

Jews and Christians

*The Myth of a Common Tradition*



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For my dear friends and co-workers at  
the Community of Saint Egidio in Rome.  
A token of enduring affection and respect.





## *Preface*

While these days Christians and Judaists undertake religious dialogue, there is not now and there never has been a dialogue between the religions, Judaism and Christianity. The conception of a Judeo-Christian tradition that Judaism and Christianity share is simply a myth in the bad old sense: a lie. These essays all together make that single point. Each of the two religious traditions pursues its own interests in its own way, addressing its own adherents with self-evidently valid answers to urgent and ineluctable questions.

True, Christianity and Judaism share some of the same holy scriptures, the Old Testament or the written Torah. But these writings form part of a larger canon, the Bible for Christianity, and the Torah (or “the one whole Torah of our rabbi, Moses,” meaning both the parts of the Torah of Sinai formulated and transmitted in writing and orally) for Judaism. Christianity reads the Bible, Judaism studies the Torah. While episodically reaching conclusions that coincide, in general the two religions share no common agenda and have conducted no genuine dialogue. Scripture can provide an agendum—but one that leads only to division, since the Old Testament for Christianity serves only because it prefigures the New Testament, and the written Torah for Judaism can be and should be read only in the fulfillment and completion provided by the oral Torah. To measure the distance between Christianity and Judaism, therefore, you have to traverse the abyss between the New Testament and the oral Torah (the Mishnah, the two Talmuds, the Midrash-compilations). And that has yet to be done, though in the concluding chapter of this book, I shall show how I think we can meet in the middle. As matters now stand, however, it is perfectly obvious that neither religion

has a theory of the other framed in terms that the outsider can share, and this underlines the main point: the two religions have not talked and cannot now talk with one another.

That is entirely to be anticipated, given the character of religious traditions as statements, each in its own framework, of the social order. The task undertaken by religious traditions—to account for the social order by appeal to supernatural truth—integrates and excludes, defining the lines of structure and the outer limits as well. So we may hardly expect religions, viewed in this way, to accomplish what to begin with they do not set out to do. If, then, there is to be the dialogue Jews and Christians today desire, it must emerge from a firm grasp of the character of religions, each seen whole and complete as a statement of the social order and a composition of the social system. Then and only then will the encounter begin: the meeting of two corporate bodies, each certain of itself but also engaged by the other, both compelled by shared interests and common tasks.

In these essays I develop these points in three ways. First, in chapters 1 and 2, I underline that from the very beginnings the Judaic and Christian religious worlds scarcely intersected. While commonly represented as an offspring of “Judaism,” Christianity in fact began as an autonomous and absolute religious system (or set of systems), only after the fact working out its theory of its origins by taking over and making its own some components of the heritage of ancient Israel. I state this matter in very simple terms: different people talking about different things to different people.

In chapters 3 and 4 I proceed from the first to the fourth century and spell out the occasion on which I think Judaism and Christianity did address a common agenda. But even there, it is clear, no dialogue or debate of any kind took place.

Chapters 5 through 8 turn from historical to theological discourse. I take up the negative and the positive side of the same matter in chapter 5. I argue that there is not now and never has been a Judeo-Christian tradition—a point that Arthur A. Cohen registered with great power in his *Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*<sup>1</sup> and that is now widely accepted, and I proceed to spell out theological reasons for that fact. In chapter 6 I briefly work out one of the fundamental reasons for the lack of dialogue, which

is the incapacity of religious systems to think about the other or the outsider—a considerable obstacle indeed.

Chapters 7 and 8, then, mean to point the way forward. The journey will be long and difficult, but if in retrospect I turn out to have shown the way for the first step, that will have been a worthwhile contribution. Only when we recognize difference can we appreciate points shared in common: love of one and the same God, for example; the aspiration to serve and worship that one God; and the absolute requirement, laid upon us all by that one God, to love one another. The “how” of loving one another forms the task of the twenty-first century, but the terrors of the twentieth century have taught us why we must.

The essays gathered here originally served in various contexts, some as addresses, some as papers or essays, some as part of larger research projects. Chapter 3 summarizes my principal statement of the matter, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: Issues of the Initial Confrontation*.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2 served as a lecture at Pontifical Lateran University in January 1989, and at the National Council of Catholic Bishops, Brasilia, in August of that same year. Chapter 6 was my presentation in Warsaw on September 1, 1989, at the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the German invasion in 1939. Chapter 7 began as an address for the *Comunità di S. Egidio* in Bari, Genoa, Navarra, Naples, and elsewhere; I serve as a kind of rabbi—a teacher of Judaism—for that wonderful group of Roman Catholic servants of God through service to humanity. I express thanks to my hosts on these occasions and also to the original copyright holders for permission to reprint these papers.

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Tampa*

Jacob Neusner



## Judaism and Christianity

### *Different People Talking about Different Things to Different People*

The earliest Christians were Jews who saw their religion—Judaism—as normative and authoritative. A natural question troubling believing Christians, therefore, is why Judaism as a whole remains a religion that believes *other* things, or as Christians commonly ask, why did the Jews not “accept Christ”? Or to ask the same question in another way, why, after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is there Judaism at all? Often asked negatively, the question turns on why the Jews do not believe rather than on what they do believe. Yet it is a constructive question even in the context of description and analysis, not religious polemic. For the question leads us deeper into an understanding, not only of the differences between one religion and the other, but also of the traits of the religion under study. In other words, it is a question of comparison—even though the question is not properly framed.

The answer to the question is simple: Judaism and Christianity are completely different religions, not different versions of one religion (that of the “Old Testament” or “the written Torah,” as Jews call it). The two faiths stand for different people talking about different things to different people. Let me spell this out.

The asking of the question, why not? rather than, why so? reflects the long-term difficulty that the one group has had in making sense of the other. My explanation of the difference between Christianity and Judaism rests on that simple fact. I

maintain that each group talked to its adherents about its points of urgent concern, that is, different people talking about different things to different people. Incomprehension marks relations between Judaism and Christianity in the first century, yet the groups were two sectors of the same people.

Each addressed its own agenda, spoke to its own issues, and employed language distinctive to its adherents. Neither exhibited understanding of what was important to the other. Recognizing that fundamental inner-directedness may enable us to interpret the issues and the language used in framing them. For if each party perceived the other through a thick veil of incomprehension, the heat and abuse that characterized much of their writing about one another testifies to a truth different from that which conventional interpretations have yielded. If the enemy is within, if I see only the mote in the other's eye, it matters little whether there is a beam in my own.

The key is this: the incapacity of either group to make sense of the other. We have ample evidence for characterizing as a family quarrel the relationship between the two great religious traditions of the West. Only brothers can hate so deeply, yet accept and tolerate so impassively, as have Judaic and Christian brethren both hated, yet taken for granted, each other's presence. Christianity wiped out unbelievers, but under ordinary circumstances adhered to the doctrine that the Jews were not to be exterminated. Nevertheless, from the first century onward, the echoes of Matthew's "Pharisees as hypocrites" and John's "Jews as murderers" poisoned the Christian conscience. Jews grudgingly recognized that Christianity was not merely another paganism. In their awareness, however, festered Tarfon's allegation that Christians knew God but denied him, knew the Torah but did violence against its meaning. Today we recognize in these implacably negative projections signs of frustration and anger at someone who should know better than to act as he does, a very deep anger indeed.

The authors of the Gospels choose a broad range of enemies for Jesus and hence for the church. One group, the Pharisees, assumes importance in our eyes out of proportion to its place in the Gospels, because the kind of Judaism that emerges from the first century draws heavily upon the methods and values imputed to the

Pharisees in the later rabbinic literature. So let us narrow our discussion from “Judaism,” a word that can stand for just about anything, to that group among first-century Judaisms that in the event contributed substantially to the Judaism that later became normative. And when we speak of Christianity, let us, following the same principle, specify a particular aspect of the rich and various belief of the church represented in the writings of the evangelists. That aspect, the common denominator of the Gospels, finds full expression in the simple claim that Jesus Christ came to save humanity. Hence we shall center on the salvific aspect of the Christianity represented by the Gospels (though not by them alone).

The Judaism defined by the system and method of the Pharisees, whom we meet in connection with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., addressed the issue of the sanctification of Israel, while Christianity, as defined by the evangelists, took up the question of the salvation of Israel. Both were expressions of Israel’s religion; one spoke of one thing, the other of something else. In retrospect, although they bear some traits in common, the two groups appear in no way comparable. Why not? The Gospels portray the first Christians as the family and followers of Jesus. So, as a social group, Christianity represented at its outset in a quite physical, familial, and genealogical way “the body of Christ.” The Pharisees, by contrast, hardly formed a special group at all. It is easier to say what they were not than what they were. How so? Although the Pharisees appear as a political group by the first century in Josephus’s writings about Maccabean politics, the Gospels and the rabbinic traditions concur that what made an Israelite a Pharisee was not exclusively or even mainly politics. The Pharisees were characterized by their adherence to certain cultic rules. They were not members of a family in any natural or supernatural sense. Their social affiliations in no way proved homologous.

Pharisees, some may object, surely appear as a “they,” that is, as a discernible type of Israelite. If they formed some sort of distinct social group, however, and if that group took shape in various places around the country, we nevertheless cannot point to much evidence about its character. We have no documentation of any kind concerning the social traits of the Pharisees as a group.

What we do have is considerable information on certain practices held to characterize and define people who were called Pharisees. If we eat our meals in one way rather than in some other, however, that common practice does not of itself make us a political party or, for that matter, a church: it makes us people who are willing to eat lunch together.

So, as a hypothesis permitting the argument to unfold, let me say that the Christians carried forward one aspect of scripture's doctrine of Israel and the Pharisees another. The Hebrew scriptures represent Israel as one very large family, descended from a single set of ancestors. The Christians adopted that theory of Israel by linking themselves first to the family of Jesus and his adopted sons, the disciples, and second, through him and them to his ancestry—to David and on backward to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (hence the enormous power of the genealogies of Christ). The next step—the spiritualization of that familiar tie into the conception of the church as the body of Christ—need not detain us. Scripture, however, did not restrict itself to the idea of Israel as family; it also defined Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy people. That is the way taken by the Pharisees. Their Israel found commonality in a shared, holy way of life that was required of all Israelites—so scripture held. The Mosaic Torah defined that way of life in both cultic and moral terms, and the prophets laid great stress on the latter. What made Israel holy—its way of life, its moral character—depended primarily on how people lived, not upon their shared genealogy.

Both Christians and Pharisees belonged to Israel but chose different definitions of the term. The Christians saw Israel as a family; the Pharisees saw it as a way of life. The Christians stressed their genealogy; the Pharisees their ethos and ethics. The Christian family held things in common; the holy people held in common a way of life that sanctified them. At issue in the argument between them are positions that scarcely intersect, held by groups whose social self-definitions are incongruent.

Christians were a group comprised of the family of Israel, talking about salvation; Pharisees were a group shaped by the holy way of life of Israel, talking about sanctification. The two neither converse nor argue. For groups unlike one another in what, to begin with, defines and bonds them, groups devoid of a



common program of debate, have no argument. They are different people talking about different things to different people. Yet, as is clear, neither group could avoid recognizing the other. What ensued was not a discussion, let alone a debate, but only a confrontation of people with nothing in common, pursuing programs of discourse that do not in any way intersect. Not much of an argument.

Why were the two groups fundamentally different? Why did each find the other just that—totally other? Certainly we can identify groups within the larger Israelite society through whom the Christian familists and the Pharisaic commensals could have come to compare one another. Since the Essenes of Qumran laid great stress on observing cultic rules governing meals, Pharisees could have debated with them about which rules must be kept, how to do so, and what larger meaning inhered in them. Since the Essenes also emphasized the coming eschatological war and the messianic salvation of Israel, Christians could have conducted an argument with them about who the Messiah would be and when he would come. Christians and Pharisees, we can see, bear comparison in an essentially morphological dimension with the Essenes of Qumran. But in the terms I have defined, they cannot be so compared with one another.

Let me answer the question of the fundamental difference between the two religious traditions by pointing out what really does make parallel the formulation of the Judaism of each. I mean to make a very simple point. Christianity and Judaism each took over the inherited symbolic structure of Israel's religion. Each, in fact, did work with the same categories as the other. But in the hands of each, the available and encompassing classification-system found wholly new meaning. The upshot was two religions out of one, each speaking within precisely the same categories but so radically redefining the substance of these categories that conversation with the other became impossible.

The similarity? Christ embodies God, just as the talmudic sage or rabbi in later times would be seen to stand for the Torah incarnate.

The difference? Christ brought salvation, and for the ages to come, the talmudic sage promised salvation.

Salvation, in the nature of things, concerned the whole of

humanity; sanctification, equally characteristic of its category, spoke of a single nation — Israel. To save, the Messiah saves Israel amid all nations, because salvation categorically entails the eschatological dimension and so encompasses all of history. No salvation, after all, can last only for a little while or leave space for time beyond itself. To sanctify, by contrast, the sage sanctifies Israel in particular. Sanctification categorically requires the designation of what is holy against what is not holy. To sanctify is to set apart. No sanctification can encompass everyone or leave no room for someone in particular to be holy. One need not be “holier than thou,” but the *holy* requires the contrary category, the *not holy*. So, once more, how can two religious communities understand one another when one raises the issue of the sanctification of Israel and the other the salvation of the world? Again, different people talking about different things to different people.

Mutual comprehension becomes still more difficult when the familiar proves strange; when categories we think we understand, we turn out not to grasp at all. Using the familiar in strange ways was, I maintain, the most formidable obstacle to resolving the Jewish-Christian argument in the first century. Both Christians and Pharisees radically revised existing categories. To understand this total transvaluation of values, let us examine the principal categories of the inherited Israelite religion and culture. Once their picture is clear, we can readily grasp how, in Christianity and Judaism, each category undergoes revision both in definition and in content.

We recall the major trends in Judaism that earlier emerged: priests, scribes, and zealots. To these we now return, remembering, of course, that there were other trends of importance as well. The principal Israelite categories are discernible both in the distinct types of holy men whom we know as priests, scribes, and messiahs, and in the definitive activities of cult, school, and government offices, and (ordinarily) the battlefield. Ancient Israel’s heritage yielded the cult with its priests, the Torah with its scribes and teachers, and the prophetic and apocalyptic hope for meaning in history and an eschaton mediated by messiahs and generals. From these derive Temple, school, and (in the apocalyptic expectation) battlefield on earth and in heaven.

To seek a typology of the modes of Israelite piety, we must look