the fulfilment of Israel
- The irreformability (?) of certain magisterial teachings and their implications for interreligious dialogue

Jewish Thought:

- Jewish definitions of anti-Semitism and expectations for meaningful reconciliation
- Critical readings of *Nostra aetate* from contemporary Jewish theologians and dialogue partners (e.g., *Dabru Emet*)

Recent Magisterial Context:

- The tension (?) between *Nostra aetate* and *Dominus Iesus*
- The post-conciliar debates regarding covenant theology, fulfilment, mission, and the theological status of Judaism

Current Working Thesis Statement:

This dissertation argues that *Nostra aetate* was structurally limited in its capacity to achieve a full theological reset in Catholic–Jewish relations because the doctrinal, scriptural, and historical frameworks inherited by the Council constrained how far the Church could reform its theology of Israel without abandoning fundamental Christological commitments.

Appendix B

Semester 1 Timetable

Week	Dates	Task	Focus
1	20–26 Oct	Hebrew Bible Essay 1	Reading and quote bank
2	27 Oct – 2 Nov	Hebrew Bible Essay 1	Writing
3	3–9 Nov	Hebrew Bible Essay 1	Writing and finishing
4	10–16 Nov	Dissertation Chapter 1	Research and quote bank
5	17–23 Nov	Dissertation Chapter 1	Writing
6	24–30 Nov	Dissertation Chapter 1	Writing and finishing
7	1–7 Dec	Dissertation Chapter 2	Research and quote bank
8	8–14 Dec	Dissertation Chapter 2	Writing
9	15–21 Dec	Dissertation Chapter 2	Writing and finishing
10	22–28 Dec	Hebrew Bible Essay 2	Reading and quote bank
11	29 Dec – 4 Jan	Hebrew Bible Essay 2	Writing
12	5–11 Jan	Hebrew Bible Essay 2	Writing and finishing
13	12–18 Jan	Dissertation Chapter 3	Research and quote bank
14	19–25 Jan	Dissertation Chapter 3	Writing
15	26 Jan – 1 Feb	Dissertation Chapter 3	Writing and finishing
16	2–8 Feb	Dissertation Chapters 1–3	Chapter review and refinement

Appendix C

Preliminary Bibliography

- Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Volume II, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), XVIII.46
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Schroeder, H. J., *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (St. Louis, MO; London: B. Herder Book Co., 1937)

Vorgrimler, Herbert (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. II (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1968)