

Revelation

Christianity and Judaism – The Formative Categories

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The Torah and The Bible

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The Torah and the Bible
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Preface

Christianity and Judaism, along with Islam, by their own word seek to reach the same God, but each takes its own path. All three invoke the same authority, Abraham and Sarah, represented by the same Scripture, and all three worship the one and only God. At the same time, each distinguishes itself from the other two, finding important differences at specific points and maintaining that it, and not the others, accurately records what that one, unique God has said. Sustained argument takes place when people who agree on premises and principles also disagree on propositions and conclusions, and therefore Judaism, Islam, and Christianity can sustain — and for determinate periods in the past have indeed mounted — cogent and illuminating arguments against one another.

Among the three, because of the intimacy of their relationship — historical and geographical alike — Judaism and Christianity have mounted the closest dialogue, which in the very recent past has turned cordial. In the past they were uncomprehending and expressed contempt for each other's absurdities. Imputations of guilt, recriminations, not to mention exclusion and even murder, ruined the possibilities for the mutual illumination of self-respecting and mutually honored partners in dialogue. Now, for the first time in the United States and the English-speaking world in general, differences between those two complex sets of religious traditions come under discussion free of rancor and recrimination. Consequently, outlining the points of concurrence and conflict may take place in a spirit of enlightenment and friendship. There arises no need to negotiate, or even place limits upon difference, but only to understand the other more fully and more accurately.

Our purpose here is to compare and contrast the paramount theological categories of Judaism and Christianity, each meaning to inform the other of the main points of the classical theology of his religious tradition on matters of concern to the other. Moreover, each takes seriously and comments on the other's presentation of his position, pointing to likenesses and differences. So we mean to describe, then compare and contrast, the main theological structures on which our respective faiths are constructed.

We do not propose to obscure theological difference or to sidestep profound disagreement in quest of the socially useful goal of amity. To the contrary, we seek a different goal from theological negotiation; neither is "liberal" about his own beliefs, let alone "tolerant" of the choices made by the other. Each believes in his tradition and its affirmations, and each without apology or excuse practices that tradition. Neither proposes to permit long-term friendship and partnership in intellectual projects to impose conditions on the integrity of his faith, nor wants the other to. Both of us are educators and scholars, firm in the conviction that knowledge and understanding affirm our convictions but also demand respect for differing ones. We each seek to grasp the rationality of the views of the other, in full awareness that it is a different rationality.

The present work is one of the three volumes that together constitute the series we have entitled *Christianity and Judaism — The Formative Categories*. In the series, we propose to provide the faithful of both Judaism and Christianity with an informative, factual account of how, in their classical formulations, Christianity and Judaism addressed the same issues and set forth their own distinctive programs and sets of propositions. This is plausible and productive for several reasons.

First, Jews and Christians have lived side by side for nearly two thousand years; each group knows a great deal about the other. We have been neighbors for a long time, and now we are striving to become friends. While neither proposes to surrender the slightest point of distinctiveness, while both affirm the ultimate difference of the one from the other, and while both parties differ about how we know the same God and about what that God has made manifest to us — we concur that we really

do worship the same God. Hence the possibility of educating ourselves about the other emerges: we disagree about the same things while also agreeing in many areas.

Second, because Christianity and Judaism in structure and even system are so much alike, it is possible to compare their theological formulations of the same questions, and the answers. Because they so vigorously disagree on the main points, it is productive and interesting to do this, though we do not mean here to carry forward the centuries-old disputations between the two great religious traditions of the West.

Third, because Christianity and Judaism (along with Islam) today confront as partners the challenges of militant secularism and proselytizing atheism, we find ourselves drawn together to address a common enemy. From the late eighteenth century to nearly our own day, practitioners of Judaism stood by while ethnic Jews allied the Jewish population with militant secularism. Nearly all Jews, including practitioners of Judaism ("Judaists"), took for granted, and with ample cause, that only in a neutral, secular society could Jews survive as a distinct group and that only in a neutral political world could Judaism be practiced. Moreover, communal secularism within Jewry held together the religious sector of the community, the Judaists, and the secular sector, the solely ethnic Jews. Only in the most recent past has a different perspective on the imperatives of the public square reshaped this vision; now a growing minority within the Jewish community finds friends outside not among militant secularists but in Christians of goodwill — Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. With them Judaists make common cause in a number of shared projects, even while carefully agreeing to set aside all theological discourse. The Judaic partner in these books concurs with this minority view. Judaists and Christians, loyal to their respective faiths, recognize urgent, shared commitments to the social order.

Now this very new, but very promising, recognition of mutuality of interest calls for precisely the kinds of books that we — the two authors of these volumes — mean to write together. For mutuality of interest depends in the end upon mutuality of understanding. By this we mean that we simply have to get to know one another better than we now do. The shared labors

for the public interest are best carried out by people who, agreeing to disagree on some things and to work together on others, deeply respect and fully understand the difference that separates them. And this requires knowledge, not the pretense that some subjects lie beyond all discourse. Precisely what the body of Christ means to the Christian, or the election of Israel (the holy people) to the Judaist, what the Torah tells the Judaist and the Bible the Christian, how God is made manifest in this world, that is, is “incarnate,” to both Judaist and Christian — these fundamental points of commonality in structure, conflict, and system require exposition, and we promise this exposition in these books.

Ours is not a relationship of sentimentality or careful avoidance of difference. We do not believe that, at the foundations, we really are the same thing, and neither wants to become like the other or to give up any part of what makes him different from the other in the most profound layers of conviction and calling. The one writer is called to the study of the Torah as his way of life and purpose of being; the other is called to realize his identity as a child of God in the manner of Jesus. But for the one, the study of the Torah, and for the other, the imitation of Christ carry learning beyond the boundaries of the Torah or of Church, respectively. Each finds his work possible only through learning more about the religion of the other. And both maintain that sound learning and authentic understanding of their respective faiths demand attention to the near-at-hand religion of the other.

Still, we work together in a personal, not a theological, partnership. The two authors are longtime friends, and we come in an irenic spirit, genuinely fond of each other and also respectful of the call that each acknowledges God has vouchsafed to the other. We cannot explain how God has spoken in such different terms to so many people. We do not know why God has made us so different from each other — all the while seeking to serve that one and the same true God. But we know that within the traditions that shape our lives and minds we are constrained to recognize that the other is possessed of the same revelation that we revere. Since the Judaic partner understands that Christianity’s “Old Testament” is his “written Torah,” and since the

Christian partner recognizes the same fact, both share the common ground that here God has said the same thing to each, and on that account comparison and contrast form options that we now wish to explore.

Firm in our convictions, neither of us asks the other to surrender his beliefs; we are not going to say which of us, from God's viewpoint, is right. In the fullness of time God will not only decide but make the decision known. For the interim we accept the situation of indeterminacy: each of us is sure he is right, but neither finds the other's assent — therefore, conversion — a condition of mutual education. There is a very practical reason for this shared decision, even while for the two of us it also represents a dimension of religious conviction to leave for God the final choice.

If we do not choose here to debate who is right, it is in some part because that debate has gone on through long centuries, and we doubt much is left to be said. Nor has the debate proved illuminating or productive, when framed in terms of truth and error. But we do wish to provide for faithful believers in Judaism and Christianity a systematic and fair-minded picture of what both religions say about the same things. The differences coincide: Torah or Bible (volume 1), Israel or Church (volume 2), the media of God's this-worldly incarnation (volume 3). In our view religious dialogue, including debate, benefits us all. Our theory — and here we speak only for ourselves personally, and not for the Church or the Torah — is that each has learned something about God that the other must want to know, even while each of us knows full well that the criterion of truth rests, as it has always rested, for Judaism with the Torah, and for Christianity with Christ. But that candid affirmation of difference defines not the end but only the beginning of the dialogue that we believe finally serves the greater glory of the one God.

Both value "the Book," meaning, the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel. What our regard for the Scriptures means should be made clear, since the issues that divide us are theological and not exegetical. Many hold that because Judaism and Christianity share the same Scriptures — the written Torah and the Old Testament being identical for the most part — the debate between them concerns the meaning of those writings. We take

a different view. Our commonalities and differences do not involve only how we read the received and revealed Scriptures but what we know about God, which to be sure is related to those Scriptures. Knowledge of God comes from theology, not from literary criticism or the exegesis of sources.

Therefore, we frame our comparisons in theological terms: God, the body of faith, the presence of God in the world, rather than in the contrasts between one party's reading of pertinent verses of Scripture and the other party's reading of those same verses. The reason is that theology does not recapitulate Scripture; but the exegesis of Scripture does recapitulate theology. The further reason is that for neither party is the Scripture of ancient Israel the sole and complete account of God's revelation to humanity. Christianity requires the New Testament, Judaism, the oral part of the Torah; so the issue is not exegetical at all. The question is how we fill with meaning the shared and common generative categories of the theological structure on which both build their systems: God, Torah, Israel for Judaism; God, Christ, Church for Christianity.

We underline, therefore, that for each of us, Israelite Scripture, though held in common, is contingent, because each of us complements the shared Scriptures with further revelation. Judaism knows these Scriptures as the written part, which, along with the oral part, comprises the one whole Torah that God gave ("revealed") to Moses, our Rabbi, at Mount Sinai. Christianity knows these same Scriptures as the Old Testament, which, along with the New Testament, comprises the Bible, the word of God. Because of the rich heritage of Scripture, with its ethics and morality and its account of what God wants of humanity, who God is, and what we are, many have concluded that a unitary "Judeo-Christian tradition" defines the common religion of the West; Judaism and Christianity then are supposed to differ on details but concur on the main points. The opposite is the fact, and here we propose a different reading of the relationship between the two heirs of ancient Israel in the West.

Specifically, we spell out how, because they concur on so much, the two religious traditions differ in a very explicit and precise way. They talk about the same things; they invoke the same evidence; they rest their respective cases on the same

premises of thought and rules of argument. And they profoundly differ. They divide on precisely what unites them, and their shared agenda of faith in and love for God accounts for the vigor and precision of their disagreements. Judaism and Christianity identify the same principal and generative categories for the formulation of the religious life: revelation, social order, and the encounter with God. In Judaism these categories bear the titles "Torah," "Israel," and "God in this world," which, in the classical documents of formative Judaism, encompasses diverse ways in which we meet God here and now. In Christianity, the counterparts are "the Bible," "the Church," and "Christ, the Word of God incarnate."

In these three volumes, therefore, we identify and spell out in an elementary way the three principal areas of communion among, and therefore conflict between, the heirs of the same Scripture:

1. how and what we know about God, that is, the character of revelation;
2. who constitutes the people to whom God is made manifest, that is, the definition of the body of the faithful; and
3. where and through whom we meet God in this world.

Each religious tradition sets forth its definition of revelation; each defines the social order to which God has spoken, called into being in God's service; and each knows where and how, in this world, we meet God in human encounter.

We focus on the classical and definitive documents of the two traditions and on their principal categories of concern. For Judaism this involves the following: the Torah, as it took shape in the first six centuries of the Common Era, as the source of revelation; the same writings' account of who and what is "Israel"; and those documents' exposition of ways in which, in everyday life, God enters into the situation of ordinary people: how we meet God this morning, right here. For Christianity, the counterpart categories are the Bible (including the New Testament); the Church as the body of Christ; and the disclosure of God's healing and judging power by means of Christ. Those three

structuring topics are developed in the New Testament so completely that Christians embrace those texts as normative. Both authors elect to limit discussion to the classical writings, in the clear recognition that both religions unfolded through time, so that later writers expanded and recast the classical definitions and even some of the categories. We maintain that, however things changed through time, the classical formulation remains paramount.

We mean to speak to Jews and Christians who want better to understand their own religious traditions. In our view, when we identify the issues that theological teachings address, and understand the alternative positions on these issues that classical thinkers have adopted, we treat religion as vital. We cease to regard our views as self-evident and recognize that the religious decisions made by Jews and Christians represent choices made in full consideration of alternatives. Then our respective religions take on weight and consequence and become living choices among alternative truths. Only by seeing the options that have faced the framers of Judaism and Christianity in their classical writings shall we understand how, in full rationality and with entire awareness of issues and options, the founders of our respective traditions took the paths they did. When religion is reduced to platitudes and banalities, lifelessly repeating things deemed to be self-evident, it loses all consequence and forms a mere chapter in the conventions of culture. But from Judaism and Christianity, for centuries stretching backward beyond counting, faithful Israel, on the one side, and the living body of Christ, on the other, drew sustenance and found the strength to endure.

Let us not at the end lose sight of the remarkable power of these religions in times past and in our own day. The world did not make life easy for Judaism through its history in the West; and in the age of militant secularism and violently anti-Christian Communism, Christianity has found itself back in the catacombs. The century that now closes has afforded to the faith of Israel and of Christ no honor, and to the Israelite and to the Christian no respect by reason of loyalty to that vocation. Christianity outlived Communism in the Soviet Union and its colonies. At the sacrifice of home and property, even at the price

of life itself, Israel resisted the world's corrosive insistence that it cease to exist and has reaffirmed its eternal calling. Whatever the choice of private persons, that social order formed by Israel, on the one side, and the Church of Jesus Christ, on the other, has endured against it all, despite it all, through all time and change. Defying fate in the certainty of faith in God's ultimate act of grace is the one thing God cannot have commanded, but it is what, in times of terrible stress, Judaic and Christian faithful have given freely and of their own volition. God can have said, and did say, "Serve me," but God could only beseech, "And trust me too."

Even God cannot coerce trust. Only Israel and the Church could give what God could ask but not compel: the gifts of the heart, love and trust, for which the loving God yearns, which only the much-loved Israel or those who have been called into the communion of the Church can yield freely, of their own volition. And that is what Israel, in response to Sinai, and the Church, in response to the empty tomb, willingly gave, and by their loyal persistence freely give today. These facts of human devotion tell us the power of the faiths that in these pages meet for a theological comparison. The stakes then are very high indeed.

The joint authors express their thanks to their respective academies, Bard College and the University of South Florida, for ongoing support for their scholarly work. At these academies, each has found ideal conditions for a life of learning, and neither takes for granted the gifts that he receives in these centers of higher learning. Both express thanks, also, to Dr. Harold Rast, Publisher of Trinity Press International, for his commitment to this project and his guidance in bringing it to fruition. If we achieve our goal of a sustained and illuminating theological encounter, it is because of his guidance and long-term commitment to our project.

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Introduction

The Torah and the Bible

Both Judaism and Christianity define truth by appeal to revelation, and each religious tradition knows precisely the locus of revelation. Christianity finds the word of God in the Bible, meaning the Old Testament and the New Testament. From antiquity to our own day Judaism has identified in the Torah the same complete and exhaustive statement of God's will. Furthermore, the authoritative representation of the Torah of Sinai in a coherent statement is located in a single protean document, the Talmud of Babylonia, or Bavli. That document, created in the seventh century C.E., forms the summa of the Torah of Sinai, joining as it does the written Torah, encompassing what Christianity knows as the Old Testament, and the oral Torah, commencing with the Mishnah. So the Talmud's presentation of the entire Torah, oral and written, forms in the system of Judaism the counter to the Bible, hence, the comparison of the Bible and the Bavli.

The comparison rests on long centuries of tradition and practice. What Christianity found in Scripture and tradition, Judaism found in the Torah as set forth by the Talmud. Together with their commentaries, formed into treasures of tradition over time, the Bible, for Christianity, and the Bavli, for Judaism, have formed the court of final appeal in issues of doctrine and for Judaism normative instruction on correct deed as well. Commentaries, paraphrases, and amplifications have carried out the exegetical elaboration.

This introduction was written by Jacob Neusner and revised by Bruce S. Chilton.

Furthermore, the pattern of truth that, for the Bible and for the Bavli alike, served to state the worldview and way of life for Church and "Israel," respectively, was endowed with the status of revealed truth; the standing of tradition was granted to the ethos and ethics of the social entity.

But, while the comparison is not only justified but demanded, still, the Bavli and the Bible are quite different kinds of documents. And in the differences we see the choices people made when confronting very nearly the same problem. Specifically, when the Bible was coming into being for Christianity, the processes of tradition were doing the work that ultimately yielded the Bavli. From the second through the fourth centuries for Orthodox, Catholic Christianity, and from the second through the seventh centuries for the Judaism of the oral and written Torah, the labor of formulation and systematic statement went forward. Judaic and Christian intellectuals were sorting out the complex problems of matching their modern worlds to the words of the ancients. Both groups of intellectuals then claimed to present enduring traditions, a fundament of truth revealed of old. And, as a matter of fact, both succeeded. The Bible, which is the creation of the Orthodox, Catholic Church, and the Bavli, the gift of the sages of the academies, indeed governed Christianity and Judaism, respectively, from the time of their closure to the present day. And no other, later writing ever competed with either document for authority or standing.

But both sets of thinkers also articulated systematic and philosophical statements, which begin in first principles and rise in steady and inexorable logic to final conclusions; these are compositions of proportion, balance, cogency, and order. They are cogent systems, whole and coherent statements. They covered the principal components of the social order — the way of life, the worldview, the theory of the social entity that characterized (at least in the minds of the theologians) the life of Israel or Church. While neither religion imagined that a single book could write down that protean system and structure that God had called into being, both insisted that a single document to begin with formed the authoritative statement of the faith.

To understand the work facing the framers of the Bavli, we

have to know what writings they held to be revealed. It is not commonly understood that Judaism is not the religion of the Old Testament; it is the religion of the Torah, which encompasses an open canon, an unending process of divine revelation. The Torah, of course, begins with the Scriptures of ancient Israel, roughly comparable to the Old Testament as defined by Protestant Christianity. But the Mishnah is included in the Torah of Sinai; this is a philosophical law code produced around 200 C.E. that formed the basis for the practical government that the Judaic political authorities exercised in both the Land of Israel ("Palestine") and Babylonia; and, further, the composite of commentaries, generally in episodic form, to Scripture and the Mishnah that accumulated from the second through the fourth or fifth centuries was deemed an authoritative part of the revelation of Sinai.

Obviously, these represent diverse documents. Scripture is written in a Hebrew different from that of the Mishnah, for example; and commentaries take a form quite separate from the language of a systematic statement of law and theology, found in the Pentateuch, on the one side, and the Mishnah, on the other. Then how are they all held together and represented as a single coherent statement? That is to say, what makes these writings not only a source of valid information but a single, systematic, coherent statement, what we should call "Judaism"?

A simple question faced these heirs of the Pentateuch: How to relate the three? The Bavli's authors' answer was to write a commentary on the Mishnah and on the Scriptures alike; they understood that they would be forming a final, coherent, and cogent statement. True, the "commentary" that bore the burden of the Bavli's system would address only those passages that the authors of the Bavli found consequential. But that independent act of selectivity formed a principal intellectual labor of system building.

Christian theologians confronted a comparable problem: how to compose a diverse collection of writings into a single, coherent formation. In the case of the Christian address to the same issue, where do we look for a counterpart labor of system building through selectivity? The answer, of course, is dictated by the form of the question. We turn to the work of canonization

of available writings into the Bible. There we see the theologians' work of making choices, setting forth a single statement. When we compare the systemic structures represented by the Bavli and the Bible, therefore, we can appreciate how two quite distinct groups of intellectuals worked out solutions to the same problem, and did so, as a matter of fact, in very nearly the same way, namely, by making reasoned choices. Both groups of authors set forth systems of thought, at the same time attaching to their systems the claim of tradition: God's Torah to Moses at Sinai, for Judaism; the pattern of Christian truth, for Christianity; hence the comparison of Bavli and Bible.

But then the points of difference are determined by the shared morphology, since, as a matter of obvious fact, the Bible and the Bavli are very different ways of setting forth a system. Each represents its components in a distinctive manner, the one by preserving their autonomy and calling the whole a system, the other by obscuring their originally autonomous and independent character and imparting to the whole the form of tradition. The upshot may be simply stated. The Bavli presents a system and to it, through the operative logic, imputes the standing of tradition. The Bible sets forth diverse and unsystematic traditions, received writings from many places, and to those traditions, through the act of canonization, imputes the character and structure of a system.

Let us now consider the literary media in which the two communities of intellectuals set forth their system as traditions or their traditions as system. We wish specifically to see how each has worked out its own system, what logic of discourse it has chosen, and, finally, how the system is situated in relationship to prior systematic statements.

The Bavli: Imputing Tradition to System

In the case of the Bavli, our point of entry is the identification of the odd mixture of logics utilized by the framers of the system as a whole. By "logics" we mean the ways by which statements cohere, that is, the modes of thought that explain how two or more sentences form a cogent statement. In simple language,