

I

The New Testament *The First to the Early Second Century*

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Jewish–Christian relations is as old as Christianity. Jews and Judaism are much older, of course. But as soon as there were Christians, they had to reckon with Jews, and Jews with them. In the *very* earliest period, in fact, more or less all ‘Christians’ were Jews, and the name ‘Christian’ did not exist yet. What we call Christianity was, in the beginning, just one minor messianic sect within the Judaism of the early Roman empire. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish teacher and wonderworker from Galilee, latterly acclaimed as messiah by his (likewise Galilean, Jewish) band of disciples. After Jesus’ execution by the Roman provincial administration under Tiberius (early 30s CE), this band of disciples continued to teach his message of the kingdom of God, and other, latecomer messengers (also Jewish: people like Paul, Barnabas, Andronicus, Junia and Apollos) joined them.

By the reign of Nero in the 60s CE – about a generation after the death of Jesus – many, perhaps most, participants in this new Christ religion were gentiles, a demographic shift whose importance is hard to overstate. But even in the 60s, the name ‘Christianity’ was not yet current. These people were just gentiles-in-Christ, gentile devotees of the Jewish God and his son, the risen messiah Jesus. The name ‘Christian’ first occurs in sources from around the turn of the second century CE (1 Pet. 4:16; Acts 11:26, 26:28; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63–64; Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16). In some of these sources it is used of people living in the mid-first century, but this may be anachronistic, since sources from the mid-first century do not yet use, or show any knowledge of, the term. The abstract noun ‘Christianity’ is a little later still, a coinage of the Bishop Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century (Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans* 3:3; *Epistle to the Magnesians* 10:1–3; *Epistle to the Philadelphians* 6:1).

When Ignatius coins the Greek word *Christianismos* (‘Christianity’), he coins it, tellingly, in contrast to *Ioudaismos* (‘Judaism’). Already in Ignatius, Christian self-understanding is dependent on and derivative from a concept of Jews and Judaism. Ancient Christian thinkers from Ignatius onwards were deeply invested in at least one aspect of (what we call) Jewish–Christian relations because, given the actual historical origins of Christianity, Christians did not know who they were, religiously, apart from Jews and Judaism. By contrast, Jewish thinkers of this early period (the *tannaim*, in particular) went on their merry

way without thinking of Christians most of the time, if their literary sources are any indication. Only in the fourth century and later, when Christian state power was ascendant, did Jewish literary sources begin to pay reciprocal attention to Christians, once it became politically urgent to do so.

This late antique encounter between rabbis and church fathers is documented in Chapters 2 and 3 below. In the present chapter, however, we are concerned only with the very earliest period, the first to early second centuries CE. The documents in this chapter differ from those in all the subsequent chapters inasmuch as they come from a time when the terms 'Jewish' and 'Christian' did not yet mark out separate identities. Of the twenty-three documents in this chapter, twenty-two are excerpted from texts in the canonical New Testament, and one comes from the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus. None of these documents calls itself 'Christian', and only two of the authors represented here even know of the word 'Christian'. Most, perhaps all, of the authors of these documents were Jews. All of them – except Josephus – also venerated Christ, but it does not follow that they considered themselves 'Christian'. That is our later label for them, not their own.

As we shall see, this change of labels has yielded some strange (and sometimes tragic) moments in the subsequent history of interpretation. For although most of the authors of the texts comprising the New Testament were Jewish, almost all of their readers down the centuries have been gentile Christians. And when gentile Christians in the second, fifth, sixteenth or twenty-first century make new, canonical, Christian meanings out of these ancient Jewish texts, these new meanings are often many miles away from the original meanings, often (though not always) in a conspicuously anti-Jewish direction. In the commentary accompanying each respective document below, we shall try to unpick these layers of interpretation: to show both what sense the document makes in its original, first-century context and also the senses it has made to later readers down the centuries.

As regards the history of Jewish–Christian relations, then, the documents in this chapter have a twofold function. In their first-century context, they are artefacts of what we could, with only slight anachronism, call Jewish–Christian relations in that period: the encounter between the earliest Christ-believers (many of them Jewish, some gentile) and the Jewish majority. Also in their first-century context, these documents attest the historically unusual combination of traditional Jewish piety and Christ-devotion in a single Jewish thinker, as in the case of the apostle Paul, John of Patmos or the author of the Gospel of Matthew. But the documents in this chapter also have an equally important second function: they are canonical resources for a great deal of later reflection on Jewish–Christian relations from antiquity to the present. In this latter capacity, these documents will pop up again and again throughout this book, as snippets of them are picked up and reused by church fathers, rabbis, councils, polemicists, theologians and other interested parties.

The ideas of these various interested parties are products of their own widely varying historical contexts, as the later chapters in this volume amply demonstrate. But the seeds of some of these ideas, at least, appear already in the texts collected in the New Testament. For example: although supersessionism proper – the theological idea that the

church succeeds and replaces Israel in God's affections – is arguably a second-century innovation, several of our first-century texts invoke the prophet Jeremiah's notion (Jer. 31:31–4) of a 'new covenant' that rectifies some supposed deficiency in the 'old covenant' made with Israel at Mount Sinai; and this contrast of old and new covenants has a long afterlife in many Christian supersessionist theologies. Interestingly, however, the first-century texts do not yet imagine the related idea – which we find earliest attested in Justin Martyr (see Chapter 2, p. 75) – of an ostensible 'true, spiritual Israel' (comprising the church) in contrast to 'carnal Israel' (comprising Jews). Another example: although the idea of a perpetual pan-Jewish bloodguilt for the killing of Jesus is a later Christian innovation, at least one New Testament text (Matthew 27:15–26; see document 16 below) does attribute the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE to God's judgement upon that generation of Jews who assented to the crucifixion of Jesus; and later bloodguilt theorists were all too happy to point to the Gospel in support of their claims. One last, more edifying, example: all of the many variations on a 'family tree' model of Jewish–Christian relations are indebted – most of them knowingly and expressly – to one extraordinarily influential first-century text: the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans, which figures God's people as an olive tree, with Israel as the natural branches and the gentiles as branches artificially grafted in (see document 6 below). Here, too, as in the uglier examples noted above, a first-century text provides the fodder for centuries' worth of Jewish–Christian engagement.

In the commentaries and bibliographies that follow, readers will encounter quite a lot of modern New Testament scholarship, the results of which we have tried to make as clear and accessible as possible. For most of its roughly 250-year history, modern New Testament scholarship has been a rather niche project undertaken by gentile Christian academics working in historically Christian universities. Before the mid-twentieth century, there were only relatively rare exceptions to this rule, but in the decades since the academic study of the New Testament has significantly expanded to include a wide variety of non-sectarian institutions and non-Christian scholars. It has, in short, become a much more *public* discipline than it once was, undertaken by academics of all faiths and none. One upshot of this development is that today many of the world's leading scholars of the New Testament – Adele Reinhartz, Amy-Jill Levine, Paula Fredriksen, Mark Nanos, Yair Furstenberg and others, all of whom appear in the bibliographies in this chapter – are themselves Jewish, which has made the whole discourse around Jews and Judaism in the New Testament a great deal more intellectually honest and morally accountable than it has often been in years past.

Not unrelated to this demographic shift in the field has been the rediscovery – especially in post-Holocaust scholarship – of the Jewishness of the New Testament itself. There were occasional, praiseworthy exceptions in older scholarship, but the dominant tradition by far was to read the New Testament *over against* Judaism, as a foil or a rival. Historians of the New Testament today, however, recognise most or all of the texts comprising the New Testament as originally Jewish works, written by Jewish authors, about Jewish ideas, for Jewish audiences (as well as some gentile audiences). The transformation

of these Jewish texts into Christian scripture – important as it was and is – was a later, secondary development. Groundbreaking studies like Krister Stendahl's 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' (1963) (see Chapter 8, p. 418), Geza Vermes' *Jesus the Jew* (1973) and E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) paved the way for this new consensus, a monument to which is Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler's remarkable *Jewish Annotated New Testament* (2011) (see also Chapter 9, p. 499). The influence of this sea change in scholarship will be very evident in the commentaries below.

Here it will be helpful to say a word about the organisation of the documents and commentaries in this chapter. Many people are accustomed to seeing New Testament texts in their received *canonical* order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians and so on. In this chapter, however, we discuss our excerpted documents in (their most likely, reconstructed) *chronological* order: Paul (40s–50s CE), Mark (70s CE), Matthew (80s–90s CE) and so on. The reason for this is that some of our documents almost certainly know, build on, or even react against other, earlier ones. So we can only see the relations between them clearly if we take them in the order in which they were probably written. This is the approach taken in the other chapters of this *Documentary History* as well (with the exception of Chapter 3, for reasons explained in the Introduction to that chapter; see p. 118), so it makes good sense to follow it here. Readers who may at first find this disorientating will soon see how it makes a lot of things fall into place.

Documents 1–7 below are all excerpted from the undisputed letters of Paul. Whereas many of the texts comprising the New Testament are anonymous, the undisputed letters of Paul permit us at least a degree of prosopography: the possibility of connecting up certain texts to a particular, known historical person. Importantly for our topic, too, Paul is the only New Testament author who certainly wrote before 70 CE, the year the Roman army sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple, and a fundamental watershed in Jewish history. That also puts him in the first generation of the Christ groups, a period when some – including Paul – still expected the arrival of the kingdom of God and the end of all things within their own lifetime. In a number of passages, Paul reflects directly on the question of the relation of Israel to the gentiles in the kingdom of God, and these reflections have been put to quite diverse uses in the history of Jewish–Christian relations. Document 8, an excerpt from the Letter to the Hebrews, was not written by Paul but is indebted to him, and was received by many ancient Christians as if it were by Paul, hence its inclusion here.

From there we move to the Gospels, taking them in chronological order. Documents 9–12 are excerpted from Mark, the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, written around 70 CE. Mark is the earliest extant narrative of the life of Jesus (about which Paul says very little), written some four decades or so after the events. It is thus a record of the time about which it purports to write, *c.* 30 CE, as well as the time when it was written, *c.* 70 CE. Mark is important both as a literary work in its own right and as the principal source for subsequent Gospel writers: certainly Matthew and Luke, and very probably John as well. Documents 13–16 are excerpted from the Gospel of Matthew, written sometime in the last quarter of

the first century. Matthew's many additions to Mark include, among other things, some quite loaded passages pertaining to Jews and Judaism, all of which are discussed below.

With document 17, we take an intermission from the Gospels and consider an excerpt from the Apocalypse of John (also known as the Book of Revelation), a text written around the same time as the Gospel of Matthew – hence its chronological place here – by a Jewish author, John of Patmos, for an audience of probably Jewish Christ-followers. Documents 18–20 are excerpted from a structurally unusual book which modern critics call Luke–Acts: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, which were originally two volumes of a single work by one anonymous author (whom tradition calls 'Luke'). This 'Luke' was either a Jew himself or an exceptionally well-informed gentile, and he draws upon Mark and possibly Matthew as well, to tell the life of Jesus and his first-generation disciples. Documents 21 and 22 come from the Gospel of John, the fourth and most literarily distinctive of the canonical Gospels. Its author, who probably uses at least Mark as a source, is – like Luke, but in his own quite different way – tremendously well-informed about Jews and Judaism (perhaps as an ethnic insider) but also writes some very harsh polemic about Jews, as we explain in the commentaries below.

The one excerpt from Josephus (document 23), the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum*, is the obvious outlier; it is the only document in this chapter that is not part of the canonical New Testament. But it is a very important text, and it makes better sense here than anywhere else. Like the other documents in this chapter, it is a late first- or early second-century Jewish text about Jesus of Nazareth, even if its author was not a follower of Jesus. What is more, arguably at least one New Testament author (the author of Luke–Acts) actually knew and used Josephus. For all these reasons, we include Josephus alongside Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke and the rest as a witness to this earliest chapter in the history of Jewish–Christian relations.

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DOCUMENTS

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I

1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 (mid-first century CE)

Text

^{2:13} We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins, but wrath has overtaken them at last.

Commentary

Paul, apostle of Christ to the gentiles, was born around the turn of the era, a near-contemporary to Philo of Alexandria and Jesus of Nazareth. The Acts of the Apostles says that his Hebrew name was Saul and that he was from Tarsus in Cilicia, Asia Minor, but his own letters say nothing about either of these biographical questions. He is simply Paul, Greek-speaking diaspora Jew and apostle of Christ. The First Letter to the Thessalonians is probably the earliest of his extant letters, making it also the earliest text in the New Testament – written in the 40s CE and sent to the assembly of gentiles-in-Christ at Thessalonike in Macedonia. (The Greek word *ekklesia*, usually translated as 'church', is an old Greek civic term meaning 'assembly'. The 'assemblies' to which Paul writes are, on the evidence of the letters themselves, mostly or entirely composed of gentiles who have been baptised into Christ.) In this letter, Paul praises them for turning away from idols to the true God (1 Thess. 1:9–10) and encourages them not to despair for their comrades who die while they wait for the appearance of Christ (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

In the document here excerpted, Paul draws a parallel between the social opprobrium suffered by the Thessalonians-in-Christ from their (Thessalonian) neighbours and that suffered by the Judeans-in-Christ from their (Judean) neighbours. In Macedonia as in the Jewish homeland, he says, the Christ assemblies find themselves harassed by outsiders. In Judea, however, those outsiders are of course Judeans (or Jews, since there is only one Greek word, *Ioudaioi*, underlying both English words). Paul then itemises a number of bad things they have supposedly done: killing Jesus, killing the prophets, expelling Paul, displeasing God, hindering Paul preaching to gentiles, filling up the measure of their sins. (This lattermost phrase is an old biblical idiom for doing wrong to so great an extent that God's wrath is forced to intervene [e.g., Gen. 15:16; Dan. 8:23].)

There is a famous problem to do with the so-called antisemitic comma at the end of v. 14, which is printed in the widely used NRSV translation (though not in the NRSVue translation given above): 'you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets' (NRSV). Punctuated thus, the text seems to suggest that *the Jews* – without qualification – killed Jesus and the prophets, a notion that would feed into the later Christian myth of Jews as Christ-killers. This, together with a common reading of v. 16 – 'wrath has overtaken them at last' – as an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (several years after the death of Paul!), has persuaded some that this passage is a later interpolation: not an original part of Paul's letter, but a gloss inserted by an anti-Jewish Christian scribe. That hypothesis could be true, but there are no manuscripts of 1 Thessalonians that lack the offending verses. It could be, then, that the passage is original to Paul, but that it refers not to all Jews, but only to those Judeans who opposed Jesus and the apostles in the earliest days of the Christ movement. The wrath overtaking them, in that case, would refer not to the destruction of 70 CE but to some lesser, local catastrophe.

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2

Galatians 2:15–3:14, 4:21–5:10 (mid-first century CE)

Text

^{2:15} We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not

by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.¹⁷ But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!¹⁸ But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ,²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

^{3:1} You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!² The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?³ Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?⁴ Did you experience so much for nothing? – if it really was for nothing.⁵ Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?

⁶ Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ [Gen. 15:6]⁷ so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.⁸ And the scripture, foreseeing that God would reckon as righteous the gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the gentiles shall be blessed in you.’ [Gen. 12:3; 22:18]⁹ For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

¹⁰ For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.’ [Deut. 27:26]¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law, for ‘the one who is righteous will live by faith.’ [Hab. 2:4]¹² But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, ‘Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.’ [Lev. 18:5]¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ [Deut. 21:23] –¹⁴ in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith [...]

^{4:21} Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law?²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by an enslaved woman and the other by a free woman.²³ One, the child of the enslaved woman, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise.²⁴ Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery.²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.²⁶ But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother.²⁷ For it is written,

‘Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,
burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs,
for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous
than the children of the one who is married.’ [Isa. 54:1]

²⁸ Now you, my brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, like Isaac. ²⁹ But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. ³⁰ But what does the scripture say? ‘Drive out the enslaved woman and her child, for the child of the enslaved woman will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’ [Gen. 21:10] ³¹ So then, brothers and sisters, we are children, not of an enslaved woman but of the free woman. ^{5:1} For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

² Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that, if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³ Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. ⁴ You who want to be reckoned as righteous by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

⁷ You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? ⁸ Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹ A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. ¹⁰ I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.

Commentary

Paul’s Letter to the Galatians is arguably the single most important New Testament text for later forms of Christian *theological* anti-Judaism. The letter’s stark binaries of law versus promise, works of the law versus Christ–faith and flesh versus spirit have been used by many Christian readers (especially Martin Luther and his Protestant heirs) to frame an equally stark binary between Judaism and Christianity. The irony here is that Paul himself, in the letter, rages not against Judaism but against another form of (what we moderns would call) Christianity. Galatians is another relatively early letter of Paul, sent in the 50s CE to a cluster of gentile Christ-assemblies (*ekklesiai*) in Galatia in central Asia Minor. The whole burden of the letter is to dissuade the gentile, Christ-believing men in the assembly from undergoing Jewish proselyte circumcision (thus the warning in Gal. 5:2, near the end of the excerpt above: ‘if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you’). In between Paul’s earlier, in-person visit to Galatia and the writing of the letter, some other apostles of Christ had come telling the men in the assemblies that they should undergo circumcision in order to become proper sons of Abraham. Paul hears of this and writes a letter angrily insisting that they not do so.

In Galatians 2, the beginning of the excerpt above, Paul makes one major point of the letter: that justification (Paul’s technical term for transferral into the perfect righteousness of the eschaton) comes only from Christ, the messiah, not from the law of Moses. The law of Moses is righteous, he says, but it cannot transfer anyone into the age to come (what Paul calls the ‘inheritance’ that God promised to father Abraham); only the messiah can do that. This is the point on which he thinks the rival apostles are misleading people. Galatians 3

comprises a dense cluster of arguments from proof-texts in the Torah and prophets. Paul claims that the Torah itself testifies that it was only meant to legislate for people who sin and die. But Habakkuk prophesies a kind of righteousness from faith by which people will live forever. The messiah ‘redeem[s] us from the curse of the law’ – namely, the curse of dying – by dying himself and then rising again, thereby triggering the new creation. In Galatians 4, Paul draws an elaborate allegory (similar in form, but not in content, to Philo of Alexandria’s allegorical readings of Genesis) about Ishmael being born to Hagar and Isaac to Sarah. The proselyte-circumcised Galatians-in-Christ are like Ishmael the slave, Paul says, while the foreskinned gentiles-in-Christ are like Isaac the heir. Both are sons of Abraham, strictly speaking, but only the latter stand to inherit God’s promise, which for Paul is the immortal life of the spirit (Gal. 3:14). Later interpreters, by using categories and contexts that were unavailable to Paul, have often read this as a supersessionist allegory for Judaism and Christianity (thus, e.g., Marius Victorinus, Chrysostom, Jerome, Thomas Aquinas, Luther). With hindsight, we can see how these Christian thinkers made such an interpretation of this text, but it is historically as well as morally dubious.

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3

2 Corinthians 3:5–16 (mid-first century CE)

Text

^{3:5} Not that we are qualified of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our qualification is from God, ⁶ who has made us qualified to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’s face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, ⁸ how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? ⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! ¹⁰ Indeed, what once had glory has in this respect lost its glory because of the greater glory, ¹¹ for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!

¹² Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with complete frankness, ¹³ not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory

that was being set aside.¹⁴ But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, the same veil is still there; it is not unveiled since in Christ it is set aside.¹⁵ Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds,¹⁶ but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Commentary

In this excerpt from his Second Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul commends himself to his audience of gentiles-in-Christ by identifying his own apostolic work as the fulfilment of the prophet Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant:³¹ 'The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors [...] ³³ [T]his is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts' (Jer. 31:31–3, NRSVue). Paul believes that his own announcement of Christ *is* this new covenant, and he contrasts it – following the contrast drawn by Jeremiah – with the covenant at Mount Sinai.

The covenant at Mount Sinai Paul calls the 'the ministry of death', 'the ministry of condemnation' and 'the old covenant'. Indeed, it is from this passage – via the north African Latin Christian writer Tertullian – that Christians get their habit of referring to the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh as 'the Old Testament', *testamentum* being the Latin gloss for 'covenant' here. Like Jeremiah, Paul imagines that under the new covenant people will be perfectly righteous all the time. (Thus there will be no more death or condemnation, as there was under the 'ministry of death' and 'ministry of condemnation'.) But whereas for Jeremiah that miraculous change lay in a utopian future, Paul is convinced that it is a present reality, and that *he himself* is bringing it about. This would become a puzzle for later Christian interpreters, who realised – as Paul did not – that the present age of sin and death is still, sadly, very much with us. Thus many Christian readers took, and still take, this text to be about not the perfect age to come but rather a current 'Christian' covenant with God, one supposedly more glorious than the covenant at Mount Sinai.

Which is why this text has been a bugbear in Jewish–Christian relations, because, interpreted in the way just described, it strikes a plainly supersessionist and triumphalist note. That is not really what Paul meant, but that fact hardly matters, since it is the history of interpretation that determines a text's impact in the world. Christians (who are, almost all of them, gentiles) have long used this passage to tell Jews that they, Jews, do not know how to read their own scriptures (quoting Paul: 'to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, the same veil is still there'). Some recent Christian statements have done better, as, for instance, the 2001 Pontifical Biblical Commission document *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (see Appendix to Part III, p. 528), which comments on our passage: 'Paul clearly states that "the very words of God were entrusted" to the Israelites (Rm 3:2) and he takes it for granted that these words of God could be read and understood before the coming of Christ. Although he speaks of a blindness of the Jews

with regard to “the reading of the Old Testament” (2 Co 3:14), he does not mean a total incapacity to read, only an inability to read it in the light of Christ.’ This interpretation is far more humane, not to mention historically accurate, than many earlier Christian ones. But even so, arguably a degree of offence remains in this text no matter how one reads it.

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4

Romans 2:25–9 (mid-first century CE)

Text

^{2:25} Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you are a transgressor of the law your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if the uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then the physically uncircumcised person who keeps the law will judge you who, though having the written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law. ²⁸ For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision something external and physical. ²⁹ Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not the written code. Such a person receives praise not from humans but from God.

Commentary

This document is one of several which have caused considerable trouble in Jewish–Christian relations due to poor translations, including, in this case, the NRSVue quoted here (though at least it improves on its predecessors the RSV and NRSV). In most standard English versions of the Bible, this text seems to actually *redefine* who is a Jew and who is circumcised. It seems to suggest that Jewishness and circumcision are inner, spiritual realities, not outward, empirical, bodily marks of identity. It seems to suggest, in fact, that the only *real* ‘Jew’ and the only *truly* ‘circumcised’ person is a Christian. To make such a claim would be a barefaced appropriation of Jewish identity for Christians, a move which many Christian thinkers down the centuries have been all too happy to make.

But that is not actually what Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans. In this letter to a group of gentiles-in-Christ at Rome, where Paul hopes to visit and be warmly received, he argues that the only viable way for gentiles to be put right by the Jewish God is through trust in the messiah, not – as some gentiles-in-Christ themselves argued – through proselyte

circumcision and adoption of the law of Moses. In Romans 2, Paul reasons with a hypothetical gentile man who has gone and got himself circumcised in order to demonstrate his devotion to the Jewish God. Paul says that such a man would have been far better off remaining in his naturally foreskinned state and keeping only those commandments that pertain to gentiles (similar to the rabbinic ‘Noahide commandments’). Jews, for their part, should indeed seek the moral circumcision of the heart, as Moses taught (Deut. 10:16, 30:6), but a proselyte’s ostentatious circumcision of his flesh will not win him any praise from God.

The key verses 28–9, then, are better translated as follows: ‘For it is not the Jew on display, nor the circumcision on display in the flesh, but the Jew in secret, and the circumcision of the heart in *pneuma* [“spirit”] not letter, whose praise comes from God rather than humans.’ The big idea – which this document has in common with the classical Hebrew prophets, the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and the ethics of *Pirkei Avot* (the collection of rabbinic moral aphorisms in the Mishnah) – is that God sees the heart and rewards sincere piety. Our text, which has been used as one plank in the platform of supersessionist Christian theologies of a ‘true, spiritual Israel’, actually says nothing of the sort, as recent research has begun to recognise. Those supersessionist theologies are still current in some Christian circles, but now they have to compete with other, more humane theologies of religious coexistence.

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5

Romans 9:1–8 (mid-first century CE)

Text

^{9:1} I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own brothers and sisters, my own flesh and blood. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

⁶ It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all those descended from Israel are Israelites, ⁷ and not all of Abraham’s children are his descendants, but ‘it is through

Isaac that descendants shall be named for you' [Gen. 21:12].⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

Commentary

This document comprises the opening verses of Romans 9, while the following document (no. 6) comprises the concluding movement of Romans 11. These two are bookends of a lengthy section of Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapters 9–11, which is the single longest discourse on Jews and Judaism anywhere in the New Testament. It is not, however, an abstract treatise on Jews and Judaism, but rather a quite contingent reflection, by the (Jewish) apostle Paul, on the real-time successes and failures of the apostles' announcement of the risen Jesus. Contrary to his and others' expectations, their movement preaching the Jewish messiah and the resurrection of the dead seemed to be doing quite well among gentiles, but not among Jews. How could this be?

Paul's perplexity and distress at this state of affairs – 'I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish' – is all the greater precisely because of (what he recognises as) Israel's tremendous privileges. Unlike the gentiles, they already have the status of God's children, the presence ('glory') of God in the Jerusalem temple, the covenants of old, the Torah of Moses, the service of the Levitical priests, the ancestors, God's promises to the ancestors and, indeed, the Christ (literally: 'messiah') himself. (Recall, Paul writes all of this a decade or so before 70 CE, with the temple cult still flourishing in Jerusalem as it had done for centuries.) Paul might have expected his fellow Jews to welcome (the man he thinks is) the messiah with open arms, but by the mid-first century, several decades after the death of Jesus, they had not done so. One possible explanation is that Jesus was not in fact the messiah, but this is unthinkable for Paul. Perhaps, then, even more impiously, one might conclude that God's promises to Israel have failed: God sent the messiah, but Israel did not receive him, so all is lost. But that, too, Paul refuses to believe: 'It is not as though the word of God has failed' (Rom. 9:6).

Paul's explanation, which he will go on to develop in Romans 9–11, is that the current state of affairs is some kind of divine mystery. In vv. 6–8 above, his argument is that the small minority of first-century Jews who recognise Jesus as messiah are a remnant, a group chosen by God to carry the divine promises even while the majority are (as Paul sees it) hardened and darkened. But this is only temporary, because by the end of Romans 11 Paul declares that God will bring the majority around in due course. Here in Romans 9, however, his argument is that, just as God chose Isaac over Ishmael, so too, at the present moment, God has chosen a remnant over the majority of Israel. If the discourse stopped there, one might possibly reason – and some supersessionist Christian theologies have reasoned – that Israel has been dispossessed and replaced. But Paul, for his part, certainly does not stop there. If Israel were dispossessed, he reckons, that would make God either impotent or dishonest, neither of which can be true. Israel's majority indifference to Jesus is, for Paul, a test of the faithfulness of God, but a test that God must surely pass.

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6

Romans 11:1–36 (mid-first century CE)

Text

^{11:1} I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.' [1 Kgs 19:10, 14] ⁴ But what is the divine reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' [1 Kgs 19:18] ⁵ So, too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

⁷ What then? Israel has not achieved what it was pursuing. The elect have achieved it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸ as it is written,

'God gave them a sluggish spirit,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.' [Deut. 29:3; Isa. 29:10]

⁹ And David says,

'Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;
¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and keep their backs forever bent.' [Ps. 68:23 LXX]

¹¹ So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their stumbling means riches for the world and if their loss means riches for gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

¹³ Now I am speaking to you gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the gentiles, I celebrate my ministry ¹⁴ in order to make my own people jealous and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their

acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted among the others to share the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember: you do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off on account of unbelief, but you stand on account of belief. So do not become arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen but God’s kindness toward you, if you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And even those of Israel, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

²⁵ I want you to understand this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not claim to be wiser than you are: a hardening has come upon part of Israel until the full number of the gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

‘Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.’ [Isa. 59:20]

²⁷ ‘And this is my covenant with them,
when I take away their sins.’ [Isa. 27:9]

²⁸ As regards the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their ancestors, ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so also they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

³³ O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?’ [Isa. 40:13 LXX]

³⁵ ‘Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?’ [Job 41:3]

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Commentary

This document is the end of Paul’s long discourse on Israel comprising all of Romans 9–11 (cf. document 5 above, the beginning of that discourse). Whereas he begins Romans 9 by

lamenting a present (mid-first-century CE) division within Israel – a minority who trust Jesus as the messiah, a majority who do not – he ends Romans 11 by expressing his confidence that all Israel is safe in God’s hands. Paul reasons, in fact, that the current state of affairs must be the consequence of a mysterious divine purpose: God, in his inscrutable wisdom, has *deliberately* made Israel disbelieve the apostles, just to allow time and space for the fullness of the gentile nations to turn from their idols and trust in the living God and his messiah Jesus.

In vv. 13–24, Paul paints what would become a tremendously influential picture of Israel and the gentiles as branches of one great olive tree, of which God is the gardener (see, e.g., Vatican II, *Lumen gentium* 1.6). The tree is the whole people of God, and the Jewish people are its ‘natural branches’, who have always had a home there as God’s covenant people (cf. ‘to them belong[s] the adoption’ in Rom. 9:4). The gentiles, by contrast, are ‘wild branches’, not naturally part of the tree. But the divine gardener, in his great mercy, is grafting the gentiles into his tree, giving them a place among his people; this is what Paul thinks is happening through his own announcement of Jesus the messiah. His contemporary fellow Jews who disbelieve the apostles Paul portrays here as natural branches which are temporarily broken off, but will be grafted in again. The allegory of the olive tree illustrates the fine line that Paul walks in Romans 9–11: all the gentiles being baptised into Christ are, he is certain, full members of the eschatological people of God, but this does not mean that Israel is displaced, disinherited or otherwise cast aside. Paul has his cake and eats it, too: God has hardened Israel to allow time for the gentiles; God can never abandon Israel.

In this context, the much-debated phrase ‘All Israel will be saved’ (v. 26) is best interpreted to mean that the whole of the Jewish people, not just the tiny remnant of Rom. 9:6–8 and 11:1–5, will surely survive the day of judgement and inherit the kingdom of God. It is, in other words, very similar to the sentiment expressed by the rabbis in m.Sanh. 10:1: ‘All Israel have a share in the world to come.’ By Paul’s lights, the unshakeable faithfulness of God entails such an outcome. Some later gentile Christian thinkers took a different view. They claimed that God *had* in fact disinherited Israel and replaced them with the church. But if so, then these Christian thinkers had to find a different meaning for Rom. 11:26: ‘All Israel will be saved’, they reasoned, must mean that *the church* will be saved, perhaps as some kind of ‘spiritual’ Israel. But more recent interpretation, especially since the Holocaust, has recognised how strained such an interpretation is. Thus, to cite perhaps the most important example, the Second Vatican Council wrote about our passage in their declaration *Nostra aetate* (see Appendix to Part III, p. 512): ‘God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues – such is the witness of the Apostle.’

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7

Philippians 3:2–9 (mid-first century CE)

Text

^{3:2} Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!

³ For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh – ⁴ even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

Commentary

The NRSVue translation quoted here handles this passage reasonably well, though many familiar English versions cause problems similar to those noted in Romans 2:25–9 (document 4 above), suggesting that the apostle Paul appropriates the names ‘Jew’, ‘Israel’ or ‘circumcision’ for Christians. Paul writes here, ‘we [...] are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 3:3), but this is often translated: ‘We are the *true* circumcision, the ones who worship in the spirit of God’, as if Paul were snatching the title ‘circumcision’ away from Jews and awarding it to Christians. As with Romans 2:25–9, that is not in fact what this passage says, but in its long Christian reception it has often been taken in that way.

The actual context of this passage in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians is that, as in Galatians, Paul is aware of some rival apostles suggesting to his audience of gentiles-in-Christ that they ought to undergo Jewish proselyte circumcision in order to follow the Jewish God. As in Galatians, Paul insists that they should not do so. But his argument here is different from the one in Galatians. Here Paul boasts that he himself, as a native-born Jew, circumcised on the eighth day, from the school of the Pharisees, a virtuoso in the Torah, is to be trusted over

against his rivals, who, he strongly implies, are not thus qualified. This passage is an important piece of evidence for the likely hypothesis that Paul's rivals are not Jews but gentile proselytes. In any case, what Paul opposes in this passage is certainly not traditional Jewish circumcision (which he praises here: 'circumcised on the eighth day'), but proselyte circumcision. When, therefore, he writes 'we are the circumcision', he means *not* 'we Christians, not those Jews' but rather 'we Jewish apostles, not those proselyte interlopers'.

The denouement of our passage (vv. 7–9) is a rhetorical devaluation of Paul's formidable credentials in comparison to metamorphosis into the image of the heavenly Christ: 'I regard everything as loss [...] I regard them as rubbish'. This is a comparison between the life of the present age (righteousness in the law) and the life of the age to come (gaining the messiah, the righteousness of God). But here, once again, the long history of Christian reception has often read our passage as a comparison between Judaism and Christianity, as if Paul were simply rejecting one religion for the other. This, together with the misreading that takes 'we are the circumcision' as an appropriation of a title from Jews for Christians, has made this document another problem text in the history of Jewish–Christian relations.

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8

Hebrews 8:1–13 (late first century CE)

Text

^{8:1} Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ² a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are already those who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one, just as Moses was warned when he was about to erect the tent. For, God said, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.' [Exod. 25:40] ⁶ But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on the basis of better promises. ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.

- ⁸ God finds fault with them when he says:
 ‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
 when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
 and with the house of Judah,
⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors
 on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt,
 for they did not continue in my covenant,
 and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord.
¹⁰ This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
 after those days, says the Lord:
 I will put my laws in their minds
 and write them on their hearts,
 and I will be their God,
 and they shall be my people.
¹¹ And they shall not teach one another
 or say to each other, “Know the Lord,”
 for they shall all know me,
 from the least of them to the greatest.
¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
 and I will remember their sins no more.’ [Jer. 31:31–4]

¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he has made the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

Commentary

The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the most mysterious texts in the New Testament. It was received in the ancient church as the Epistle of *Paul* to the Hebrews, but it almost certainly was not written by Paul (the text itself does not claim to be), nor is it actually addressed to ‘the Hebrews’, nor is it even an epistle. It is a high literary homily or sermon (with an ersatz epistolary ending, Heb. 13:22–5), whose author and audience are both formally anonymous, which constructs an elaborate contrast between God’s new covenant mediated by his son the messiah and God’s old covenant mediated by the Levitical priesthood.

Hebrews is often read, not altogether unreasonably, as a supersessionist contrast between Judaism and Christianity. The strange thing about it, however, is that Hebrews quarrels not with (what we normally think of as) Judaism – that is, the everyday piety of Jewish laypeople – nor even with the priestly cultus of the late Second Temple, which was still a relatively recent memory at the time Hebrews was written (late first century CE, within a generation of the destruction of the temple by the Roman army). Instead, Hebrews quarrels with *Leviticus*, that is, the ancient Israelite priestly Torah. The quarrel takes the form of a highly literary *synkrisis* (‘comparison’ in the technical sense of Graeco-Roman rhetoric), but it is hard to see how, or indeed whether, it mapped onto

the actual religious practice of any of Hebrews' original readers. We do not know who these readers were, but we do know that they were not ancient Israelite priests!

The excerpt above quotes at length from Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant in contrast to the ostensibly old covenant at Mount Sinai (cf. document 3 above). But whereas, for Jeremiah, the difference between the covenants is simply Israel's obedience, for Hebrews the new covenant entails a new priesthood, new sacrifices and a new sanctuary. (Following the idiom of Leviticus, Hebrews speaks in archaic terms of 'sanctuary' and 'tent', not in the more contemporary terms of 'temple'.) Whereas Jeremiah's focus was ethical, Hebrews' focus is cultic. For Hebrews – unlike any other text in the New Testament – the essential thing about Christ is that he is a high priest. Hebrews argues that, when the Israelite priests offered sacrifices to God in the tabernacle in the wilderness, that was only a shadow of the original heavenly sanctuary (cf. Exod. 25:40), where Christ is now both high priest and sacrifice. For Hebrews, Christ's heavenly priesthood supersedes and renders obsolete the earthly priesthood prescribed in Leviticus.

We can perhaps imagine why, especially after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, the author might have thought along these lines. But it is still far from clear what relation, if any, Hebrews had to the religious lives of actual Jewish people at the time he was writing. In any case, his loaded language of shadows, obsolescence, disappearance, passing away, etc., applied by later Christian readers to the religious lives of actual Jewish people, became fodder for some stridently supersessionist Christian theologies down the centuries. But recent church statements – e.g., *God's Unfailing Word* (2019), from the Church of England Faith and Order Commission – have rightly criticised such interpretations of Hebrews on both exegetical and theological grounds.

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9

Mark 7:1–23 (late first century CE)

Text

^{7:1} Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and they do not eat anything from the

market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.)⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?’⁶ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.” [Isa. 29:13]

⁸ ‘You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

⁹ Then he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!’¹⁰ For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother,” [Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16] and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” [Exod. 21:17; Lev. 20:9]¹¹ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban” (that is, an offering to God),¹² then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother,¹³ thus nullifying the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.’

¹⁴ Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’

¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.¹⁸ He said to them, ‘So, are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile,¹⁹ since it enters not the heart but the stomach and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean.)²⁰ And he said, ‘It is what comes out of a person that defiles.²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly.²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

Commentary

The Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the numerous early Christian Gospels, four of which are canonised in the New Testament. Mark was probably written around 70 CE, roughly concurrent with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. The author is anonymous, as is his audience, although the fact that he sometimes pauses to explain Jewish customs (e.g., Mark 7:3–4 above) suggests that he expects that gentiles will read his life of Jesus.

This document relates a halakhic dispute between Jesus and his disciples on the one hand and the Pharisees and their disciples on the other. At issue is the legal question of whether ritual impurity can flow from food, through hands, to a person’s body. The Pharisees think so, hence they undertake a ritual hand-washing before eating. Jesus thinks not, hence he and his disciples do not. Jesus argues that this practice of the Pharisees is their own innovation, not part of the Torah of Moses. Strictly speaking, this is true. In the most relevant text, the food laws of Leviticus 11, certain *prohibited* foods (e.g., carrion

animal flesh) can contaminate a person, but they would do so whether the person washed his hands or not. *Permitted* foods, however, cannot contaminate a person, even if they happen to have come into contact with ritual impurity (e.g., food prepared by a menstruating woman). (The general term for food laws like these is *kasbrut*: a system for discerning proper from improper foods, and proper from improper ways of preparing food.) Hand-washing before eating, then, is irrelevant to the transferral of ritual impurity. Jesus' legal opinion on this issue agrees exactly with Rashi's (Rashi at b.Shabbat 13b); but the Pharisees here and some *tannaim* in the Mishnah take the opposing view.

The moral of the story is that here, as often in the Gospels, Jesus' notorious conflicts with the Pharisees are actually traditional intra-Jewish halakhic disputes and not (as Christians frequently read them) stories of Jesus overthrowing Judaism to make way for Christianity. (Christianity, of course, does not yet exist in the Gospels.) Sometimes this Christian reading tradition even leads to translation problems, as in Mark 7:19 above. The NRSVue puts the final clause of the verse outside the quotation marks, in parentheses, and translates it 'Thus he [Jesus] declared all foods clean', as if Jesus were nullifying the whole biblical system of kosher and non-kosher foods. But that contradicts what Jesus actually says in the passage (which is about hand-washing, not *kasbrut*), and it is a dubious translation of the Greek. The final clause literally reads simply 'purifying all the foods', and it makes better sense as the end of Jesus' own sentence: '[Food] enters not the heart but the stomach and goes out into the sewer, purifying all the foods.' Jesus does not abolish *kasbrut*; he simply takes a more biblicist position on mealtime hand-washing than some of his Jewish contemporaries. Christians generally do not observe *kasbrut*, of course, but this has to do with a later policy of the apostles (see document 20 below).

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IO

Mark 12:1–12 (late first century CE)

Text

^{12:1} Then he began to speak to them in parables. 'A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the winepress, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants and went away. ² When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. ³ But they seized him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ And again he sent another slave to them; this one they

beat over the head and insulted. ⁵ Then he sent another, and that one they killed. And so it was with many others; some they beat, and others they killed. ⁶ He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” ⁷ But those tenants said to one another, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.” ⁸ So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. ⁹ What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ Have you not read this scripture:

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
¹¹ this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes”?’ [Ps. 118:22]

¹² When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away.

Commentary

By this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples have reached Jerusalem, where he will die at the hands of the Romans. This scene takes place in the temple’s outer court, and the ‘them’ to whom Jesus here speaks in parables are the chief priests, scribes and elders (Mark 11:27), that is, the Jewish ruling class. (The Pharisees, Jesus’ usual interlocutors back in Galilee, are largely absent from the Jerusalem-set passion narratives.)

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus frequently teaches in parables. This polemical parable, directed ‘against them’ (Mark 12:12), is a retelling of the prophet Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7). Jesus’ version, like Isaiah’s, is about God hoping to find righteousness in Israel but being disappointed. (So, too, the rabbis’ version, which interprets the watchtower as the Jerusalem temple and the winepress as the high altar (t.Sukkah 3:15). In short, both Jews and Christians have used this prophetic image to criticise injustice in their own communities, and sometimes also to criticise one another.) Jesus adds, however, the characters of the tenants and the messengers, thus ascribing guilt to the ruling class in particular. The tenants in the story are the elders of Israel and the messengers are the prophets of old, whose message of repentance fell on deaf ears. Jesus himself comes preaching repentance like the prophets before him. But in a twist, he is more than a prophet; he is God’s own son. (In Mark’s Gospel, ‘son of God’ does not yet have the maximal Nicene Christian sense of ‘second person of the Godhead’. It is a biblical, messianic title, which also has resonances with the contemporary Roman emperors who, like Jesus, ascended to heaven after their deaths.)

With obvious dramatic foreshadowing, Mark’s Jesus declares that the elders will kill him as they did the prophets, stirring up God’s anger against them. God’s vineyard, Israel, will of course survive, but it will be given to other tenants who do repent – perhaps alluding to the tax collectors, sinners and others who receive Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God in Mark’s Gospel. (Some later Christian supersessionist theologies would make the parable mean that God revoked his favour from Israel entirely and transferred it to the gentile

church.) The quotation here of Psalm 118:22 (“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”) to represent Jesus’ rejection by the elders but later vindication by God becomes very influential in subsequent New Testament passages, appearing again in Matt. 21:42, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, 1 Pet. 2:7 and frequently in Christian texts thereafter. Psalm 118 is also one of the Hallel psalms used, from antiquity down to the present, in the Jewish liturgy for festivals (including Passover, the very context where Jesus cites it in Mark 12). What is more, rabbinic texts also keep alive the messianic interpretation of the psalm that originally underlay its use here in Mark 12: the stone is King David (the messiah), while the builders are his father Jesse, the prophet Samuel and other leaders who overlooked the young David (b.Pesah. 119a).

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11

Mark 14:53–65 (late first century CE)

Text

^{14:53} They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. ⁵⁴ Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest, and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸ ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.”’ ⁵⁹ But even on this point their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, ‘Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?’ ⁶¹ But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ ⁶² Jesus said, ‘I am, and

“you will see the Son of Man
 seated at the right hand of the Power”
 and “coming with the clouds of heaven.” [Dan. 7:13]

⁶³ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses?’

⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?’ All of them condemned him as

deserving death.⁶⁵ Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophecy!’ The guards also took him and beat him.

Commentary

In our previous document, Jesus told a parable against the Jerusalem chief priests, scribes and elders; here he appears before them in chains. This scene is often called a trial, which is not quite right, since – as the subsequent narrative bears out – any actual capital proceedings against Jesus have to happen before the Roman governor. What this scene does give us, though, is Mark’s idea of what the Jerusalem ruling class has against Jesus: namely, that he is the messiah son of God.

When Jesus admits to being the messiah son of God, the high priest accuses him of blasphemy (Mark 14:64), which is a famous problem. Blasphemy in ancient Judaism – as in modern Judaism, and Islam, and even Christianity for that matter – means to slander God himself. But if so, to claim to be the messiah is not blasphemy. (For a human to claim to be *God* might be blasphemy, but that is not what Jesus does in our text, or anywhere in Mark’s Gospel.) There were numerous Jews in antiquity who claimed to be, or were said by others to be, the messiah (e.g., Herod the Great, Bar Kokhba, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch), and none of them is ever charged with blasphemy. So it is not altogether clear why the high priest draws this conclusion in Mark 14. It could be that this is simply a misunderstanding of Judaism by the author of Mark’s Gospel: Jews in the first century CE did not think that a messianic claim was blasphemy, but Mark mistakenly thought that they did.

Alternatively, Mark might mean to draw attention to one part of Jesus’ confession in particular: messiah *son of the Blessed One*, that is, messiah son of God. There are several kinds of messiahs in Jewish tradition (see Chapter 3, pp. 141–5): the very well known messiah son of David (a king), but also messiah son of Aaron (a priest), messiah son of Joseph (a warrior) and – as here – messiah son of God. What exactly ‘messiah son of God’ means is ambiguous (in some Hebrew Bible texts, the messiah son of David *is* the messiah son of God). But Mark may take it to mean that Jesus, at least after his death and resurrection, has become a god, like the Roman emperors who underwent apotheosis. And this he might take, rightly or wrongly, to amount to blasphemy from a Jewish perspective. Quite apart from the blasphemy issue, however, the rabbis also take the verse here quoted by Jesus – Dan. 7:13: ‘the Son of Man [...] “coming with the clouds of heaven”’ – as a reference to a triumphant messiah: if Israel is meritorious, then the messiah will come with the clouds of heaven (b.Sanh. 98a). In later Jewish–Christian relations, writers on both sides would draw an oft-repeated contrast between a Jewish *political* messiah and a Christian *spiritual* messiah, but that contrast is nowhere to be found in this earliest period.

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12

Mark 15:1–15 (late first century CE)

Text

^{15:1} As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ² Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' ³ Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' ⁵ But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶ Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷ Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸ So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹ Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ¹⁰ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹² Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' ¹³ They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁴ Pilate asked them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus he handed him over to be crucified.

Commentary

In our previous document (Mark 14:53–65), Jesus faced questioning by the Jewish priests and elders in Jerusalem. Here, however, there is a transfer of custody to the Roman provincial governor, Pontius Pilate. The chief priests could opine that Jesus was *deserving of* death (Mark 14:64), but only the Roman administration could actually put him to death, as they go on to do by the end of Mark 15. Long gone by this point in Mark's Gospel are the Pharisees, who had been Jesus' closest interlocutors and competitors back home in Galilee (Mark 1–10). In Jerusalem, by contrast, Jesus has to reckon, first, with the priestly aristocracy and, second and finally, with the Romans. With the Pharisees, Jesus had had sectarian disputes over interpretations of the law (sabbath allowances, ritual purifications, etc.). The only concern of the chief priests and the Romans, however, is whether Jesus poses a political threat.

We leave aside for now the argument over the two Jesuses, Christ and Barabbas, which Matthew narrates in more elaborate detail (see Matt. 27:15–26; document 16 below). More important for our present purposes is the fact that Pilate’s worry about Jesus of Nazareth is that he is supposed to be *king of the Jews* (Mark 15:2, 9, 12). But the Jerusalem chief priests had not said this. In the previous scene, the high priest had asked whether Jesus was the *messiah son of the Blessed One* (Mark 14:61). To that question, Jesus had answered, ‘I am’. But when Pilate asks if he is king of the Jews, he only answers, ‘You say so’. His answer to Pilate does not affect the outcome, however. What gets Jesus crucified is the fact that the Roman governor worries he *might* be a kind of would-be king, a rival to Roman imperial government, or that his followers have that dangerous idea. (There are striking parallels a century later in the Bar Kokhba revolt under Hadrian, but Bar Kokhba was a Jewish king who *did* take up arms against Rome.) Most of what Jesus does during his ministry in Mark (and the other Gospels) is not characteristically messianic or royal: he teaches, heals people, exorcises demons. Ironically, the fact that Jesus goes down in history as Christ, or messiah, is due to the Romans’ perception of him as a would-be king of the Jews.

The Talmud, in its only express mention of the execution of Jesus (b.Sanh. 43a), seems to show an awareness of this Gospel account. Interestingly, however, the rabbis claim that Jesus was executed not for being ‘king of the Jews’ but rather for committing certain capital offences specified in the Torah: practising sorcery and enticing Israel to apostasy (Deut. 13:1–11). This story, however, was redacted out of many medieval Talmud manuscripts under the widespread policy of Christian censorship of Jewish books.

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13

Matthew 5:17–22, 27–48 (late first century CE)

Text

^{5:17} Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ [Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17] and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ [Lev. 24:17]

²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire [...]

²⁷ You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ [Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18] ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart [...]

³¹ It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ [Deut. 24:1] ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ [Lev. 19:12] ³⁴ But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

³⁸ You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ [Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20] ³⁹ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor [Lev. 19:18] and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Commentary

The Gospel of Matthew comes first in the canonical order of the books of the New Testament, but in chronological terms it was actually the *second* Gospel written. Matthew (the name attached to the Gospel in Christian tradition, though not in the text itself), written in the last quarter of the first century, knows and uses the Gospel of Mark, which was written around 70 CE. (Luke and John come later and use at least Mark, and possibly also Matthew, to write their Gospels.) Matthew reproduces most of what is in Mark, though with some changes, but he also adds a great deal of material, especially large blocks

of Jesus' teachings, including the so-called Sermon on the Mount, from which the excerpt above is taken.

This document, which is conventionally styled 'the Antitheses' (for the repeated formula: 'You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you'), illustrates Matthew's close but complicated relation to Judaism. It is because of passages such as this that Matthew is often called the most Jewish of the four canonical Gospels. Only in this Gospel does Jesus emphatically insist that he does not abolish the law of Moses, that not a single letter of the law can pass away. Many interpreters have detected in this saying a veiled argument against Paul or Pauline Christ-believers, on the assumption that he or they *did* abolish the law of Moses (though, as we have discussed above, things with Paul are not nearly as simple as that).

Matthew's Jesus does not annul any of the commandments of Moses, but he does add further ones. That is the point of the antithesis formula, 'You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you'. Moses prohibited murder, but Jesus prohibits even angry words. Moses prohibited adultery, but Jesus prohibits even lust and divorce. Moses prohibited false oaths, but Jesus prohibits all oaths. Moses prohibited excessive retaliation, but Jesus prohibits all retaliation. Moses commanded love of neighbours, but Jesus commands love even of enemies. In short, Matthew's Jesus builds a fence around the law (as in the early rabbinic saying in m.Avot 1:1: 'The men of the Great Synagogue said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Law'). He confirms the law of Moses, but then adds even stricter interpretations of the commandments, what later Jewish tradition would call *chumrot* (religious stringency). In all three Synoptic Gospels (and, much less so, John), Jesus teaches halakhah, but the halakhah in Matthew is the most demanding. In Matthew, Jesus' disciples are commanded to be more righteous than the gentiles, more righteous even than the Pharisees and scribes.

In short, whereas Christians have often thought of Jesus as bringing a new message *in place of* the Jewish law, in Matthew's Gospel he actually teaches *a rigorist interpretation of* the Jewish law. Interestingly, on this particular point early modern Christian interpreters (e.g., Luther, Calvin, Bullinger) generally improved upon their ancient and medieval forebears (e.g., Irenaeus, Chrysostom, Thomas). Where those earlier interpreters tended to pit the law of Christ against the law of Moses, the Reformers took Jesus to be quarrelling with contemporary Pharisaic interpretation, not with Moses himself.

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Matthew 6:7–15 (late first century CE)

Text

^{6:7} When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
 may your name be revered as holy.
¹⁰ May your kingdom come.
 May your will be done
 on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
 but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,
¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Commentary

Sometimes called the Paternoster after its opening words in Latin, the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; shorter form Luke 11:2–4) is one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament and is widely regarded as the Christian prayer *par excellence*. It offers a window into the liturgical origins of Christianity within Judaism partly because of its possible Aramaic origins and partly because, in both form and content, it is a Jewish prayer. It is Jesus who prescribes it, and Christians still pray it, but there is nothing uniquely Christian (e.g., trinitarian) about it.

From this document we learn that the very early Christ-followers were, and prayed as, Jews, and that Jesus himself prayed as a Jew. What is more, inasmuch as Christian liturgy in all the mainstream churches (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) still gives pride of place to the Lord's Prayer, that liturgy retains its many ancient biblical and Jewish (even rabbinic) resonances. For instance, the petition for 'daily bread' is an allusion to Prov. 30:8–9, and the address to God as 'our father' (*pater noster*) appears already in the Hebrew Bible (Isa. 63:16) and continues in the Talmud (e.g., b.Ber. 32b; b.Sotah 10a; b.Ta'anit 25b) and Jewish liturgy. The Lord's Prayer is of course familiar to many Jews from long cultural exposure, but it is also the case that, in terms of content, there is nothing in it that would be religiously objectionable to even strictly observant Jews.

Close examination of the text also reveals parallels to contemporary Jewish liturgical practice. Elements are found in similar form in the *Kaddish* (e.g., the exaltation of God) and *Amidah* (e.g., the tripartite outline of praise, petition and thanksgiving). In particular, the hallowing of God's name and the reference to the coming of God's kingdom are both central to the *Kaddish*, and the appeal for forgiveness appears prominently in the *Amidah*. In some circles, early Christians were instructed to recite the Lord's Prayer three times daily (*Didache* 8:2), as Jews were the *Amidah*. Finally, the concluding doxology of the Lord's Prayer (attested in the *Didache*, though not in Matthew or Luke) is a praise of God common in the Hebrew Bible (especially the Psalms) and other early New Testament texts (e.g., Rom. 11:33–6); doxologies are also found in central Jewish prayers such as the *Shema* and *Kaddish*. In short, despite its fame as a Christian symbol, the Lord's Prayer is by far the most Jewish of all Christian prayers.

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15

Matthew 23:1–36 (late first century CE)

Text

^{23:1} Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses's seat; ³ therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶ They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. ⁹ And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father, the one in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. ¹³ 'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in you stop them. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land

to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

¹⁶ ‘Woe to you, blind guides who say, “Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.” ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, “Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.” ¹⁹ How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it, ²¹ and whoever swears by the sanctuary swears by it and by the one who dwells in it, ²² and whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

²³ ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

²⁵ ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and of the plate, so that the outside also may become clean.

²⁷ ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, ³⁰ and you say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.” ³¹ Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. ³³ You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape the judgment of hell? ³⁴ For this reason I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, ³⁵ so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.’

Commentary

This document, a litany of prophetic woes spoken by Jesus against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, has a dark history of Christian reception, in which some of its angriest lines (‘scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!’; ‘you are like whitewashed tombs!’; ‘upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth!’) came to be recast as Christian slanders against Jews and Judaism generally. In the Gospel of Matthew, however, even

this furious passage begins with an acknowledgement of the legitimate authority of the scribes and Pharisees in Galilee and Judea of the late Second Temple period: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’s seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it.’ As teachers of the law to the people, the scribes and Pharisees rightly derive their authority from Moses. This is far more than later Christian texts (or even most other New Testament texts) can bring themselves to concede.

But despite (or because of) the legitimacy of their office, Matthew’s Jesus finds the scribes and Pharisees guilty of rank hypocrisy, that is, of failing to practise what they preach. They preach the commandments of Moses, as they should, but they fail to keep the commandments themselves. More specifically – so the accusation goes – they keep some commandments but not others. They offer tithes but do not maintain justice. They pray with phylacteries but do not cultivate humility. They teach at synagogue but do not give assistance to the poor. They honour the righteous dead but antagonise (those whom Matthew counts as) the righteous living, namely Jesus and his disciples. Some later anti-Jewish Christian interpreters would come to conclude that such hypocrisy was characteristic of Judaism as such, or even of the law of Moses itself. For Matthew, however, Jesus and the Pharisees agree on the principle of the sanctity of the law of Moses. The point is that Jesus, like the classical prophets before him, has to indict his contemporaries for their transgressions of the law. The closing lines of the passage, which prophesy bloodguilt for the murder of the prophets coming on the present generation, is an unobvious hint of Matthew’s post-70 CE setting and his interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem. The bloodguilt issue arises again several chapters later in Matthew’s Gospel, at the trial of Jesus, which is our next document.

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16

Matthew 27:15–26 (late first century CE)

Text

^{27:15} Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. ¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner called Jesus Barabbas. ¹⁷ So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ ¹⁸ For he realized

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that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.’²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.²¹ The governor again said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’²² Pilate said to them, ‘Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ All of them said, ‘Let him be crucified!’²³ Then he asked, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified!’

²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’²⁵ Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’²⁶ So he released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus he handed him over to be crucified.

Commentary

This scene – of the Roman governor Pilate releasing one of two prisoners and washing his hands of bloodguilt for the death of Jesus – is unique to Matthew’s Gospel and has a sinister afterlife in the history of Christian anti-Judaism. One famous modern example: when Mel Gibson made his 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, he took care to include the scene of the (Jewish) crowd crying out about Jesus, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’ From one quite particular interpretation of this verse comes the centuries-old Christian trope of pan-Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus, the so-called ‘blood curse’ of Matt. 27:25.

The Gospel-writer, who diverges from his source Mark in adding this scene, does go out of his way to read the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (after which catastrophe he is writing) as a terrible divine punishment visited upon the Jerusalemites of 30 CE and their children (c. 70 CE) for supposedly baying for Jesus’ blood. (In another bizarre twist on this theory, Origen says that Jerusalem was destroyed as divine punishment for the murder not of Jesus but of Jesus’ brother James, and says he learned this from Josephus.) Matthew’s is a dark, moralising interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem, but it is not any kind of curse upon all Jews in perpetuity. That idea is a later Christian improvisation on the text of Matthew’s Gospel.

There are further layers to this story, too. Pilate’s wife learns by dream divination that Jesus is an innocent man, hence Pilate asks the Jewish crowd what wrong Jesus is supposed to have done, then symbolically washes his hands so that guilt for Jesus’ blood is transferred – according to the logic of the story – to the crowd. What is more, the motif of the two prisoners (both named Jesus), one put to death and the other released, could perhaps be Matthew’s effort to paint Jesus as the goat sacrificed to God on Yom Kippur (cf. that idea in Hebrews 9), with the other Jesus (Barabbas) corresponding to the other goat (the so-called scapegoat or Azazel goat) released into the wilderness. In short, this story both relates Matthew’s own Jewish theological interpretation of the death of Jesus and provides ample grist for the mill of later Christian anti-Jewish polemic.

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17

Revelation 2:8–11, 3:7–9 (late first century CE)

Text

^{2:8} And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life:

⁹ I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.

¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death [...]

^{3:7} And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of the Holy One, the True One,
who has the key of David,
who opens and no one will shut,
who shuts and no one opens:

⁸ I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door that no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not but are lying – I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

Commentary

The Apocalypse of John, better known as the Book of Revelation, is less prominent in the history of Jewish–Christian relations than, say, the Gospels or the letters of Paul. But it is more significant, for the ancient period, at least, than its reputation might suggest, and this passage in particular has sometimes been a problem text in Jewish–Christian

relations. The book is an apocalypse, a Jewish (and later also Christian) genre of revelatory literature in which a seer has visions of or takes mystical journeys to heaven, hell, the ends of the cosmos, etc. (cf. Daniel, Book of the Watchers, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch). Revelation is written by a certain prophet called John, otherwise unknown to us (i.e., not to be identified with any other persons called John in the New Testament).

Significantly for the history of Jewish–Christian relations, in two of the brief letters that appear near the beginning of his visions (letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia, both excerpted here) John warns about certain people ‘who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan’ (Rev. 2:9, 3:9). This is a fascinating expression, since it hints at a phenomenon which is thinly attested here and there in other ancient sources: debates over people falsely claiming the name of ‘Jew’. The difficulty is that, as with many of the documents in this chapter, it is much contested who exactly our author is and what he means by this phrase. The majority interpretation to date has been that John is a Christian, of uncertain ethnicity, who here implies that he and his Christian coreligionists are the real ‘Jews’, while actual Jews are, in his view, only falsely so called. In fact, John supposedly avers, these actual Jews in Asia Minor are a synagogue not of God but of Satan. If this interpretation were right, then the passage would be baldly anti-Jewish and, to just that extent, an obvious problem for Jewish–Christian relations.

But as recent research has demonstrated, what clues there are in the book in fact suggest that John himself, as well as his audience, is Jewish. He and they recognise Jesus as the messiah, so we might think of them as ‘Christian’, but that word does not appear in the book. In John’s own presentation, he and his audience are just Jews, faithful to God and to the messiah. If so, then these people ‘who say they are Jews and are not’ might be exactly what the phrase suggests on the surface of it, namely gentiles who try to appropriate the name ‘Jew’ for themselves (perhaps as godfearers or proselytes, groups well attested elsewhere in the New Testament; see documents 2, 4 and 7 above). It is quite likely, in other words, that this passage does exactly the *opposite* of what the majority interpretation has thought: it is not taking the name ‘Jew’ away from actual Jews; rather, it is condemning other people who do so. Revelation likely attests a religious phenomenon that was relatively common in the first century CE, but became much less so thereafter, where groups of Jews venerated Jesus alongside the Jewish God without thinking, or anyone else thinking about them, that they were ‘Christian’.

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Luke 13:1–5, 31–5 (late first or early second century CE)

Text

^{13:1} At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?’ ³ No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.’ [...]

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ ³² He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.” ³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”’

Commentary

The Gospel of Luke follows and makes use of Mark, certainly, and possibly also Matthew. Luke is different from its predecessors, however, in being not just a Gospel but rather a two-volume collected biography of Jesus and his apostles: Luke-plus-Acts. The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, although they are separated (by the Gospel of John) in the New Testament canon, were originally two volumes of a single work. Volume 2, the Acts, possibly also knew and used the works of the Jewish historian Josephus, which would push its date into the early second century.

This document, excerpted from Luke 13, is part of the long central section of the Gospel in which Jesus slowly makes his way to Jerusalem to die a prophet’s death. The opening verse introduces Luke’s readers to the character of Pontius Pilate (who will, of course, pull the trigger that kills Jesus at the end of the Gospel). Luke mentions in passing an episode in which Pilate murdered certain Galilean Jews who had made pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. This may or may not correspond to one of several incidents of Pilate’s violence against Jewish festival-goers mentioned by Josephus. In Luke’s Gospel, in any case, this passage establishes Pilate as an impious and murderous figure.

Later in the same chapter, in the second paragraph of our document, there is more talk of murder, when Luke reports that Herod (i.e., Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great)

is seeking to kill Jesus. This, too, foreshadows Luke's account of the trial and execution of Jesus, where Pilate and Herod appear together as co-conspirators (Luke 23:1–12, document 19 below). Herod is Jewish (or part-Jewish, according to Josephus) and Pilate Roman, but as Luke sees it, they are allied together against Jesus because of their investment in the Roman imperial rule of Judea.

Equally interesting is the fact that, here, it is certain *Pharisees* who warn Jesus to flee to safety. The Pharisees are often portrayed, in Luke as in the other Gospels, as Jesus' competitors. But here they are on his side against the murderous plotting of Herod. This episode suggests what was historically probably the case: that, on a broad map of ancient Jewish sects, Jesus was far closer to the Pharisees than he was to any other group. Some historians have argued, not implausibly, that Jesus just *was* a Pharisee. In any case, at the end of our document he speaks as a Jewish prophet, foretelling and lamenting the destruction of the holy city, very much as another Jesus, Jesus ben Ananias, did shortly before the destruction by the Romans in 70 CE (Josephus, *War* 6.300–9). Parallels like these have been a large part of the modern recovery of 'Jesus the Jew' both in historical research and in Jewish–Christian dialogue.

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19

Luke 23:1–12 (late first or early second century CE)

Text

^{23:1} Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ² They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man inciting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to Caesar and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' ³ Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' ⁴ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.' ⁵ But they were insistent and said, 'He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.'

⁶ When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷ And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹ He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no

answer.¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by vehemently accusing him.¹¹ Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him and sent him back to Pilate.¹² That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Commentary

Luke's account of the trial of Jesus makes explicit what Mark's account (see documents 11 and 12 above) had not, namely, that 'messiah' in the Jewish idiom can be understood to mean 'king' in the Roman idiom. Here the assembly of Jerusalem elders spells out to Pilate that he should be concerned about Jesus as a would-be king and disturber of the Roman peace. Uniquely in Luke, however, Pilate evades responsibility for the whole affair by referring it to his client ruler Herod (i.e., Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great), tetrarch of Galilee.

The brief scene of the captive Jesus appearing before Herod occurs only here in all of the Gospels (though it is memorably recreated in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*). Luke's literary point seems to be to paint Herod as a co-conspirator with Pilate in the execution of Jesus. Luke had previously mentioned (13:1, document 18 above) that Herod had already been angling to kill Jesus. And our document ends with a remarkable report of a new friendship between the Roman governor and his client ruler, bound together by their shared resolution to rid themselves of the trouble posed by Jesus. As with the other Gospel passion narratives, one main historical lesson is how very precarious life could be for Judean and other provincial subjects under Roman imperial rule.

Even if this friendship between Herod and Pilate be judged historically implausible, it does important literary work in Luke–Acts. In Acts 4, after the resurrection of Jesus, the apostles reflect back on this moment in Luke 23 with their own midrash on Psalm 2. The apostles pray, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them,²⁵ it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: "*Why did the gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things?*²⁶ *The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.*" [Ps. 2:1–2]²⁷ For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed [...]' (Acts 4:24–7, NRSVue). In other words, Luke takes the plural 'kings of the earth' in Ps. 2:2 to be Herod and Pilate, two 'kings' (in fact, tetrarch and prefect, respectively) who conspired together against the Lord's messiah, Jesus. Luke's interpretation is particularly significant for later Jewish–Christian relations for its assigning blame for Jesus' death not to Jews – as Matthew arguably does (document 16 above) – but rather to gentile kings. Luke's account is thus a predecessor for the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra aetate* (see Appendix to Part III, p. 512): 'neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his [Jesus'] passion.'

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20

Acts 21:17–26 (late first or early second century CE)

Text

^{21:17} When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly. ¹⁸ The next day Paul went with us to visit James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ When they heard it, they praised God. Then they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. ²¹ They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the gentiles to forsake Moses and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. ²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. ²⁴ Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself observe and guard the law. ²⁵ But as for the gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality.' ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them.

Commentary

This document takes us into Luke's second volume: the Acts of the Apostles. The story is continuous with Luke's Gospel; volume 1 ends and volume 2 begins with the same scene: Jesus being taken up into heaven. The remainder of volume 2 relates the exploits of the apostles, in particular Peter and Paul. This document, excerpted from Acts 21, near the end of the book, tells the story of Paul's return to Jerusalem after his several years preaching the risen Christ to gentiles all around Asia, Macedonia and Achaia. As the story goes, it is a dangerous visit for Paul because Jews in Jerusalem think that he is actively undermining Jewish law and custom in the diaspora.

The remarkable thing, however, is that Luke presents these Jerusalemite rumours about Paul as manifestly *false*. Luke is quite precise about saying that Paul opposes proselyte circumcision for gentiles, not traditional circumcision for Jews (Acts 15:1–2, 22:3, 24:14, 25:8). (And this actually agrees exactly with what Paul says in his own letters; see documents 2, 4 and 7 above.) To underline the point, Luke narrates Paul taking part in a votive offering at the Jerusalem temple with several other Jewish Christ-believers. As for gentile Christ-believers, Luke here reiterates the rule that Paul and the other apostles had agreed to in Acts 15, namely that they must abstain from idol sacrifices, food with blood, food from a strangled animal and sexual immorality. These prohibitions are an early instance of the so-called Noahide laws of later rabbinic tradition (e.g., b.Sanh. 56a): commandments given to Noah and applicable to gentiles (in contrast to the Torah of Moses applicable to Israel alone). Jesus and the apostles, being Jews, continue to keep Torah, up to and including the priestly sacrifices in the temple.

This is all the more interesting given that Acts comes from at least the late first, possibly even the second, century. Many other Christian texts from after 70 CE adopted the view that the Christian church had replaced the Jerusalem temple as the site of God's presence in the world, and that the death of Jesus had supplanted all plant and animal sacrifices (see, for example, document 8 above). Acts, however, portrays the apostles as participating fully in the sacrificial worship of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem as, historically, they almost certainly did. (Another important scene in this connection is Acts 2:43–7, where all the Jerusalem Christ-believers are portrayed as still offering Jewish worship at the temple.) It seems not to occur to our author to think that the church supersedes the temple, even though he writes well after the temple's destruction. For the author of Acts, there is no incompatibility between preaching Christ and offering traditional Jewish sacrifices.

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21

John 8:31–47 (late first or early second century CE)

Text

^{8:31} Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'

³³ They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?'

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³⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are descendants of Abraham, yet you look for an opportunity to kill me because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸ I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'

³⁹ They answered him, 'Abraham is our father.' Jesus said to them, 'If you are Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are indeed doing what your father does.' They said to him, 'We are not illegitimate children; we have one Father, God himself.' ⁴² Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God, and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. ⁴⁴ You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God.'

Commentary

The Gospel of John is fourth in canonical order and probably also in chronology. It is strikingly literarily different from the other three (Synoptic) Gospels. The author very probably knows and uses at least Mark (the earliest of the four) and possibly also Matthew and Luke, but takes considerable liberties in his own composition. He seems to know quite a lot about Jews and Judaism, even down to rather obscure details about Judean, Galilean and Samaritan customs, so that we can easily imagine that he is Jewish himself. On the other hand, however, John's rhetoric towards and about Jews is some of the harshest and most polemical in the New Testament. So if he is a Jew, he has perhaps experienced an estrangement from his own people, or alternatively he may be an exceptionally well-informed gentile Christ-follower.

This document, excerpted from a dialogue between Jesus and 'the Jews' in John 8, gives a characteristic impression of John's anti-Jewish rhetoric. Like the Synoptic Gospels, John paints scenes of conflict between Jesus and the people who oppose him. But whereas the Synoptic Gospels usually single out the Pharisees (in Galilee) or the chief priests (in Jerusalem) as Jesus' opponents, at key points in John they are just 'the Jews', full stop. The effect of this change is significant. Even though, in John's story (as in historical fact), Jesus and the disciples are also Jews, they are not so called; 'the Jews' appear as a kind of stock character over against Jesus. In our document, for example, Jesus harangues the Jews, telling them that they are children of the devil (John 8:44).

The Greek *Ioudaioi* can mean Judeans as well as ‘Jews’, and some well-meaning Christian interpreters have argued that John’s polemic only reflects a local rivalry between Galileans and Judeans, or some such, the effect of which could be to blunt the otherwise jarring anti-Jewish rhetoric of the text. It would be nice if this were the case, but historically it seems unlikely. As Adele Reinhartz has argued, John, whoever he is – whether estranged Jew or learned gentile – probably means to say that disciples of Jesus are on the side of God, Jews on the side of the devil. (In this respect, John may provide precedent for the ugly modern Christian usage of ‘the Jews’ in a pejorative sense; hence the problem.) John’s Gospel being part of Christian scripture, and being important to Christians for other reasons (e.g., its divine Christology, without which there would be no ecumenical creeds), this poses an ethical problem for Christian readers. The Gospel is probably here to stay, so the urgent task is for the churches to find other, more humane models for Jewish–Christian relations than this document offers them. There certainly are such models elsewhere in Christian scripture (see *passim* in this chapter), but Christian readers will need to keep their ethical wits about them.

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John 9:13–34 (late first or early second century CE)

Text

^{9:13} They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴ Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵ Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ ¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.’ Others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. ¹⁷ So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’

¹⁸ The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹ and asked them, ‘Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?’ ²⁰ His parents answered, ‘We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, ²¹ but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is

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of age. He will speak for himself.’²² His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.²³ Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’²⁵ He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’²⁶ They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’²⁷ He answered them, ‘I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?’²⁸ Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.’²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’³⁰ The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.’³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’³⁴ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

Commentary

This fascinating document has played an unusual role in the history of Jewish–Christian relations. On its surface, it is a story about a blind Jewish man healed by Jesus and the aftermath of his healing in his synagogue community. At another level, however, it has often been read as a thinly veiled account of the so-called ‘parting of the ways’ between Judaism and Christianity (see Chapter 2, p. 66), perhaps even – according to these readings – in the actual experience of the author and audience of the Gospel of John (the so-called ‘Johannine community’ of modern scholarly hypothesis).

As the story goes, the blind man’s (Jewish) parents feared to speak the truth about the incident to ‘the Jews’ because, John says, ‘the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue’ (9:22). The Greek word at the end of this sentence, *aposynagogos*, ‘cast out of the synagogue’, is a neologism; it does not occur in any other earlier or contemporary sources. Nor, again, is there any external evidence for any such decree of ‘the Jews’ in this period: a legal ruling that Jews who confessed Jesus as messiah would be excommunicated from synagogue. Elsewhere in ancient Judaism, being a partisan of a particular messiah (e.g., Bar Kokhba) has no bearing on one’s membership in the Jewish community. The one possible exception to this generalisation is the *Birkat ha-Minim* (see Chapter 3, p. 123), the latest clause added to the *Amidah* prayer (also called the *Shemoneh Esreh* or Eighteen Benedictions), although it does not mention messiahship, and the direct evidence for it is much later than the Gospel of John, let alone the lifetime of Jesus. The *Birkat ha-Minim*, in one well-attested ancient form preserved in manuscripts from the

Cairo Genizah (and compare t.Ber. 3:25; y.Ber. 2:4 (5a); y.Ber 4:3 (8a); b.Ber. 28b–29a), reads:

For the apostates let there be no hope,
and uproot the kingdom of arrogance speedily and in our days.
May the Nazarenes (*Notzrim*) and the sectarians (*minim*) perish as in a moment.
Let them be blotted out of the book of life,
and not be written together with the righteous.
You are praised, O Lord, who subdues the arrogant.

J. Louis Martyn influentially argued that this Jewish curse upon Christians dated all the way back to the time of the Gospel of John, which he coordinated with the famous early rabbinic gathering at Yavneh. And this, Martyn reasoned, explained John's anxiety about 'being cast out of the synagogue'. The problem is that Martyn's hypothesis rests on an extremely fragile foundation. We do not know what exactly happened at Yavneh, nor can we securely date the *Birkat ha-Minim* that early. Nor, in any case, is the *Birkat ha-Minim* a perfect match for the scenario John describes. John's account here is *his own* perception of a breach between the synagogue and the disciples of Jesus, which may or may not map onto any events in external history. It does, however, provide some context for John's antagonistic rhetoric about 'the Jews' (*Ioudaioi*, which can also mean simply 'Judeans', but is probably used here in a more generalising and pejorative sense), noted in document 21 above.

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Josephus: Jewish Antiquities 18.63–4 (early second century CE)

Text

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the

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prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

Source

Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Volume VIII: Books 18–19*, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library 433 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

Commentary

This document, traditionally called the *Testimonium Flavianum*, is unlike the others in this chapter in one key respect: it is not part of the New Testament. Like the other documents in this chapter, however, it is a Jewish text from the turn of the second century (excepting a few textual interpolations, on which more in a moment) that knows of Jesus of Nazareth. The author is Flavius Josephus, né Joseph ben Matthias, the son of a Judean priestly family who, after the ill-fated Jewish–Roman War of 66–70 CE, became a court historian to the Flavian emperors at Rome. He wrote two major works (as well as a couple of minor ones), the first a history of the war, the second a national history of the Jewish people from the creation of the world to the early Roman empire. Our document comes from near the end of this latter work, a single paragraph of which mentions a certain Galilean wonderworker by the name of Jesus.

The text as we have it in the manuscripts, and as printed above, looks suspiciously Christian, in particular in its claims that Jesus was more than human, was the messiah and was raised from the dead as the prophets testified. Josephus himself was a non-Christian Jew, but the text of his works was transmitted through antiquity and the Middle Ages by Christian scribes. Most likely, then, what has happened here is that an original Josephan report about Jesus has been interpolated with Christian glosses further extolling him. If we set apart the likely Christian glosses in italics, leaving the likely original text in roman type, we get the following:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. *On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him*. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

This passage, along with Josephus' whole oeuvre, is important in the history of Jewish–Christian relations because ancient, medieval and early modern Christians made Josephus play the role of Jewish witness to (what their supersessionist theologies said was) the end

of Judaism and rise of Christianity. Josephus wrote a century before the codification of the Mishnah, so he did not live to see the ascendancy of Rabbinic Judaism. Christian readers, therefore, could choose to read him as a kind of coda to their Christian Bibles. Read in this very tendentious way, Josephus' tragic account of the horrors of the Jewish–Roman War became, for Christian writers, a vindication of the church over against the synagogue. Modern historical research has restored Josephus to his own first-century Judean and Roman contexts, but the Christian reception history of his works still casts a long shadow.

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