



5 points

from *Nostra Aetate*, n.4

Vatican II marked a new era of reconciliation between Christians and Jews. In paragraph 4 of the 1965 document *Nostra Aetate* (Latin: 'in our times') the Church embraced its unique links with Judaism. Here we summarize its key statements:

1. Historically and spiritually, Jews and Christians share a common ancestry in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. Through the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people (the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings) the Church received the revelation of the 'Old Testament.'
2. The Church emerged from the Jewish people. Jesus, Mary, the apostles, and others among the first Christians, were Jews.
3. The Jews remain God's chosen people, a people dear to God's heart. [In his 1980 speech in Mainz,

Germany, Pope John Paul II referred to the Jews as the people of the old covenant, "never revoked by God."]

4. The Jewish people are not to be held responsible for the death of Jesus. Christian faith sees salvation through Christ as a gift of all-embracing love freely offered to (and never imposed on) all peoples. Jewish-Christian dialogue is to be encouraged.

5. Anti-semitism is the antithesis of the gospel. Its appearance in any form, at any time or place, is tragic and totally unacceptable.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock." (*Nostra Aetate*, n.4).

After centuries of distance between Christianity and Judaism, a gradual revolution is underway as Christians rediscover their deep historical and spiritual links with the Jewish people. This radical reappraisal was officially set in motion at the Second Vatican Council with the document *Nostra Aetate* and has continued to find expression in subsequent documents and initiatives down to this day.

This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, seeks to bring the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* into the hearts and homes of parishioners. It does so by engaging Christians in Torah reflection. Each week, we explore a portion of the Torah (the first five books of the bible) drawing on Jewish sources and insights. In this way, Christians engage with the ancient stories of their own Scriptures with an appreciation of the Jewish people, their long history of biblical interpretation, and the fact that Jesus himself was a son of the Jewish people.



Genesis 23:1—25:18

Hayei Sarah:
'the life of Sarah'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 23:1—25:18

This Torah portion continues the drama of Abraham's family. It opens with the death and burial of his wife, Sarah. The proximity of this scene to last week's portion led the sages to a startling thought: when Sarah discovered that Abraham had intended to kill their son Isaac, she died of a broken heart.

Our focus today, however, is a business deal: Abraham's purchase of a piece of land that will become the family burial plot. Read this passage in 23:1-20.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: *NRSV*.

Tasting Torah

After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying place" (Genesis 23:19-20).

"After this" says the text. After what? The preceding negotiations over the purchase of the cave and land are curious in their detail. As you read Gen.23:1-20 carefully, perhaps you noticed:

- The juxtaposition of emotion ('mourning,' 'weeping') and business terms ('property,' 'price,' 'possession').
- The repetitious references to the legal witnesses of the negotiations ('in the hearing of,' 'in the presence of').
- Abraham, a foreigner, is well regarded by the locals.
- The interaction between Abraham and Ephron. Ephron offers the land as a gift, but Abraham wants legal title.

What else do you notice about this text?

Touching Torah

Certainly, from an historical perspective, this passage contains interesting information about ancient eastern burial customs and business etiquette. But how does the Torah's preoccupation with Abraham's land package contribute to the way we relate to God? This is the question that fascinated the sages. From your reading, how would you enter this conversation?

Depthing Torah

In the discussions of the sages, two insights emerge in creative tension. On the one hand, our Torah passage represents the realization of God's promise to Abraham: "I will give to you, and your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien" (Gen.17:8). Sarah's grave site—where Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah will also be buried—represents the chosen people's first permanent legal foothold in the land of Canaan. The dream is now reality.

Yet this momentous step comes at a high price. As well as being charged a hefty sum, Abraham—a man of wealth and status in his country of origin—is required to humble himself, bowing down not only to Ephron but 'to the people of the land' (v.12). Says Ramban (13th century Torah scholar), Abraham, while respected by the Hittites, was still an alien among them, and required not only the consent of Ephron, but the support of all the people. Thus, the Jewish biblical tradition regards the acquisition of the cave of Machpelah as one of the trials of Abraham, one in which he performed admirably. For through Abraham's humility and unswerving dedication to the task, God's vision became a reality in time and place.

Doing Torah

Table topic: Lofty spiritual visions do not escape the practicalities of living in the real world (e.g., a person of prayer still has to pay the mortgage!). Describe the material-spiritual tensions/opportunities in your own life.



Faith & Life

A parishioner says:

"Among his many tasks, our parish priest spent a good deal of time in negotiations with the surrounding schools to acquire adequate meeting spaces for parish use, and in such a way that the schools, too, were advantaged by the new arrangements. His practice of good stewardship highlighted the connection between spiritual and material tasks, between pastoral ministry and competent administration. Our new meeting spaces are constantly filled with the activities of prayer groups, social justice meetings, pastoral planning committees, social functions, children's ministries, cultural activities and bible studies."