

Book Review

Fritz, Maureena. *Redeeming Jesus' Name: Reflections of a Ninety-Year Old Nun Living in Jerusalem*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003. 155 pp. + ix.

As the title of this book states, *Redeeming Jesus' Name* is the memoir of a nun with long experience of living and working in Israel. Maureena Fritz is a Sister of Sion, a Catholic religious order dedicated to fostering Christian-Jewish relations. She is also a Professor Emerita of St. Michael's College, Toronto, whose theological studies led her to Jerusalem, where she came face to face with Judaism and the reality of Christian anti-Semitism. Subsequently, she founded the Bat Kol Institute in Jerusalem, which in different forms has offered Christians the opportunity to study the Bible using Jewish sources in a Jewish setting. Now 98, Sister Maureena cares passionately about Christian-Jewish relations, and has made the education of Christians about the violence against Jews committed in the name of Jesus the Jew her life's work. As someone who has participated in three Bat Kol programs, I can attest to the great value of the Institute's offerings.

The book is composed of seven chapters, which weave Sr. Maureena's personal reflections together with her scholarly knowledge of the Bible, Judaism and Christian history. Chapter 1, entitled "Interpretation: God's Word is Not Frozen in the Past," introduces both Talmudic Rabbinic methods of interpretation and Christian traditions of interpretation which hold that the meaning of scripture is not univocal or frozen in the past, but part of ongoing divine revelation. The chapter concludes, however, by questioning the official Catholic position that divine truth (especially with respect to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity) rests

definitively in certain authoritative Catholic teachings—a doctrine shared, in varying forms, by many Christian denominations.

Chapter 2, “God Speaks to Us in the Events of Our Lives”, begins with Sr. Maureena’s personal search for the voice of God in the wake of the Shoah. To approach this question, she considers the stories of a variety of biblical figures: Eve, Abraham, Judah’s daughter-in-law Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, David, and Moses. These characters have in common the experience of hearing God speaking to them within the context of their everyday lives. This includes the author’s own experience of remembering with horror “the number of times I applied to all Jews statements about Jews found in the Gospels” like John 8:44: “You [Jews] are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires” (p. 35). How, she asks, can Christian faith be reformulated in the wake of centuries of institutionalized anti-Judaism?

The title of Chapter 3, “My Encounter with Ecclesia and Synagoga,” refers to an image found in some medieval Christian churches, where the church and the synagogue are depicted as two women, one triumphant over the other (see pp. xiv, 53). Sr. Maureena interweaves her own encounter with the Jewishness of Jesus, on the one hand, and the history of Christian anti-Judaism, on the other, as a Sister of Sion. This began in 1978, when she was on sabbatical in Jerusalem, where she met Holocaust survivors who flinched at the sight of a crucifix. At the Ratisbonne Center of Jewish studies for Christians, she was introduced to the long history of the Christian persecution of Jews. Sr. Maureena provides a brief review of this history, beginning with the origins of the church as a Jewish sect, the era of the Crusades, the Counter-Reformation, and the post-enlightenment emancipation and assimilation of Jews into European

society, which swerved disastrously into racial anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust. This summary is followed by a discussion of *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (1965), a ground-breaking document from Vatican II, which emphasized “God’s special love for the Jewish people; and condemns hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism at any time and by anyone” (p. 47). It is during the Council that the mission of the Sisters of Zion underwent a significant transformation from praying for the conversion of the Jews to the pursuit of Christian-Jewish dialogue. Sr. Maureena provides a fascinating insight into the significant role of the Sisters of Zion in the writing of *Nostra Aetate*, and in pressuring the bishops to support the document (p. 49). However, the chapter ends on the sad note that the roots of anti-Judaism run so deep in the church that even *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent statements on Christian-Jewish relations retain the virus of supersessionism—the teaching that the fulness of divine revelation is found *only* in Christianity.

Chapter 4 (“Replacement Theology in Paul and the Gospels”) is the longest chapter in the book, and, as the title states, argues that core NT writings are the source of the replacement theology (supersessionism)—the notion that Christianity “replaces” Judaism—that pervades Christianity. Using both evidence from the Book of Acts and Paul’s letters, Sr. Maureena concedes that although Paul saw himself as a faithful Jew, he nonetheless rejected the law (the Jewish way of life) as a thing of the past, and regretted the fact that the majority of Jews did not accept Jesus as Messiah. She agrees with James Dunn that Paul is ultimately responsible for “the parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity. Likewise, she finds expressions of replacement theology in the four Gospels, especially in John, concluding with

the question of what to do with a “revelation of God” that “calls for the demonization of an entire people” (p. 87). She goes on to astutely point out the continuation of replacement theology and supersessionism in *Nostra Aetate* and, especially in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document on *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures* (2002). These documents, she notes, express genuine concern to remedy past wrongs done to the Jewish people while remaining grounded in a theology “that understands Christianity as the fulfillment, and therefore the replacement, of the ‘Old Testament’—a theology that identifies the Jews as ‘disobedient’ to God’s will for them” (p. 91).

The next chapter (Chapter 5: “Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?”) also concerns scriptural interpretation. It begins with a list of Jewish writers (Joseph Klausner, Jules Isaac, Martin Buber, David Flusser, Amy-Jill Levine, Marc Chagall) who have appreciated Jesus as a faithful Jew. Next, Sr. Maureena sifts through Pauline and Gospel passages (e.g., Mark 15:39; Luke 1:28-35; John 1:1-14; Col 1:15-17) to show that references which have long been interpreted as referring to the divinity of Christ can be construed metaphorically as statements of God’s revelation *in* Jesus’ words and deeds rather than as ontological expressions of Jesus *as* divine. The author recommends a Spirit Christology that focuses on the empowerment of the human Jesus by the Holy Spirit, an experience open to all human beings, rather than a literal reading of John’s Logos Christology.

In the final two chapters (Chapter 6: “Who is Jesus for Me?” and Chapter 7: “Who is God for Me?”), Sr. Maureena reflects personally on the significance of Jesus and his mother Mary. Her Mariology is highly influenced by Jane Schaberg’s *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (New York: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), and will be challenging for

many readers to consider. Her Christology of Jesus as “godlike” but not God, as a prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of God, but who did not claim to be God, while grounded in the earlier chapters, will likewise evoke strong reactions in some readers. Sr. Maureena describes her relationship with God in terms of betrothal (“falling in love with God”), the Sabbath (which she observes in imitation of Jesus), and *teshuvah* (repentance, expressed through mending relationships with the Jewish people). In the postscript, “Looking Ahead”, she reflects on what she calls as “pluralistic Christology” that recognizes that Jesus belongs to everyone, “as we believe the Buddha, for example, belongs to everyone” (p. 149).

By way of discussion, since I am a NT scholar, I will focus here about where I agree—and disagree—with Sr. Maureena’s discussion of Paul and the Gospels. While it is true to say that the Christian scriptures have been used to promote anti-Jewish attitudes throughout history, to frame them in terms of supersessionism and replacement theology—the idea that Christianity “replaces” Judaism—is an overstatement, in the sense that when these documents were written, they were not scripture—they were occasional writings meant for the edification of small, marginal, sectarian groups scattered throughout the Roman empire. There was no such thing as “Christianity” (the word “Christian” only appears 3X in the NT [Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16], as a nickname that outsiders use to refer to them)—but tiny communities in a variety of situations and with different beliefs and practices. Some were of Jewish ethnicity, some were Gentile, some mixed. All of them shared the belief that the end of history was imminent, and that a new, utopian age would be decisively established, i.e., they had a vivid expectation of the kingdom of God. They had no idea that a religion called “Christianity” would arise, or that their “scriptures” (if they knew them) would

be used to persecute Jews (or anyone else).

With respect to the Gospels, I'm not as sure as Sr. Maureena that they are devoid of declarations of Jesus' divinity, although admittedly the few can be interpreted in different ways. For example, when, in a passage not considered in the book, Thomas exclaims "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), this can be read as directed to God (not Jesus), or to Jesus (my Lord) and God (my God), but the most natural interpretation is that, as Adele Reinhartz holds, it's an affirmation of the high Christology of John's Prologue (see Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], p. 194). Whether it began in the first century or the fourth, Christians began to see Jesus as divine at some point. The deeper question suggested by Sr. Maureena is, what would Jesus as a *first-century Jewish prophet ministering to other Jews* think of such an idea?

That said, insofar as the NT has often been (and continues to be) read through a supersessionist lens and has been used to uphold replacement theology, Sr. Maureena's book is a strong reminder that Christians need to exercise caution and discretion when they read these documents. To end with a quote from one of the Jewish scholars cited in the book: "After two thousand years of ignorance, the time has come for church and synagogue, Jews and Christians, to understand our intertwined histories, to see Jesus as a Jew who made sense to other Jews in a Jewish context, to learn how our two traditions came to a parting of the ways, to recognize how misunderstandings of Jesus and Judaism continue even today to foster negative stereotypes and feed hate, and to explore how the gains in interfaith relations made over the past several decades can be nurtured and expanded" (Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*:

The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus [New York: HarperCollins, 16).

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