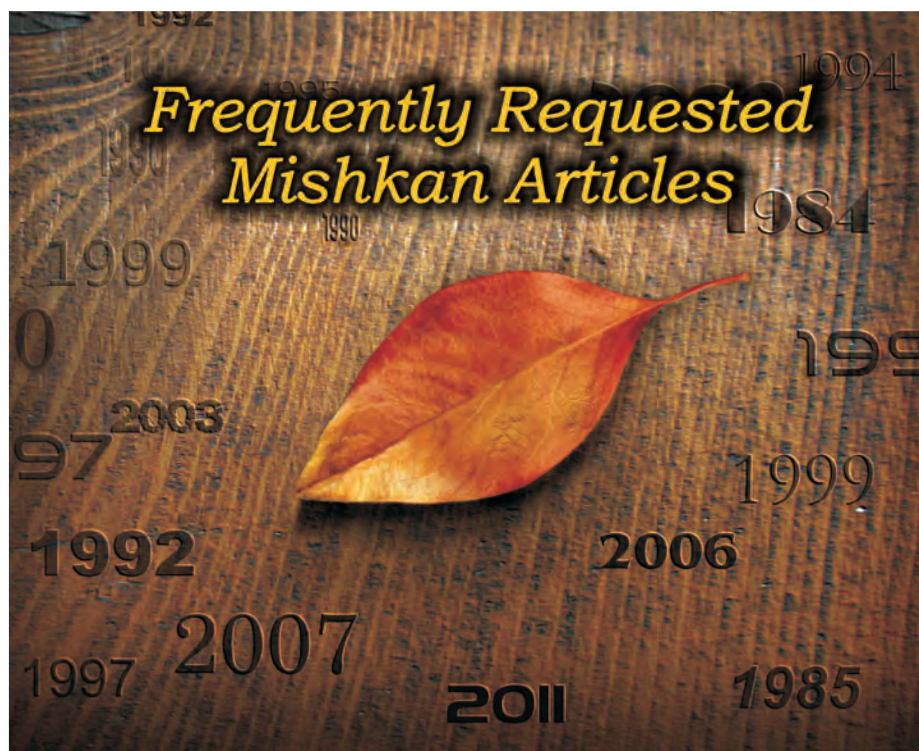




# MISHKAN

■ A FORUM ON THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE ■ *Issue 71/ 2013*



# MISHKAN

**A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People**

ISSUE 71 / 2013

**Editor: Jim R. Sibley**

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**Mishkan** is a quarterly journal dedicated to biblical and theological thinking on issues related to Jewish Evangelism, Hebrew-Christian/Messianic-Jewish identity, and Jewish-Christian relations.

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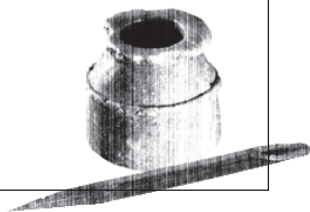
**Mishkan's** editorial policy is openly evangelical, committed to the New Testament proclamation that the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus (Yeshua) the Messiah is "to the Jew first."

**Mishkan** is a forum for discussion, and articles included do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors, Pasche Institute of Jewish Studies, or Criswell College.

**Mishkan** is the Hebrew word for *tabernacle* or *dwelling place* (John 1:14).

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

## Frequently Requested *Mishkan* Articles



By **Jim R. Sibley**

The selection of the articles in this issue is the result not of a scientific poll, but rather an informal survey of our editorial committee. These articles have not only been requested, but hold an enduring quality. Of course, this is one thing that has distinguished *Mishkan* from its beginning—so much of the content is worth referring to again and again. Some of the articles have been corrected where typographical and formatting errors have been found, but remain essentially as they were when originally published.

The variety is also to be appreciated. Our authors are from a number of nations: France, Israel, Norway, United Kingdom, and the United States. The topics are varied, as well: replacement theology, Jewish views of Jesus, the use of rabbinic literature, and the theological impact of the Holocaust. The articles have been written at various times over the past twenty-five years. Yet in the midst of this diversity, there is unity. Each author has a compassion for Israel and the Jewish people, and each has a commitment to the Messiah of Israel.

We are grateful for the ministry of Knut Høyland and express our appreciation for the contribution he has made, and continues to make, not only to *Mishkan*, but to the Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, which he has served as international director and CEO. As he steps down from this responsibility, we wish him well, and congratulate Caspari on its thirtieth anniversary of effective ministry.



# The Messianic Use of Rabbinic Literature

by **Avner Boskey**

## Introduction

Nearly two thousand years ago, the Apostle Peter advised Jewish Christians in the Diaspora to

sanctify Messiah as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense [Greek, *apologian*] to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Messiah will be put to shame. (1 Pet 3:15–16)<sup>1</sup>

Peter's exhortation stresses that Messianic reserves of honesty, humility, and diligence are needed in apologetics, and that the defense of the Messianic gospel must be carried out with Messianic integrity.

It comes as no surprise to most readers that, in the latter part of the twentieth century, an ongoing and organized campaign of muckraking is being directed against Jewish believers, whether in Israel or in the Diaspora. These attacks, orchestrated by leaders in the Jewish community, are directed against both the Jewish believer's integrity and his commitment to maintain a Jewish expression of his new covenant faith in Messiah Yeshua. The presupposition lying behind these attacks stresses the supposed incompatibility between faith in Yeshua and Jewishness, and the purportedly dire threat to Jewish existence were such a link to be forged.

One of the more popular exponents of such an agenda states succinctly:

Hebrew Christians also insist that they constitute the only truly fulfilled Jews. . . . In fact, by sprinkling their Christian lives of faith with Jewish customs and rituals taken out of their proper, historic con-

1 All Scripture citations are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted. Messiah has been used in place of Christ throughout.

text, they pervert Jewish symbols and make a mockery of the Jewish faith. . . . Christians would do far better . . . to abandon and denounce the overly zealous and deceptive means *usually* employed by various Hebrew Christian groups. (Emphasis added.)<sup>2</sup>

Messianic Jews would adamantly disagree that Jewishness and Yeshua are mutually exclusive and would stoutly defend both the messiahship of Yeshua and His impeccable Jewish credentials on convincing exegetical grounds. Under no circumstances would they allow any challenge to either the integrity or the Jewishness of the Messianic gospel to go unanswered. The Apostle Paul clearly testifies that if Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel, then He is also the Messiah *for* Israel:

And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; *the promise* to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. . . . I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Messiah was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:6–7, 22–23)

Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon us to ask the question: Have Christians always demonstrated the same exegetical honesty, scholarly care, and respectful treatment in their use of rabbinic literature as has been the custom in regard to the biblical text? Rabbi Eckstein and others would charge that Messianic Jews and Gentiles are dilettantes and deceivers who pervert Jewish symbols. Unless we maintain high standards in our use of rabbinic materials, we leave ourselves wide open to the valid charges of pseudo-contextualization and poor scholarship. Were this to happen, the focus of our dialogue with the larger Jewish community would shift from the claims of Yeshua to the question of whether Messianic Jews, in their use of rabbinics, have unwittingly involved themselves “in great matters, or in things too difficult for [them]” (Ps 131:1).

It is with the intent of clearing the air, refocusing priorities, and laying down some methodological guidelines that this article is presented. Critical comments brought to bear against Christian use of rabbinics will be examined; historical and present examples of such abuse will be analyzed; and finally, guidelines will be suggested which may be of help in encouraging an honest, humble, and diligent approach to rabbinic literature worthy of the epithet “Messianic.”

2 Yechiel Eckstein, *What Christians Should Know about Jews and Judaism* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 295, 299.



## Modern Criticisms of Messianic Use of Rabbinic Materials

Christian use of rabbinic literature, both past and present, is viewed with a jaundiced eye by many in Judaism. Conservative rabbi Ben Zion Bokser states:

The conventional attitude of Christian teachers toward the Oral Torah was to ignore it . . . when they did concern themselves with it, they generally sought to belittle it. . . . Christian writings often abound in all kinds of derogatory characterizations of rabbinic Judaism, all of it generally deriving from the one over-all complaint that the Rabbis taught . . . a system of legalism rather than a faith which speaks to the heart of man. . . . There is ultimately no way to answer the distortions of the Oral Torah which abound in Christian writings, except to engage in a detailed study of the nature of the Oral Torah and its vast literary sources.<sup>3</sup>

Claude G. Montefiore is not as sharp, but no less firm, when discussing the Christian *tendenz* seen in parallels drawn between the New Testament and rabbinic sources:

. . . a main interest for most Christian writers is to vindicate, so far as they can, the originality of Jesus, and, for that purpose, the question of dates is for them a matter of the utmost importance. . . . I am not concerned to deny the originality of Jesus in that, so far as we know, he was, let us say, the first to enunciate a particular doctrine, even though all parallels from the existing Rabbinic literature are later in date than A.D. 30. . . . A given parallel to a Gospel saying may be much later than Jesus: from the point of view of chronology, the originality of Jesus is completely vindicated. That vindication having been secured, the interest of the Christian writer in the Rabbinic "parallel" usually ceases. For his purpose the parallel is of no value. He has bowled it over; he has knocked it down.<sup>4</sup>

Though both Bokser and Montefiore charge Christians with an ignorance of rabbinics and a desire to champion the superiority of the Gospels at rabbinic expense, it could be noted that many rabbis are similarly ignorant of the New Testament and have no problem championing the superiority of Judaism at Christian expense. Nevertheless, it behooves us as believers in Messiah to listen to these charges, as many of us have indeed been guilty of such behavior.

Dr. Samuel Sandmel points out some of the pitfalls into which Christian novices have fallen in their encounter with rabbinic materials:

3 Ben Zion Bokser, *Judaism and the Christian Predicament* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 8–10.

4 Claude G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (New York; Ktav, 1970), xxxvi–xii.





The rabbinic literature . . . is in Hebrew and Aramaic, and represents a field of study for which arduous preparation is required. It is immense in quantity. In style it is both terse and yet replete with allusiveness, and both factors make it difficult to comprehend. Moreover, it is technical, for it was the compiled answers to questions of meticulous Jews concerning religious law, and therefore it presupposes on the part of the reader an abundance of quite technical knowledge. At a number of stages in the Renaissance and in the rise of Humanism, Christian scholars made anthologies of rabbinic literature which they translated into Latin; a New Testament scholar could, as it were, have access to excerpts, merely excerpts, in these translations. Some difficulties with these excerpts escaped both the compilers and the users. First, the excerpted material entered the anthology only if it seemed to impinge on the New Testament, with the result that the excerpts answered the implied question[—]what bearing does the rabbinic literature have on [the] New Testament?[—]and not the important prior question, what is it that the rabbinic literature is saying? Citations devoid of context are always dangerous; one can “prove atheism by Scripture.” (There is a passage, in Psalm 14:1, which says, “There is no God”; the whole passage reads: “The fool has said in his heart that there is no God.”) What the somewhat knowledgeable excerpter provided and what the novice inferred from this provision of rabbinic material could well be as different as night from day. Second, the quintessence of the spirit of rabbinic literature could lie quite outside the excerpted passages, and the novice could be misled into supposing that he knew the spirit when he was in reality only in the periphery. Third, the man who deals only in excerpts necessarily lacks that mastery which alone provides a personal sense of authority. Fourth, since the rabbinic literature is difficult (and the mere translation of it is in reality only the prelude to understanding it), the texts have, for the most part, gone without scientific editing or scientific commentary, even today.<sup>5</sup>

Sandmel also notes that Christians sometimes bend over backwards in order to make a Jewish rabbinic source seem pro-Christian, rather like some maiden ladies who detect a marriage proposal behind every kind gesture from an eligible male.<sup>6</sup> Their use of Joseph Klausner’s writings are a case in point, as Sandmel notes:

[Klausner’s] approach to the Gospels exhibits a unique capacity to have reviewed much of the Gospel scholarship and to have remained immune from reflecting it; Klausner was the amateur Talmudist and amateur psychologist applying dilettantism rather whimsically to the Gospel passages. These comments are directed, of course, to

5 Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 69–70.

6 I am indebted to Dr. Maurice Bowler for this illustration.

Klausner's scholarship on the Gospels, and not to his being Jewish. Yet there is the curious situation relating to Jesus, that Christians are often inordinately eager to cite some Jewish opinion in support of a Christian contention—my own writings have inadvertently served this purpose to some limited extent—with the result that Klausner is often cited by Christians who attribute to him an authority that with all deference he does not deserve. Conservatives especially have taken him to represent not only the Jewish mind, but also the epitome of rabbinic learning, apparently unaware of how severely rabbinites have taken him to task.<sup>7</sup>

Ignorance, denigration, derogation, distortion, *tendenz*, misuse of context, no scholarship, no mastery of material—all of the above charges have been made against Messianics<sup>8</sup> use of rabbinic materials. A brief review of the historical evidence will allow us to determine whether or not these charges have historical validity.

## The Historical Encounter

### *Second to Twelfth Centuries*

The purpose of this section is to show that Messianic Jews were aware of, and made use of, developing rabbinic materials. Their apologetic goals were to prove Yeshua's messiahship from Scripture, and they made use of rabbinic parallels whenever such parallels agreed with their case.

### *Tannaim and Nazarenes (Second to Fourth Centuries AD)*

Although it might be argued that the first encounters between Messianic and rabbinic perspectives take place in the Gospels,<sup>9</sup> the bulk of this investigation focuses on events from the second century AD onward. Various texts in the Gemara and Midrashim refer to the interaction which took place between the Tannaim<sup>10</sup> and Messianic Jews regarding the interpretation of Scripture,<sup>11</sup> as well as the occasionally frustrating nature of the debate.<sup>12</sup> Yeshua Himself was described as one who mocked the words of

7 Sandmel, 92–93.

8 In this article the terms "Messianic" and "Christian" are used interchangeably, as are the proper names "Yeshua" and "Jesus" (ed.). [Editorial comments are those of Baruch Maoz, who served as the original editor.]

9 Cf. Matthew chapters 5–7 and 23, especially 5:21, 22, 27–28, 31–34, 38–39, and 43–44, where Yeshua contrasts "You have heard it was said . . ." with "But I say to you . . ."

10 The term "Tanna" (plur. Tannaim) refers to the spiritual descendants of the Pharisees, who were engaged in the study and propagation of the oral tradition in Israel from AD 70 until the codification of the Mishnah ca. AD 200. The post-mishnaic scribes of the Talmud are referred to as Amoraim (sing. Amora) (ed.).

11 TB A.Z. 16b–17a; Eccl. Rabb. 1:8:3.

12 TB A.Z. 4a, b; Ber. 7a; Eccl. Rabb. 1:8:4. The view that Messianic Jews are the focus of these passages is also held by Dr. Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson (cf. "Disputation and Polemics," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 6:82–83), H. Travis Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, etc.

the Sages and was subsequently punished for such behavior.<sup>13</sup> During the same period, warnings were issued by the Sages to avoid discussions with His disciples, the Messianic Jews, who also refused to accept the authority of the Sages. No one, not even a Tanna, was to engage the Messianic Jews in discussion of scriptural topics, unless the debater was sufficiently skilled in refutational techniques.<sup>14</sup>

Of particular interest is the knowledge some rabbis possessed about the Gospels: in TB Shabbat 116b, reference is made by Rabban Gamliel of Jabneh (second century AD) to Matthew 5:16–17, as well as to a corpus of literature called “the Gospels.”<sup>15</sup>

#### *Justin Martyr and Trypho (Mid Second Century AD)*

Mention must also be made of Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin was a Gentile Christian from Samaria, and yet his arguments with Trypho seem to reflect some awareness of, and interaction with, traditions of messianic exegesis preserved in the Targumim. Dr. Oskar Skarsaune, in his book *The Proof from Prophecy*, suggests that Justin’s Messianic *testimonia* show a much greater correspondence to talmudic and targumic *testimonia* than to those of New Testament writers.<sup>16</sup> He concludes:

This review of Jewish parallels to Justin’s material shows that all the main texts were familiar Messianic testimonies within Jewish exegesis prior to, contemporary with, and later than, Justin. There are even parallels and points of contact in some textual and exegetical details, and in the combination of texts. This would seem to indicate that Justin’s material evolved in a milieu being in close contact with Jewish exegesis. This close contact may also be indirectly witnessed in some possibly anti-Christian motifs in the rabbinic exegesis, or in the grappling with problems raised by Justin.<sup>17</sup>

Skarsaune’s tentative conclusions point to Christian awareness of developing rabbinic messianic traditions and their incorporation in the developing body of Christian *testimonia*.

Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson has these comments to make about Justin:

The lists of *testimonia* from the Hebrew Bible prepared by early Christian teachers [was] . . . to be used not only to convince pagans but also, in most cases, to persuade Jews to accept the Christianity

13 TB Gitt. 57a.

14 TB A.Z. 4a, 27b; Eccl. Rabb. 1:8:3; TB San. 38b.

15 Puns are made on the Greek word for gospel (*evaggelion*) by R. Meir and R. Johanan, while Rabban Gamaliel’s Messianic opponent is made to assert that “the Law of Moses has been taken away and the Law of the *Evangelium* has been given” (per. Cod. Oxford).

16 Oskar Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition: Text-type, Provenance, Theological Profile*, Supplement to *Novum Testamentum* 61 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), 260–62.

17 *Ibid.*, 269.



clauses. . . . This relatively early encounter between a separated Christianity and Judaism establishes the main themes and groundwork of future Jewish-Christian *testimonia*, the polemical statements by Tertullian against the Jews in the same century, and the fragments of Jewish-Christian disputation found in tannaitic and amoraic literature. . . .<sup>18</sup>

*The Nazarene Interpretation of Isaiah (Late Fourth Century AD)*

The first Messianic Jewish perspective on rabbis and their literature passed on by Christian hands comes from the latter quarter of the fourth century AD. In his commentary on Isaiah, Jerome makes reference to a contemporaneous Nazarene interpretation of Isaiah, from which he loosely quotes. In Isaiah 8:11–15, the Nazarene interpretation applies “the two houses” to the two schools of Shammai and Hillel. R. Akiba, Aquila, and R. Meir are mentioned, as are R. Johanan b. Zakkai, R. Eliezer, R. Tarphon, R. Joshua, and R. Jose Ha-Gelili.<sup>19</sup> F. C. Burkitt, referring to the above passage, states, “I do not think that there is another passage in any of the Church Fathers which betrays so much acquaintance with Talmudic Judaism.”<sup>20</sup> Dr. Ray Pritz, in his *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, dates this work as being no earlier than the latter half of the second century.<sup>21</sup>

In Isaiah 8:19–22, the Nazarenes say, “When the Scribes and the Pharisees tell you to listen to them . . . you must answer them like this. . . .”<sup>22</sup> Pritz states that this “is surely an indication of an ongoing dialogue and polemic, one which we see frequently attested to in the talmudic sources.”<sup>23</sup> Other passages make reference to “the errors of the Scribes and Pharisees” and “the very heavy yoke of the Jewish *traditiones*,”<sup>24</sup> as well as to the fact that “the *deuterotai* passed away, who earlier deceived the people with very vicious traditions.”<sup>25</sup> Pritz suggests that the latter two terms are technical and refer to the Mishnah and the Tannaim respectively.<sup>26</sup> Whether or not this is in fact the case, it is obvious that this Jewish-Christian Nazarene source makes use of Tannaitic traditions and offers an appraisal of both their spiritual value and authority.

The above sources do not permit extensive conclusions, but at least this can be said: During the first four centuries, rabbis and Nazarenes were somewhat aware of each other’s traditions, perspectives, and literature. Though perhaps some help on the specifics of their debate and the various points of contention might be found in the various talmudic passages concerning the *minim*, the historical sources from the period tantalize more

18 Ben-Sasson, 6:82, 85.

19 A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects*, Supplement to *Novum Testamentum* 36 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 220–21.

20 F. C. Burkitt, *Christian Beginnings* (London: London University Press, 1924), 73.

21 Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem/Leiden: Magnes/E. J. Brill, 1988), 62.

22 Klijn and Reinink, 220–23.

23 Pritz, 63.

24 Klijn and Reinink, 222–23, comment on Isaiah 9:1.

25 *Ibid.*, 222–23, comment on Isaiah 29:17–21.

26 Pritz, 63, 66–68.

than they clarify. What is clear is that Jewish and Gentile Christians were aware of and made use of rabbinic traditions in their evangelistic dialogue with the Jewish community.

### **Medieval Europe (Sixth to Sixteenth Centuries AD)**

Although Jews could be found scattered across the Roman Catholic continent of medieval Europe, they were still a distinct minority, one with a different religion, language, and literature. Christianity being the dominant religion in Europe, the tolerance granted both to rabbinic Judaism and to its literature was subject to the vagaries of Catholic religious sentiment and prejudice.

Bokser notes that, philosophically speaking, the Oral Torah is

by its very being a denial that the Hebrew Bible moved naturally and inevitably toward one fulfillment, that of Christianity. It exemplifies another path of development—the Jewish path. The presence of another path . . . constitutes a challenge to Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

He adds:

The Talmud as a body of literature became a target for Christian attacks in the Middle Ages. After Christianity had consolidated its power, the Jews were the only dissident element who insisted on retaining their distinctiveness, thereby challenging the claim of Christianity to total religious sway over European civilization. Considering the basic logic by which the Church was guided, the opposition to the Talmud becomes understandable. . . . The offense of the Talmud to Christianity stems . . . from its refusal to acknowledge the claims of Christianity and from its positive contributions to the strengthening of Judaism as a distinctive faith.<sup>28</sup>

In AD 553, Emperor Justinian enacted Novella 146, which forbade the use of the *deuterosis* (the Mishnah) for exegesis.<sup>29</sup> Flannery notes that “the banning of the Mishnah . . . prefigured the burning of the Talmud of later times.”<sup>30</sup> Since Justinian I was emperor of the Christian Eastern Roman Empire, one must unfortunately view his legal injunction as representative of official Christian attitudes to rabbinic literature.

In AD 1240, Nicholas Donin, a French Jew who became a Franciscan, instigated a public disputation directed against the Talmud, with four rabbis appointed for its defense. It seems that Donin had been excommunicated by R. Jehiel b. Joseph of Paris prior to his conversion to the Franciscan faith

27 Bokser, 8.

28 *Ibid.*, 144–45.

29 For an English translation, see James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York: Atheneum), appendix 2, 392–93.

30 Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 69.



for repudiation of the oral law as well as for Karaite tendencies.<sup>31</sup> Ben-Sasson notes that Donin's arguments "were to a large extent a continuation and development of the anti-Talmudic arguments of the Karaites."<sup>32</sup> His thirty-five accusations against the Talmud included charges of blasphemies against Jesus and Mary, attacks on the church, pronouncements hostile to non-Jews, obscenities, and gross anthropomorphisms. As a result of the trial held in June 1242, twenty-four wagon loads of books totaling thousands of volumes were torched in Paris by the public executioner.

The logic behind this attempt to discredit the Talmud is explained by Bokser:

The original text of Scripture was to be interpreted by Christianity in one way, and by Judaism in another way. Faithful to the Oral Torah, the Jews dismissed the Christian interpretations as untenable. The resistance of the Jews to Christianity thus centered in the literature of the Talmud. . . . It became the bulwark of Judaism and the basis of its rejection of the competing claims of Christianity. It therefore seemed to Christians that if they could overcome the hold of the Talmud on the Jews they would automatically break the resistance to the missionary efforts of the Church.<sup>33</sup>

In AD 1263, Barcelona was host to a second very important disputation, this one instigated by Pablo Christiani, another French Jew who had taken upon himself Dominican vows. Christiani's opponent of choice was to be Nahmanides (R. Moses b. Nahman). Dr. Haim Beinart tells us that Christiani attempted to use the Talmud in order to prove three points:

. . . that the Messiah had already appeared; that he was "both human and divine," and had died to atone for the sins of mankind; and that, in consequence, the precepts of Judaism had lost their validity. Against this Nahmanides argued that the literal meaning of the passages quoted from the Talmud do not admit this christological interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

It evidently escaped the attention of the Dominicans that the very Talmud they had attempted to burn for blasphemy in AD 1240 had suddenly become such an effective tool for proving the messiahship of Yeshua.

The results of the disputation were severe: in August 1263, James I of Aragon ordered the deletion of all blasphemous references to Jesus and Mary in the Talmud; failure to do so was punishable both by fine and by burning of the uncensored books. Jews were forced to listen to Dominican conversionist sermons. Nahmanides was arraigned before the Inquisition

31 Judah M. Rosenthal, "Donin, Nicholas," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 6:167-68.

32 Ben-Sasson, 6:92.

33 Bokser, 144.

34 Haim Beinart, "Barcelona, Disputation of," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 4:213.

on blasphemy charges, and he subsequently fled Spain for Palestine. As a result of the disputation, in AD 1264, Pope Clement IV ordered the surrender of all Jewish books in the Kingdom of Aragon to the Dominicans and Franciscans for examination and censorship. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* was also condemned to the fire as a result of its brief references to Jesus.

One of Christiani's fellow Dominican disputants was Raymundus Martini (Ramon Marti), who published his *magnum opus* in AD 1280, titled *Pugio Fidei* (Dagger of the Faith). This treatise, printed in Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin,

altered the course of the Christian anti-Jewish polemics for several centuries. The chief innovation of this school of apologists was the use of rabbinic literature to prove the truth of Christianity in much the same way that Jewish polemicists used the New Testament to prove the truth of Judaism. . . . Although Talmud and Midrash had been used in this way before, never had there been such a thorough search for rabbinic passages which could be interpreted Christologically. Despite the fact that the Talmud had been burned in Paris only twenty-three years before, the underlying assumption that allowed its use as a witness for the Church was the notion that the rabbis knew the truth of Christianity but obdurately withheld it from the masses.<sup>35</sup>

Another by-product of these inquisitorial times was the condemnation of the Talmud by Popes Innocent IV in 1244, Alexander IV, John XXII in 1320, and Alexander V in 1404. In 1442–43, Pope Eugenius IV published a bull prohibiting Jews in Leon, Castile, and Italy from studying any Hebrew book except the Pentateuch. In 1554, severe censorship of the Talmud was included in the first *Index Expurgatorius*; in 1565, Pope Pius IV decreed that the Talmud be deprived of even its name.

Schechter wryly notes that these debates always elicited nervousness and humility

on the side of the Jews, who know that, whatever the result may be, the end will be persecution; arrogance is always on the side of their antagonists, who are supported by a band of Knights of the Holy Cross, prepared to prove the soundness of their cause at the point of their daggers.<sup>36</sup>

Adler, in his book *The World of the Talmud*, points out:

35 Frank E. Talmage, *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter* (New York: Ktav, 1975), 72–73.

36 Solomon Schechter, "Nachmanides," in *Understanding Rabbinic Judaism: From Talmudic to Modern Times*, ed. Jakob Neusner (New York: Ktav, 1974), 218.



Probably no other work in world literature has been as consistently maligned and as fiercely condemned as has the Talmud. It is a work that is paradoxically little known and greatly misjudged. It has been censored, banned and publically burned. The history of its persecution, it has been said, parallels that suffered by the people that created it.<sup>37</sup>

In summary, a cursory examination of history shows that Christian use of rabbinics during the medieval period attempted either to discredit the Talmud or to prove the truth claims of Christianity by proof-texting messianic passages in rabbinic literature. Coercion, censorship, and burning of rabbinic works did not lie beyond the scope of Christian behavior during this time.

\* \* \*

The purpose of this section has not been to present an exhaustive historical overview of Christian attitudes to rabbinic literature; Pfefferkorn and Eisenmenger have not been discussed, Reuchlin and Rosenberg have not been mentioned. What does stand out clearly is that Christian rabbinics has not always concerned itself with exegetics and apologetics, but has often degenerated into gross superstition, coercion, bigotry, and persecution. We who are called by Messiah's name must fall to our knees in sorrow and broken-heartedness, confessing to the Jewish people how grieved and horrified we are by this satanic misrepresentation of Messiah to His own people. Only a clear understanding of how anti-Semitism has masqueraded under a cloak of anti-Talmudism, and a spiritual repugnance for that masquerade, can prevent such anti-Christian behavior from recurring.

## Dating of Rabbinic Literature

*Caveat lector* is an appropriate warning for all who would attempt to date rabbinic materials. Rabbinic literature spans a gap of up to two thousand years, if one takes modern halakic works into consideration. In his book *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*, Sandmel suggests to the Christian reader that a healthy caution is absolutely necessary for the one attempting to date pericopes found within rabbinic literature.

Many of the statements attributed to Jesus are paralleled in the ancient Jewish literature. Some Jewish scholars have used this circumstance to deny originality to Jesus, while others have used it to show the "essential Jewishness" of Jesus. One needs to note that the parallels have usually been scrutinized for facets of similarity, and not nearly so often for facts of difference. Moreover, the rabbinic literature has been used with considerable carelessness, not only by Jewish scholars, but also by Christians. Not only has the motive existed either to glorify Jesus at the expense of the rabbis or the rabbis at

37 Morris Adler, *The World of the Talmud* (New York: Schocken, 1958), 12.





the expense of Jesus, but ordinary cautions of primary concern in the historians' method have been tossed aside. Excerpts from the difficult rabbinic literature, available in convenient translation, especially in a highly commendable five-volume German commentary [known as "Strack and Billerbeck"], have encouraged both the imprudent and, one must say, the impudent. . . . [T]he earliest rabbinic collections, which contain the oldest material, were written down two centuries after Jesus. The material in the collections includes some which undoubtedly antedates Jesus—but to separate the layers in the rabbinic literature is a task of great delicacy, and one which has yielded, for the few who have tried, no abundant agreement. Much of the parallel material comes from rabbinic collections, which were made in Babylonia, and not in Palestine, in even later centuries; these later collections admittedly also contain very old material, but again the uncertainty exists about the age of relevant passages. Some Jewish scholars seem to believe that since some of this material is demonstrably older than Jesus, potentially all of it is; and some Christian scholars, overlooking the fact that late collections contain quite ancient materials, declare that the true priority and hence the inherent virtue of originality belong to Jesus. But since controlling criteria are absent, these quarrels about priority are as useful, and truly as relevant, as that about the chicken and the egg. Even when rabbinic literature is used in a non-partisan manner, it does not furnish a full and exact understanding of the time of Jesus. . . . [I]n their own peculiar way, the rabbinic collections reflect the interest of the editors. Pharisaic in its outlook, rabbinic literature has little that is charitable to say about the Sadducees. So selective is it in what it offers that it mentions neither Philo nor Josephus; we should not know from the rabbinic literature about the mere existence of most of the other preserved Jewish writings called Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Traditions older than the year 70 are to be found in the rabbinic literature, but only in the form of stray bits. It is to be remembered that between the time of Jesus and the time of the recording of rabbinic literature, the tremendous upheavals of 70 swept the Pharisees into the ascendancy. The destruction of the Temple in 70 ended the Temple cult and the Sadducean movement which presided over it. The Pharisees, who had been until then an active but possibly small minority among many minorities, rose with their institution, the synagogue, to become practically synonymous with Judaism. . . . Since the period before 70 in Palestine is not readily to be recovered from rabbinic literature because of its Pharisaic one-sidedness, these variables tantalize the historian. . . . The end result is that the more closely we look for exactness in details, the more elusive it is. . . . We are on the safest ground when we are the most general; when we proceed to specific matters, definiteness eludes us.<sup>38</sup>

38 Samuel Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew

Sandmel's perspective reflects a broad consensus, and he has ably understated his case. E. P. Sanders raises the same problem in his own discussion of the use and dating of rabbinic material:

How sharp the controversy is with regard to the question of the date and reliability of Rabbinic material can be seen from an exchange between Wacholder and Morton Smith which was occasioned by Wacholder's review of Neusner's *Development of a Legend*, an analysis of the traditions concerning R. Johanan b. Zakkai. In his review, Wacholder wrote: "This book suggests that the science of Talmudics has a long distance to go before it reaches the present state of N.T. scholarship. There is an urgent need for basic chronological, historical, and literary studies of early rabbinic literature before ambitious monographs such as Neusner's could be productive" [ed.: *JBL* 91 (1972): 124]. Wacholder especially referred to Neusner's failure to recognize late features in the halakic midrashim. Morton Smith replied to the review, suggesting, among other things, that Wacholder's late dating of the midrashim is idiosyncratic.<sup>39</sup>

Stuart Miller, in his *Studies in the History and Traditions of Sepphoris*, makes the following observations regarding careful use of rabbinics:

The question to be addressed here, however, is how the information provided in rabbinic literature is to be used for such an inquiry. . . . [T]he rabbinic evidence must be utilized with extreme caution. Attempts to extrapolate historical information from rabbinic literature are made even more complicated by the nature of the sources. Seemingly relevant information can often be found in contexts which give no obvious indication of the time or place intended. Or else, the composite nature of the material may suggest several different possibilities. Even when the text or its contents can be reasonably assigned to a particular period or locale, it is by no means certain that the historical information it provides is original to it. Very often, parallels found in other collections lack the information, expand upon it, or contradict it altogether. As much of the material was redacted long after the time it reflects, it is difficult to discern what constitutes an editorial gloss and what is germane to the text. Finally, we are dependent upon those manuscripts and editions available to us. Indeed, the obstacles to fruitful historical inquiry seem formidable. Several attempts, however, have been made to investigate historical topics using the rabbinic sources critically. . . . With regard to the usage of rabbinic sources, Lieberman has stated, "Every single passage of Talmudic literature must be investigated both in the light of the whole context and as a separate unit in regard to its correct reading, meaning, time

Union College Press, 1957), 199–201.

39 E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), 65.

and place" [ed.: "The Martyrs of Caesarea," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Salves* 7 (1939–44), 395]. . . . In *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees Before 70* . . . Neusner proposes a method for dating traditions attributed to a given rabbi. Neusner considers a tradition to be verified if it is quoted or alluded to by a later authority. The period in which the later authority taught can be regarded as a firm *terminus ante quem* for the tradition. . . . Other methods of verifying traditions can, of course, be suggested. As mentioned earlier, parallels found in sources external to rabbinic literature can be used to verify a particular tradition. Unfortunately, this type of information is not always available. The date of compilation of a collection in which a tradition appears can also be used to establish a *terminus ante quem* for that tradition. This approach, however, does not always permit as precise a dating as possible. . . . Any historical inquiry which utilizes rabbinic literature as its main source must consider the problems addressed by Lieberman, Bloch, Sperber and Neusner. The mere collating of data and harmonization of divergent sources can no longer be considered a valid approach to this type of inquiry. The studies presented below attempt to illustrate how philological, literary, textual and historical considerations can help elucidate some of the rabbinic traditions pertaining to Sepphoris.<sup>40</sup>

The above comments convince us of the need for extreme care and cautious scholarship in regard to dating rabbinic materials. Very few adherents of rabbinic Judaism, let alone Messianic Jews or Gentiles, have the necessary training to meet the high standards of scholarship enjoined by the above men. As a result, Messianics using rabbinics have occasionally made unwise or even incorrect statements. Often the philosophical presuppositions on which such statements are based reflect the popular consensus of either the Jewish or Christian communities at large, consensuses which are historically incorrect. Sometimes a *tendenz* may be seen at work, operating under the influence of apologetic need. At other times, lack of clarity is due to excessive mysticism, ignorance, or simply difficulty in dealing with the material. Whatever the source, such occasional abuses can make Messianic believers seem boorish or even deceptive in the unfriendly eyes of our opponents. The resultant caviling not only dishonors the name of our Messiah, but also hobbles our cause. In the interests of improving our track record and maintaining higher standards, let us examine some of the afore mentioned examples.

### **Quotations and Concepts—Contemporaneous?**

David Bivin and Roy Blizzard, in their *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, state that "rabbinic parallels give us a clear indication of the language in which Jesus taught. Jesus was thoroughly versed in the written

40 Stuart S. Miller, *Studies in the History and Traditions of Sepphoris*, *Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity* 37, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 7–8, 10–11.

and oral law. As we noted above, he followed rabbinic custom and taught in parables. . . .<sup>41</sup> Two points may be noted. Since the Oral Torah was not codified in the Mishnah until ca. AD 200, and in the Gemara until AD 400–550, it is both an unproven and an etiological generalization to say that Yeshua *followed* rabbinic custom and was thoroughly versed in the Oral Torah. Though undoubtedly many of the traditions preserved in the Talmud go back to Pharisaic times, each parallel must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Unfortunately, the authors make their assertions based on rather late evidence. The “king parables,” referred to previously, are given in the Talmud in the names of three Tannaim (late first, early second centuries AD) and one Palestinian Amora (mid fourth century AD). Therefore, it is beyond the bounds of proper scholarship to assert that Jesus *followed* rabbinic custom when the only evidence brought forward refers to customs coming from a period between fifty to three hundred years later than Yeshua.

Another example from the same work states that “Jesus is in complete agreement with the Rabbis” and then goes on to quote three Midrashim whose authors are either anonymous or second-century AD Tannaim.<sup>42</sup> Since the only evidence presented comes from a period at least one hundred years after Yeshua, it would be more fitting for Bivin and Blizzard to state that the rabbis are in complete agreement with Yeshua! The authors make a third such mistake when they state, “We can be sure, however, that this expression is good Hebrew because it is found in the Hebrew literature contemporary with Jesus, in what is known as Rabbinic Literature.”<sup>43</sup> This time the reference is to two anonymous *beraitot* found in Tannaitic works, coming from a period between the second and fourth centuries AD, and not redacted before the fourth century AD. Here, then, rabbinic material is used in an attempt to prove that it either precedes or is contemporaneous with Yeshua. Since most of the quotations are given in the name of rabbis at least one century later than Yeshua, one must come to the conclusion that the authors have not marshaled sufficient data to prove contemporaneity with, and certainly not priority over, Yeshua.

Incorrect dating of rabbinic materials can occasionally be found in Messianic music. An example of this is in the song “Today I Am a Man” on the Liberated Wailing Wall’s *Times and Seasons* release. The writer affirms that as his son faces his Messianic bar-mitzva (during which time he will publicly read from the Scriptures), “it comforts him to know that, in Jerusalem, a bar-mitzva Boy confounded older men. For now, like me, he’s found Yeshua and believes in Him, and he approaches his bar-mitzva born again.”<sup>44</sup> The song is a highly enjoyable, catchy, up-tempo number replete with *frei-*

41 David Bivin and Roy B. Blizzard, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* (Arcadia, CA: Makor Foundation, 1983), 76.

42 *Ibid.*, 152–53: Gen. R. 10:1 and Ex. R. 6:1 (both anonymous but cf. Lev. R. 19:2, where ascriptions are to R. Joshua b. Levi and R. Simeon [Bar Yohai]).

43 Bivin and Blizzard, 158.

44 Gina Ciavolino Moss and Stuart Dauermann, “Today I Am a Man,” on *Times and Seasons*, Liberated Wailing Wall, Jews for Jesus, CD, 1986.



*lach* riffs. It presupposes that the background of Luke 2:41–51 entails a bar-mitzva ceremony in Jerusalem; indeed, many non-Messianic Jews also presuppose that the bar-mitzva service dates from hoary antiquity. It comes, therefore, as a surprise to many that the use of the term “bar-mitzva” to denote the ceremony when young Jews assume religious and legal obligations, first appears in the fifteenth century in *Sefer Ziyiyoni* of R. Menahem Ziyiyoni.<sup>45</sup> Various references from the second and third centuries AD refer to the responsibility incumbent on a Jewish lad, on reaching the age of thirteen years plus one day, to fulfill all the commandments,<sup>46</sup> but this refers to legal obligations, not to a Torah-reading ceremony.

The modern ceremony of being called up to the Torah actually owes itself to late medieval origins. Though it may make us feel more Jewish to think of Yeshua as a *bar-mitzva bocher*, it seems that there is no historical evidence for assuming that either He or any of His contemporaries celebrated such a ceremony. Biblicists might note that Luke accounts for Joseph and Mary’s *aliyah* to Jerusalem on the basis of Exodus 23:14–17, the thrice-yearly pilgrim’s ascent. As well, Yeshua is described as just having turned twelve, and not thirteen—the latter being the age when Jewish boys are traditionally bar-mitzva!<sup>47</sup> This error in dating rabbinic materials is most probably due to an unqualified acceptance of a modern Jewish consensus or “folk-history,” though the folk consensus is, in this case, historically without foundation.

In Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum’s excellent book *Jesus Was a Jew*, dating problems can also occasionally be found. Targum Jonathan on Isaiah is *conclusively* dated to be from the first century AD and, since this was before Christianity ever became an issue, “Jonathan ben Uzziel could hardly be accused of adopting the ‘Christian interpretation.’”<sup>48</sup> The Zohar is similarly ascribed: “(It) dates to about A.D. 100 and is thought to have been written by Simon ben Yohai.”<sup>49</sup> A few pages later one finds this addition: “Also from the eleventh century we have the writings of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai.”<sup>50</sup>

Targum Jonathan’s final redaction is thought to have occurred by the seventh century AD,<sup>51</sup> and its traditions are thought to have originated in the early centuries AD. By the beginning of the fourth century, it was recognized as being of ancient authority.<sup>52</sup> It does not seem possible, therefore, based on the evidence presented, to make either as bold a statement

45 Zvi Kaplan, “Bar Mitzva,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 4:243.

46 TB Avot 5:21 given in the name of R. Judah b. Temai or possibly Samuel the Lesser (n.b. Soncino edition’s editor comments on p. 75): “This, of course, underlies the *Bar Mitzva* institution, which, however, in the present usage of the term, appears to be of much later origin.” Yoma 82a, in the names of R. Nahman and R. Johanan; Gen R. 3:10, in the name of R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon; Mishnah, Niddah 5:6.

47 N.b. Mishnah Niddah 5:6!

48 Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1974), 26.

49 *Ibid.*, 27.

50 *Ibid.*, 31.

51 Bernard Grossfeld, “Bible-Translations,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 4:846.

52 *Ibid.*, 4:846–48.

or as unassailable a conclusion as Fruchtenbaum has done. The Zohar, according to one of the world's greatest authorities on Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, is purported "to be the utterances of the *tanna* Simeon b. Yohai and his close companions (*havrayya*)."<sup>53</sup> But

. . . according to the clear testimony of Isaac b. Samuel of Acre, . . . the book was published, part by part, not all at once, by the Spanish kabbalist Moses b. Shem Tov de Leon, who died in 1305, after he had met Isaac of Acre. . . [Moses' widow] and daughter maintained that . . . [Moses] had written the whole work on his own initiative. . . . The question, therefore, is whether Moses de Leon himself was the editor, author, and publisher, or whether a Spanish kabbalist, associated with him, wrote the book and gave it to him to edit.<sup>54</sup>

It should be noted, of course, that it is physically impossible for the same rabbi to have written works both in the second and eleventh centuries; neither of these writings is accepted by serious scholarship as being the product of R. Simeon bar Yohai.

In Fruchtenbaum's *Footsteps of the Messiah*,<sup>55</sup> a comprehensive and systematic approach to dispensational eschatology, the author bases both the name of his book and a significant eschatological observation on an interesting interpretation of Matthew 24:1–8. "What is the one single event that will determine that the last days have begun and that we are indeed living in the last days?"<sup>56</sup> The answer revolves around Yeshua's phrase "nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." The key to this idiom, Fruchtenbaum states, is to be found in the Jewish context of the day when it was spoken. Support is then adduced from Isaiah 19:1–4 (written ca. late eighth century BC) and 2 Chronicles 15:1–7 (referring to events in the early ninth century BC) wherein similar (though not the same) terms are used. Fruchtenbaum then turns to two sources purporting to be from Christ's day ("in Christ's day the expression . . . was a Jewish idiom of a world war preceding the coming of Messiah"<sup>57</sup>), which turn out to be quotes from Ravina (a third- to fourth-century Amora) in *Bereshit Rabbah* and the *Zohar Hadash* (late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries AD). The author's use of rabbinic material is meant to establish a specific idiomatic usage in Yeshua's day. In that the quotations are either 800 years before or 300 to 1,300 years after Yeshua, such conclusions do not appear to be well-grounded.

A methodological note is in order: were authors not only to quote from rabbinic material but also forced to date that material in print, many of the aforementioned problems would be avoided.

53 Gershom Scholem, "Zohar," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16:1194.

54 *Ibid.*, 16:1209.

55 Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (San Antonio: Ariel Press, 1982).

56 *Ibid.*, 62.

57 *Ibid.*, 64.

### Reading, Writing, and Redaction

A widespread practice among Christian commentators is to assume that Tannaitic traditions (second century AD) reflect Pharisaic usage (first century AD). As Sandmel has pointed out (*supra*), such conclusions cannot be taken for granted. An example of the above can be found in Daniel Juster's *Jewish Roots*: "Halakic reasoning is pre-Yeshuic. . . . The body of Oral law found in the Talmud is sometimes most ancient and at other times reflective of very late applications (1st–4th century)."<sup>58</sup> Since Juster does not refer to percentages, it is impossible to fully evaluate his statement; however, even a cursory examination of the Talmud will reveal that the vast majority of its "applications" and halakah date from the second to fourth centuries AD.

Ole Chr. M. Kvarme, in his article "Jesus, the Kingdom and the Torah,"<sup>59</sup> uses a similar methodology:

This may also be seen in the healing of the man with the withered hand. The rabbis of the N.T. times also state that the Sabbath was given for the sake of man and not vice-versa. The contemporaries of Jesus were concerned with putting a hedge around the Torah and with establishing what were the exceptions when Sabbath-precepts could be overruled. They agreed on the principle (later given in the congnomen *pikuah nefesh*) that danger to life could overrule the sanctity of the Sabbath, though not in the case of chronic disease.<sup>60</sup>

The rabbis of New Testament times to which Kvarme refers in his footnotes turn out to be Simeon b. Menasya (second- to third-century Tanna and contemporary of R. Judah the Prince), R. Ishmael b. R. Eleazar, R. Akiba, R. Eleazar b. Azariah, and R. Mattiah b. Heresh, all second-century Tannaim. The principle of *pikuah nefesh*, then, is not found in rabbinic material dating back to Yeshua's day. Either other earlier examples are needed to prove Kvarme's point, or more tentative conclusions should be drawn.

Occasionally, attempts are made to date various liturgical elements to the same time as Yeshua and so to prove that Yeshua's utterances were truly within the mainstream of His Jewish milieu. A question presents itself as to whether this method is tautological, for it could perhaps equally prove that synagogue liturgy is dependent on Yeshua! Would such liturgy then be considered Jewish, Messianic, or Christian? One such example is found in Marvin R. Wilson's essay "An Evangelical Perspective on Judaism": "The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) is thoroughly Jewish, reflected in such ancient Jewish prayers as the *Kaddish* and the 'Eighteen Benedictions' (*Shmoneh Esrai*)."<sup>61</sup> A cautionary note is provided by Dr. Joseph Heinemann of Hebrew University:

58 Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: A Foundation of Biblical Theology for Messianic Judaism* (Rockville, MD: Davar, 1986), 229.

59 Ole Chr. M. Kvarme, "Jesus, the Kingdom and the Torah," *Mishkan*, no. 4 (1986): 20–38.

60 *Ibid.*, 28; MRI to EX. 31:14; TB Yoma 85b; M. Yoma 8:6.

61 Marvin R. Wilson, "An Evangelical Perspective on Judaism," in *Evangelicals and Jews in*

It is almost certain that by the end of the (Second) Temple period the eighteen benedictions of the weekly *Amidah* had become the general custom. However, their exact sequence and the content of the individual benedictions probably still varied. . . . Soon after the destruction of the Temple, the *Amidah* was "edited" finally in Jabneh, by Rabban Gamaliel II and his colleagues (Ber. 28b–29a). Even then, only the order, general content, and benediction formula were standardized; the actual wording was left to be formulated by the individual worshipper or reader. Attempts to reconstruct the "original" text of the *Amidah* or to ascertain the date when each section was "composed" are pointless, especially in view of the ruling that benedictions were not to be written down (Tosef., Shab. 13:4 . . .).<sup>62</sup>

A comparison of the *Kaddish*, the *Amidah*, and the Lord's Prayer may reveal common traditions, but neither priority nor dependence is easily established.

One more issue must be considered regarding dating, and that is the difference between source documents and traditions. Sandmel has pointed out (*supra*) that more recent documents may contain quite ancient traditions; however, just because some of the traditions in a document may unquestionably be very old, nothing can be concluded with certainty regarding the dating of the passages in question. Caution is the watchword here.

Skarsaune suggests that testimonial traditions found in Targum or Talmud obviously antedate New Testament *testimonia*: "It is this process of enriching the dossier of Christological proof-texts with more of the traditional Jewish testimonies which comes to its climax in Justin's material."<sup>63</sup> This can only be stated confidently when the dating of those *testimonia* can be clearly shown to precede Justin. The general evidence brought forward by Skarsaune is all Tannaitic (second century AD), and Amoraic (third century AD)<sup>64</sup>; the evidence which he adduces for Psalm 24:7 is to be found in Targum, Midrashim, and *Moed Katan* 9a (the latter in the name of Rav, a third-century Babylonian Amora and founder of the Sura academy). Skarsaune then posits a "transition from Jewish exegesis to the one we meet in Justin, because we possess an intermediate link in the *Apocalypse of Peter*."<sup>65</sup> Skarsaune has not adequately defended his dating so as to allow for such generalizations regarding rabbinic Jewish exegesis (perhaps firm conclusions are not easily attainable). Furthermore, since the *Apocalypse of Peter* is normally dated to the early second century,<sup>66</sup> Skarsaune's marshalling of rabbinic evidence from the second and third centuries does not

*Conversation on Scripture, Theology and History*, ed. Mark H. Tanenbaum, Marvin R. Wilson, and A. James Rudin (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1978), 16.

62 Joseph Heinemann, "Amidah," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2:839–40.

63 Skarsaune, 262.

64 *Ibid.*, 260.

65 *Ibid.*, 268.

66 "Peter, Apocalypse of St.," *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1069.



prove his point. Were he able to prove the priority of the aforementioned traditions preserved in the Targum, he could be excused for concluding that “the *Apocalypse of Peter* is only a slight Christianization of the Jewish exegesis quoted above, especially as found in the Targum.”<sup>67</sup> Perhaps a presupposition exists here regarding the priority of some of the traditions preserved in the targumic material. Note that all bases are covered by Skarsaune’s final conclusion:

This review of Jewish parallels to Justin’s material shows that all the main texts were familiar Messianic testimonies within Jewish exegesis prior to, *contemporary with, and later than Justin*. . . . This close contact may also be indirectly witnessed in some possibly anti-Christian motifs in the rabbinic exegesis, or in the grappling with problems raised by Justin.<sup>68</sup> (Emphases added.)

### Text and Context

A familiar hermeneutical principle reminds us that “a text without a context is a pretext.” In attempting to extend the field of *testimonia* from the Hebrew Scriptures to the Talmud and other rabbinic writings, Messianics have occasionally run afoul of the previously-stated principle of interpretation. Two presuppositions have lain behind such uses of rabbinic literature: the *concealment* position would hold that the rabbis believed in Yeshua’s messiahship but were too obdurate to reveal this truth to the common people; and the *precedent* position would attempt to show that rabbis in times past have understood certain Scriptures to have clear messianic content or allusions—therefore one cannot *a priori* condemn the attempt to ascribe those passages to Yeshua as being either farfetched or “un-Jewish.”

Certain difficulties sometimes arise from the aforementioned attempts: occasionally, errors in dealing with the text are made (such as spelling errors, category mistakes, unqualified use of inaccurate secondary sources, inaccurate quotations, etc.) due to lack of technical skill in Semitics; at other times contextual blunders occur, whereby the context of a pericope is violated or a more fully-blown Christian interpretation of the text is perceived than is rightly warranted, due to lack of command of the relevant material. Errors in handling the text and contextual blunders both serve to present an image which most Christians would be hard put to appreciate—that of an ignorant fellow (at best) or of one guilty of negligence bordering on malpractice (at worst) in our use of rabbinic materials.

One late example of errors in handling the text would be that of Francisco Machado and his *Mirror of the New Christians*, published in Portugal in 1541. Talmage notes that

67 Skarsaune, 268.

68 Ibid., 269.



there are . . . certain difficulties in his use of the material. Passages are seldom quoted accurately and at times are distorted almost beyond recognition. Furthermore, Machado was under the impression that certain tractates of the Talmud and other literary works were people. Thus, he speaks of “Midrash your doctor” and “Rabbi Bereshit,” i.e. Rabbi Genesis (Midrash Genesis Rabbah).<sup>69</sup>

Modern examples of the same errors would include Mal Couch’s *Rabbinical Views of Messianic Passages*. In this short booklet, the author states that

after an intensive six-month study of the Old Testament Messianic passages, I decided to compile the key quotes from the major rabbinical writings and Jewish scholars of the last 2,000 years. . . . Their traditional expectation of the Messiah correlates almost perfectly with our Christian viewpoint.<sup>70</sup>

Couch then proceeds to quote rabbinic writings, but gives the names of John Bowker, Hal Lindsey, E. W. Hengstenberg, etc. as the authors of these excerpts! In most cases the original rabbinic references are not given; often quotations are ascribed to the wrong sources; titles of books or tractates are given in bad Hebrew or in incomplete fashion; one book is simply called “Soncino.” These types of compendia are of little value to the student, since they are so full of errors; furthermore, such lack of scholarship reflects poorly on the cause of Christ among those acquainted with rabbinics.

One good example worth noting, both in terms of accurate standards of spelling and of dating, is the evangelistic book *Y’shua* by Moishe Rosen.<sup>71</sup> An appendix at the back of the book lists rabbinic sources with their approximate date of compilation or recension. Though such simple cautions would seem to be elementary, it bears stressing that too few authors are doing their required homework in this area.

Contextual errors are of a different sort: attempts are often made to read more into the text than intended. One such example will be given here—that of the rabbinic interpretation of Isaiah 53. Rabbinic opinion is unanimous (that is, until Rashi’s novel interpretation in the eleventh century AD that the main personage in Isaiah 53 refers to the nation Israel) that Isaiah 53 refers to Messiah,<sup>72</sup> though it is true that, in modern times, this fact tends to be either overlooked or brushed under the carpet. It must be noted, however, that although a messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 once was the commonly accepted consensus, not all such messianic interpretations described the Suffering Servant in terms applicable to Yeshua. For example, Targum Jonathan, though accepting the passage as messianic,

69 Talmage, 131.

70 Mal Couch, *Rabbinical Views of Messianic Passages* (n.p., n.d.), 1.

71 Moishe Rosen, *Y’shua* (Chicago: Moody, 1982).

72 Adolf Neubauer and S. R. Driver, *The Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters*, 2 vols. (New York: Ktav, 1969); cf. Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew*, 25–35, for a historical survey of this rabbinic position.

deliberately de-emphasizes the nature of the messianic Servant's suffering, ascribing it to the nations, to Israel, or to Messiah's own martyrdom. Samson Levey concludes, as a result, that "at the very least, this passage shows beyond a doubt that in Jewish Messianic thought of the Targum there is no room whatsoever for a suffering and dying Messiah."<sup>73</sup>

Messianics often make use of Targum Jonathan in order to show that a messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 is consistent with ancient rabbinic traditions, and so it is.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, few Messianics point out that Targum Jonathan's agreement lies only in the area of general subject matter (the Messiah) and not in all of the specifics (what is the role of Messiah). It is the present author's opinion that many of those making use of such literature are themselves unaware of these distinctions, and are perhaps over-confident as to what such texts actually *do* prove. In defense of Messianic believers, it must be noted that modern Jewish refutation literature either deliberately ignores one and a half millennia of rabbinic thought (since such information would be self-defeating for their argument), or else attempts to belittle the importance of such information.<sup>75</sup> It would be neither appropriate nor honest for the aforementioned authors of refutation literature to accuse Jewish Christians of *tendenz* on this point, since they themselves ignore or downplay much more significant information for their own apologetic purposes. Nevertheless, it would be advisable for the Messianics to "go the extra mile" (Matt 5:41) and, with all candor, explain where Targum Jonathan and other such materials agree with our position and where they disagree.

A good example of the above methodology is found in Burt Yellin's article "Messiah in Rabbinic Thought," published in *The Messianic Outreach*. Having demonstrated that rabbinic literature also accepts the messianic nature of many biblical passages understood by Christians to be christological, he notes that this in itself does not decisively prove whether or not Yeshua of the New Testament is the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>76</sup> The solution to such a quandary, he concludes, involves careful study of the Scriptures and personal prayer to God Himself.

Another area of abuse has been that of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah. Gershom Scholem gives us a brief historical perspective on Messianic use of Kabbalah.

73 Samson H. Levey, *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation* (New York: Hebrew Union College, 1974), 87.

74 F. Kenton Beshore, *The Messiah of the Targums, Talmuds and Rabbinical Writers* (Montrose, CA: International School of Biblical Research, 1971), chart 21; Rosen, 75–77; Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew*, 26; etc.

75 Samuel Levine, *You Take Jesus, I'll Take God: How to Refute Christian Missionaries* (Los Angeles: Hamoreh Press, 1980), 23–28; Gerald Sigal, *The Jew and the Christian Missionary: A Jewish Response to Missionary Christianity* (New York: Ktav, 1981), 35–68. Neither of these books discusses the rabbinic consensus prior to Rashi. David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod, *Jews and "Jewish Christianity"* (New York: Ktav, 1978), 47–50. These authors attempt to belittle the evidence, mentioning it only in a footnote with a heavily slanted emphasis (cf. p. 49).

76 Burt Yellin, "Messiah in Rabbinic Thought," *The Messianic Outreach* 5:1 (Fall 1985): 14.

From the late 15th century onward, in certain Christian circles of a mystical and theosophical persuasion a movement began to evolve with the object of harmonizing kabbalistic doctrines with Christianity, and, above all, of demonstrating that the true hidden meaning of the teachings of the Kabbalah points in a Christian direction. Naturally, such views did not meet with a friendly reception from the kabbalists themselves, who expressed nothing but derision for the misunderstandings and distortions of kabbalistic doctrine of which Christian kabbalah was full; . . . Historically, Christian Kabbalah sprang from two sources. The first was the christological speculations of a number of Jewish converts who are known to us from the end of the 13th century until the period of the Spanish expulsion, such as Abner of Burgos and Paul de Heredia, who pseudepigraphically composed several texts of Christian Kabbalah entitled *Iggeret ha-Sodot* and *Galei Rezaya* in the name of Judah ha-Nasi and other *Tannaim*. Another such tract put out by Jewish converts in Spain toward the end of the 15th century, and written in imitation of the styles of the *aggadah* and the *Zohar*, circulated widely in Italy. Such compositions had little effect on serious Christian spiritualists, nor was their clearly tendentious missionary purpose calculated to win readers. . . . Furthermore, the number of Jewish converts to Christianity from kabbalistic motives, or of those who claimed such motives retrospectively, remained disproportionately small among the numbers of converts in general.<sup>77</sup>

Dr. Jakob Jocz adds a Jewish-Christian perspective:

It is unfortunate that excess of zeal on the part of Jewish missionaries, especially converts, has led to extending the field of evidence from the Old Testament first to the Talmud and then to Jewish mysticism. In the search for a starting-point the temptation to elaborate any affinity of ideas is very natural. Paul in Athens seized upon the inscription Ἄγνωστον Θεῷ in order to make known the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ; he even quotes a Stoic poet to give force to his argument against idolatry. But occasional reference to a familiar quotation from an alien source is one thing, and the adducement of proof that the source is only apparently alien is another. . . . Later, when the mystical literature of the Synagogue became more widely known amongst Christian scholars, the apparent affinity with Christianity led to the conviction that it actually contained in esoteric language the doctrines of the Church. Thus, the *Zohar* was held to be an important witness to the truth of the Christian faith. Some resemblance to the Christian doctrines of the Atonement, Mediation, the Holy Trinity, etc., and the metaphysical speculations of the Cabbalah has led to the assumption of an internal harmony between Christianity and Jewish mysticism. Medieval scholasticism was

<sup>77</sup> Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 6:643, 645.

specially attracted by the speculative, fanciful method of exegesis employed by the *Zohar*. Fascination for Jewish mysticism has survived to our days.<sup>78</sup>

A modern example of such excessive zeal is seen in the work *The Great Mystery or How Can Three Be One?* by Tzvi Nassi (Hirsch Prinz). Prinz quotes liberally from the *Zohar* and from other kabbalistic writings, coming to his final conclusion:

I now appeal to every candid and unprejudiced Israelite or Christian, who has read these pages, whether I am not right in maintaining *that the Jewish Church before the Christian era, and in the first two centuries of the same, held דְּשִׁלוּשָׁא רַבּוּא, the Doctrine of the Trinity, as a fundamental and cardinal article of the true faith?*<sup>79</sup>

Prinz's conclusion, based on the *Zohar*, is that the doctrine of the Trinity was a cardinal article of faith of the Jewish synagogue prior to Yeshua and up *until the 200s AD*, a sort of "trinitarian *Ani Ma'amin*." Of course, Prinz's dating of the *Zohar* is inaccurate by a minimum of only twelve hundred years. It may be rightly asked, however, if the *Zohar* has ever represented fundamental or mainstream Judaism. Jocz again makes a valuable contribution:

Christian writers have rightly found in Jewish mysticism the weakest spot in the armour of the Synagogue which is ever ready to defy the missionary propaganda of the Church. But while older writers have worked on the principle that good evidence from any source may be used for missionary purposes . . . [t]he association of *Cabbalah* with Christian theology throws a shadow of suspicion upon the Church. Christianity is more than speculative mysticism. The mystical elements in the Christian tradition are not the main characteristics of the Church. Besides, the *Cabbalah* itself owes some debt to Christian ideas, having drawn upon a large variety of sources. Orthodox Judaism, on the whole, has looked upon its mystical speculations with suspicion. Judaism, though making room for a certain amount of mysticism, is essentially a religion of law and reason. Mystics in Judaism, as in every other religion, have always been a small minority. . . . While there is an undeniable affinity of outlook between Jewish and Christian mysticism, Jewish mystical speculations cannot serve as a bridge leading to Christian orthodoxy. The underlying principles of Judaism and Christianity are such that they automatically exclude each other. A. Fürst has shown the precariousness of the missionary approach via

78 Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ: The Relationship Between Church and Synagogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 209.

79 Rabbi Tzvi Nassi (Hirsch Prinz), *The Great Mystery or How Can Three Be One?* (n.p., n.d.), 89.



Jewish mysticism. The divergence between Jewish mysticism and the Christian Faith is fundamental. Spiegel rightly says: "The Kabbalah teaches nothing less than that this deliverance of God can be brought about by man and by man alone." It is here that the disparity appears in all its force.<sup>80</sup>

Minimal rules of conduct become clear as we conclude this section. Attempts to use rabbinic literature must be accompanied by an effort to spell, quote, and transliterate accurately; the student should check the primary sources rather than rely on secondary materials; one's knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic should be sharpened; one should read broadly and particularly on the subject; one should be acquainted with the literary genre under consideration on a variety of subjects; and one should resist the ever-so-powerful temptation to read foreign meanings into the texts. An excellent opportunity is afforded here to engage in dialogue with Jewish scholars so as to bounce one's tentative conclusions off those more fluent in, and knowledgeable of, that literature. We who accept the Bible as God's infallible revelation to men and women must always remember that the defense of Yeshua's messiahship is found primarily and finally in the Scriptures; though supporting evidence may come from other sources, including rabbinic literature, none of that evidence can usurp the Bible's primacy. That reminder should circumscribe the extent of what one attempts to prove from rabbinic literature.

### Modern Messianic Philosophy Concerning Rabbinics

At the close of the twentieth century, all the uses of rabbinics mentioned in this article (both negative and positive) are still to be found among Messianics. The occasional charlatan still makes his furtive appearance, like Michael Esses, who forged a rabbinic certificate of ordination from a non-existent yeshiva and who for many years was a "bright light" on the charismatic circuit, proclaiming himself a "Judean rabbi" and claiming great skill in rabbinic exposition.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, Christian works are still to be found which caricature rabbinic literature in pejorative terms, classifying the entire rabbinic corpus as trivial, disingenuous, hair-splitting, flimsy, and full of foibles.<sup>82</sup> Between these two extremes lies the vast majority of Messianic believers, far removed from ethical deception or anti-Judaic feeling.

It may be fairly stated that a less skittish and less phobic approach toward rabbinics can be seen across the board among Messianic Jews today, though this increasingly interested attitude is not without its problems. What follows is an exposition of general philosophical guidelines and ca-

<sup>80</sup> Jocz, 210–11.

<sup>81</sup> Betty Esses De Blase, *Survivor of a Tarnished Ministry* (Santa Ana, CA: Truth Publishers, 1983), 69–77.

<sup>82</sup> Victor Buksbazen, *The Gospel in the Feasts of Israel* (Fort Washington, PA: C. L. C. 1954), 79–85, 91.

veats set down by various Messianic thinkers today which may prove of interest to the reader.

### **“No Negatives”**

Occasionally Messianics still try to prove how right we are by proving how wrong Judaism is. Jocz's criticism of Professor Alexander McCaul's *The Old Paths*<sup>83</sup> points out that his writings were based on

the exaltation of Christianity at the expense of Judaism. The result of such an approach invariably led away from the main purpose of Christian witness into the inconclusive discussion as to which “religion” is superior . . . his digressions are such that they seem to include every possible superstition in order to show the absurdity of Rabbinism.<sup>84</sup>

History reveals to the impartial observer how anti-rabbinism has easily degenerated into anti-Semitism. It would be an asset to all Messianic believers were *argumenta ad hominem* to cease immediately in our use of rabbinic literature.

### **The Great Omission**

A greater appreciation for things rabbinic has occasionally led some evangelicals into an immature befuddlement regarding the gospel. Kvarme sadly notes:

In the last decades evangelical theologians have been much concerned to develop a new and positive understanding of the Jewish People as the elect people of God, as well as a prophetic understanding of the land and the state of Israel. I have myself welcomed this re-orientation in evangelical theology, but I have been perplexed when I have seen evangelical theologians also embracing Judaism and the rabbinic faith tradition in such a way that all witness to Jesus as Messiah and Lord has been silenced. At the same time I have been very impressed by the honest and straightforward attitude of many Jewish theologians in the Jewish Christian encounter.<sup>85</sup>

The study of rabbinics is a praiseworthy and helpful endeavor; it should never be used, however, to conceal a cooling spiritual ardor or to excuse a lack of evangelical courage.

83 Alexander McCaul, *The Old Paths or The Talmud Tested by Scripture* (London: London Society's House, 1886).

84 Jocz, 215.

85 Ole Chr. M. Kvarme, “The Approach to Rabbinic Theology in Jewish Evangelism” (paper presented at the meeting of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism, Easneye, August 1986), 15.



### ***Sisterhood Is Powerful***

The opinion is often voiced that Christianity is a daughter religion of Judaism, a headstrong and rebellious upstart which broke away from its mother. The presuppositions behind such a viewpoint accept both the priority and spiritual authority of rabbinic Judaism while rejecting any similar claim by first-century Messianic Jews. As a result, Messianics who study rabbinics often are made to feel like poor, distant relatives who must approach the rabbinic table apologetically, hat in hand. History, however, does not justify such a hypothesis.

Rabbinic Judaism after 70 A.D. is not identical to the Judaism of Jesus and the first disciples. . . . Judaism at the time of Christ was a complex entity, which housed distinctively different parties and tendencies; Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots and others we only know by name. None of these could claim a monopoly on Judaism, nor did any deny the Christian Jews their Judaism when they emerged as a new Jewish religious faction after 30 A.D. But after the Jewish-Roman conflict and the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., most of these factions disappeared. Only two groups survived the catastrophe—the Pharisaic-Rabbinic and the Christian-Jewish. The Pharisaic tradition eventually established itself as the only legitimate Judaism, while the Christian church became more structured and delimited itself from rabbinic Judaism. It is therefore not completely accurate to call Christianity the religious “daughter” of Judaism, if one means rabbinic Judaism. It is more fitting to say that Judaism and Christianity are “sister” religions, having the same “mother” in pre-70 A.D. Judaism.<sup>86</sup>

Jocz, in rebutting the arguments of Sanders, notes:

Pharisaism is not the only offshoot of Old Testament religion. This is a fallacy which has obscured the vision of many writers. The question, therefore, whether Jesus intended to separate himself from Judaism is fallacious. It presupposes that Rabbinic Judaism in New Testament times was the sole heir of Old Testament tradition. Jewish writers have vigorously asserted that Pharisaism is the only legitimate offspring of the prophetic tradition and the direct heir of the Hebrew Bible. It has retained its original purity and “has no Greek strand” like Christianity. L. I. Finkelstein goes so far as to assert that half the world derives its faith from the Pharisaic tradition. The final argument for the truth of Pharisaism is usually seen in the fact of its survival. But it may be questioned whether Rabbinic Judaism continued in a straight line the Hebrew tradition. In the New Testament period, representing the last stages of the formative process of Judaism, there still existed a parallel tradition closely related to the Prophets of the Old Testament. Prof. Burkitt maintains with good reason that Christianity and Juda-

<sup>86</sup> “To the Jew First,” *Mishkan*, no. 4 (1986): 59–60.



ism are both two daughters of what he calls “Old-Judaism.” Christianity has as much a claim upon heirship as Judaism has, unless spiritual rights are narrowed down to physical descent.<sup>87</sup>

This realization means that believers who approach rabbinic material for study purposes do not need to feel in any way intimidated. They are studying one Jewish expression and tradition which underwent a major and decisive transformation after AD 70, a tradition which is opposed to Yeshua’s messiahship and deity. Messianic believers belong to a competing Jewish tradition which disagrees with rabbinic Judaism on many basic issues. It is worth remembering that, although rabbinic Judaism is seen by many as normative Judaism today, according to Josephus, at one time the Pharisees themselves were a small minority of six thousand within a larger Jewish population of perhaps two to two-and-a-half million.<sup>88</sup> It would be quixotic for the Pharisees’ spiritual descendants to look askance at Messianic Jews today, merely because our numbers are at present small, in the vicinity of one hundred thousand.

### **By What Authority?**

Voices are heard within Messianic Judaism which argue for the legal authority of rabbinic halakah in the life of Messianic believers. Though they are by no means the majority, these voices have been granted and are still granted an inordinate amount of space to plead their cause. One such example is found in David A. Rausch’s book *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity*. There an argument is advanced for the obligatory nature of the oral law.

As to the oral tradition and Talmud, there is diversity of opinion among traditional Messianic Jews. Some believe the oral tradition was given at Mt. Sinai with the Biblical Law—others do not. Some are not sure. . . . In the final analysis, not many traditional Messianic Jews would say outright that Talmud is divinely “inspired” (many frankly do not know), but they would assure one that God “authorized” Talmud. . . . Yeshua said to do what the rabbis do—so he authorized it also.<sup>89</sup>

In another place in this book, we find a continuation of that argument:

Is the Talmud inspired? This is an awkward question to ask. The Torah is inspired in its entirety. The Oral Tradition is the Torah’s integration into one’s person, and thus, is in a sense inspired. . . . A non-Jew, who

<sup>87</sup> Jocz, 31–32.

<sup>88</sup> Josephus Flavius, *Ant.* XVII. 2, 4 (42); cf. Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 2, rev. ed., ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Miller, and Matthew Black (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 396.

<sup>89</sup> David A. Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity*, Texts and Studies in Religion Volume 14 (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 137, 139.



almost by definition does not understand the Oral Tradition, cannot have [the Oral Torah's commandments (ed.)] applied to him.<sup>90</sup>

The vast majority of Messianic Jews would reject the above hypotheses as inaccurate, untenable, and unbiblical. Juster offers this perspective in his *Jewish Roots*:

All practices and traditions are to be evaluated according to Scriptural teaching, taking great pains to study it with depth and care. . . . Messianic Jews should respect the Jewish application of the Torah, Halakah, while at the same time reserving the right to criticize it in love. Yeshua Himself warned, "You make vain the Word of God by your traditions."<sup>91</sup>

The Norwegian Mission to Israel (DNI) also makes its position very clear in its statement "To the Jew First":

. . . (A)vailable sources show that the law-abiding Christians of Jewish descent did not accept without question the rabbis' interpretation of the Law, especially after the reconstruction of Pharisaic Judaism in 70 A.D., after the destruction of the Temple. . . . No longer did the Jewish believers in Jesus regard the rabbis as the highest authority in questions of the Law, but this place was filled by Messiah Jesus. . . . The rabbinic tradition incorporates several elements which are negatively disposed towards Jesus as Messiah and to Christian belief in Him. At the same time it also contains important elements which date back to the time of Jesus and which, for one wanting to remain Jewish, are natural to identify with. There is much work waiting to be done in this area for the Christian Jew, though it is impossible to prescribe blanket solutions. However, an unconditional acceptance of rabbinic tradition cannot be considered.<sup>92</sup>

Any tradition which would place itself above Scripture as an interpretative grid would not only violate the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*; it would run interference against the principle which Paul laid down in an ancient yet similar situation:

See to it that no one takes you captive . . . according to the tradition of men rather than according to Messiah. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority. (Col 2:8–10)

90 Andrew P. Piland, Appendix "In Defense of Talmudic Law," in *ibid.*, 258, 260.

91 Juster, 228.

92 "To the Jew First," 58, 60.

### ***What's on the Agenda?***

One question which must be faced by Messianic Jews and Gentiles making use of rabbinic literature and traditions is this: Have the theological presuppositions of rabbinic theology, its emphases and agendas, been weighed and understood? This is a question of fundamental significance, for one's response to it will serve as a hermeneutical grid guiding one's use of rabbinic literature and tradition.

An example is in order: in *Jewish Roots*, Daniel Juster first discusses modern halakic matrilineal descent and then contrasts this with original biblical, patrilineal descent. Having shown that the biblical and halakic positions are in disagreement, Juster concludes with a *volte-face*: "Therefore, to the traditional definition of who is a Jew, we must add the element of descent from the father."<sup>93</sup>

This seems to be a case of rabbinic theology modifying our biblical theology and creating a synthetic *tertium quid*. In this regard, note Juster's final statement: "Suffice it to say that the Scriptural role of the father and descent from the father is also crucial."<sup>94</sup>

This trend can also be seen in Juster's comment on bar-mitzvas and Jewish identity. In his chapter entitled "Extra-Biblical Practices," Juster discusses, among other subjects, that of bar-mitzvas. In that chapter he unequivocally states that "we are not bound by tradition as a legalistic straight-jacket."<sup>95</sup> However, in his discussion of the same subject in his book *Growing to Maturity*, one finds the statement, "The full scope of being a loyal Jew includes . . . bar-mitzvahs."<sup>96</sup> Is the reader to understand that one's loyalty and full commitment to Jewish identity will be considered somewhat deficient unless one embraces an extra-biblical religious practice of medieval Judaism? Surely Juster must have intended to express himself more clearly on this point. A note of caution should also be sounded regarding a further comment by Juster that non-Jewish members of Messianic congregations should not have bar-mitzva services; they should be confirmed by a different ceremony as the bar-mitzva service is "specifically connected to affirming a Jewish identity."<sup>97</sup> Is there biblical warrant for placing such an extra-biblical practice off-limits to non-Jewish members of the body of Messiah, or for having separate confirmation services in one and the same congregation with the discriminating factor being that of race? Furthermore, is the affirmation of Jewish identity the goal here, considering that the bar-mitzva tradition was totally unknown to such impeccable Jews as Abraham, Moses, Yeshua, or Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, the redactor of the Mishnah? Perhaps we are dealing with the desire to affirm a specific type of Jewish identity, one which would be similar in appearance

93 Juster, *Jewish Roots*, 191–92.

94 *Ibid.*, 193.

95 *Ibid.*, 227.

96 Daniel C. Juster, *Growing to Maturity: A Messianic Jewish Guide* (Rockville, MD: Union of Messianic Congregations, 1982), 204.

97 Juster, *Jewish Roots*, 223.



to that of the mainstream rabbinic tradition, and thus in some way more “kosher” in the eyes of Messianics because of that similarity.

The main theological problem that surfaces in the Messianic use of rabbinic materials is one of emphasis: since rabbinic liturgical tradition places no emphasis on Yeshua, His deity, His atonement, the gospel and its offer of salvation, the Jewish-Christian remnant of Israel, Gentile believers, and the second coming, in what way does it show itself to be an ideal vehicle for the believer’s liturgical and devotional exercises? Furthermore, since rabbinic Judaism is on record as disagreeing most strongly with the above Messianic elements, and since that opposition has expressed itself quite clearly over the past two millennia in rabbinic literature and tradition, aren’t Messianic Jews and Gentiles facing an intrinsically unsuitable corpus with an insurmountable task?

The first step for anyone wishing to make use of rabbinic traditions is to understand them—where they agree and where they disagree with the Messianic faith. Having become aware of both points of confluence and points of tension, the creator of new liturgical traditions must not sweep these differences under the carpet; he must find an artistic and positive way of removing those elements which are unsuitable for Messiah’s worshipping body, and of adding those elements which express a fully-blown Christian perspective. Suffice it to say that the creator of such traditions must be informed by, and adept in, the length and breadth of new covenant teaching, lest his or her additions be sub-Christian in nature. Occasionally the rabbinic mold will be found brittle and unsuitable for holding new covenant truth, and it should be gently left to rest, an old wineskin unfit for new wine (Luke 5:36–39). At other times it may become a most suitable vessel for Messianic joy and worship. Unless Messiah’s teaching comes through the rabbinic filter with unmistakable clarity, however, the whole attempt should be scrapped.

It would be helpful to examine five liturgical elements which have been embraced to varying degrees by different Messianic congregations in the U.S. The examination will focus on specific areas of tension or disagreement with new covenant teaching and on ways of resolving those tensions, if at all possible.

### 1. *The Amidah*

As noted previously, the *Amidah* or *Sh’moneh Esrei* has ancient origins, though the specific wording of its Second Temple expression is at present impossible to determine. The difficulties associated with a Messianic use of the *Amidah* are twofold. Negatively, the *Amidah* is lacking the fully Messianic teaching found in the new covenant. Though God is praised in the *Amidah* for His faithfulness, He is not praised for revealing His faithfulness in the inauguration of the new covenant; though His resurrection and healing power are lauded, no hint is given that these events are most clearly fulfilled in the mighty resurrection and miracles of Yeshua, etc. If the borrowing of a theological term from another context is acceptable

to the reader, then the main criticism of the *Amidah* is that it is not “full gospel” liturgy—it does not reflect the fullness of new covenant teaching.

On the other hand, believers are often wont to downplay one element of the *Amidah*, which tends to stick in the throat of the present author—that of the addition to the Twelfth Benediction, the “Nineteenth” or so-called *Birkat HaMinim*. In this blessing, formulated by Samuel the Lesser at the request of Rabban Gamliel II in Jabneh and soon after arranged by Simeon Ha-Pakul,<sup>98</sup> an imprecation is made against the Nazarenes, effectively placing them beyond the pale of participation in the synagogue liturgy.<sup>99</sup> Since some Messianic Jews are unaware of this history, their recitation of the *Amidah* will not regurgitate this rather bitter historical memory. But for those who choose to remember the prophetic fulfillment of John 16:2–4, a somewhat hollow feeling will always accompany the reading of the *Amidah*.

## 2. The Thirteen Principles of the Faith

Alexander Altmann remarks that the Maimonidean “Thirteen Principles” marked an attempt by that author

to invest his principles with the character of dogma, by making them criteria of orthodoxy and membership in the community of Israel; but it should be noted that his statement was a personal one and remained open to criticism and revision. . . . Of [its] many poetic versions, the best known is the popular *Yigdal* hymn (c. 1300). . . . The formulation of *ikkarim* was designed to accentuate the vital beliefs of Judaism and to strengthen Orthodoxy. It was also meant to define the position of the Jewish faith vis-à-vis Christianity.<sup>100</sup>

Juster mentions that the *Yigdal* has been revised for Messianic Jews (and Gentiles too, we would hope!). Yet he gives no explanation for such a revision.<sup>101</sup> A quick examination of the Thirteen Articles reveals that, in Rambam’s mind, a loyal Jew is one who denies the Trinity, the possibility of the Incarnation, the messiahship of Yeshua, and the possibility of a future new covenant. Since eight of the thirteen articles fundamentally disagree with the Messianic faith, one is led to ask if perhaps another medium could be found which does not view God’s revelation in Messiah so negatively. At the very least, an almost complete recasting of the entire Thirteen Articles is needed in order for them to present a faith which is both wholesome and Messianic. It is worth mentioning that in the 1880s the famous Messianic Jew Joseph Rabinowitz of Kishinev did just that when he “drew up a list of thirteen articles of faith and labor, after the pattern of the thirteen Principles of Faith set down by Moses Maimonides. The substance of the

98 TB Ber. 28b; Meg. 17b.

99 For a fuller discussion cf. Jocz, 51–57, 336 n. 258; Pritz, 102–07.

100 Alexander Altmann, “Articles of faith,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 3:656.

101 Juster, *Jewish Roots*, 245.



articles was that Jesus is the only Savior of Israel, as well as of the whole world."<sup>102</sup> It might also be suggested that all Messianic believers making use of such a recast version be educated as to the Maimonidean form, as well as to what the biblical reasons are which cause Messianics to differ from Rambam.

### 3. *Adon Olam*

This hymn focuses on the eternity of God, as well as on His unity, majesty, and faithfulness; the listener is thus exhorted to place his absolute trust in Providence. A popular hymn in the synagogue which boasts of many beautiful melodies, this song is no less appreciated in gatherings of Messianic Jews and Gentiles, both in the Diaspora and in Israel. According to a debatable tradition, the hymn was composed by Solomon ibn Gabirol in the eleventh century AD.

It is to be noted that its third verse begins with the words *והוא אחד ואין שני* ("For He is one, and there is not a second"). For Messianic believers who understand the Trinity to be a biblical expression of God's unique unity, this verse poses no problems; nevertheless, the average Orthodox Jew understands this verse as championing the absolute unity of God in true Judaism, as opposed to "false" Christianity's belief (so he thinks) in "three Gods." Furthermore, his perception of the hymn's intent is not far off course; the language of this verse is peculiarly reminiscent of certain Midrashim of the fourth century AD. In the Midrash on Ecclesiastes 4:8, the words *לך אחד ואין שני* ("There is one, and he has not a second; he also has no son or brother") are made to refer to the God of Israel who, it is sworn, has no Son.<sup>103</sup>

Another homily, in Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:33, has R. Aha recount a conversation between Solomon and God. The Lord prevails on Solomon to counteract belief in a divine Son, and as a result, Solomon fulfills the divine request by composing the words of Ecclesiastes 4:8: *יש אחד ואין שני*. Both Midrashim seem to be pushing in the same general direction—a polemical and anti-Christian denial of the deity of the Son. In Exodus Rabbah XXIX:5, R. Abbahu attempts to draw a similar conclusion to the above homily, and in the tractate Ta'anit of the Jerusalem Talmud, Abbahu unmistakably connects these thoughts together in the following saying:

If someone will tell you "I am God," he is a liar; "I am the son of man" his end is that he will regret it; if he says that "I am going to heaven," he says this but he will not fulfill it.<sup>104</sup>

It would appear that these parallels are not accidental, and that the similarity of phraseology between *Adon Olam* and the Midrashim bespeaks a

102 Jacob Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* (Chattanooga, TN: Baker, 1979), 149.

103 Eccl. Rabb. IV:18:1

104 TJ Ta'anit 2:1, 651; cf. Mordecai Margalio, "Aha," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2:435, and "Apologetics," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 3:191, for the same position.

similarity of theological conviction and of polemical intent. Could it be that this intent has slipped by the majority of Messianic believers who heartily sing this song? Could it be that we are making use of rabbinic theology and tradition unawares?

#### 4. *Shalom Aleikhem*

This soulful hymn is usually sung at home, at the beginning of the *Erev Shabbat* meal. In the song a welcome is extended to the *malakhei ha-sharet*, the ministering angels of God Most High who come from before the presence of the King of kings. This terminology is derived from the *aggadah*, wherein the archangels Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel are referred to by the above title.<sup>105</sup> The actual tradition upon which this hymn is based comes from an *aggadah* given in the name of R. Yose b. Judah, a second-century AD Tanna:

Two ministering angels accompany man on the eve of the Sabbath from the synagogue to his home, one a good angel and one an evil angel. And when he arrives home and finds the lamp burning, the table laid and the couch bed covered with a spread, the good angel exclaims, "May it be even thus on another Sabbath too," and the evil angel unwillingly responds "Amen." But if (all is) not (in order), the evil angel exclaims "May it be even thus on another Sabbath too," and the good angel unwillingly responds "Amen."<sup>106</sup>

During the seventeenth century, the kabbalistic books of *Tikkunei Shabbat* were the first to state that it was the kabbalistic custom to recite *Shalom Aleikhem* and *Eshet Hayil* before the Sabbath meal.<sup>107</sup>

The Messianic believer who utilizes this tradition must ask himself some hard questions: Does he or she believe that one good angel and one demon accompany him or her home from synagogue on Friday nights? Does he even go to synagogue on Friday nights? Is it biblically proper or even desirable to invoke the presence of archangels, and, for that matter, is such a spiritual authority given to men and women? Is the Messianic believer aware of the kabbalistic connotations of this song? How does this kabbalistic tradition fit into the parameters of biblical angelology? Could it be that, once again, a rabbinic aggadic tradition has caught us unprepared, taking us into areas about which we know nothing?

#### 5. *Lekha Dodi*

This song is a favorite hymn sung at the inception of the Sabbath, wherein the Sabbath is welcomed as a queen. The song is based on a passage in *Baba Kamma*:

105 Arthur Marmorstein, "Angels and Angelology," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 3:968.

106 TB Shabb. 119b.

107 Efraim Gottlieb, "Sabbath," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 14:569.



On a Sabbath evening (before sunset), why is (running) permissible? As shown by R. Hanina: for R. Hanina used to say: "Come, let us go forth to meet the bride, the queen!" R. Jannai, however, while dressed in his Sabbath attire used to remain standing and say: "Come thou, O queen, come thou, O queen!"<sup>108</sup>

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Lurianic customs had become the vehicle which expressed kabbalistic doctrines about the Sabbath. One mystical function which could be fulfilled by the keeping of such customs was the actualizing or symbolizing of the "sacred marriage" between God and His *Shekhinah*. According to Scholem, the Kabbalists thought:

Human action on earth assists or arouses events in the upper worlds, an interplay that has both its symbolic and its magical side. Indeed, in this conception of religious ceremony as a vehicle for the workings of divine forces, a very real danger existed that an essentially mystical perspective might be transformed in practice into an essentially magical one. . . . A special atmosphere of solemn celebration surrounded the Sabbath, which was thoroughly pervaded with kabbalistic ideas about man's role in the unification of the upper worlds. Under the symbolic aspect of "the marriage of King and Queen," the Sabbath was enriched by a wealth of new customs that originated in Safed, such as the singing of the mystical hymn *Lekhah Dodi* and the recital of the Song of Songs and Chapter 31 of Proverbs . . . , all of which were intended as meditations on the *Shekhinah* in her aspect as God's mystical bride.<sup>109</sup>

Messianic believers, if they are to make use of kabbalistic liturgical traditions, must carefully discern and understand the gnostic theological origins of such traditions, and then find some way of both cleansing that liturgy and refocusing it on Yeshua, and not on the feminine aspect of a dualistic and shattered divinity. One would have to ask whether the whole endeavor, as far as kabbalism is concerned, is worth the candle.

In all five of the examples given, it has been noted that various motifs or concepts are expressed in certain rabbinic liturgical traditions, which, at best, are not in line with or, at worst, are downright opposed to biblical and Messianic teaching. Unqualified use of these traditions helps to propagate a theology which is foreign to that of the new covenant, with the result being the unwitting establishment of a rabbinic agenda. When these theological differences are ignored or brushed away, the ability of Messianic believers to engage in critical and biblically-based thinking on the subject of rabbinic literature and tradition is gradually discouraged, slowly eroded, and finally destroyed. If we would make judicious and biblically-filtered use of the above traditions, then it is incumbent upon us to let

108 TB Baba Kamma 32a, b; cf. Shabb. 119a.

109 Scholem, "Kabbalah," 6:641-42.



our fellow Messianic believers understand the theological presuppositions behind many of these traditions, especially when those traditions may not agree with clear scriptural teaching.

Another problem must be considered—that of contextualization and the gospel. When Messianic believers make use of certain rabbinic traditions or customs, having recast and changed their meanings, will this metamorphosis or plastic surgery be obvious to other Messianics or even to non-Messianic Jews? The latter may assume that we are using these forms with the meaning that Orthodox Judaism has given to them, and, as a result, unless we make our recast meaning crystal clear, these non-Messianic Jews may later discover the disparity in meaning and accuse us of deceptive practices. Reform Judaism has been accused of similar things by Orthodox Judaism, as has the Conservative movement. It is fair to ask, in such cases, to what extent this type of contextualization confuses more than it helps. It may even be that the contextualization process described above ends up confusing more Messianic believers than any other single group, since not a few Messianics are simply unaware of the aforementioned tensions.

A similar and related issue is that of target audience: Does our excitement concerning rabbinic traditions arise out of our desire to become “as a Jew to the Jews,” as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 9:20? That is certainly a praiseworthy motive. But perhaps we are becoming as rabbinic/Orthodox Jews (who are approximately 15% of the Jewish people) in order to reach secular Jews (who are the overwhelming majority at approximately 85% of the Jewish people). That is not contextualization—it is a missiological blunder of epic proportions!

A third question must be asked, albeit with humility: Could it be that one motive lying behind Messianic attempts to employ rabbinic literature is a nagging feeling of insecurity vis-à-vis, and a lack of acceptance from, the Jewish community—which feelings it is hoped will be assuaged the more closely one’s practices resemble that of “authentic” (that is to say, rabbinic) Judaism? Could it be that some of us are attempting to prove to the Jewish community that we have not become heretics by believing in Yeshua, and the proof of this is to be seen not as much in biblical reasoning and godly living as in our strikingly visible use of rabbinic liturgy and traditions?

Only God can truly discern the motives of men’s and women’s hearts, dividing between spiritual and carnal motivations. It might not be out of place to ask Yeshua to search our own hearts on this issue, to point out if there might be any wicked way within us, and to lead us afresh on the everlasting way (Ps 139:23, 24).

## Conclusions

Some brief comment may now be offered as to the value of talmudic studies for Messianic believers, and one or two caveats may also be noted. Questions concerning the chronological priority of texts cannot always be dogmatically answered, nor are they always a fruitful topic of discussion. Nevertheless, the gospel documents are one of the earliest sources avail-



able to us from the period in question, and much productive study awaits the one who will make bold and scholarly use of the Gospels, both in historical research and in comparative study with rabbinic literature.

Enough has been written to caution those who would blindly assume that rabbinic Judaism was the womb out of which our Messiah emerged. One must examine all such presuppositions carefully—it could be that long-cherished views have no historical basis and are in need of revision. Not every aspect of the life and times of Yeshua the Messiah is recoverable (if at all) by a quick glance at the Mishnah. The decisive importance of R. Johanan b. Zakkai's reconstruction of Judaism in the post-AD 70 period must also inform our study of rabbinic literature, as well as the effects of the Bar-Kokhba revolt (AD 132–35) upon the messianic hope of rabbinic Judaism. These two periods are significant turning points both for Judaism and for Messianic-rabbinic relationships; their importance as milestones on the changing road of Judaism can all too easily be overlooked, especially with regard to central issues such as that of atonement.

Talmudic studies can contribute to Messianic believers' understanding of how rabbinic Judaism and the Messianic movement of Yeshua developed side by side, of how their own theologies were shaped and hammered out through wary interaction and heated debate. The study of rabbinic literature could further aid the Messianic in understanding modern forms of Judaism, and how aspects of Jewish religious thought have been shaped by events which occurred over the past millennia. Judaism has shaped the Jewish people's thinking for a long time, and anyone attempting to understand the Jews as a people will quickly see that a thorough grounding in rabbinics is both a welcome and important prerequisite.

A final word: our study of rabbinic literature and our creative use of rabbinic traditions must be guided by three concerns: that these activities be glorifying to God and in accordance with His Word; that they should be done in the name of Messiah and consistently point to Yeshua as Lord and Messiah; and that they should be accomplished under the guidance, and by the empowerment, of the Holy Spirit. So help us God.

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# An Assessment of “Replacement Theology”

– *The Relationship between the Israel of the  
Abrahamic-Davidic Covenant and the Christian  
Church*

by **Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.**



Replacement theology is not a new arrival in the theological arena; it probably has its origins in an early political-ecclesiastical alliance forged between Eusebius Pamphilius and the Emperor Constantine.<sup>1</sup> Constantine, regarding himself as God’s representative in his role as emperor, gathered all the bishops together on the day of his tricennalia (thirtieth anniversary of his reign), an event, incidentally, which he saw as the foreshadowing of the eschatological messianic banquet. The results of that meeting, in Eusebius’ mind, made it unnecessary to distinguish any longer between the church and the empire, for they appeared to merge into one fulfilled kingdom of God on earth in the present time.<sup>2</sup> Such a maneuver, of course, nicely evacuated the role and the significance of the Jewish people in any kingdom considerations. Here began the long trail of replacement theology.

Replacement theology, then, declared that the church, Abraham’s spiritual seed, had replaced national Israel in that it had transcended and fulfilled the terms of the covenant given to Israel, which covenant Israel had lost because of disobedience.<sup>3</sup> Tom Wright made the point even more adamantly when he affirmed:

Modern attempts to revive such a geographical nationalism, and to give it a “Christian” coloring, provoke the following, most important, theological reflection: the attempt to “carry over” some Old

1 I am indebted to Daniel Gruber’s seminal research in his volume *The Church and the Jews: The Biblical Relationship* (Springfield, MO: General Council of the Assemblies of God, Intercultural Ministries Department, 1991), 8–10.

2 Eusebius as cited by Gruber (p. 24). Gruber (p. 10) also points to Veselin Kesich, “Empire-Church Relations and the Third Temptation,” *Studia Patristica* 6 (1961): 469–69.

3 Some, such as my good friend Chris Wright, strenuously object to the use of the terms “replacement” or “supersession” as the way to describe the views of this position. In the view of many in this school, if the “promise is now being fulfilled through a multi-national people, the Jew and Gentile in Christ, then the ‘forever’ aspects of nation-state, land, king and priests have likewise been transcended, taken up, and fulfilled” (“A Christian Approach to Old Testament Prophecy Concerning Israel,” in *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purpose of God*, ed. P. W. L. Walker [Cambridge: Tyndale, 1992], 6).

Testament promises about Jerusalem, the Land or the Temple for fulfillment in our own day has the same theological shape as the attempt in pre-Reformation Catholicism to think of Christ as being re-crucified in every Mass.<sup>4</sup>

He continued:

The work of Christ is once again “incomplete.” . . . [This] is not only “Christian Zionism,” . . . it is also, more significantly, “Christian anti-semitism.” If the wrath of God spoken of by Jesus and Paul was truly finished with the awful events of AD 70, then the only appropriate attitude in subsequent generations towards Jews, the Temple, the Land or Jerusalem must be one of sorrow or pity. . . . To that extent, “Christian Zionism” is the geographical equivalent of a soi-disant “Christian” apartheid, and ought to be rejected as such.<sup>5</sup>

There are at least five fatal flaws in the thinking of those supporting the replacement covenant thesis: 1) The “new covenant” was made with the house of Israel and Judah. God never made a formal covenant with the church; 2) The failure of the Jews, like the failure of the church, was calculated in the plan of God (Rom 11:8); 3) The New Testament clearly teaches that God has not cast off disobedient Israel (Rom 11:1, 25–26), for they are the natural branches into which the church has been grafted; 4) The “eternal” aspect of the promise of the land is not to be equated with the “eternal” aspect of the Aaronic priesthood (1 Chr 23:13) or the Rechabite descendants (Jer 35:19); and 5) Paul’s allegory of Galatians 4:21–31 does not teach that national Israel has been replaced by the church; it teaches that the quest for justification by works leads to bondage, whereas justification by faith and grace leads to freedom and salvation. Each of these theses must be examined in as much detail as the space here allows.

## The New Covenant

God never made a covenant with the church as such; the “new covenant,” in which the church now shares, is the one that God originally made “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31b). No one, to my knowledge, has attempted to make a case for equating the house of Israel and Judah with the Christian church! And even those who argue that the equation should be made only with “Israel” are unable to establish that any of the seventy-three appearances of the word “Israel” in the New Testament, or the four appearances of “Israelite(s),” are equated in the text with the church—not even in one text. And even those who make such

4 Tom Wright, “Jerusalem in the New Testament,” in *Jerusalem, Past and Present in the Purpose of God*, ed. P. W. L. Walker (Cambridge: Tyndale, 1992), 73–74.

5 *Ibid.*, 75. The rather strong nature of the language used here does not seem to be the usual style of publications emanating from this source.



a false equation, and who then go about contemporizing the message of the Old Testament, do not make the equation uniformly of all references to "Israel" and "Judah" when interpreting the Old Testament. Only when something good is said about "Israel" is there a tendency to understand it to be speaking of the church. When something bad is said of "Israel" in the Old Testament, usually that is left as a word about national Israel by modern holders of this theory—a most unsporting way to proceed!

No other covenant is mentioned by the New Testament. Thus, the new covenant was not even made with the elect, the faithful, or the believing; it was made with northern and southern Israel, *qua* "Israel." The gospel presented in the new covenant was a continuation of God's dealings with Israel; in fact, it was from the Old Testament that the early church got her message of good news that she proclaimed with such joy in all those years from approximately AD 30 to 50–70, before the New Testament was revealed by God.

### The Failure of Israel

Israel's disobedience and dispersion were not the end of her calling, for God had announced in the New Testament that His "gifts and His call are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). In fact, rather than Israel's disobedience serving as a signal that her usefulness in the divine plan had ceased, the reverse was asserted by the Apostle Paul. As Hendrikus Berkhof states, "She is and remains the link between the Messiah and the nations. She could be this link through her obedience, but even now, in her disobedience, she still fulfills her functions as a link."<sup>6</sup> That is why Paul claimed that "because of [Israel's] transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:11).

Another indication that Israel's rejection of the Messiah and her present disobedience (to speak, for the moment, of the vast majority of her people) were not the final episode in the whole drama of her salvation can be seen in Romans 11:15. Paul argues there that "if [Israel's] rejection means the reconciliation of the world [in that Gentiles would be given an opportunity to come to the Messiah as never before], what will [Israel's] acceptance mean but *life from the dead*?" It is possible that this phrase that we have emphasized in the last quote could be taken spiritually, but Scripture does not appear to treat it in that manner.<sup>7</sup> Instead, it appears to be picking up the very figure used by Ezekiel 37:12, 14, where the Lord said, "O my people. I am going to open up your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. . . . I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you down in your own land." Thus, the dry bones would be brought back together again and the breath of God would be breathed into the bones that had lain scattered all over the valley floor. If some would prefer to treat this passage as a prediction

6 Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ, the Meaning of History*, trans. Lambertus Buurman (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), 144–45.

7 "Life from the dead" is never used in a spiritual sense, argued Berkhof (pp. 144–45).

of an individual's bodily resurrection, the divine interpreter Himself will disallow it, for in Ezekiel 37:11 He declares, "Son of man, these bones are *the whole house of Israel*" (emphasis added). Therefore, it would be only fair to conclude that Paul was referring to the reestablishment of Israel as God's people in the land again when he mentioned that Israel's acceptance of her Messiah in the end times will mean "life from the dead."

In the meantime, however, note the logic here. If so much good has come to the world because of Israel's disobedience, exclaims Paul, can anyone imagine what the world is in for when Israel is once again accepted back into the fold of God? Why, it would be like receiving dead people back to life. And the reverberations of such an event will indeed be earth-shaking! But the plan of God had deliberately calculated the failure of Israel and her people. Romans 11:8 affirmed, using the informing theology of Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10, that "God gave [Israel] a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they should not hear, to this very day." Thus, the spiritual slumber in which Israel currently tosses is divinely induced! God thereby insured, in that sense, that all Israel would not believe so that salvation might come to the Gentiles through those Jews who did not believe. And so it happened that "because of [Israel's] disobedience," divine mercy was shown to the Gentiles—and that condition persists down "to this very day," Paul adds.

Of course there are a large number of Jewish people that do believe; however, the full number of Jewish believers (Rom 11:12) will not come "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom 11:25). Therefore, it was not a matter of Israel's faithfulness or her ability to retain what was started with her—nor has it ever been. That assessment would need to be made of all the peoples of the world, for as the Psalmist said, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (Ps 130:3–4).

### Natural and Wild Olive Branches

Romans 11 is the *crux interpretum* for all who tackle the problem of the relationship between Israel and the church. And the assumption of some<sup>8</sup> that "all Israel shall be saved" really refers to the New Testament church becomes entirely impossible as the chapter proceeds, especially in verses 25 and 26. Perhaps this is why many who assume this position, though not all, find it more convenient to ignore Romans 11 altogether, and instead build their positions on logical extrapolations of their theologies, rather than on explicit exegesis of texts of Scripture at that point.

It is clear from Romans 11:13 that Paul is addressing his remarks in this chapter to Gentiles. It may well have been that Paul sensed that the Genti-

<sup>8</sup> Usually this view is associated with many (but not necessarily all, for the leading exponents of a premillennial theology at the turn of the century were mainly from this tradition) who hold to covenant theology. For example, see such a Reformation commentator as Martin Luther in his *Commentary on Romans*, chapter 11.



le Christians were becoming a bit arrogant toward the unbelieving Jewish community, perhaps thinking that God had indeed closed the book on His dealings with this national people with whom He had had such a long history of relations. But that may be the precise reason why Paul began with the rhetorical question in Romans 11:1, "I say then, Did God reject his people?" Paul thunders his answer: "By no means!" Consider me, he continued, for I too am from the physical seed of Abraham and the tribe of Benjamin—neither of which is meant to be a means of expressing his identity in this setting with the church.

Paul was not attempting to sustain the general argument of God's faithfulness to all believers, that is to say that God had not cast off Abraham's spiritual seed, as Paul had allowed in Galatians 3:29, and so He had thereby proved Himself faithful. If Paul had meant to say that, what was the point of his raising his physical, tribal ancestry in Israel? No, God still loved the nation of Israel, the people whom He "foreknew" (11:2). And just as God had reserved in Elijah's day a "remnant" of seven thousand who had not bowed their knees to Baal, so "at the present time" God also had a "remnant chosen by grace" (11:5) in the nation of Israel. If that remnant in Elijah's day was Jewish, chances were very good that that was what the remnant was meant to be in Paul's argument. It will make no sense to have Paul arguing that God has a Gentile "people" (11:1) of faith out of which He has secured a believing remnant (11:4–5) for Himself. The logic would fall under its own weight—who are these Gentile believing "peoples" out of which God has secured an alternate believing remnant?

Paul goes on to distinguish two groups in Israel: 1) "the elect" (11:7) or "chosen" (11:5); and 2) "the rest" or "the others" (11:7). God's grace had given to the first group of Israelites what the second group of Israelites sought, but had not obtained (11:7): salvation.

Now here is the marvel of the whole affair: when the root of a tree is holy, the branches will also be holy (11:16b). The reference to their roots must be to the promises made to the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Alas, however, "some of the (natural) branches were broken off" (11:17) because of their unbelief. But the temporary loss of these natural branches resulted in an enormous bonanza for the Gentiles (11:12). And lest the Gentile believers become too puffed up in their own conceits, as if what they now have in Christ was the result of their own searching and finding, any more than it was of "the rest" of Israel's searching, Paul warns the Gentile believers not to "boast over those branches," for the Gentile church does not exist for the sake of the Jews, nor was the root of the church's faith in herself, "but the [Jewish] root supports [the Gentile believers]" (11:18). Rather than replacing the former branches, the newly grafted in branches were anchored and provided for in the roots that had been sunk into the earth in the promises given to the Jewish patriarchs!

In fact, rather than lording it over the unbelieving Jewish branches that were cut off because of their unbelief, the Gentile believers were to remember that "God is able to graft them [the natural Jewish branches] in again" (11:23) to the olive tree. It is the Gentile church that is the anomaly

here: it represents the wild olive tree that was grafted into the cultivated olive. (Paul realizes that he has reversed the horticultural analogy for the sake of his illustration. Normally wild stock is used as the base on which to graft cultivated branches; that is not the case here [11:24].) Thus, to all who wish to view the believing church as the newest show in town which some Jewish believers may join if they realize that the church is an innovative Gentile creation, Paul sends a warning salvo over the bow of all such enterprises. Gentiles are not, and never were, the natural branches: Israel was and still is!

What then is the answer to the big question? Does God have a plan for physical, national Israel in the future? Or is such a hope tantamount, as one writer said, to making her a co-redemptrix<sup>9</sup> with Christ, or introducing "Christian Zionism"<sup>10</sup> and "Christian apartheid"<sup>11</sup> into the Bible?

Romans 11:25b–26a answers that question. "Israel has experienced a hardening in part *until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved*" (emphasis added). God is not finished with His people Israel as yet. Therefore, to express that He *is* not only runs right in the face of these verses, but also misconstrues the line of continuity that God has built into the whole soteriological process that involved Jew and Gentile from the very beginning (e.g. Rom 1:16) and casts off a balanced doctrine of ecclesiology. Look, therefore, for Israel to suddenly obtain one of these days what she has sought in vain (as far as most of her people are concerned) for all these long years without finding it. The number of Israelites who will be saved is called "the fullness" (Greek, *plērōma*, v. 12), or, as the same word is translated in verse 25, "full number," exactly paralleling, incidentally, the number of Gentiles who have come to the Savior.

The late Anthony A. Hoekema raised two objections to our argument. First of all, he complained, Romans 11:26 did not say, "And *then* [implying the Greek word *tote* or *epeita*, a temporal usage] all Israel will be saved." Instead, the Greek used (*kai houtō[s]*)—meaning "thus," "so," "in this manner"—describes the *manner* in which it would happen, not the temporal succession of events.<sup>12</sup> In other words, according to Hoekema, Paul was not saying, "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the time when the full number of the Gentiles has been reached, and *then* (after this has happened) all Israel will be saved." Instead, Hoekema urged that Paul was saying that Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and *in this way* all Israel (with Hoekema's new meaning of Israel) will be saved. In other words, the text described not the timing for this event, but the manner in which it would happen, according to Hoekema.

9 So complained John R. Wilch, "The Land and State of Israel in Prophecy and Fulfillment," *Concordia Journal* 8 (1982): 173. See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Must the Christian Include Israel and Her Land in a Contemporary Theology?" in *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 46–58.

10 See footnote 3.

11 See footnote 3.

12 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 144–45.





Hoekema's second objection was that it did injustice to the word "all" in "all Israel will be saved" to limit this enormous ingathering of Jews to the Messiah just to the end times. That generation would only be a fragment of the large number of generations that had passed by in the meantime, so how could one possibly claim that "all Israel" had been redeemed?

Hoekema had been answered, however, thirteen years before he wrote by the Dutch Reformed theologian Hendrikus Berkhof. To the first objection he replied:

We do not read "then" or "after this," but there is no reason to exclude the possibility that this "and so" is a future event. Paul is dealing with the historical order of God's activities, and only just before used the conjunction "until" (25). Yet, "and so" implies more than "until." However, it is less clear what the antecedent of "and so" is.<sup>13</sup>

Berkhof went on to suggest that the antecedent of "and so" probably is "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (the meaning being that since the "full number" had come in, all Israel could now be saved). Or, one could read "and so all Israel will be saved" (meaning, the last would be first, and the first temporarily last).

The point, however, that both Hoekema and Berkhof missed was that Romans 11:27 linked this "and so" with "this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." This was nothing less than a reference to the new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), also called "My covenant," the "eternal covenant," and the "new heart and new spirit" in sixteen other passages.<sup>14</sup> The contents of this new covenant were an expansion of the promises that had been made to Abraham and David and a renewal of the promise that God would send a Seed—the Messiah, be their God, use Israel as His means of blessing all the nations on the earth, and grant them the land as an eternal inheritance. Thus we are brought back to the land promise and to the destiny that God has shaped from the beginning for His people Israel. Indeed, in the very context from which the new covenant comes (Jer 31:31–34), there is a renewed emphasis on the land promise once again (Jer 31:35–40)! This promise about the land and the future of the nation of Israel could be nullified if the sun and moon were to cease shining; however, in the event that both the sun and the moon continued (as I just checked out my window to see if this covenant was still on), then for just that same period of time God would continue to maintain His promises named in that context. Even the late, highly regarded, Reformed theologian John Murray commented, after rightly noticing that Romans 11:26 and 27 were citations from Isaiah 59:20–21 and Jeremiah 31:34:

<sup>13</sup> Berkhof, 145–46.

<sup>14</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Promise and the New Covenant," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15 (1972): 11–23. Also reprinted in *The Bible and Its Literary Milieu*, ed. John R. Maier and Vincent L. Tollers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 106–20.

There should be no question but Paul regards these Old Testament passages as applicable to the restoration of Israel. We cannot dissociate this covenantal assurance from the proposition in support of which the text is adduced or from which follows in verse 28 (on account of the patriarchs). Thus the effect is that the future restoration of Israel is certified by nothing less than the certainty belonging to covenantal institutions.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, even though the “and so” of this passage in Romans 11 may not be temporal in its reference, nevertheless, it is sequential and consequential in that it ties the promises of the patriarchal-Davidic-new covenant with the coming in of the “full number,” or the “full inclusion,” of Israel. Once this is admitted, the unity and the connectedness of the three elements of Messiah, gospel, and land come back into play as part of a fully developed theology.

As for Hoekema’s second complaint about limiting the “full inclusion” to the end times, we can only argue that this is a refusal to see that the past and present remnant of Israel are the foundation and guarantee that God would complete His work in a grand eschatological and climactic act. Repeatedly, the prophets of the Old Testament had depicted an Israelite remnant returning to the land (e.g., Isa 10:20–30) and becoming prominent among the nations (Mic 4:1) in the end days. In fact, Zechariah 10:8–12 is still repeating this same promise in 518 BC, well after the days when many in Israel had returned from their last and final exile, the Babylonian Exile.

Thus, we conclude that God has not cast off disobedient Israel and replaced her with the Christian church for all time and eternity. The natural branches, meaning present day Israel, must not be regarded as dead and gone forever in the program of God, for one day He will re-graft those natural branches into the trunk from which they were once broken off. In the meantime, the wild branches, now the believing Gentiles, must not get on their high horses and get all high and mighty about being the tree into which everyone else must be united. God never made a covenant with the church—believe me! The only covenant was with the house of Judah and the house of Israel. The roots of the tree of faith still remain in the promises given to the patriarchs.

### **The Question of Eternality**

The promise of God regarding Israel and her land was said to be an “everlasting” or “eternal” covenant in its scope. But many scholars, such as Chris Wright, admonish, “The expression ‘for ever’ (*le-olam*) needs to be seen, not so much in terms of ‘everlastingness’ in linear time, but rather as an intensive expression within the terms, conditions and context of the promise concerned.”<sup>16</sup> Wright points out that the Rechabites were promised

15 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:99–100.

16 Chris Wright, 6.



descendants "forever" (Jer 35:19), but if this were a straightforward prediction, where are their descendants today, queries Wright? In like manner, Wright pointed to the house of David and the Levitical priesthood, in which the same form was used about their longevity in Jeremiah 33:17–22.

However, Jeremiah 35:19 does not use the Hebrew word *le-olam* (forever or everlasting); instead, it uses the expression literally translated "a man shall not be cut off from before my presence." The same expression is used of the Levites and David in Jeremiah 33:17. Note, however, when the word *olam* is used of David or the Aaronic line of the Levites, it has reference to the *office*, not the person, of the Davidic king or the priesthood! And if it be doubted what this Hebrew word signifies, let it be remembered that the promise to the descendants of Israel and the provision of the office of the messianic king and messianic priesthood is as lasting as the sun and moon according to Jeremiah 31:35–40 and 33:17–22.

The careful definition of Daniel Gruber merits close examination. He explained:

The claim that the Hebrew for "forever" or "everlasting" really means "to the end of the age" is only partially true. In some cases it does mean that, but that is not all that it means. The English word "always" provides a helpful parallel. It means "every time," but it also means "as long as," and "forever."<sup>17</sup>

There are actually several different Hebrew expressions used to signify "forever." Most of them use the word *olam* by itself or with a prefix or suffix. Examples are *me-olam* (from *olam*), *le-olam* (to *olam*), and *olamim* (the plural of *olam*). Looking at the use of such words in context is very helpful in understanding the meaning they are given in the Bible.

Gruber then proceeds to show how each of these combinations of the word *olam* are used in various contexts. This word is used to express the length of time that God will be God in Genesis 21:33, or that God would be King (Jer 10:10) and His reign would endure (Ps 66:7). Therefore, when God gave the land of Canaan to Israel "for an everlasting possession" (*olam*) in Genesis 17:8 and 48:3–4, there is a strong presumption in favor of seeing that there could be just as abiding a promise in linear terms as was true of God Himself, who is "everlasting" and "eternal" (at least so far as what the term could potentially mean). It did not need to be merely an intensive expression within certain boundaries or limits of expression.

Our point has been to show that the word "forever" is not limited in every instance of its usage, for there are numerous examples of its meaning that transcend such boundaries. When the additional phrases that are used in numerous contexts about the land being given in perpetuity to Israel and the enduring nature of God's promises to Israel as a nation are all added up, the impression of all the contexts is overwhelmingly in favor

17 Gruber, 339–41.

of an oath delivered by God that is as enduring as the shining of the sun and moon (e.g., Jer 33:17–22).

### The Allegory of Galatians 4:21–31

Paul's allegory in Galatians 4:21–31 has often been understood to teach that national Israel has now been replaced by the Christian church. But this is to completely misunderstand what Paul intended and the audience to whom he addressed his remarks.<sup>18</sup>

Paul's audience was primarily a Gentile audience. And the issue at hand was whether Gentiles should submit to physical circumcision in order to be righteous before God. If one misses this key point, the meaning of Paul's allegory will be lost and wrong meanings will be found where they do not exist.

The comparisons are seen in a series of related pairs: two sons, two cities, two mountains, two conditions, two destinies, and two covenants. Some of these comparisons need to be filled in from one's knowledge of the Scriptures, e.g., Abraham had two sons: one is named Isaac, but the other, Ishmael, is not named.

What, then, is Paul trying to say? Is he declaring that the Jews were cast out and that the church is now the heir? To say this would be to confuse the opposites that Paul is using: the opposite of the Jew is not the church, but the Gentile. If one wants to learn what Paul's opposite for the church is, it must be the "unbeliever," not the Jew. For even Paul himself was once a persecutor of those who believed in the Messiah. In that action, he was much like Ishmael,<sup>19</sup> born of the flesh and destined to be cast out. But when he believed, he became like Isaac, destined to be an heir, and part of the persecuted seed of promise. But the same could be said for a Gentile like Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, who at first persecuted Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:17). But when he, too, became a believer, he moved from one side of this allegory to the other side (1 Cor 1:1).

Gruber aptly concludes:

The point is not that one's physical ancestry necessarily leads to bondage, for neither Gentiles nor Jews need to remain in a lost state. It is the quest for justification through the works of the law [by both Jew and Gentile, we might add], rather than through grace and faith, that leads to bondage. Paul was writing to Gentiles in Galatia who were making the wrong choice, which would lead them back into

18 Here again I am indebted to Daniel Gruber and his remarkable work titled *The Church and the Jews*. See his discussion of this allegory on pp. 210–12, which I now follow rather closely.

19 Hans K. La Rondelle actually makes the equation that Paul resists: he declared, "This passage has rightly been called 'the sharpest polemic against Jerusalem and Judaism in the New Testament'" (J. C. DeYoung, *Jerusalem in the New Testament* [Kampen: Kok, 1960], 106). Paul goes on so far as to equate "the Present Jerusalem, the nation of Israel, with the status before God of Ishmael, who was totally disinherited because he persecuted Isaac."

bondage and a disinherited state, and eventually turn them into persecutors.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Replacement theology is just plain bad news for both the church and Israel. It must be stressed repeatedly that no part of the church believed such a doctrine until Constantine introduced it in the fourth century of the Christian era under a false axis, in which the church and the empire were forged into an alternate alliance by the emperor Constantine and the church father Eusebius. The effect was to replace Isaac as the son of promise with Eliezer of Damascus.

But more pertinently, this substitution and supersession of the church for Israel runs directly counter, not only to the repeated expectations of the Old Testament prophets, but also to the painstakingly careful analysis offered by the Apostle Paul in Romans 9–11. Instead of viewing Gentiles as being grafted into the stock, root, and trunk of the Jews, it reverses the imagery and offers a Gentilized gospel to the Jews.

We urge Christ's church to quickly reexamine this most important doctrine, for with it goes the investment of the church in Jewish missions and her expectations of God's future work in the *eschaton*, and more importantly it involves the church's ability to correctly proclaim the doctrine of salvation in its biblical fullness and the doctrine of the church in its relations to Israel and the world. Moreover, it leaves Christ's church helpless before a plethora of Old Testament texts, not to mention before Paul's *magnum opus* of Romans, with its constant reference to Jew and Gentile in the whole soteriological argument, and the definitive emphasis found in Romans 11.

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<sup>20</sup> Gruber, 212.





# Jewish Views of Jesus through the Ages

- *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus and Its Implications for Jewish-Christian Relations*

by **Walter Riggans**

One of the most significant aspects of modern "Jesus research" is the participation and contribution of Jewish scholars in the whole enterprise. The purpose of this paper is to outline the history of this Jewish movement toward a new appreciation of Jesus, to draw out some of the main issues involved in the contemporary debate, and to suggest some of the major challenges to the church in terms of the broader issue of Jewish-Christian relations. The subtitle of this article was inspired by a 1984 book written by Donald Hagner, then a professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary. He attempted to exhibit that Jewish interest in Jesus was in fact being pursued at the expense of His true identity, viz. the Son of God and Savior of the world.<sup>1</sup> We shall attempt to evaluate this claim as part of the present study.

## The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Our particular interest lies with the increased Jewish participation in Jesus research after World War II. Jewish scholars form part of what Tom Wright refers to as a new phase of the quest for the historical Jesus.<sup>2</sup> This search

1 Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of the Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

2 The quest for the historical Jesus has moved in three phases since the publication in 1778 of Hermann Reimarus' *Fragments* (English translation by C. H. Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1970]; cf. Craig A. Evans, "Jesus of Nazareth: Who Do Scholars Say That He Is?" *Crux* 23, no. 4 [1987]: 15–19): (1) the "Old Quest," 1778–1906, which presupposed that the historical figure of Jesus was not supernatural; (2) the "No Quest," 1906–1953, which had the conviction that Jesus' historical figure was lost to history—only the Christ of faith matters; and (3) the "New Quest," from 1953, which combines the search for the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

On the central contributions to the debate, see Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte des Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1906). The English translation by James M. Robinson was titled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: A&C Black, Ltd., 1910). Within the middle period, Evans cites as an exponent of the "No Quest" Rudolf Bultmann's *Jesus* (Berlin: Deutsche Bibliothek Verlagsgesellschaft, 1926); Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner's



was based on a general consensus that Jesus can only be recovered and reclaimed, both as a historical person and as God-with-us, as we recover and reclaim His own historical context—the cultural, political, and religious reality of first-century Jewish society.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the new “realistic quest” is not monolithic with respect to the images of Jesus produced by its scholars, neither is there a common portrayal of Jesus by Jewish scholars. From Christian participants have come images of Jesus including aggressive political revolutionary, social and political anarchist, committed advocate for the poor, eschatological prophet, and magician.<sup>4</sup> Examples of Jewish images of Jesus include political revolutionary, Essene Torah-purist of the Hillelite stream, and Galilean charismatic leader.<sup>5</sup> Christian scholars, on the whole, are convinced that the contribution of Jewish expertise vis-à-vis the Second Temple period is proving to be invaluable.

We can date the real impetus and momentum in contemporary Jewish research on Jesus to the turn of the twentieth century, when the German non-Jewish scholar Julius Wellhausen wrote a statement which changed the face of New Testament scholarship, not simply for specialists, but also for Christian and Jewish religious leaders. In his introduction to the Synoptics, he stated: “*Jesus war kein Christ sondern Jude*” (Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew).<sup>6</sup> These words have driven and haunted Jesus research since then. Never again could the Jewishness of Jesus be ignored or undervalued. Eighty years after Wellhausen, another non-Jewish scholar, James Charlesworth, could write authoritatively that Jesus’ Jewishness was not simply a matter of interesting background to His life, but rather part of

Sons, 1958). Ernst Käsemann’s 1953 paper was titled “Das Problem des historischen Jesus,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 51 (1954): 125–53. Its translation, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” was published in Käsemann’s book *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 15–47. James M. Robinson’s famous review of the whole movement was called *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1959). Further criticism of this “New Quest” is given by the Jewish scholar B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979).

- 3 N. T. Wright, “Constraints and the Jesus of History,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39, no. 2 (1986): 189–210. As examples of this new phase, he cites: Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*; M. J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1984); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1973); John K. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980).
- 4 Representative examples are S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1967); G. R. Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Elbert Hubbard, *Jesus Was an Anarchist* (New York, 1974); Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegeman, *Jesus von Nazareth—Hoffnung der Armen* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1978); Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978); Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Winston-Seabury Press, 1985); Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*; Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
- 5 See, respectively, Hyam Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance* (London: Orbach and Chambers, 1973); Harvey Falk, *Jesus the Pharisee: A New Look at the Jewishness of Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985); Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973).
- 6 Julius Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1905), 113.

the indispensable foreground for coming to terms with Him.<sup>7</sup> A significant contribution to the work done in those eighty years has been offered by Jewish scholars.

There have been some particular landmarks along the way. In 1922, Joseph Klausner wrote the ground-breaking book on Jesus by a Jewish scholar. His Hebrew original was translated into English in 1925 by Herbert Danby, and it took the Jewish world by storm. At one summary point, he wrote:

Jesus is a great teacher of morality and an artist in parable. He is the moralist for whom, in the religious light, morality counts as everything: in his ethical code there is a sublimity, a distinctiveness and an originality in form unparalleled in any other Hebrew ethical code.<sup>8</sup>

Then, in 1930, Martin Buber wrote:

From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. . . . I am more than certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories.<sup>9</sup>

By 1973, Geza Vermes was able to say that

no objective and enlightened student of the gospels can help but be struck by the incomparable superiority of Jesus. . . . Second to none in profundity of insight and grandeur of character. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Finally, one could mention Pinchas Lapide, who declared in 1981 that at the end of the 1970s,

Jesus is no longer the central figure in the discussion between church and synagogue. Thanks to the current surge of interest in Jesus within the State of Israel, the Nazarene, long shrouded in silence, is beginning to be acknowledged among his own people and in his own land.<sup>11</sup>

These kinds of statements would have been unthinkable for Jewish people before the modern period. Even now most Jewish people advise a more cautious appreciation of Jesus, lest the Jewish community develop the wrong attitude to Christianity, viz. that it too is acceptable for Jewish peo-

7 James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archeological Discoveries* (London: SCPK, 1989), 5 and *passim*.

8 Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teaching* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 414.

9 Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith: A Study of the Interpenetration of Judaism and Christianity*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 81.

10 Vermes, 224.

11 Pinchas Lapide and Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul: Rabbi and Apostle*, trans. Lawrence W. Deneff (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 31.





ple. However, Jesus is definitely back on the agenda in Jewish-Christian relations, and this is of paramount significance for the church.

The Jewishness of Jesus is beginning to feature more prominently in contemporary documents published by church authorities, such as diocesan statements, synodal statements, World Council of Churches statements, and the like. One might cite the progress in Roman Catholic documents from the 1965 publication of the Second Vatican Council's influential *Nostra Aetate*, through the 1975 *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate*, to the 1985 *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*. Section 3 of the *Notes* of 1985 is devoted to "Jewish Roots of Christianity," and its opening words are, in their own way, as significant and unexpected as were Wellhausen's some eighty years earlier: "Jesus was, and always remained, a Jew." What role, then, have Jewish scholars played in the eight decades between those two programmatic Gentile Christian statements? And what are the implications for Jewish-Christian relations?

### Pre-Modern Jewish Views of Jesus

There is hardly any actual reference to Jesus in the literature of Talmudic times, the first six centuries of the Common Era. The lack of reference to Jesus and to the birth and growth of the church must be the result of a conscious decision to avoid and prevent discussions of Jesus in the Jewish community. What mention there is of Jesus, or even of those Jewish people who became His followers, is usually ascribed to the period of the Amoraim (ca. 200–500) rather than the Tannaim (first and second centuries). In other words, the Gospels are the only first-century documents which give us accounts of the early Jewish reaction to Jesus. When He is spoken of in rabbinic literature, He is regularly referred to as "that man" or some form of symbolic name, such as *ben Pandera*. Occasionally, we find Him called Yeshu, a term which soon became known as an acronym for the Hebrew curse *yimach shemo uzikhro* (may his name and memory be blotted out).<sup>12</sup>

Two important points need to be made about the presentation of Jesus in these texts: 1) There is no denial that Jesus was a historical person, though there is some confusion about His exact dates; and 2) Jesus is denigrated as a blasphemer and heretic who tried to exploit the divine name in order to aggrandize power to Himself and lead the Jewish people away from their true path of faithfulness to God.

12 Of immediate interest in the Talmudic material are the following passages: Yeb. 4:13, 49b; Sanh. 43a, 106a, 107b; Gitt. 56b, 57a. Basic research work has been done by Gustav Dalman, *Jesus Christ in the Talmud, Midrash, Zohar and the Liturgy of the Synagogue*, ed. and trans. A. W. Streane (1893; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1973); R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (1903; repr. Clifton, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1966); Johann Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth in der Talmudischen Überlieferung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978).

By the ninth century, a whole series of calumnies of Jesus were being crystallized into various recensions of a popular piece, which came to be known as *Toldot Yeshu*. This purports to be an account of the life of Jesus, but it is clearly apologetic and polemic in tone and intention. Jewish scholars today consistently maintain that it has no historical value whatsoever for the life of Jesus, though it remains important for study of the attitudes of Jewish communities toward Jesus and the church, and particularly toward Jewish believers. *Toldot Yeshu* became the prime source of the Jewish community's knowledge of Jesus from the early Middle Ages to the early twentieth century in Eastern Europe. The narrative is made up of stories of Jesus' illegitimacy, blasphemy, immorality, and hubris, presenting Him as a thoroughly reprobate Jewish man, one of whom the Jewish community should be ashamed, and at whose actions and attitudes it should be outraged.<sup>13</sup>

The Middle Ages saw another source of information about Jesus develop as the church began to see religious capital in imposing formal controversies on the Jewish communities of Europe. These disputations were structured like an open dialogue between Christian theologians (often converts from Judaism) and Jewish religious leaders, but in reality, the Jewish participants were placed in a situation in which it was impossible for them to win. The Jewish spokesmen knew that it might be better for their community were they to "lose" the debate, and so there was also a great deal of political retreat on behalf of the Jewish religious leadership. As Hagner summarized: "We encounter here, by way both of reaction and self-protection, at worst a wholly negative, destructive attitude to Jesus, and at best a cold neutrality."<sup>14</sup>

Because of the anti-Semitism of the church—expressed in contemptuous attitudes, social marginalization, theological demonization, and outright persecution and murder—Jewish people came to fear and hate Jesus. Not only was there the push away from Jesus due to the attitudes and behavior of the church, but there was also the constant pulling back by the rabbis, who developed their own theological system for interpreting history and redemption for the Jewish people. As a result of both discourse contexts, the Jewish people did not consider Jesus a subject worthy of discussion.

## Enlightenment and Emancipation

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the gradual opening of the West to Jewish involvement, participation, and even influence. The European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century had its impact on the Jewish communities of Europe and the West. Also, there we find increased questioning of authority and tradition, increasing faith in the supremacy of reason, open enquiry and experiment, a determination to foster tol-

13 An English translation of *Toldot Yeshu* is readily available in H. J. Schonfield's book *According to the Hebrews* (London: Duckworth, 1937).

14 Hagner, 53.



erance and priority of morality over theology, and a commitment to the separation of church and state.

When we speak of the emancipation of the Jews, the reference is to the gradual abolition of those disqualifications and inequities which had been meted out specifically to Jewish people. Citizenship was granted; admission to politics, higher education, and the arts was given. Nothing was ever to be the same again in any sphere of Jewish intellectual, aesthetic, or religious life. In 1925, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise said about the translation into English of Joseph Klausner's *Life of Jesus*:

It marks the first chapter in a new literature. Such a book could never have been written years ago. . . . Thank God the time has come when men are allowed to be frank, sincere and truthful in their beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

The context for the writing of this new chapter was a momentum of political freedom in which Jewish people could develop confidence in speaking publicly about Jesus. This relative freedom within the Christian society of Europe led to an increased willingness to consider Jesus within the Jewish community itself. Above all, the new cultural context allowed the traditional Christian views of Jesus to be challenged.

Until the late eighteenth century, Jews and Christians only encountered each other as adversaries, the whole process being under the domination and control of the theological dogmas which informed and established each community's definition in opposition to the other's. The Enlightenment and the rise of nineteenth-century historicism made it possible for liberal Jews and Christians to side-step dogma, whether about Christ or Torah, and begin to examine one another's faith, ethics, and community life matrix more openly, objectively, and generously.<sup>16</sup>

Liberal Christians began to look at Jesus in a new, non-christological light. Liberal Jews, already working out a life no longer dominated by the Torah as defined by the Orthodox rabbis, began to question whether such a "de-dogmatized Jesus" could be a suitable person for Jewish people to investigate. One must not forget that anti-Semitism was alive and well throughout this entire period. There was no hidden agenda among the liberal Christian scholars who sought to enable a rapprochement with the Jewish people. Judaism was still denigrated as legalistic, in contrast with Jesus' gracious ethics of love. The Jewish spokesmen were well aware of the continuing negative attitude toward them, but they began to gauge the spirit of the times as allowing them at last to counter the claims of Christianity publicly, as well as within their own walls. The most celebrated such exchange of opinions remains the response of Leo Baeck in his 1905 book, *Das Wesen des Judentums* (The Essence of Judaism), to Adolph Harnack's 1900 book, *Das Wesen des Christenthums!* (The Essence of Christianity).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

Jewish and Christian thinkers came increasingly under the influence of Kant's rationalizing of religion, whereby it was held that if ideals were to be considered valid, they had to be of universal significance. Jesus was, therefore, increasingly presented as a paradigm of the universal ethical ideals of civilized, rational humanity, these being simultaneously presented by Jewish thinkers as the heart of Judaism. These liberal scholars were determined to be emancipated from the prisons of their respective orthodoxies, and both groups, as part of their own agendas, wanted to emancipate Jesus from the dogma of the church's Christology. Buber, in his 1930 book, showed a certain desire to see this development accelerate. As Novak perceptively states: "Buber wants to release Jesus from the confines of both Christian and Jewish dogma. The former makes too much of him, and the latter too little."<sup>17</sup>

Charlesworth stresses this very point in his work on modern Jesus research. In his opinion, it only became possible to search realistically for the historical Jesus once Jesus had been freed from the traditional christological dogma of the church, which prevented even an attitude of open inquiry into these matters, let alone the development of alternative reconstructions of Jesus. He argues in *Jesus within Judaism* that having come through the turmoil of the years of so-called critical scholarship of the Bible, we are now in the position of proclaiming, Jew and Christian together, that all theological truth about Jesus *must* be based squarely upon what he calls "free historical inquiry."<sup>18</sup> In his other major work in this area, he comments that the new situation has helped both Jewish and Christian communities in coming to a more mature appreciation of the Jewishness of Jesus. Jewish people are learning that they need to escape the caricature of Jesus as a confused, deluded, probably illegitimate person, and Christians are realizing the error of seeing Jesus as either not really Jewish at all, or else as unique—having nothing in common with other Jews, then or now.<sup>19</sup>

This movement toward a new appreciation of Jesus in the Jewish community has only involved those Jewish people who are true children of the Enlightenment and the Emancipation. The traditional, Orthodox communities, as a rule, have continued to resist this change. To this day they generally continue to operate on the level of avoiding all conversation about "that man" of the Talmud. Largely, this reflects a reaction against what they see as the widespread assimilation of the Jewish people in the modern period and is thus much more a negative response to the Enlightenment, with its drive for the supremacy of free inquiry and reason, than specifically a reaction against the purported Jewishness of Jesus. Relatively few Orthodox Jews are involved in the Jewish reclamation of Jesus, and those who are do not really represent mainstream orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup>

17 Ibid., 84.

18 Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, 198.

19 James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 46.

20 In 1966, eminent Orthodox Jewish philosopher Eliezer Berkovits wrote an influential arti-



These Reform Jews were essentially setting out to challenge the Jewish community's traditional self-understanding and its role in the modern world. Their investigation of Jesus must be seen as part of this particular quest for self-identity. Post-Enlightenment Jewish thinkers wanted Judaism with less dogma, ritual, and superstition, and a life-style liberated from the domination of halakah. Jesus was, therefore, viewed primarily as an important representative of the universal ethic of the undogmatic Judaism. In a 1901 book written by the Reform rabbi Joseph Krauskopf, the following words are to be found—words which capture the motivating agenda of the Jewish reclamation of Jesus: "When the Jew shall have completely cast away his obstructive exclusiveness and ceremonialism, and the Christian his Christology, Jew and Gentile will be one."<sup>21</sup>

It has never been part of the Jewish agenda to have their faith in any way "fulfilled" by their participation in the quest for the historical Jesus. As Samuel Sandmel, one of the most influential Jewish students of New Testament studies, has put it:

I neither feel nor understand that my Judaism is in any way incomplete. . . . I do not discern any religious incompleteness which the figure of Jesus would fill in, just as I see no incompleteness which a Mohammed or a Confucius would fill in.<sup>22</sup>

Much of the early Jewish optimism and enthusiasm faded during the pogroms in Russia in the 1880s, and then also during the Hitler years in Europe. Nonetheless, the overall momentum has never been lost. Indeed, since the Holocaust, many Jewish people see a special need to find the real Jesus of history, and thus expose the awful sham and shame of the church's Christ. Be that as it may, Christian biblical scholarship has been enormously enriched by the participation of Jewish scholars of the Second Temple period and of the various Judaisms of that period; and to this subject we now turn our attention.

## Major Issues in Modern Jewish Scholarship

There are five significant issues which will be dealt with here. We will discuss the main issues involved and review the implications for Jewish-Christian dialogue that arise from them.

cle called "Judaism in the Post-Christian Era" (*Judaism* 15 [1966]: 76–84), in which he listed five clusters of reasons why Jewish people should not become involved in dialogue with Christians. These reasons came under the headings emotional, philosophical, theological, practical, and ethical.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Novak, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 111. See also pp. 44, 46f.

*The Real Jesus Can Be Recovered*

For most Jewish people, it is experienced as an actual discovery that this real Jesus is not only Jewish, but also a Jewish man of His own time and place. From the beginning there was a definite tendency to see Jesus as in need of rescue from the Christian theological constructions of Him. Already in 1888, an American Reform rabbi, Isaac Mayer Wise, was dismissing Christian biographies of Jesus in no uncertain terms: "All so-called lives of Christ, or biographies of Jesus, are works of fiction, erected by imagination on the shifting foundation of meager and unreliable records."<sup>23</sup>

David Flusser, in his 1969 book *Jesus*, and Geza Vermes, in his 1973 book *Jesus the Jew*, try to minimize the importance of the fact that they are Jewish. They stress that the Jewish Jesus is in fact the only Jesus there is, the only Jesus that historical research can recover for us. For them, the faith or heritage of the historian is actually irrelevant. Vermes went so far as to give to his book the sub-title *A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. He wrote in the opening pages of that work that his intention was "to discover the authentic, original, historical meaning of the words and events reported in the Gospels."<sup>24</sup>

Clemens Thoma, a Catholic scholar who specializes in the issues of Jewish-Christian relations, accepts this view that Christian piety has blurred the historical Jesus from our sight, welcoming Jewish clarification of the situation. It is to the Jewish people that we must turn for proper knowledge of the Israel of Jesus' day and, therefore, of Jesus Himself:

Christians have torn Jesus from the soil of Israel. They have de-Judaized, uprooted, alienated, Hellenized, and Europeanized him. The consequences of these manipulations and whitewashings are hopeless confusion about the person of Jesus, the nature and tasks of Christianity, and the meaning of Judaism in religious history.<sup>25</sup>

The particular advantages accorded to Jewish scholarship are, on the one hand, non-contact with the Christian traditions of christological faith, and on the other hand, familiarity with the prime sources of Jewish history and religious thought from the early centuries of the Common Era. The first matter is rather complex, since Jewish scholars will nonetheless be coming from a position of contact with Jewish traditions of *a priori* reductionism vis-à-vis Jesus.

As to the second point, we are now far more aware of the methodological problems involved in trying to use critically the Jewish sources which are regarded as throwing light on Jesus the Jew. The dating and establishing of provenance for the various sayings and traditions in the literature (whether rabbinic, from Josephus, or from the pseudepigraphical mate-

23 Isaac Mayer Wise, *The Martyrdom of Jesus of Nazareth: A Historical-Critical Treatise on the Last Chapters of the Gospel* (New York: The American Israelite, 1888), 132.

24 Vermes, 16. He closes the book by summing it up as a "first step in what seems to be the direction of the real man" (224).

25 Clemens Thoma, *A Christian Theology of Judaism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 107.



rials) are notoriously complicated. The severe rejection by the Orthodox communities of any attempts to apply modern critical methods to the rabbinic sources has made progress in this discipline slow and difficult for Jewish scholars. One simply cannot, as many Jewish writers still presume, use sources from the third century onward to establish the beliefs and practices of the first century.

The Talmuds and Midrashim are every bit as much confessional documents as are the Gospels. Daniel Harrington puts it this way:

There is greater appreciation of the creativity and coherent vision of the rabbis as they worked out their vision of Jewish life in the second and third centuries, and more than a little doubt whether it is proper to look upon them as the lineal continuation of the Pharisaic movement.<sup>26</sup>

Just as gospel specialists insist on the need to sift through the material in order to retrieve the authentic Jesus from the various presentations of Him, so the specialists in later Jewish literature are learning the tools for sifting through that material. We are still at the early stages of this research and must beware of the positivist presupposition of those who believe that the real Jesus can be recovered from rabbinic literature rather than from the Gospels.

#### *The Historical Value of the Gospels*

We are now dealing with Jewish scholars who regard the Gospels as valuable first century works, which faithfully reflect the actual beliefs, customs, and practices of the different Jewish communities of first century Palestine, and which probably reflect much of the actual historical context of Jesus' life (notably, not the accounts of the trial of Jesus). It is striking how often Jewish scholars take liberal Christians to task for not crediting enough historical credibility to the Gospels, at least to the Synoptics. In 1977, Trude Weiss-Rosmarin was able to state that, as a rule, Jewish students of Jesus gave more credence to the Gospels than their Christian counterparts:

. . . Jewish students of nascent and early Christianity tend to be more "Gospel true" than modern and contemporary Christian New Testament scholars, who are in agreement that the "historical Jesus" is beyond recovery. . . .<sup>27</sup>

Vermes took the same line in his 1973 book in which he quoted Bultmann's famous words: "We can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus." In response to this, Vermes said: "My guarded opti-

26 Daniel J. Harrington, "The Jewishness of Jesus: Facing Some Problems," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987): 7.

27 Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, ed., *Jewish Expressions on Jesus: An Anthology* (New York: Ktav, 1943), ix.

mism concerning a possible recovery of the genuine features of Jesus is in sharp contrast with Rudolf Bultmann's historical agnosticism."<sup>28</sup>

Vermes states that so long as one is aware of one's theological interest, and allows for it, then one can do responsible history as well as responsible theology.<sup>29</sup> Flusser, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, opened his book *Jesus* with the words: "The main purpose of this book is to show that it is possible to write the story of Jesus' life."<sup>30</sup>

E. P. Sanders acknowledges the contribution of Jewish New Testament scholarship as well as that of various Christian scholars (not uninfluenced themselves by Jewish work on Jesus) when he says in his 1985 book:

The dominant view today seems to be that we can know pretty well what Jesus was out to accomplish, that we can know a lot about what he said, and that those two things make sense within the world of first-century Judaism.<sup>31</sup>

Sandmel is quite atypical of Jewish scholars in this regard, perhaps because he is so influenced by liberal Protestant gospel research. In the years when so much solid work was being done by others, he wrote, "We can know what the Gospels say, but we cannot know Jesus," maintaining that the Gospels obscure the story of Jesus' life rather than clarify it.<sup>32</sup>

Christians have much to be grateful for in this overall Jewish conviction that the synoptic Gospels deserve a high "historicity quotient." The fourth Gospel is more problematic, but even here there has been a reclamation of its essentially Jewish provenance and pedigree. The way is opening up for all non-Jewish students to reap the rewards of this increased attention to Jewish texts, as well as to the traditional worlds of the Greek poets and the Roman legislators.

### *Jesus Should Be Rooted in the Judaism of His Day*

Leo Baeck, the great German statesman of Reform Judaism, opened this century with an influential remark:

Most portrayers of the life of Jesus neglect to point out that Jesus is in every characteristic a genuinely Jewish character, that a man like him could have grown only in the soil of Judaism, only there and nowhere else.<sup>33</sup>

28 Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 235, n. 1.

29 Geza Vermes, *The Gospel of Jesus the Jew* (Newcastle: University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1981), 4.

30 David Flusser, *Jesus* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 7.

31 Sanders, 2.

32 Sandmel, 124.

33 As quoted by Shalom Ben-Chorin in "The Image of Jesus in Modern Judaism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 408.





In 1913, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise wrote with considerable rhetorical power that Jesus should never have been removed from His only rightful context: "Jesus should not so much be appreciated by us as assigned to the place in Jewish life and Jewish history which is rightfully his own."<sup>34</sup>

Sadly, there has been no shortage of Christian reductionism which has tried to deny the significance of the context of Jesus' life and faith within first-century Judaism. Jewish scholars are certainly forcing this issue back onto the agenda, insisting that Jesus cannot be alienated from the Hebrew Bible or the Judaism of His day. If one attempts to de-Judaize Jesus by making Him an "everyman" in His relationship to the Divine Being, rather than a Jewish worshipper of Israel's God, then one commits theological suicide, losing not only the *Jesus of history* but also the theologically unique *Christ of faith*. A non-Jewish Messiah is a contradiction in terms!

There is certainly another danger involved in deciding *a priori* that Jesus could in no way have transcended the norms of His day. Hagner draws attention to what he calls the hidden agenda of Jewish scholarship at this point:

In demonstrating the Jewishness of Jesus, Jewish scholars thus have an unavoidable interest in vindicating the Judaism of His day. While the methods may vary, the interest is a common one. For these scholars it is impossible that Jesus the Jew could truly have spoken against the Judaism in whose name he is being reclaimed in their writings.<sup>35</sup>

Hagner has been accused of cynicism by some and of paranoia by others, but the general point he makes is valid. We must beware of artificially restricting Jesus to being merely one among many. But on the other hand, we have the equally artificial construct of the so-called criterion of dissimilarity, restricting authenticity to those sayings of Jesus which are judged to be dissimilar to Judaism (and Christianity). Ernst Käsemann, for instance, concluded: "Only in a few instances are we standing on more or less firm ground; that is, where the tradition, for whatever reason, can be neither inferred from Judaism nor attributed to earliest Christianity."<sup>36</sup>

Both groups of scholars claim to be able to find the real Jesus by means of exploiting our increasing knowledge about the Judaism(s) of His day—Jewish scholarship tending to collapse Him into that Judaism, and critical Christian scholarship tending to disassociate the real Jesus from that Judaism. Jewish scholars rightly highlight the unacceptability of the presupposition that Jesus' religious self-definition is to be determined primarily, if not solely, by what are perceived to be the *differences* between Him and Judaism.

Another quite basic problem in this area of research is the overall methodological problem of determining the nature of Palestinian Judaism in Jesus' day. We are now more aware than at any time since the beginnings

34 Stephen S. Wise, in the June 7th edition of the magazine *The Outlook*.

35 Hagner, 39.

36 Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1965), 206f.

of the quest for the historical Jesus of the complexity and creativity of Jewish religious life in Jesus' day. Perhaps more caution is needed, then, in trying to assess the confidence with which some Jewish scholars tell us the kind of Jew Jesus was.

*Reduction of Jesus to Being Simply a Great Jewish Figure of His Time*

Zwi Werblowski, one of the leading proponents of Jewish-Christian dialogue in Israel and a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said in 1978 that "the activity of Jesus himself and of his disciples is regarded today by most Jewish researchers as being a part, not of the history of Christianity, but that of Judaism."<sup>37</sup>

This is a significant statement. Equally important is the confident assertion of Pinchas Lapidé:

. . . since Jesus of Nazareth during his entire life on earth was a pious Jew, and not a Christian—much less a Paulinist—we Jews ought to be allowed to determine for ourselves what this rabbi of Galilee means for us.<sup>38</sup>

The momentum lying behind confidence such as this can be traced back to the pioneering work of Klausner, who was bold enough already in the early 1920s to state that Jesus was "wholly explainable" by the Judaism of His day.<sup>39</sup> This has gained such currency within the Jewish communities of the West that it is taught almost as commonplace in school textbooks. Here are two typical examples from North American materials: "Jesus was a Jew and taught the best and noblest that was in the Jewish tradition"; and, "Throughout, we observe that, though somewhat of a mystic, Jesus was nonetheless a loyal Jew."<sup>40</sup>

As far as the Jewish community at large is concerned, the most influential Jewish scholar after Klausner has been Martin Buber. He presented Jesus as his "brother" and as a uniquely important Jewish figure. *Vis-à-vis* traditional Judaism, Buber elevated Jesus to the level of great brother; *vis-à-vis* traditional Christianity, he reduced Jesus to the level of the Jewish people's great brother. Buber saw messianic import in the teaching and lifestyle of Jesus, but he did not regard Jesus as Israel's Messiah. He was a paradigm of Buber's "I-Thou" relationship with God, but fell far short of being the supernatural Son of God of Christian theology.

The issue, then, is whether or not there is, in fact, a Jewish hidden agenda, setting out to strip Jesus of what is seen by Christians as His full and universal significance. A number of comments seem to represent such a Jewish apologetic position. Consider the following two examples:

37 "Jesus devant la Pensée Juive Contemporaine," *Les Grand Religions* 36 (1978): 36.

38 Lapidé and Stuhlmacher, 50.

39 Klausner, 363.

40 William B. Silverman, *Judaism and Christianity: What We Believe* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 1968), 93; Milton G. Miller, *Our Religion and Our Neighbors*, rev. ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1971), 59.



There is a profound difference between a prophet and a teacher. A prophet is an innovative genius who discovers or expresses a spiritual truth above and beyond any that existed previously. A teacher transmits such truth to others. It has already been agreed that Jesus was a great teacher. In our judgement he was not a prophet. Insofar as his teachings were authentically Jewish, they were enunciated eight centuries earlier by Hosea, six hundred years before by Isaiah. His teaching, where good, was not original, and where original, was not Jewish or good.<sup>41</sup>

Most clearly, the theological impasse occurs at the consideration of the resurrection of Jesus. For Jewish scholars (with one notable exception), this is simply not acceptable as part of the authentic life of Jesus the Jew. In Klausner's programmatic work, he comes to the end of his chapter on the death of Jesus with the famous words: "Here ends the life of Jesus, and here begins the history of Christianity."<sup>42</sup> David Flusser closed his book on Jesus with the very words: "And Jesus died."<sup>43</sup> Shalom Ben-Chorin states unequivocally that in his opinion, the Jewish image of Jesus quite naturally comes to a close with the death of Jesus on the cross: "The Jewish Jesus-image thus recognizes neither Christmas with the crib and the star of Bethlehem nor Easter with the open grave and the resurrection."<sup>44</sup>

The exception to this Jewish consensus is Lapidé, already referred to several times in this paper. He asserts that it is quite possible for an Orthodox Jew to accept in principle that God raised Jesus from the dead, since Judaism affirms God as the One who can, in fact, raise the dead back to life. However, this would not, of itself, constitute proof of Jesus' messiahship, let alone His divinity, since the Bible itself relates other accounts of mortal men being brought back to life by the power of God. But Lapidé's view has not won general acclaim within the Jewish community.<sup>45</sup>

This issue remains: Can the Jewish reclamation of Jesus be shared only by Christians who are willing to compromise His divinity, disallowing Jesus to transcend the context, normal boundaries, and constraints of history?

41 Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn, "Jews for Jesus: Are They Real?" in *Smashing the Idols: A Jewish Inquiry into the Cult Phenomenon*, ed. Gary D. Eisenberg (London: Jason Aronson, 1988), 167; C. G. Montefiore, "Jewish Conceptions of Christianity," *The Hibbert Journal* 28 (1929-30): 249. See also Gerald Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Ktav, 1969), 226-38, esp. 237f.; Klausner, 127; David Flusser, "Jesus," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 10:10; Rabbi Randall M. Falk in the recently published *Jews and Christians: A Troubled Family* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 103.

42 Klausner, 355. Klausner deals with the New Testament account of the resurrection in only four pages.

43 Flusser, *Jesus*, 132.

44 Shalom Ben-Chorin, 427.

45 For Lapidé's views, see Hans Kung and Pinchas Lapidé, "Is Jesus a Bond or Barrier?: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 14 (1977); Pinchas Lapidé, *Auferstehung: Ein Jüdisches Glaubensverlebnis*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer Verl., 1978). See also Falk, 111f.

### *Are History and Theology Being Hijacked?*

Not only is this the conviction of Christians like Hagner, arguing from a distinctly evangelical basis, but it is also the opinion of the Jewish scholar of the origins of rabbinic Judaism, Jacob Neusner. Throughout his career he has maintained that Judaism and Christianity always were, and still are, different religions: "The two faiths stand for different people talking about different things to different people."<sup>46</sup>

Neusner criticizes the misguided attempt to blur the differences between Judaism and Christianity, an attempt which implicates both faith communities. He sees the reason for this undisciplined interpretation as a desire to reconcile the two faith communities of today: If Jews and Christians could only come to accept each other as different incarnations of the one faith, inviting the other to continue in its own distinct path, then there would at last be peace between them. Therefore, he says,

Our century has witnessed a fundamental theological error which has, as a matter of fact, also yielded an erroneous hermeneutics. . . . The theological error was the representation of Christianity as a kind of Judaism, the appeal to Judaism for validation and judgement of Christianity—these familiar traits of contemporary biblical and theological studies obscure that simple fact.<sup>47</sup>

Neusner is especially contemptuous of the idea that Christianity is best seen as the daughter religion of Judaism.

Christianity came into being as a surprising, unexpected and entirely autonomous religious system and structure, not as a child, whether legitimate or otherwise, of Judaism.<sup>48</sup>

He is, therefore, a severe critic of Jewish scholars like Vermes and Hyam Maccoby, who present Jesus in complete continuity with His Jewish context.

The characterization of Jesus as a Galilean wonder worker like Honi the Circle Drawer, for example, is a total fabrication, a deliberate misreading of the gospels, and a distortion of the very character of the rabbinic evidence adduced on behalf of that proposition.<sup>49</sup>

This is a major theological and moral issue which we must take seriously. What is the relationship between Christianity and Judaism? Christian tradi-

<sup>46</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Jews and Christians: The Myth of a Common Tradition* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press Limited, 1991), 1 and *passim*. For a refutation of Neusner's basic postulate, see Oskar Skarsaune, "Salvation in Judaism and Christianity," *Mishkan*, no. 16 (1992): 1–9.

<sup>47</sup> Neusner, 18, 94.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 120. For other contemporary rejections of this simplistic model, see Charlesworth, *Jews and Christians*, 36–43; A. F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 1f., 179ff.; Norman Solomon, *Division and Reconciliation* (London: Council for Christian-Jewish Understanding, 1980), 2f.

<sup>49</sup> Neusner, 120.



tion cannot accept that the two are completely autonomous, just as the church maintains that the two testaments belong together. On the other hand, the traditional Christian theology of replacement, or supersession, is no longer acceptable. Jesus was, in one sense, a product of His time and place. Therefore, the search for a more thorough understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus, a search in which Jewish scholarship is proving to be of increasing importance, should be encouraged.

## Implications

Let us then review the main issues and their implications for the urgent matter of Jewish-Christian relations today and tomorrow.

### *Regaining Jesus' Continuity with His Jewish Matrix*

The church has tended to (over) stress both Jesus' discontinuity with His Jewish matrix and His universal humanity at the expense of His Jewishness. And yet, if Jesus has nothing to say directly to Jewish people, then how can He have anything to say directly to anyone else? It easily degenerates into the creation of more than one Jesus, each in a different culture's or scholar's image. Jewish research into the historical Jesus is helping us to redress the balance with proper regard for Jesus' continuity with, and particular identity with, His own and His community's Jewishness.

It is to be hoped that evangelical Christian scholars will be at the heart of this new synthesis. How many of us, therefore, and how many of our students, are involved in disciplined study of the Jewish sources, or in substantial dialogue with Jewish scholars, or are even *au fait* with the Jewish works being published today on Jesus research? One implication of all this is that we *must* be involved in the debate with Jewish scholars.

### *Evaluating the Historicity of the Gospels*

The church has cause to be grateful to Jewish scholarship for introducing a new confidence in the historical reliability of the overall presentation of early Jewish life given in the (Synoptic) Gospels. What one might call creedal conflict is obvious when it comes to the accounts of the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus, and considerable mistrust is evident as regards the trial narratives—these three issues being predictably the most sensitive. There is also a different interpretation given to the issue of Jesus' attitude toward the Torah—both Oral and Written—than that commonly found among Christian exegetes, but this tends to be disagreement of a useful nature. The point to be stressed at this juncture is that the historicity of the bulk of the Gospel material is being defended on a non-Christian basis by Jewish scholars.

Jewish scholars claim that Christians are being introduced to the life and times of Jesus through the use of Jewish religious and historical sources, and through Jewish familiarity with those sources. The methodological problems associated with this approach can be briefly summarized: The sources come from communities writing generations after the time of Je-

sus' life, and, therefore, writing for their own purposes, purposes which by definition sometimes run counter to those of the "Jesus Movement." This methodological debate must, therefore, be enjoined between Jewish and Christian scholars.

### *Recovering the Real Jesus*

It has been refreshing to find Jewish scholars expressing confidence that Jesus of Nazareth can be sufficiently recovered from the Gospel accounts, that it is possible for us today to encounter Him. New life has come into the debate, and we are indebted to the Jewish contribution. Is this to be desired unreservedly, or do we, like Hagner, detect hidden pitfalls?

One cannot separate the knower from the known, or in this case, the seeker from what is sought. Jewish people are looking for a different Jesus, a Jesus who will vindicate the Judaism of first-century Israel. The possibility of Jesus being a divine figure as well as a human personality is denied *a priori* by Jewish scholarship, whereas traditional Christianity refuses to depart from this fundamental tenet of faith.

Here lies an important issue for us: Can one suspend judgment on the divinity of Jesus, or at the very least relegate that conviction to the sidelines for a time, until work is done on His life as a Jewish human being in the Land of Israel? Or does His divinity influence the kind of Jewish person He was? Did the society in which He grew up, and particularly the synagogue in which He learned the Scriptures and traditions, actually contribute to His development as a person, in relationship to His Father as well as to others? If the answer to these questions is yes, then we have much to learn about Him from the new realistic quest.

This brings us back to the issue at stake here: If one is able to distinguish clearly between the aspects of Jesus research in which Jewish scholars can help, and those subsequent aspects in which they cannot, then does it follow that Christians will simply have to accept that Jesus will remain only an important Jewish teacher for the Jewish community? Can Jesus be, at one and the same time, the Christ of the church and a rabbi of the Jewish people? Are evangelicals compromising their faith by being involved in such interfaith projects?

### *Separating Jesus from His Disciples*

This is another major issue facing the church in its Jesus research. Evangelicals have a particular concern to preserve a relationship of continuity between Jesus and the nascent and emerging church. However, it has become a bit commonplace to find Jewish scholars driving a wedge between Jesus and Paul. They wish to differentiate clearly between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, an attitude and approach not unfamiliar to those who are *au fait* with recent New Testament scholarship. Hagner sums up this aspect of Jewish scholarship in the following way:

This Christ—indeed Christianity itself—is regarded as largely the creation of the apostle Paul, who by importing Hellenistic ideas, subverted the message of Jesus, and so brought a new religion into existence.<sup>50</sup>

This kind of wedge can be seen consistently in the relevant works by Jewish scholars, for example Klausner, Buber, Sandmel, and Vermes.<sup>51</sup> Indeed the very title of one of Hyam Maccoby's books tells the story well: *The Myth-maker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*.<sup>52</sup> Is Jesus to be reclaimed at the expense of Paul? Few issues can have more serious implications for Jewish-Christian relations.

#### *Appreciation of the Jewish Agenda*

Jewish people pursue their own agenda. The status and role of Jesus are issues for them in their own context of concerns and perspectives. Judaism's engagement with Jesus is in fact part of the movement toward its own self-confident taking of a rightful place in the modern world as a major world religion in its own right. Rabbi Alan Mittleman has put it this way:

The "homecoming of Jesus," therefore, is an aspect of the modern Jew's act of historically oriented self-discovery, or of self-recovery. It is an aspect of the modern Jew's search for essence and definition.<sup>53</sup>

To this way of thinking, Christianity has been guilty of deifying and institutionalizing a loyal son of Judaism and, consequently, condemning Judaism as it has developed without Jesus to, at best, the status of a failed, unfulfilled, and barren religion, and, at worst, a sentence of death and destruction. And so Christians must accept that Jewish people are working with an agenda quite different from their own.

Is the church secure enough and humble enough to acknowledge the help it needs from Jewish scholarship and, what is more, to accept it on the Jewish community's terms? Hagner comments:

Jewish scholars are in a particularly advantageous situation to understand the teaching of Jesus. Familiar with the Old Testament, the development of early Judaism, the Jewish background of the Gospels, and often learned in the difficult world of rabbinic literature, they are often able not only to place Jesus in historical context, but also to enter the mental world of Jesus, and to capture every Jewish nuance in his words. For this, Christian scholars, though sensing an incom-

50 Hagner, 26.

51 Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, trans. W. F. Stinespring (New York: Macmillan Co., 1943), 580f.; Buber, 55; Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), 161; Vermes, *The Gospel of Jesus the Jew*, 45.

52 Hyam Maccoby, *The Myth-Maker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1986).

53 Quoted in Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), 111.



pletteness in the Jewish approach, continue to be grateful.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps the issue is most controversially presented by the Roman Catholic theologian Clemens Thoma, who argues that, in fact, Christians positively need to hear Jewish theological critiques of the church's Christology. In 1980, he wrote:

Christian theologians would be well advised . . . to consider Jewish exceptions to their theological and Christological statements. Taken altogether, Jewish ideas are not mere negations, opposition for opposition's sake, but warnings of potential perversions of faith in the God of Israel.<sup>55</sup>

Can the church accept such a perspective on contemporary Jewish-Christian relations?

*Identification with Jewish Believers in Jesus*

As far as I am concerned, the most tragic aspect of modern Jewish-Christian relations is the marginalization of those Jewish people who are our brothers and sisters in the faith. Through the centuries, the synagogue has told Jewish believers they are no longer Jewish, having betrayed the Jewish people to join the Gentiles and their religion. This was all based on the presumption that Jewish people could not come to faith in Jesus from conviction alone, reflecting also the Jewish community's terrible treatment at the hands of Christians. For its part, the church has also demanded that Jews reject their Jewishness if and when they become baptized members of the church. Its agenda has been dominated by varieties of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

However, can Christians today do other than affirm Jewish faith in the Jesus of history, the faith that He is indeed Israel's Messiah and the Savior of the world? The Jewish scholarship which we are examining here denies the possibility, viability, and integrity of such faith. Will the church compromise its commitment to these brothers and sisters to save the dialogue?

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54 Hagner, 27.

55 Thoma, 131.





# Post-Holocaust / Shoah Theology

by **Henri Blocher**

*Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm (Job 38:1).<sup>1</sup>*

Theology should be nothing else than *fides quaerens intellectum*. Post-Holocaust theology should be the attempt, from the standpoint of Christian faith, to *think* about the massive extermination of Jews perpetrated by the Nazis in Europe, essentially in the years 1941–45, and its significance and consequences. Though the horror of the crime tends to stupefy our minds and suspicions of Christian responsibilities make us frightfully vulnerable to self-protective temptations, we may not evade the call to take “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5, NASB). We do heed Elie Wiesel’s warning: “There can be no theology after Auschwitz, and no theology whatsoever about Auschwitz. . . . One can never understand the event with God; one cannot understand the event without God. Theology? The logos of God? Who am I to explain God?”<sup>2</sup> We surely have no intention of “explaining God,” and our goal is not to “understand” the event; but, *with* our merciful God, under the teaching of His *Logos* and the guiding assistance of His Spirit, we do pray that we shall think in a more wholesome way of the event—rather than darkening His counsel “by words without knowledge.”

“Holocaust” is the common designation in English. Prestigious voices, such as Wiesel’s,<sup>3</sup> again, have deplored this lexical choice, with the comment that a “holocaust” is a *sacrifice* offered to God—the opposite of the brutal murder of millions of helpless human beings. We may note, however, that “holocaust” may be used of sacrifices to *false* gods (2 Kgs

1 All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

2 Wiesel’s part in Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig, *Hope against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 93.

3 Especially in his essay “Job ou Dieu dans la tempête” [Job or God in the Storm], according to Jean-Claude Favez, “Elie Wiesel et la Shoah,” in *Présence d’Elie Wiesel*, ed. David Banon (Geneva: Labor & Fides, 1990), 70. Wiesel contributed to the spread of the word but later regretted it.

16:13), and the idols of Nazi racism bear a family resemblance to Molech or Chemosh, who also demanded burning children as their daily fare. Two Hebrew words have been introduced as rival designations: חרבן (*churban*) and שואה (*shoah*). Most often one finds *shoah*, and I will use this familiar form.<sup>4</sup> The former term, meaning “ruin, devastation,” occurred for the destruction of the first and second temples in Jewish literature and is not very frequent (it does not appear in the Tanakh, but the root is a common one in biblical Hebrew); the latter, meaning “storm, tempest” (Prov 1:27) and then “disaster, calamity” (Isa 47:11) was used by Polish Jews as soon as 1940 for what was beginning to befall them.<sup>5</sup> It has become the preferred word on the European continent, definitely so among French-speaking Jews, and I will follow suit.

“Post” in our title carries a nuance. We will not concentrate on a theology of the Shoah.<sup>6</sup> Rather, as we consider the event from a distance, we shall bring into focus interpretations that developed afterward, and we shall be interested in any fruit or effect we can perceive. In a first move, we shall try to locate the Shoah within a biblical framework, to identify some contours of the event, and to find the proper theological perspective. In a second part, we shall draw lessons, reflectively deepening and widening our understanding. Thirdly, we shall look beyond the Shoah, searching for import and longer-term significance. Since the topic of anti-Semitism must be dealt with separately, in another paper, we shall refrain, as far as possible, from mixing the two and exploring the connections between (what many label) “traditional Christian anti-Semitism” and the last massive destruction of Jews in Europe. The ideological underpinnings of Hitler’s *Endlösung* of the *Judenfrage* were overtly anti-Christian, and, as regards the Shoah itself, Christians, whether nominal or authentic, can only be charged with insufficient reactions and culpable apathy, and not with initiative and active involvement.<sup>7</sup>

4 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Holocaust.”

5 David P. Kingdon, “Holocaust,” *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, ed. Campbell Campbell-Jack and Gavin J. McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 322a. He refers to Uriel Tal for this information (and also states that “Holocaust” came into use in English between 1957 and 1959).

6 Hence a difference with our article “Approches théologiques de la Shoah,” *Théologie Évangélique* 6 (2007): 163–79, despite the overlap, which could not be avoided.

7 Hitler branded Christianity as “an invention of a sick mind,” as quoted by Richard Harries, *After the Evil: Christianity and Judaism in the Shadow of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14. Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologist, had composed a complete program for the eradication of the central Christian convictions in the German National “Church”—the swastika was to replace the cross with everything both symbols represent (William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960], 240). Not all Nazi leaders were as radical as Rosenberg, but it is clear that the *Führer’s* frequent references to the “Almighty” did *not* mean “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” If “of the four commanders of the ‘mobile killing units’ (*Einsatzgruppen*) which murdered about five million people, including one and a half million Jews, one . . . was a Protestant minister” (Byron L. Sherwin and Susan G. Ament, “Introduction,” in *Encountering the Holocaust: An Interdisciplinary Survey*, ed. Byron L. Sherwin and Susan G. Ament [Chicago: Impact Press, 1979], 2f), this is more an aberrant case, an appalling one indeed, than a representative specimen.

The facts have been established beyond any reasonable doubt. Whether the total number of Jewish victims was nearer to five or to six million may be left for historians to decide.<sup>8</sup> Some have argued that c. 250,000 among them were *Christian Jews*.<sup>9</sup> Non-Jews who were murdered in a similar fashion numbered about 6.5 million.<sup>10</sup> Objections launched by revisionists and negationists only prove one thing: the power of presuppositions (prejudice) and ideological interference in scholarly, especially historical, work.<sup>11</sup> Technically competent academics may be blinded by subjective passion<sup>12</sup> and become manipulated manipulators in the warmth of a tightly knit “non-conformist” network. Against a reduction of factual reality to a social construct, one may note also that the evidence was sometimes able to break through prejudice: Claude Pressac had started as a revisionist and intended to expose the myth of the gas chambers, but he was constrained by what he found to revise his own opinion, and through his expertise the technique and operation of the gas chambers could be accurately defined and described.<sup>13</sup> Material proofs, despite S.S. efforts to erase all traces, and an immense variety of testimonies from trustworthy sources, from all spiritual and political quarters, are more than enough for certainty. We may trust the official account of the Shoah.

Debated, however, is the *uniqueness* of the Shoah. In a sense, every event in history may be said to be unique. Biblical metaphysics—contrary to mere monism, which logically implies pantheism—maintains the truth of the Multiple, which is of each singularity. Biblical diction likes the phrase “never before had there been such a plague . . . nor will there ever be again,”

8 With laudable scientific restraint, Raul Hilberg only claimed there were more than five million, cf. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Réflexions sur le génocide*, Bibliothèques 10/18 (Paris: la Découverte, 1995), 336.

9 This information was brought to the April 1989 Willowbank “Consultation on the Christian Gospel and the Jewish People,” either by Dr. Tormod Engelsen or in close connection with his paper.

10 Sherwin and Ament, 21.

11 I may mention a thought-provoking symposium on this epistemological issue (but not on the Shoah): Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart, eds., *Religious Advocacy and American History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). There are several remarkable essays, e.g. the balanced treatment by George M. Marsden, “Christian Advocacy and the Rules of the Academic Game,” 3–27.

12 Carol Iancu (*Les Mythes fondateurs de l'antisémitisme. De l'antiquité à nos jours*, Bibliothèque historique Privat [Toulouse: Privat, 2003], 144) recalls the first negationist assertions made by Maurice Bardèche in 1948 (*Nuremberg ou la Terre promise*) and Paul Rassinier in 1950 (*Le Mensonge d'Ulysse*). Bardèche was the brother-in-law of Robert Brasillach, who was executed after the war (a distinguished intellectual and highly gifted writer, he had penned outrageous attacks against the Jews and called for their extermination); one can imagine how the subjective factor influenced Bardèche's perception of the evidence. Rassinier, an anarchist, was a survivor of the Dora concentration camp; he remembered the *kapos*, some of them Jews I suppose, as more cruel than the Nazis, and this obsessive memory may have distorted his judgment.

13 According to Vidal-Naquet, 339f (who also comments that Pressac, for such a happy turn, did not acquire the true historian's competence). Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers*, trans. Peter Moss (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989).



from the judgments of Egypt (I am quoting from Exodus 10:14) to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Mark 13:19, as commonly interpreted). At the same time, the unity of God's government, and of the universe's being in its origin and preservation, entails that analogies, "family resemblances," warrant the recognition of classes, categories: it rules out philosophical nominalism. One rightfully compares. Is the Shoah beyond all comparison? The unspeakable horror of the Shoah should not disqualify the unspeakable horror of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem—remember Lamentations. The disaster of the Jewish War, with its extension into the second century and Hadrian's crushing of the Bar Kokhba revolt (135) affected the Jewish population in Palestine no less dramatically than what happened in Europe eighteen centuries later.<sup>14</sup> David Wolf Silverman reminds us that "the Jews of the fifteenth century experienced the Spanish Expulsion (1492) as unique and in the words of one of their leaders and thinkers—Don Isaac Abravanel—as equivalent to the departure of the first human pair from the Garden of Eden."<sup>15</sup> For the victims of pogroms in the preceding centuries, and indeed since antiquity,<sup>16</sup> for a family submerged by hatred and seeing their children ripped or smashed to death, could there be a more unspeakable horror? Subjectively, isn't this already Auschwitz? "Pogrom," we are told, comes from Russian *po*, "entirely," and *gromit*, "destroy."<sup>17</sup> After the assassination of the liberal tsar Alexander II (1881), there was a tidal wave of pogroms in southern Russia that received the Hebrew name *sufot hanegev*,<sup>18</sup> "storms of the south" (סופרות הנגב); it is remarkable that סופה (*sufah*) is a near-synonym of שואה (*shoah*), as evidenced in Proverbs 1:27. This does suggest that the Shoah cannot be isolated from the long series of persecutions and massacres that preceded it. "The late eminent historian Hermann G. Adler opposed the view that Nazism introduced an entirely new dimension into human destructiveness. In Adler's epigram, from the day of Original Sin the Holocaust became possible."<sup>19</sup>

Some writers go one step further than the stress on uniqueness. Wiesel can affirm: "Auschwitz can only be the absolute revelation of something absolute, absolute evil."<sup>20</sup> The Eckardts also use the phrase "absolute evil."<sup>21</sup> Franklin H. Littell claims that the Holocaust and the creation of the

14 So argues John J. Johnson, "Should the Holocaust Force Us to Rethink Our View of God and Evil?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 52/1 (2001): 124.

15 David Wolf Silverman, "The Holocaust and the Reality of Evil," in *Evangelicals and Jews in an Age of Pluralism*, ed. Marc H. Tanenbaum, Marvin R. Wilson, and A. James Rudin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 272.

16 Especially in Egypt, where Jews were many. Fadyev Lovsky (*Antisémitisme et mystère d'Israël* [Paris: Albin Michel, 1955], 48) recalls the Elephantine riots of 411–410 BC, and (60) the bloody conflict under Claudius, in Alexandria (Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 2.18.7–8).

17 Iancu, 81.

18 *Ibid.* I reproduce Iancu's transcription. To my comment on the two Hebrew words, I may add that Horace Meyer Kallen (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Pogrom,") asserts that pogrom, in Russian, was "[o]riginally the word for 'storm.'" I am not able to substantiate the claim.

19 A. Roy Eckardt with Alice L. Eckardt, *Long Night's Journey into Day: Life and Faith after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 44.

20 Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, 72.

21 Eckardt, 42. Cf. 53: "The 'devil' and 'antisemitism' are correlative symbols."



State of Israel are events as important to our faith as the Exodus and the fall of Rome.<sup>22</sup> One sympathizes fully with the intention of such language to express maximum indignation and abhorrence. It answers to a truthful experience: when we look into the Shoah we see opening unfathomable abysses of wickedness. Such evil is a bottomless pit. Yet, if we were perfectly lucid and properly sensitive, we would uncover a similar abyss in every form of evil, in “ordinary” fits of anger and common insults (Matt 5:22). How can there be something so ugly, so vicious and mean in me? How can I take some pleasure in such villainy? Bottomless. But this, to say it bluntly, does not warrant “absolute” language. A loose and emotional use of that register of words does not foster rigorous thinking. An absolute is a second god, and we should realize that there can be no relation, no contact, between different absolutes (this is even unthinkable)! A central insight of the biblical doctrine of evil, with confirmation in the phenomenology of human experience, is the *secondary* character of evil, radically relative to the good: evil is deprivation, the lack of some goodness that was due<sup>23</sup>; evil is the perversion or corruption of the good. Though few among the “wise,” or would-be wise, show this penetration, we should discern that only within the framework of the sovereign divine rule, the rule of Goodness in Person, can evil be denounced, can evil be named. Without that framework, indignation disintegrates and dissolves into meaninglessness.<sup>24</sup> Many contemporaries, who have given in under relativistic propaganda and desperately lack bench marks to live by, do keep the Shoah as a substitute reference, an *ersatz* absolute—but this reflects the disorientation of our late modernity; Christian theology should know better.<sup>25</sup>

Whether the Shoah is more important than the fall of Rome, time will tell (or the Last Day); comparing it with the Exodus is more risky, inasmuch as God has revealed the significance of the work He accomplished “with outstretched arm” through His servant Moses—the equivalent is not available in the case of the Shoah. The Exodus is a key element in the structure of *Heilsgeschichte*, whereas the role of the Shoah still calls for further elucidation. I do not wish to deny *in advance* an important role—and it is likely to be tied to unique features of the Shoah. These may be recognized without

22 Franklin H. Littell, *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); “Christendom, Holocaust and Israel: The Importance for Christians of Recent Major Events in Jewish History,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10 (1973): 483–97; as summarized by John Jefferson Davis, “The Holocaust and the Problem of Theodicy: An Evangelical Perspective,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29/1 (January 2005): 55.

23 The mere absence of something good, as is inherent in finitude, should not be termed “evil” (contrary to those “negative” views of evil which call such an absence “metaphysical evil”): for humans, not to possess a third eye is no evil, but having only one (since having two belongs to the integrity of human nature) is evil indeed.

24 I developed the argument in *Evil and the Cross: An Analytical Look at the Problem of Pain* (1994; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004). (I may add that I was not consulted on the sub-title wording; it does not translate my French one, “La pensée chrétienne aux prises avec le mal”; my book does not focus on *pain* but, as I consider more biblical, on *sin* as “capital evil.”)

25 Johann Baptist Metz (Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, 16) warns against turning “Auschwitz into a sort of ‘negative religion’ or ‘negative myth’ for Christians.”

falling into “absolute” language and should now be described as we go on drawing contours of the event.

Three features mark the Shoah to an unprecedented degree in the bloody trail of pogroms and genocides: magnitude, method, and de-humanizing. Though history has known other large-scale massacres, the number of victims, the proportion among European Jews especially, is exceptional. I have argued elsewhere that ultimately, and radically, “quantity” is a “quality,” but suffice it to say that threshold effects (for all living creatures) and the organic dimension of a community—which is more than the sum of all its members—entail that magnitude changes quality. Its magnitude confers an awful qualitative uniqueness to the Shoah. The “body” of world-wide Jewry (it is real, though very difficult to define) was mutilated, and the memory will last. Then the Shoah was unique at the level of method: “Outrageous though it may appear,” Alistair McFadyen writes, “the holocaust was a triumph of rationality in planning and action, which was threatened wherever irrationality—even of over-zealousness—intruded into and interrupted efficient organisation.”<sup>26</sup> The contrast with pogroms, the outbursts of mob violence, is striking. The machine was working, as it were, by itself, and the cogs in the machine felt little personal responsibility—we may remember that Himmler chose the gas chamber technique in order to *spare* the executioners’ feelings, for the sake of efficiency.<sup>27</sup> Murder was turned into an industry. The place of method may be more than an illustration of German genius: a sign of the times. A key component in the method was the de-humanization of the victims: *Untermenschen*. It was systematic, and the very presupposition of the system. Everything was done to downgrade the Jews (and the Gypsies, homosexuals, Communists, Jehovah Witnesses, etc.) to a sub-human level, including in their own eyes. I remember reading that in the Treblinka death camp one S.S. guard had called his dog “Man” and would set the dog on a poor Jew: “Man, kill that dog!” Foundations were laid with the racist ideology that reduces humanity to biology. The ruling metaphor was taken quite literally (hence the good conscience of torturers): Jews were nothing else than vermin to be destroyed, pests to be eliminated, deadly bacilli, cancerous cells. De-humanization almost always goes with murder, especially collective murder, but it reached perfection in the Shoah. The combination is perfectly adjusted to the main tenets of theological anthropology and ethics.

Reconnoitering the contours of the Shoah in a biblical perspective also requires that we ask about applicable schemes, schemes which Scripture uses when disaster is to be interpreted. The first one is that of *retributive justice*. Time and time again in the Prophets, calamities and desolations are foretold as punishments of the people’s sins. Few writers dare suggest that the Shoah was a divine punishment! There have been Jews, Haredim and

<sup>26</sup> Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83. Cf. the comments by the Eckardt, 44.

<sup>27</sup> McFadyen, 93.



other ultra-Orthodox rabbis such as Jacob Israel Kanievisky or Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstamm, who have made such suggestions.<sup>28</sup> The transgressions that attracted the Shoah have been assimilation (it had gone farthest in Germany), Jewish participation in the *haskalah* (Enlightenment), and Zionism. Benjamin Brown notes:

Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum of Satmar, for instance, could never accept the argument that the successes of the Zionist state reflect divine support for its existence. According to his interpretation of a famous passage at B. Ket. 111a, founding an independent Jewish state before the coming of the Messiah constitutes an open revolt against the sovereignty of God; it is a breach of the "Three Oaths" the Lord imposed on the Israelites. Creation of the State thus invited a horrendous punishment, which he finds in the Holocaust.<sup>29</sup>

Simone Weil, the Auschwitz survivor and highly respected political figure, remembers rabbis *in the concentration camp* following a similar line.<sup>30</sup> Among Christians, apparently, Daniel P. Fuller argued that the Deuteronomy 28 threats were then executed.<sup>31</sup> Contemporary sensitivities are so strongly opposed to the idea of retribution in history that we should pay some honor to the boldness of such a stand; people today are so afraid of being associated with Job's friends that they become most like them in conformity to majority "correctness." Who are we to rule out, as many clerics do, that God exercises judgments on the earth? Even the objection of "innocent" children is not decisive: if we take into account original sin, if we remember that all are born in sin (Ps 51:6 [Heb 6]; 58:3 [Heb 4]) and *by nature* subject to divine wrath (Eph 2:3), "innocence" is relative. If we agree with J. J. Davis<sup>32</sup> that children dying in infancy are presumptively elect, and, though sinners, included in the atonement, saved in Christ, the problem of children is no longer so acute. On the other hand, what counts as apostasy in the eyes of ultra-Orthodox Jews is not assessed in the same way by Christian theology. The sins of Deuteronomy 28 are not *obviously* those of modern Jews. There is little warrant in the New Testament (against traditional Christian anti-Semitism) for the idea that all Jews, throughout history, remain under a curse and must be repeatedly punished. As Jesus, in utter sadness, foresees the fate of Jerusalem as the counterpart of His passion—He is the "green" tree, spiritually alive (cf. Ezek 17:24), and the people of the city the "dry" one, spiritually dead—He has in view the AD 70 catastrophe, not the twentieth century Shoah. The cry of the crowd,

28 Benjamin Brown, "Orthodox Judaism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2000), 319.

29 *Ibid.*, 333. Cf. Davis, 56f.

30 As quoted by Jean-Paul Rempp, *Israël, peuple, foi et terre. Esquisse d'une synthèse* (Carols: Excelsis, 2010), 32 n.19. Rempp also mentions an "Orthodox rabbi" recently (unnamed).

31 Daniel P. Fuller, "Why Was There an Auschwitz?" *Eternity* 15 (December 1964): 27–28, 32–38; according to Davis, 60f, to whom I owe the information.

32 Davis, 73.



according to Matthew 27:25, means that they assumed the responsibility of their action, but God's truer judgment is not even expressed, and in any case, it does not fall beyond the third and fourth generation.<sup>33</sup> We should, therefore, renounce the retributive scheme to interpret the Shoah.

The other biblical situation, not seldom encountered (very frequent in individual cases), is that of suffering *unrelated* to particular faults. For the faithful, it is the reverse side of their being in the world—for "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19, literally, "lies in the evil one"). Job offers the paradigm situation of the righteous one who suffers *because of his righteousness*, and that it may be further purified. In the New Testament, *martyrdom*, which is one facet of Jesus' own death,<sup>34</sup> is the example of suffering for God's sake and a source of blessing. Can the Shoah bear an interpretation along those lines? Richard L. Rubenstein protests: "The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job."<sup>35</sup> But he speaks in Karamazov-like anger and proclaims the "death of God."<sup>36</sup> Davis, on the contrary, sees the parallel with Job as significant: the role of Satan in Job corresponds to the "demonic dimensions of Hitler's genocidal project"; there is a "randomness" element in history (Eccl 9:11), things that happen unpredictably, independently of the order of justice—Job's sufferings, the Shoah—and this element helps purify religion from self-interest.<sup>37</sup> Davis similarly applies the concept of martyrdom: "A Jew, even a non-religious Jew, who was murdered merely *for being a Jew*, the bearer of a name associated with the God of Abraham, could thus, in an extended sense, be viewed as a martyr."<sup>38</sup> The problem for Christian theology concerns the value, *coram Deo*, of the Jews' righteousness and testimony. Stern New Testament statements suggest a negative assessment (Phil 3:6–9 on righteousness; John 7:28; 8:19, 41ff, 55 on the knowledge, and therefore confession, of God). At the same time, matters are complex. Paul does credit non-Christian Jews with real zeal for God, *zēlon theou* (ζῆλον θεοῦ), but misguided by ignorance or false knowledge, *ou kat'epignōsin* (οὐ κατ'ἐπίγνωσιν). Paul can speak, in his defense before Agrippa, of the twelve tribes of his day as "hoping to see fulfilled" the promise, "as they earnestly serve God day and night" (Acts 26:7). Inasmuch as this positive element can be retained, we are not obligated simply to reject Davis' proposal. We may add that the sure privilege of the Jews "according to the flesh" is their natural, family relationship to Jesus (Rom 9:5, *to kata sarka*,

33 See Lovsky's vigorous argument, 432–51 (with a strong emphasis on early Christian writers).

34 John 18:37 (*marturēsō*, μαρτυρήσω); 1 Tim 6:13; the first martyr identified in the early church, Stephen, *imitates* Jesus Christ in his last words (Acts 7:59–60).

35 Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 153; as quoted by Johnson, 125. Johnson himself rather sees a convergence (125f).

36 According to Neil Gillman ("Contemporary Jewish Theology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, 454), Rubenstein writes: "The death of God is a cultural fact . . . the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth has been broken. We stand in a cold, silent, unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own."

37 Davis, 75f; see especially n. 98 (p. 76): "This hypothesis of random, gratuitous evil as a 'filter' on selfish religion has some similarity to the perspective of Moses ben Hayyim Alsheikh (c. 1508–1600), a Jewish commentator on Job. . . ."

38 *Ibid.*, 69.





το κατά σάρκα, “as to fleshly origin”), and the hatred against them which culminated in the Shoah is bound to this family election.<sup>39</sup> There is a common factor, therefore, in the world’s rejection of Jesus and of the Jewish people—there is a kinship between the Shoah and the cross.

## Digging Deeper Theologically

When what happened in the Shoah is seen in a biblical perspective, some features spur the theological mind to further reflection. One can first look more closely at the monstrous revelation of *evil*. Working toward the *Endlösung* involved myriads of very diverse people, some of them primitive, thugs, and even morons, but many well-educated and rather refined, and most of them “average.” As Hannah Arendt brought out in her report on Eichmann’s trial, these men were so *ordinary*.<sup>40</sup> A deep comment was made on the Nazi doctors (who usually needed a fortnight, when arriving in concentration and death camps, to quiet their feelings) by a survivor: “But it is *demonic* that they were *not* demonic.’ The lesson of Auschwitz is that ‘ordinary people can commit demonic acts.’”<sup>41</sup> How illustrative of the continuity Jesus revealed between the secret inclinations of the heart and spectacular crimes, and of universal sinfulness! And the part *apathy* played must be mentioned. The Eckardts note with Wiesel that “the victims suffered more ‘from the indifference of the onlookers, than from the brutality of the executioner.’”<sup>42</sup> Though there were many exceptions, and also noteworthy differences among European nations,<sup>43</sup> the vast majority did not actively oppose Hitler’s program. The impression prevails that the Nazi enterprise could have been checked if more people *among those who did not hate the Jews* had reacted in time. The efficacy of the Danish king’s resistance and, less well known, that of the sultan of Morocco (Mohammed V) who resisted orders from the French collaborationist Vichy government,<sup>44</sup> suggest the same. “In order for evil to triumph, it is enough that good people do . . . *nothing*.” Why is it so,

39 According to F. Lovsky (“La Théologie et Elie Wiesel,” in *Présence d’Elie Wiesel*, 82), theology should “mediate Wiesel’s conviction: the goal of the Shoah was to kill the Messiah, in case he had been born, and at any rate to destroy his family if he had not.”

40 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann à Jérusalem. Rapport sur la banalité du mal*, 2nd ed., Folio Histoire, trans. Anne Guérin (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), e.g. 460f. Cf. Vidal-Naquet, 266, and 287, the warning about criminal potentialities in democracy.

41 Darrell J. Fasching, *Narrative Theology after Auschwitz: From Alienation to Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 133; drawing on Robert J. Lifton’s *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

42 Eckardt, 20.

43 Jean Améry, a survivor (*Par-delà le crime et le châtement. Essai pour surmonter l’insurmontable*, trans. [from the German original] Françoise Wuilmart [coll. Babel; Arles/Québec: Actes Sud/Leméac, 1995], 172), recounts how, when they were transferred from Auschwitz to Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, peasant girls in Bohemia would run to them, despite S.S. guards, with bread and apples—but not in Germany.

44 David Banon, “Isaac, la mort en face,” in *Présence d’Elie Wiesel*, 51. He refused to impose the yellow star, and the Moroccan Jews were not molested. I do not ignore favorable circumstances in both these cases: in Denmark, Jews were very few, and the stakes were not high for the Nazis; Morocco was protected by geography.

why was it so in the Shoah? One reason, of course, is simple: in many situations, resistance would have required *heroes*; who can boast he would be one (Cf. Luke 22:33)? Willingness to self-sacrifice transcends ordinary ethics. The power of propaganda and twisted information was on the Nazi side. The dependence of individuals (even individualistic individuals!) on collective norms and representations was evident, and it reveals a fateful trans-individual dimension of sinfulness. The *gradual* character of the murderous action was used with consummate skill (one remembers the parable of the frog in a pot of water on the stove—at first pleasantly warm . . . ). The first measures did not appear much worse than what Jews had undergone for so many generations. The *Kristallnacht*, another pogrom . . . nobody imagined Auschwitz. The skill of the Nazis must be stressed: they showed, as Primo Levi said, “The Devil’s knowledge of the human soul.”<sup>45</sup> They used all the mechanisms of human psychology and physiology, and were even able, in many cases, to turn the Jew “into the accomplice of his executioners.”<sup>46</sup>

The perversion of skill and science draws attention to one aspect of the revelation of evil in the Shoah. *That* evil, supreme among evils, evidenced the corruption of *goodness*. Unthinkable as it may seem to us, loyalty to their group (among soldiers), devotion to their country, and the conviction that they were redressing injustice and curing the world of a deadly disease, did drive executioners. Worthy motives! And this belongs essentially to evil: a borrowed, or rather stolen, essence (from God’s good creation), turned poisonous. There is no lie which is not parasitic on a prior truth. Idolatry corrupts the beauty of a creature and its capacity for revealing God. Even murder, I venture to suggest, expresses the corruption of one demand of love: that the object of my love should not exist apart from me (love and hate pass so easily into each other!). The mass-murders of the Shoah did reveal evil as the corruption of the good.

The perfection of the *method*, which we observed, calls for a specific comment. It was the perversion and corruption of one form of rationality: “scientific and technical-bureaucratic reason.”<sup>47</sup> It reveals the “totalitarian tendencies of technical-instrumental reason.”<sup>48</sup> Wiesel seeks no protective nuances: “I am convinced that what happened in Auschwitz is a result of rationalism.”<sup>49</sup> The warning is dramatic against the divorcing of ends and means, so characteristic of our social life. Do we resist actively enough the “reification” so easily associated with the rule of instrumental reason? We should meditate upon the strange condemnation of the census taken by David (2 Sam 24). Why was it so grievous a sin? Critical scholars speak of the

45 Primo Levi, *Si c’est un homme* [*Se questo è un uomo*], pocket ed. (1987; repr., Paris: Julliard, 2003), 137; the French translation reads “une connaissance diabolique de l’âme humaine.”

46 Eckardt, 19.

47 Fasching, 41.

48 McFadyen, 88. He confesses his debt to Zygmunt Bauman (*Modernity and the Holocaust* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989]), which I have not seen.

49 Schuster and Boschert-Kimmig, 71. He is faithful to the Kabbalah and Hasidic mysticism of his training in Transylvania (70, the difference between him and Emmanuel Levinas, who came from more rationalistic Lithuania).



old “taboo” of counting heads, but we should not rule out the possibility that the Word of God is teaching us a precious spiritual and theological truth. Counting means reducing to the status of parts of a larger whole items that can be added to one another: it involves the temptation to ignore the irreducible mystery of the person, the transcendence that belongs to God’s image. This is why God only, in His unique transcendence, can count heads—souls—and orders that a redemption price be paid when a census is taken in His name, for each one a כפר נפשו (*kofer noshu*, Exod 30:12). In Nazi camps, the *Häftling* lost his/her name and was reduced to a number, inscribed on his/her body; this may signal a danger not absent from our rational societies.

We come again to the work of dehumanization. It is worth reflecting on the “mechanisms” that were made to function. Reduction to biology relied on a theory of racial characteristics: Racism provided the explicit rationale for the Shoah. It should instruct us. It shows the hold pseudo-science can keep through many years, in whole nations, at all levels of education; it shows the malignancy of improperly formed concepts (such as that of “race”); it shows the danger of metaphors, such as the metaphor of “blood” and “blood purity,” in which people uncritically invest their sense of identity. How vital the discipline, the therapy, of a sober scriptural method! Another dimension of racism, more or less unconscious, would be worth investigating: the role of sexual determinations. F. Lovsky has observed “the erotic character of the German legislation” on race.<sup>50</sup> The form and force of repulsions betrayed the play of such factors. The central place of sexuality in a biblical anthropology would throw light on that component of Shoah criminal behavior, and vice versa. Still another “mechanism” that deserves exploration would be “scapegoating.” Nazi propaganda prepared and legitimized the Shoah by making the Jews the scapegoats for all the ills of German society, Europe, and even the world. Though his doctrine, in important chapters, must be criticized, René Girard may be of help here: theology should exploit some of his insights. Attacking the Jews is doing precisely what the first century Pharisees were doing in Jesus’ indictment.<sup>51</sup> Hitler, quite faithful to Nietzsche’s thought (much more than Nietzschean scholars are willing to concede), perpetrated the genocide to eradicate that Judeo-Christian secularized legacy: the predominant concern for the victims.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, Girard does not see that the effective antidote to viciously inventing scapegoats is the one holy, divine, self-sacrifice: the Lamb of God who bears and takes away (double meaning of *airôn*, αἴρων, John 1:29) the sin of the world.

50 Lovsky, *Antisémitisme*, 365 (366, the usual alliance of eroticism and paganism).

51 René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, researched with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort (Paris: Grasset, 1978), 196f.

52 “The spiritual goal of Hitlerism, in my opinion, was to free Germany first, and then Europe, from the calling assigned by its religious tradition, the concern for victims” (René Girard, *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair*, Livre de Poche [Paris: Grasset, 1999], 222). Girard then comments on quotations from Nietzsche and (227) complains that intellectuals deliberately ignore them (227). Hitler’s enterprise failed, but it avenges itself by turning the concern for victims into a caricature of itself in today’s world (228). This is remarkably lucid.

Post-Holocaust/Shoah theology is interested in what happened, or is still to happen, after the event. Likely, it will shed some light on the import and significance (Lovsky rightly distinguishes between explanation and signification<sup>53</sup>).

The first fact, no one can deny, is simply *survival*. A remnant did return from the camps. Deliverance materialized. The words of Psalm 66 came true: "For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, *but you brought us to a place of abundance*" (vv. 10–12, emphasis added). Even Levi, who remained a stranger to faith, can tell how they, the few who had been left in Auschwitz (too weak to walk), felt when they discovered that the Germans were gone: "It is certain that the remembrance of biblical deliverances in the worst moments of distress went through every mind like a breath or a breeze."<sup>54</sup> Eliezer Berkovits, an Orthodox rabbi, insists that the same pattern of trial and *in extremis* salvation recurs in Scripture and history. He "cites the many acts of kindness, generosity and loyalty that occurred throughout the terror, the fact that the Final Solution ultimately failed. . . ."<sup>55</sup> Hitler failed and fell into the pit he had made (Ps 7:15). It is one of the features of the Shoah, which the Eckardts mention,<sup>56</sup> that it was self-defeating: Hitler diverted military resources to satisfy his hatred of Jews that were missed in decisive battles! In this way, the victims contributed to the overthrow of the demonic tyranny. History bears out two main principles of God's dealings with Israel: permanence, in the form of a remnant, through dreadful ordeals (e.g., Amos 9:8–10) and punishment of evildoers, in God's own timing.

The summary of Berkovits' argument I just quoted goes on: ". . . the fact that the Final Solution ultimately failed, and preeminently the establishment of the State of Israel as dramatic revelations of God's lasting power over history and love for Israel."<sup>57</sup> The next post-Shoah event is the creation of the modern State of Israel. It is interesting to know that, for about twenty or thirty years, the Shoah was under-emphasized among Jews: they would rather enthusiastically identify with Israel. Only when disappointment with the State grew, "Holocaust consciousness supplanted Israel consciousness, to some extent, as the focus of collective attention and the core of the Jewish 'civil religion.'"<sup>58</sup> Yet the close link with the Shoah cannot be

53 Lovsky, "La Théologie et Elie Wiesel," 83.

54 Levi, 246. The last words in French (I had no access to the Italian original) read "*comme un souffle dans tous les esprits*"; I conjoined the two possibilities for "*souffle*," breath and breeze.

55 Gillman, 453, referring to Eliezer Berkovits' *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1973).

56 Eckardt, 44.

57 Gillman, *loc. cit.* (453).

58 Yosef Gorny, "Judaism and Zionism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, 489f (quoted 489). Jean-Paul Rempp (75 n. 21) mentions that Avraham Burg, a former chairman of the Knesset, regrets Israel's identity being almost exclusively defined through its relationship to the Shoah, and quotes Georges Bensoussan: "Shoah hypermnesia leads to Zionism amnesia" (76 n. 24).



doubted. Without the trauma of universal conscience, the powers would not have granted Israel its recognition. Without the Shoah, a limited number only would have made the “ascent,” the *aliyah* (עלייה).<sup>59</sup> Louis Goldberg combines both fruits of Shoah suffering—the political restoration of Israel (at least in part) and the saving testimony of believers in the camps which led other Jews in the camps to eternal life—to interpret Hitler as a “vessel of wrath” which God did use:

Another piece of an answer is that God led some of His choice believers into the camps. Because of the testimony of these special servants of God, many a Jewish person came to faith, either in the camps, or after being delivered.

Another part of the bits and pieces of an answer is that we can say that Hitler functioned much in the same way as did the pharaoh of the exodus. The more pharaoh hardened his heart, the more he became the vessel of wrath by which many Jewish people afterward would be able to escape out of Egypt. In the same way, Hitler was also the vessel of wrath by which many of those who remained after the war would go to Israel.<sup>60</sup>

Rubenstein in his own way affirms the linkage: the return of Jews to the land “has *religious* significance . . . but the idea that it is part of a divine plan for salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*) can only be affirmed if it is also claimed that the *Shoah* is equally a providential expression of the divine plan.”<sup>61</sup> Richard S. Harvey writes, “A successful apologetic must seek to answer the theodic demands of Holocaust theology, whilst also seeking to articulate a continuing theological significance for the Jewish people which does not ignore the contemporary issue of the land of Israel. . . .”<sup>62</sup> Discussing the various opinions of evangelical theologians on this land, on prophetic fulfillment, on Zionism, lies beyond the scope of the present paper. It is certain, however, that a post-Holocaust/Shoah theology must make room for this extraordinary sequel: the restoration of a Jewish State after eighteen to twenty-one centuries (depending on the starting point, between the Hasmoneans and Bar Kokhba).

To many evangelical theologians (and in my own way, I would concur), *aliyah* is a “sign of the times.” The question, therefore, is raised of a similar significance of the Shoah. Davis makes a strong point as he recalls the biblical theme of the intensification of evil before the end comes. The pattern

59 Though we must remember, with Rempp (65 n. 2), that Zionism antedates the Shoah and other factors were at play when the State of Israel was founded and acknowledged internationally.

60 Louis Goldberg, *God, Torah, Messiah: The Messianic Jewish Theology of Dr. Louis Goldberg*, ed. Richard A. Robinson (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate Productions, 2009), 232. I was led to these lines by Richard Harvey’s quotation (*Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 2009], 93); Harvey quotes from the manuscript (80), and I found the passage in the book.

61 Richard L. Rubenstein, “Some Reflections on ‘The Odd Couple’: A Reply to Martin Marty,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44/1 (Winter 2009): 136.

62 *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, s.v. “Judaism.”

is found in Ezekiel 38–39, Daniel 11–12, Matthew 24:2–27, 2 Thessalonians 2, and Revelation 7:14.<sup>63</sup> He quotes from the Mishnah *Sotah* 9:15 and the Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 98a (“When you see a generation overwhelmed by troubles as by a river, await him,” Isa 59:19f).<sup>64</sup> The image of the “birth-pangs” of the Messianic age, the *chavle hammashiach* (חבלי המשיח), was well-established, and Jesus Himself owned it and set it forth to interpret His own suffering (John 16:21). Davis’ proposal is cautious enough to be accepted: the Holocaust/Shoah can be viewed as “an *anticipation* of the end and an example of the *intensification* of evil as history approaches its climax.”<sup>65</sup> If, as I do, one hopes for and expects a large-scale turning to Yeshua among Jews “according to the flesh,” both the trial and the re-gathering to the land may be seen as preparatory measures, before the final re-grafting. The conversion of most Christians, even “nominal” ones, from their older anti-Semitism, an observable effect of the Shoah, may remove a stumbling-block (who could have imagined popes visiting synagogues?). Let the Shoah mark the beginning of the birth-pangs, and life surge from the dead!

Even the brightest hopes attached to the significance of the Shoah do not explain why the sovereign God permitted such horrendous evil to take place.<sup>66</sup> I am less fearful than Davis of what he calls a “fideistic” stance—I would dispute the use of the term—though I applaud his critique of popular “rational” theodicies.<sup>67</sup> When God, at last, answers Job “out of the storm” (*se’arah* סערה, a near synonym of *shoah* שואה; Job 38:1), does He explain why evil and suffering occur? As John J. Johnson writes: “Does he explain why he, as an all-powerful God, allows such things? No. He does, however, impress upon Job the limits of Job’s *understanding* of such things. What Job does learn here is that the ways of God are beyond the understanding of men, and that sometimes men and women of faith can only accept, in ignorance and humble piety, the ways of God toward his creatures.”<sup>68</sup> A post-Holocaust/Shoah theology will be a theology of humble trust and confident hope!

Originally published in *Mishkan*, no. 65 (2010): 5–19.

63 Davis, 70.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 71.

66 This thesis, in general terms, I develop in *Evil and the Cross*.

67 Davis (62f) rejects “bare fideism” and (65–68) evaluates free-will, greater good, and limited God doctrines. Davis focuses on theodicy, with apologetic concerns; this paper has been composed from another angle.

68 Johnson, 125f.

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## A New Reality for Christians in the Holy Land

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Anyone who has visited the Old City of Jerusalem knows that getting an overview of the intricate mosaic of the Christian community and its history in the city is a very difficult task. In recent months there has been an increased focus on the Christian community in Israel. And these reports, which have been quite confusing and at times almost contradictory, add even more complexity to the picture.

On the one hand, the number of Christians registered as residents of Israel has increased significantly in recent years. In a Christmas greeting to Christians in the country, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said that the Christian community in Israel is “strong and growing” as opposed to other Christian communities in the Middle East. “Israel is proud of its record of religious tolerance and pluralism, and Israel will continue to protect freedom of religion for all. . . . We will continue to safeguard places of Christian worship throughout the country.” He added that Israel “would not tolerate any acts of violence or discrimination against any place of worship. This is not our way, and this is something we cannot accept.”

On the other hand, the past year has been full of reports of violence and discrimination, as well as the continued exodus of Palestinian Christian and Arab Israeli Christian families from the country. Dr. Amnon Ramon’s recently published book, *Christianity and Christians in the Jewish State*, paints a grim picture of the situation: the number of Christians living in Jerusalem has decreased by more than 50% since 1946. Dr. Ramon asserts that it is hard being a Christian in Jerusalem, and that the community is rapidly diminishing:



by **Knut Høyland**

“The process of decline in the numbers of Christians here is reaching a critical point,” he says. “I’m afraid we might be soon facing a situation of an ‘endangered species’ with regard to these communities.”

Recent months have seen an increase in the number of attacks on Christian sites as well as the harassment of clergymen walking through the Old City. Ramon adds: “When an MK [Michael Ben-Ari of the National Union] contemptuously tears up the New Testament while standing at the podium in the Knesset [in response to New Testaments being distributed to Knesset members], why should we be surprised to see young Jews from the religious right wing setting fire to monasteries or spitting in clergymen’s faces?” These attacks also included so called “price tag” vandalism on church buildings such as the Baptist House and the Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem. Ramon explains that this is the result of the Jewish Orthodox community’s growing trend of extremism regarding all things Christian: “The Christian issue—presented as a threat to Judaism—has gained a kind of high priority, I would say, sometimes even more acute than [concerns about] the Arabs.”



The difficulty most Christians face is the lack of an official policy, at the national level, regarding their status in the city. "Since the dismantling of the Religious Affairs Ministry . . . there is no organized address for the Christian communities living here. Even before the ministry was shut down, though, it was in the hands of the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) Shas party, which didn't make things easier for the Christians." Governmental policy seems to range from indifference, at best, to animosity, at worst. This is why so many young (mostly Arab) Christians are leaving the city. As one Armenian Christian told *The Jerusalem Post*, "What do I have here? . . . For you, the Jews, I am an Arab—an enemy. For the Arabs, I am a Christian, an intruder."

The question that must be asked, then, is how this grim picture relates to reports of a "strong and growing" Christian community in Israel. One answer would be that in comparison to the Christian community's situation in neighboring countries, especially following the so-called "Arab Spring," the situation in Israel is much to be preferred. After all, there is a large degree of religious freedom in Israel, and Christians do not have to fear for their lives. Despite the recent attacks, there is protection under the law for Christians, and such attacks are investigated and, in some cases, lead to prosecutions, although the process may at times be slow and tedious.

Another answer can be found when one looks beyond the simple statistic which compares the number of Christians in the land from year to year. If one takes a look at the demographic changes in the community over the past years, an interesting image appears. There is no doubt that the Christian Palestinian/Arab Israeli community is

diminishing due to mass emigration of Christians who find life here too difficult as a result of the political situation and economic and social realities.

At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of Christians in the country. This increase is due to the influx of thousands of Russian Orthodox and Ethiopian Christians—Christian members of Jewish families who immigrate under the regulations of the Law of Return. In addition, in recent years there has been a great influx of Christian foreign workers and refugees who are searching for a better life for themselves and their families. Interestingly enough, the highest concentration of Christians can today be found in the poorest neighborhoods of south Tel Aviv, not in Jerusalem. Tens of thousands of Christian migrant workers and refugees live in Israel today (unconfirmed estimates suggest there are as many as 100,000–200,000); the largest group among them are the Filipinos, but there are also Thai people, Indians, Chinese, Sudanese, Eritreans, and others. This community also includes hundreds of children of migrant workers who are born and grow up in this country; they maintain some sense of a "foreign" Christian identity, but at the same time are culturally fully integrated into Hebrew-speaking Israeli secular society while knowing very little about their parents' faith and cultural background.

Although much has been said of the growth of the Messianic movement in Israel in the past decades, this growth is quite insignificant in comparison with the growth of these communities of migrant Christians. The great challenge today is that there is very limited contact between these communities and the more established Christian communities in the land, such as the Messianic move-





ment and the mainly Arabic-speaking traditional churches.

Although this growth should be a source of encouragement for local Christians, an additional challenge is that these “new” Christians live in this country with only a temporary status, at best, and could easily be expelled if the authorities choose to do so. And so this growth could be turned around more or less overnight. It should be noted that there is one other country in the Middle East which has seen a similar growth in the Christian community, and that is Saudi Arabia. As in Israel, the growth there is due to the influx of Christian migrant workers.

So there is good reason at least to look beyond simplified presentations of the Christian community as “strong and growing” and nuance the picture somewhat. At the end of the day, this development constitutes a great challenge to the Messianic movement and the traditional churches in Israel. How can the body of Christ in this land come together in unity despite enormous differences in cultural and theological backgrounds, seize this time of growth in order to support one another when various parts of the body are under attack or in need, and live out a common witness of the Lord Jesus Christ? Only time will tell.

#### Sources:

Quotes and background information for this article are taken from the *Caspari Center Media Review*; articles published in *The Jerusalem Post* on October 26 and December 25, 2012; and an unpublished lecture by Rev. Dr. David Neuhaus, SJ, titled “Ecumenism in Israel: The Challenge of the New Christian Communities,” presented on the occasion of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute’s 40th anniversary, October 27, 2012.

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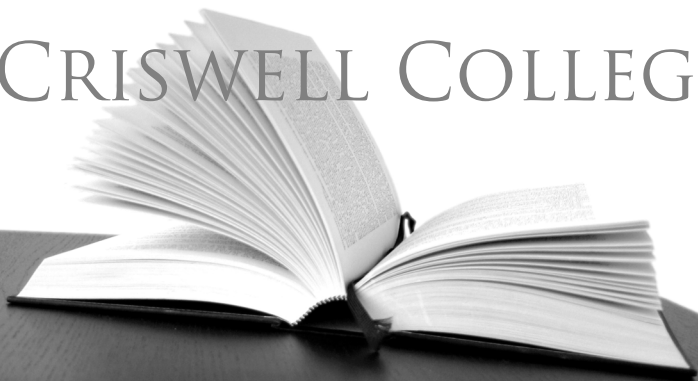
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