Jesus

FIRST-CENTURY

Rabbi

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with JOSEPH A. LIEBERMAN



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PREFACE

Oy, as we say in Yiddish. Oy! The ache of sadness, the ache of joy. The ache of praying for what seems impossible. The ache of hoping for the fulfillment of God's promise to us all. The time seems to have arrived when Christians and Jews are beginning to have a new understanding of each other. Old notions and prejudices are rapidly being discarded, making room for what the Holy One might have had us understand all along. After the Holocaust, it's time to ask as the great first-century sage Hillel did, "If not now, when?" In March 2008, *Time* magazine cited "Re-Judaizing Jesus" as one of "10 Ideas That Are Changing the World." I think I know why.

There are several books published with the goal of teaching Jews how to respond to Christian missionaries. The biblical citations that missionaries like to use (Daniel 9, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:5–6, Isaiah 53, etc.) are responded to in a respectful manner, but not one of the books understands the historical Jesus. The tone of the books is defensive, and the comments about Christianity are usually as inaccurate as comments I read about Judaism from some Christian sources. Do we need to criticize each other's faith in order to explain or exalt our own faith? I hope not. Do we need to "spin" descriptions of our own beliefs when comparing them to each other's beliefs? I hope not. The word of God in each of our great religions needs no interpretative spin.

What we need are more passionate, joy-filled discussions and dialogues with an underlying celebration of what we have in common. When members of one faith community define the beliefs of another faith community, there is a tendency to "one up" the group being defined. For example, if a Jewish person describes the notion of God's unity in Judaism and then compares it to the Trinity, there may be a tendency to "spin" the comparison in order for

the Jewish idea to sound better than the Christian belief. The same tendency is evident when some Christians define Jewish beliefs.

A good ground rule for interfaith encounters would be for members of each faith tradition to self-define their own beliefs. Members of each respective faith can then agree to discontinue relying upon what they *think* the other believes, and to rely on the new definitions. I am honored to have compiled this book for Christian friends who wish to learn and study the Jewish roots of their faith, and for my Jewish brothers and sisters who often lack accurate information about first-century Jewish beliefs and religious practices. On a personal level, I feel a bit like the theologian and philosopher Martin Buber when he wrote,

> "From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Savior has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which, for his sake and my own, I must endeavor to understand. . . . My own fraternally open relationship to him has grown even stronger and clearer, and today I see him more strongly and clearly than ever before. I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories."[1]

Herein lies the mystery of the Jewish-Christian encounter. To a Jew, Jesus can at most be a brother: a fellow Jew at the highest spiritual level who was martyred like millions of other Jews; a *rebbe* (an endearing Yiddish term for rabbi) of a group of *hasidim* (pious disciples) who wanted to see the prophetic dream of peace and justice fulfilled in this world; a healer and miracle worker in the lineage of Elijah and Elisha before him; a mystic like the Baal Shem Tov after him; an incredible *maggid* (preacher and evangelist) in the tradition of the Pharisees. He was a good son, a good Jew, and what we in Judaism call a *mensch*—someone who lived up to his total human potential.

And yet to a Christian the above can never, and should never, be enough. To a disciple and *talmid* (student), Jesus is so much more. He is one with his father. He is the anointed one, the Messiah who was spoken of in the Jewish prophetic writings, and he is the Savior, the great Comforter, and the Redeemer. Without him, salvation had not been accessible to the citizens of the ancient empires. Through Jesus, a personal, covenantal relationship with the God of Israel now seemed possible without having to convert to Judaism. Through him hope was given to the Gentile world for the coming of the Kingdom of God, both in this world and in the world to come. Through Jesus, the non-Jewish world became "those who have received a faith as precious as ours" (2 Peter 1:1). They joined the Jews who had been keepers of this covenant since the time of Abraham.

So herein lies the mystery and the riddle: one Jesus, two understandings. Once free of missionary pressure, the Jewish people may learn to see the historical Jesus as he was—a Jew who observed the commandments of the Torah, a great teacher, rabbi,[2] and *tzadik* (a saintly person). But a Christian's relationship is not solely based on the historical Jesus. It is primarily with the theological Jesus—the Jesus who is beyond time and space—to the Christ who is mysteriously one with the Father and the *Ruakh HaKodesh* (the Holy Spirit). How can these two positions be reconciled? Do they even need to be reconciled? I do not think they can be, nor should they be.

Our contemporary, commodity-based mindset does not hold onto subtleties and contradictions very well. We don't have much room in our minds for mystery, riddle, and paradox as we once did. We want answers. We pose our questions in black and white, either/or. An evangelical pastor once said to me, "Either Jesus is the Savior or he is a fraud." I asked, "Why? Where did you come up with such a clear either/or choice? Maybe he is Savior to you and great rabbi to me, and we're both right."

Can we learn to live with the anxiety of an unanswered mystery? Can we actually celebrate the mystery and shake our heads in wonderment at the infinite wisdom of the Creator? I don't propose to minimize Jewish

and Christian differences in this book. On the contrary, I think it is time to celebrate our differences. A healthy ecosystem is one where there is eco-diversity. I sense that the same principle holds true for our faiths as well. Judaism needs the broad spectrum of its various movements. Christianity needs its broad spectrum of denominations and movements. And both faiths, I believe, in a most profound and mysterious way, need each other. Jews and Christians have theologies that differ when it comes to the nature of Jesus. But we also have an identical moral passion for justice and equality based on the prophets. We have parallel problems and challenges that face us both. And we love and serve the same God.

I hope this book helps imprint a Jewish face on a Joshua whose name and identity was Hellenized and changed to Jesus, whose title is often changed to Lord instead of Rabbi so that he would appeal to the non-Jewish world, whose native country was called Palestine by the Romans in order to remove the identification with Judaism that Judea implied. It's my personal hope that this book helps place the martyrdom of Rabbi Joshua in context to the tens of thousands of other rabbis and lay people who also died on the cross at the hands of the Romans. Finally, I hope that God will bless the faithful within our various denominations and movements to study more together, celebrate more together, and dare to pray together more often. The Bible teaches us that there is a "time to break down, and a time to build up" (Ecclesiastes 3:3). Many Jews and Christians sense the time for building up has arrived between Church and Synagogue. We will both have to leave some of our differences at the door, live with God's mystery, and shout "Halleluyah" for that which we have in common.

INTRODUCTION

While I was compiling the materials for this book, I was uncertain whom to address my comments to: Catholics, mainstream Protestants, spirit-filled evangelicals, Southern Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Eastern Orthodox, Mormons, or to missionaries who believe that the "great commission" must extend to Jews who need to be "completed." I decided that I am not writing this book to any one particular denomination or movement. I am writing it with a focus on my Christian friends, but it is also for Jews who want to learn about the Jewish roots of Christianity. Many of the questions raised in this book come from conversations that I have had with well-meaning missionaries who usually know very little about Judaism, and who have approached me with the Christian gospel over the past forty years. I hope that the responses are useful to mainstream and evangelical Christians, as well as to Jews who want to respond intelligently to missionaries.

My goals are beyond the scope of what I can possibly achieve in a single volume, and I hope you will read some of the materials I refer to in this book. From a Jewish perspective, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* by Samuel Tobias Lachs is a scholarly and well-researched demonstration of the roots of Jesus's teachings within first-century Judaism. I cannot speak highly enough of the anthology entitled *Christianity in Jewish Terms* published by Westview Press. It's a cutting-edge collection of essays by leading Jewish and Christian scholars who bring to light the parallels of the two religions. *The Misunderstood Jew* by Amy-Jill Levine is a rare gem because of the author's scholarship and hopeful tone. Finally, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* that Dr. Levine coedited with Dr. Marc Z. Brettler is the first comprehensive study of the New Testament by Jewish scholars. This book is a must for any serious student of the New Testament.

I am not an academic. Borrowing the Christian term, I am more of what Christians might call an evangelist (a good news giver) or what Jews call a *maggid* (storyteller and expositor of Torah), and I have some "good news" to share with both Christians and Jews. This good news is equally shocking to religious members within each community. Let me begin by explaining to you, my Christian readers, what you may have already discovered: Jews have a knee-jerk, defensive reaction to the gospel. The "New" Testament has been badly misused over the past two thousand years, and this misuse has led to events like the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the terrible anti-Semitism of the twentieth century throughout Europe. To most Jews the good news of the Christian gospel has not been good. In fact, it has been horrible news. History has shown us that the way the gospel was taught meant that we were being asked to convert, forced to convert, forced to leave our homes, beaten for being "Christ-killers," or killed for clinging to our covenantal relationship with God.

Anti-Semitism is a virus that is sometimes difficult to isolate. It's not always as overt as the hatred expressed by Nazism or Stalinism. Sadly, at times, anti-Semitism has even taken on the disguise of the gospel. Prejudice has robbed Christians of a collegial partnership and relationship with Jews for two millennia. Xenophobia and internal church politics have contributed to anti-Semitism over the past two thousand years. Later in this book you will read how replacement theology (the doctrine that asserts that the new covenant of Christianity has replaced the old covenant of Judaism) was embedded in the writings of almost all the early church fathers, and how it inadvertently continues to be perpetuated in Bible translations, and in the sermons of well-meaning teachers and pastors.

After two thousand years, the residual hatred and distrust of Jews emerges in a variety of ways. There continue to be synagogue and cemetery desecrations, as well as local acts of vandalism targeting Jewish communities around the world. Some Jewish people will defensively lump all Christians together, and our reactions to the simple and profound message that underlies

Christianity may take the form of reactionary prejudice. When a missionary approaches a Jew who is already living a life in service to God, the idea of being told we are "incomplete without Jesus" is insulting even though the missionary may mean well. Being told we are "loved" but "without salvation" in the same breath is arrogant and displays an ignorance of the Jewish faith. On the other hand, the Jewish people acknowledge and are very grateful for Christian support of Israel. Also, in the past few decades, local churches in the Unites States are the first to come to the aid of Jewish communities after synagogue desecrations.

Within Judaism there remains plenty of hypocrisy, arrogance, and haughtiness concerning the nations of the world—issues that we have been dealing with internally for three thousand years. The writings of the prophets, in fact, are some of the best self-critical religious writings ever written. But when a religious Jew hears a Christian quoting the Jewish prophets as proof of Jewish theological inadequacy, Jews take it as condescending and hypocritical. At those moments the Jew might want to quote Jesus by saying, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). Jesus's rhetorical question was, in fact, right in line with the teachers and sages of his era. Rabbi Natan taught the classical maxim, "Remove the chaff from yourselves, then remove it from others. . . . Reproach not your neighbor for a blemish that is yours" (Talmud: Baba Metzia 59b).

This book is not a refutation of Christianity. It isn't about Christian theology or its conception of Jesus. It's not a debate or refutation of the notion of Trinity, original sin, Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus as one with the Father, or Jesus as a mediator between people and God. It's not about Christianity's methodologies for confession leading to forgiveness, or its theological notion of salvation by grace. This book isn't about baptism, the Christian understanding of the remission of sin, or the various denominational communion rituals. It's not about the origins of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, or any of the sacred Christian festivals. This book isn't about the miracles of the

New Testament: the virginal conception, Jesus walking on water or raising the dead, Jesus's resurrection, or his after-death appearance to his disciples.

Instead, this book will clarify aspects of the life of the historical Jesus, the Jewish Jesus, the first-century Rabbi Jesus. My goal is simply to put his words and teachings into their proper cultural and religious context. The subject of this book has to do with the teachings within Judaism that were most likely studied and believed by the historical Jesus. This book does not focus on the Christian's faith in the theological Jesus—the Jesus worshiped by the church is the province of Christians. To a Christian he is seen as both Messiah and Savior. To a Jew, the messiah is an anointed person, and God is the Savior. On these points some of us will probably always differ. But the historical Jesus—Jesus the man, the Jewish man, the rabbi—he belongs to both of us. The focus of this book is on the notions, ideas, theology, scriptural passages, and eschatology that Jesus the Jew, Jesus the rabbi, the historical Jesus believed. What writings by other rabbis did Rabbi Joshua study during the first thirty years of his life? Who did he study with? Who were his favorite teachers? What prayers did he chant each morning and evening? What parts of the Jewish oral tradition did he quote or refer to that are recorded in the Gospels?

In this spirit, I come to you with the excitement of a fellow believer who has good news to share with you. It amazes me how much I know about Jesus's daily spiritual life simply because I practice Judaism. I know what prayers he might have said each morning; I know what Torah portions he studied each Sabbath; I know how he celebrated the holidays and what issues recorded in the Oral Torah were being debated during his lifetime. I remember looking at Matthew 14:19 for the first time, reading about Jesus holding up the loaves and fishes and making a blessing. The words in English would have been, "Blessed are You, Holy One our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth." I realized it was ironic that every religious Jew today knows the blessing that Jesus might have spoken, but very few Christians do. I cannot imagine a Christian whose Christianity would not be

greatly enhanced by deepening his or her knowledge of the historical Jesus, the Jewish Jesus, and about the religion of Judaism that has flourished just as much in the past two thousand years as it did for the two thousand years before Jesus. The time is ripe for Christians to delve into the powerful teachings that grew out of the pre-Rabbinic Judaism that Jesus was a part of, and that brought the world such great wisdom in the past two thousand years. Simultaneously, it seems to be the right time for Jews to reclaim Jesus as an authentic Jewish teacher and native son.

Now seems to be the time for both Jews and Christians to move forward. We each need to correct any remaining misrepresentations that we make about each other's faiths as quickly as possible. With God's help, and through the work of many courageous scholars and teachers, I have faith that every nuance of replacement theology is on its way out. I have faith that a new understanding of the historical Jesus is on its way in. More and more Christians of every stripe and color are awakening to the possibility of new relationships and interfaith opportunities with their Jewish brothers and sisters. As a Jew, I am watching in awe. God's footprints are everywhere. Let us follow.

Setting the Scene for Interfaith Encounters

Interfaith gatherings between mainstream Christians and Jews are now commonplace. In the past thirty years both mainstream and evangelical churches have also started studying and celebrating the Jewish roots of their beliefs. I personally hope that Jews and Christians will come together in prayer more often to celebrate our Creator. Naturally I hope that the distraction of evangelism to my people can end quickly so we can get on to the greater work of serving God. There is much we can do together once Jewish people stop feeling threatened by missionaries whose goal is to convert "incomplete" Jews to Christianity.

A first step might be to realize how closely linked we are. Once a Jew or a Christian starts out on the road to study the historical roots of Christianity,

he or she is startled by the exact same set of facts: (1) Jesus was Jewish; (2) Jesus kept both the moral and ritual *mitzvot* (commandments) of the Torah, and instructed his Jewish students to do the same; (3) Christianity has much more in common with its parent religion than it has ever acknowledged until recently; (4) Judaism has much more in common with the teachings of Jesus than it has ever acknowledged until recently; and (5) the historical attempts of missionaries to convert Jews hurts the Jewish people and ultimately goes against God's will.

Generalities are always flawed, so I ask the reader for a bit of poetic license in my descriptions of Judaism and Christianity as I try to shed some light on our differences so that we might ultimately be able to celebrate our commonality. Judaism generally sees the world through a collective lens, starting with a national focus on all of Israel, and then leading back to each individual. Christianity generally starts with a focus on the salvation of each individual, which would then lead to the redemption for the whole world. While the Jew's focus is usually on the messianic vision of world redemption first, the Christian's focus is usually on personal salvation first.

It's easy to utter the words *Jesus was Jewish*, but more difficult for members of either faith to actually imagine this as an historical reality. Many Christians think of the Jewishness of Jesus in the same way they think of the Catholicism of Martin Luther—in other words, he was Catholic but broke away from many of the theological doctrines of the Church at that time. Jesus, however, never left Judaism. Along with the other great sages and teachers that Jews study and revere (Judah the Prince, Hillel, Shammai, Akiva, Yokhanan Ben Zakkai, etc.), Jesus was critical of hypocrisy of some within the Temple priesthood led by the Sadducees. But Jesus never left Judaism, even when he was critical of hypocrisy. He never abandoned the practice of fulfilling the Torah's commandments (i.e., observing the Sabbath, keeping the kosher dietary laws, observing the festivals, etc.).

For the Jew, imagining a thoroughly Jewish Joshua chanting *tehillim* (psalms) and praying in Hebrew each morning with his *talmidim* (disciples)

while each wears *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) on his garment and dons *t'fillin* (phylacteries) is contrary to two thousand years of Christian art that sought to de-Judaize Jesus and the disciples. Classical European painting and sculpture depicted Jesus, his family, and friends as looking anything but Mediterranean Jews (e.g., Michelangelo's famous sculpture of David who is not even circumcised). Lamentably, the only Jewish-looking people in most of this art are the opponents of Jesus—Judas, the High Priest, the Sadducees, and angry mobs. In reality, however, the religion of Jesus was Judaism, and ethnically he must have looked like a million other young men of Judea who lived near the Mediterranean.

For a Christian to imagine the scene of a Jewish Jesus is startling. What, no Eucharist? No walking to the local ecclesia on Sunday? No Communion? The average Christian has been raised to believe that Jesus left his native religion to begin a new faith. Or that Paul began a new faith as Jesus would have wanted him to do. For a Jew the scene may be equally as startling. You mean Jesus quotes wisdom sayings from the rich Jewish tradition of his day, and repeats classic parables? Jesus was invited by other religious Jews to teach in synagogues? The Our Father prayer and the Beatitudes are Jewish in origin, and their content was familiar to most of the Jewish people who heard Jesus recite them? Really? Almost all the Jews who heard him teach loved his teachings because they were so rooted in the emerging movement that soon would come to be known as Rabbinic Judaism.

New Testament scholar Dr. Brad Young places Jesus squarely within the context of the Jewish heritage, culture, and religion that he never abandoned. He writes:

> Although Jesus was Jewish, his theology is sometimes treated as if he were Christian, but Jesus never attended a church. He never celebrated Christmas. He never wore new clothes on Easter Sunday. His cultural orientation was rooted deeply in the faith experience of his people. His teachings concerning God's love and the dignity of

> each human being were based upon the foundations of Jewish religious thought during the Second Temple period. The more we learn about this fascinating period of history, the more we will know about Jesus. Jesus worshiped in the synagogue. He celebrated the Passover. He ate kosher food. He offered prayers in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish religious heritage of Jesus impacted his life in every dimension of his daily experience.[3]

Isaiah 52:13–53:9, the famous suffering servant allegory, is literally a description of the nation of Israel as the suffering servant. Yet to the Church, the servant has been reinterpreted as Jesus. In a simple and logical gesture of our mutual love for the Almighty, isn't it time for us to simply move over and make room for each other's interpretation? Does Isaiah 53 have to be read with only one "correct" interpretation? To the Jew this passage will always be about the people and nation of Israel: "But you, Israel, are my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen" (Isaiah 41:8). To the Christian this passage's simple meaning is extended to Christ (1 Peter 2:24). Let us all hear the admonition and instruction of the prophet: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?" (Malachi 2:10).

The miracles written about in the New Testament vary little from the miracles that God demonstrated in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). And, of course, the church wholeheartedly adopted the moral underpinnings of Judaism. The infrastructure of the prayer service arose from Judaism, and to this day Jewish and Christian service structures bear an unmistakable similarity to each other. Christianity has had an equally positive influence on Judaism: on our liturgical music, synagogue architecture, congregational decorum, and on the implementation of social justice and civil rights projects. The Reformation was the basis for the formation of Protestant denominations, but it also had a beneficial influence on Catholicism. The same Reformation was also good for Judaism, and the diversity that is evident within modern

Judaism was, to a large degree, inspired by this ultimately good upheaval within the church.

In the past fifty years Christianity has courageously repented for many of the theological positions that contributed to the Holocaust. The sincerity of the Catholic Church and various evangelical groups in the work of reconciliation has been extraordinary. Mainstream Christian groups (Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and others) had already been making bold efforts at reconciliation throughout the twentieth century, and especially since the end of World War II. Following the Six-Day War in 1967, evangelical Christians have shown unprecedented levels of financial, emotional, and spiritual support for the State of Israel. There are many of us in both faiths who believe that God has a special purpose for healing the divisions between Synagogue and Church—to get to work on our common mission of ushering in the messianic age of peace and justice into the world.

Another step in resolving the mystery might be to admit that we simply do not understand each other's faith. Many years ago I was teaching an "Introduction to Judaism" class in my synagogue. When I attempted to define Christianity, there was almost a riot in the class. You see, I was using concepts about the church that I had learned from my extensive contact with the Irish and Italian Catholic kids I grew up with in Brooklyn. As I tried to redefine what I was saying, I realized I was only digging myself into a deeper hole. If I said something that was appealing to the Lutheran in the class, it was incorrect to the evangelical in the class. If I said something that was appealing to the Baptist in the class, it was inaccurate to the Methodist.

Oy, what a lesson! I learned that I would never again try to define someone else's faith. The next year I brought in representatives from several Christian denominations. Differences in doctrine became clear and my yearly lecture on Christianity improved since I was no longer trying to define Christianity through my own childhood biases and filters, no matter how well intentioned. Just as I made many unwitting errors in attempting to portray Christianity, most Christians make these same unwitting errors

when they try to define Judaism. When it comes to issues of the remission of sin, atonement, forgiveness, the afterlife, and salvation, I have heard the oddest explanations by Christians about what Judaism supposedly believes. I have also heard the oddest "definitions" of Christian beliefs from fellow Jews about doctrines like resurrection, the virgin birth, vicarious atonement, the Trinity, and salvation.

Statements about the parallels between the Old and New Testaments come from scholarly research published mostly during the past fifty years or so. Courageous twentieth-century pioneers of interfaith dialogue have inspired my own editorial statements about the overlap in our theologies. My editorial goal has been to try to uncover what I believe to be artificially contrived separations between our theologies. For example, Jews certainly do not define the notion of mediator, son of God, vicarious atonement, Trinity, and original sin in the same manner as Christians—but functionally speaking, Judaism does in fact have all five of these elements within our faith.

I realize I risk offending some within my own faith community by "minimizing the differences" between these two great faiths. I'm willing to take that risk. We have all maximized the differences for too long. Although I don't want to minimize important differences, I no longer wish to defend what I sincerely believe to be contrived distinctions, especially those based on false stereotypes. Rev. Dr. Clark Williamson, one of the pioneers in the modern interfaith dialogue movement, sadly affirms that the "Christian stereotype of Judaism as arid, legalistic, grace-less, and devoid of faith is familiar." But in his critique of a particular Jewish scholar's inaccurate description of Christian theology, he warns of "the other side of the stereotype: Christianity is individualistic, other-worldly, unconcerned with doing good works, focused entirely on truth, and exclusivist with regard to salvation."[4]

I am not the first to have noticed that Christ to a Christian is functionally similar to what Torah is to a Jew. Of course, Jews don't worship Torah, but it is clear that both Torah and Christ are connecting points, or portals, to

God. It could be said that whereas Trinitarian Christians worship Christ, Jews simply revere the Torah. When the Torah is taken out of the ark, Jews stand and give it a gentle kiss as it is carried around the congregation. We listen to the Torah with the expectancy of a direct and personal encounter with the Divine. In this sense, the Torah is a mediator—an intermediary between God and the people. For Jews the Torah is simply the most dependable way that we can know what God wants from us. Do we read and listen to the Torah as the living word of the Holy One? Yes. Mediation simply means that something (Torah for Jews, Christ for Christians) aids two parties (God and us) to have accurate and intimate communication. Words like redemption, sin, law, repent, commandment, and Lord may have uniquely different meanings within each of our faiths, but that's the beauty of an interfaith relationship—to learn how the same Living God has revealed identical concepts to us in unique ways.

Theologically, Jesus is seen as God incarnate, who entered the world as a man so that humanity could be redeemed by identifying with his suffering, death, and resurrection. Christianity teaches that Jesus entered the world as the final sacrifice for the nations of the world. Jews, on the other hand, look to Sinai both as a moment in history and as the primal, spiritual event that is linked to the journey of every individual: a journey from slavery to freedom, from the enslavement that led to the revelation at Sinai, and from revelation to the Promised Land. At the same time, the suffering of ancient Israel in Egypt has been an unending model for many minority groups—pilgrims, Mormons, and the leaders of the civil rights movement, for instance—to renew their sense of hope in the face of despair.

Christians tend to focus on their Messiah's suffering, which expiates the sins of every believer. This leads every individual to empathize with the suffering of others. Jews start the other way: we tend to see the suffering of every child, and every righteous person, as having the potential to bring a certain degree of atonement to the world. Although the analogy is not perfect, it seems that to some degree, at least, what the Torah is to a Jew,

Christ is to a Christian. Christians see Jesus as the Son of God whereby everyone may enter the kingdom of heaven, while Jews see every person as a son or daughter of God, whereby everyone may enter the Kingdom of God right here on earth. Christians focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, both Jewish and Christians await a universal resurrection and share the dream that the messianic era will be marked by worldwide peace and justice.

The Torah is the story of a people, and Sinai is the story of the revelation of God's word to that people. The life of Jesus is the story of a person, the model for all people, and the Logos made flesh. Every Jew leaves Egypt at Passover; every Christian goes to Calvary each Easter. Israel is the suffering servant; Jesus is the suffering servant. At Sinai millions received the revelation at one time; at Pentecost each Christian receives the blessings of the Holy Spirit, one at a time. During the Shoah six million died for being Jews. From a historical perspective, Jesus was crucified by the Romans, and was perceived to be a political threat to the Empire. From a Christian theological perspective, Jesus died at Calvary to atone for the sins of humanity.

Rabbi Dr. Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, who teaches at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, reminds us of our common history of misrepresentation: "We Jews and Christians have made a lot of noise over the centuries, drawing boundaries in the wrong places and reducing subtle dialectics that exist in both faiths to dichotomies that allegedly divide one from the other. When our traditions have tried to paint pictures of the other, they have hardly been at their best."[5] When we enter an interfaith discussion, let us permit spiritually committed Jews to define Judaism and spiritually committed Christians to define Christianity. We all need to be as spin-free and objective as we can when it comes to history, especially the history of two thousand years ago when record keeping and documentation wasn't at the same level as it is today.

A further step might be to admit that there's nothing to resolve—that God has given each of our faiths separate, parallel, but uniquely different missions.

Arising out of decades of prayer, study, and interfaith conversations, I believe that first-century Christian theology was never intended for Jews who already had a gospel of their own. Although there is contradictory evidence, it is possible that Paul might have intended for the good news primarily to be "proclaimed among Gentiles" (1 Timothy 3:16). This might have been seen as a fulfillment of Isaiah's words: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'" (Isaiah 49:6). Also, it may have been that when Jesus sent his disciples "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6), he was doing the same kind of outreach that all rabbis do—reaching out to Jews whose connection to God is severed because of bad teachers or assimilation.

The underlying critique that informs my writing has to do with the way that some Christian teachers, preachers, and scholars continue to misrepresent Judaism. Needless to say, distorted teachings about Christianity by Jewish leaders have also contributed to keeping us apart, but distorted teachings about Judaism by Christians have had disastrous consequences for Jews, including vandalism, persecution, forced conversions, violence, pogroms, exile, and massive numbers of deaths. Christianity, our daughter religion, represents two billion followers, whereas Judaism, a nonmissionary religion, rarely sought the kind of growth that the Christian church sought. In every generation we struggle to maintain our own small population in the face of prejudice, assimilation, secularism, anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and missionary encroachment.

Along with most Jews, I have been deeply moved by the extraordinary rate of positive change, acts of repentance, revision of prejudicial liturgy, songs, Passion play texts, and ideas within the church toward the Jewish people especially since the end of World War II. I also recognize that fewer and fewer American Christians subscribe to the kind of replacement theology analyzed in this book. This is not, however, always true.

The sense of reproof and rebuke that underlies some of my commentary cuts both ways. Some Jews and Christians may choose to spend another

two thousand years criticizing each other's rituals, theological dogmas, and beliefs, but I believe that God would be better served if we were to look into the mirror and correct the errors within our own religions and denominations first. In the eighteenth century, one of our saintly teachers, the Baal Shem Tov, said, "If a person sees something wrong with someone else, this is a sign that he himself has a similar fault. He sees himself, as it were, in a mirror: if the face he sees is not clean, it is his own which is dirty." Or as the rabbis in the Talmud wisely observed, "He who continually declares others unfit is himself unfit. With his own blemish he stigmatizes others as unfit" (Kiddushin 70a).

Christians from various denominations who just a few decades ago didn't ever talk with each other are now in ecumenical dialogue with each other. More and more they're talking with Jews as well. This is a moment in history that should not be taken for granted. Something much greater than all of us is at work here. May God bless us with the courage that each of us will need to take the risk to continue our dialogue, study, and prayer together. The cross in Constantine's dream turned into a sword raised against the Jews and other non-Christians in what remained of the Roman Empire. Now, let us ask God together to turn Constantine's sword into a pruning hook! Measure for measure, trust for trust. As this happens, I believe the Jewish people will be able to study and celebrate the Jewishness of the historical Jesus.

In a world where all religious beliefs come under scrutiny, some may ask, what can God's purpose now be for the Jewish people? Many modern philosophers and scholars, both religious and secular, have tried to answer this question. Judaism, and the survival of the Jewish people, seems to have defied the laws of history and probability. Just as Christianity has its own special mission and covenant with the Creator, so too the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt has always been a beacon of light and hope to all downtrodden minorities who need to cling to their faith in God in the face of oppression and hopelessness.

The same principle of a unique but distinctive destiny holds true for Christians. The word *christ* comes from the Greek word meaning "anointed." Maybe it's the destiny of Christians to recognize and anoint all that is good in the world—not to convert the world to Christianity, but to "christen" the beauty of all that God has created. The Jewish people may have endeavored to be a light unto the nations (Isaiah 42:6), but Christianity has brought that light to the world in a way that Judaism could never have done. This partnership between Jews and Christians has rarely been acknowledged, let alone celebrated, by leaders of either faith. Maybe now is the time to acknowledge and express gratitude for each other's divinely guided spiritual paths. God, Torah, Israel; Father, Son, Holy Spirit—two triads, two paths, two religions, one God, one goal! Could it really be so simple? I think so.

About Language

Words like law, sin, repent, salvation, and redemption have very different meanings in Hebrew than they do in English. I've attempted to deal with each of these key theological terms in word studies throughout this book, but I haven't retranslated them into English. For example, I would have preferred using the term *return* instead of *repent* in parts of this book, since that's a more literal translation of the Hebrew. But I want the English reader to be comfortable studying the biblical texts they love. Another example would be the word *law*, a poor translation of the Hebrew *Torah*, which more accurately and literally means "teaching."

The reader will note that I have used Jewish abbreviations for dating: BCE, the abbreviation of "before the Common Era" is used in place of BC. CE, the abbreviation for "Common Era" is used in place of AD. When I include a citation from a book of the Bible, you will see the citation at the beginning or end of a quoted verse (e.g., Genesis 1:1). I have done the same with the Talmud, midrash, and other writings in the rabbinic tradition (e.g., Mishnah: Avot 1:1). I realize that some readers are not familiar with books from the

rabbinical tradition, but those who wish to study and research further will at least have the correct source for each citation and quote.

When quoting from the Bible, I have used the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) translation, except when noted, or when I quote someone who uses a different version. Many of the barriers that separate Jews and Christians are due to mistranslations, misinterpretations based on poor translations, and the non-Hebraic features of all English renditions of the Bible. The Tanakh (Jewish Scriptures in Hebrew) is a Middle Eastern text, written in a Middle Eastern language, and directed at a Middle Eastern audience. It uses a Middle Eastern grammar that is distinctively different from Greek, Latin, or English. The New Testament is written in Greek, which has its own nuances and is difficult to translate into modern languages. It seems odd to say, but the Tanakh is not the same as the Bible we know in English. The Bible is a translation of the Tanakh, and there are fundamental linguistic differences that can only to be bridged by good teachers with accurate Bible commentaries.

The first centuries before and after the common era were some of the most fertile periods in Jewish history. New theological concepts were emerging, along with new modalities for Jews to express their relationship with the Creator. Jesus lived in the middle of that era, and was part of the creative process that saw the emergence of a "new" Judaism by the fourth and fifth centuries. This new, or more accurately "renewed," Judaism has been called Rabbinic Judaism, and the period of time is known as the Rabbinic Era. Throughout this book, I refer to the writings of the sages and rabbis of this period by a number of somewhat synonymous and overlapping terms: the rabbinic tradition, oral tradition, Rabbinic Judaism, Oral Law, Oral Torah, rabbinic writings, rabbinic commentaries, and rabbinic literature. The relationship between the Written Torah (the Five Books of Moses) and the Oral Torah (key rabbinical writings) will be discussed in its own chapter.

As we know, Judaism did not stop growing when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed two thousand years ago. Judaism changed as much in the

last two millennia as it did in its first two thousand years. Judaism has not been replaced, but it has been renewed. The "old" Testament is still a "new" Testament to Jews. My own rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, has proposed that we use the terms Elder Testament and Younger Testament, which I use in much of this book. First of all, the word *elder* is a term of respect that the Jewish Scriptures deserve. And second, these terms tend to bring a smile to almost everyone who hears them—after two thousand years of disputation, we all need to smile a bit more.

I
The Jewishness of Jesus

ONE

Shared Roots

It strikes me as nothing less than extraordinary that both Christianity and modern Judaism were born of two separate catastrophic events that happened within a few decades of each other, within only a few hundred meters from each other, and brought on by the same ruthless Roman Empire. The crucifixion of Jesus took place just outside the Jerusalem city walls somewhere around 36 CE, and the destruction of the Temple occurred within those very walls in 70 CE. Somehow each religion has transformed these catastrophes and what seemed to be failure into compelling stories of hope, renewal, and redemption.

Christianity as a religion emerges from the hope brought on by an inspired theology that connects Jesus's death to the resurrection—the story told each Easter. A lesser-known fact is that the rebirth of ancient Judaism into modern Judaism was also catalyzed and symbolized by a single event—the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. It was after that terrible event that Judaism was forced to accelerate the transformation of its religious practices from an offering-based religion centered around the Temple to a prayer-based religion centered around individual homes and synagogues—in essence, the Judaism we are familiar with today.

This transformation actually began a few hundred years before the events of 70 CE, and culminated in the fourth and fifth centuries with the compilation of the Jerusalem Talmud. But it was the Temple's destruction that forced the hand of Jewish theology whose scriptures are clear and specific about offerings being made at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the explosive growth of Christianity and its absorption by Constantine into what remained of the Roman Empire that forced the sages of Judaism to intelligently and creatively respond to Christianity's exclusive claims.

Although the fruits of modern rabbinical Judaism did not fully ripen until centuries after Jesus's lifetime, it seems clear that Jesus was part of the paradigm shift that was transforming his native religion. How do we know this? Because throughout the Younger Testament, Jesus not only quotes the Torah and the prophets, but his teachings parallel the emerging oral tradition that existed in his lifetime. As you will learn throughout this book, Jesus often seems to be quoting directly from the Jewish oral tradition that was extant in his lifetime. We can further infer from the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that Jesus taught in synagogues by invitation, and that scribes and Pharisees came willingly to hear him teach.

As a mainstream congregational rabbi in America, I would not waste the time of my congregation with guest lecturers and out-of-town teachers unless they really had something special to add to our understanding of Torah. Religious leaders in the past were no different. It seems implausible for Jesus to have been reading aloud the words of the prophets and teaching in synagogues without some kind of invitation, permission, and blessing of the synagogue leaders. In Luke 4:16, Jesus was the reader of the weekly prophetic portion. This act is considered an honor in Jewish worship services. It seems unlikely that this could have happened without an explicit invitation.

Many teachers and rabbis in Jesus's day used parables to teach difficult subjects. Jesus lived on the cusp between biblical and rabbinical Judaism, and it's striking how many of his statements, phrases, expressions, and style of argument come from the oral tradition that began to be written down in the first century BCE. Whether or not Jesus was quoting from his contemporaries and the sages who came before him, it's clear his teachings are firmly rooted in the Judaism in which he was raised. Knowing this opens up immense possibilities in understanding the historical Jesus's day-to-day behavior and activities, what he believed, how he prayed, and even what his intentions may have been with regard to the gospel.

Further, placing Jesus firmly within the rabbinic tradition adds a new dynamic to Jewish-Christian conversation. Sometimes Jesus speaks on his

own authority, yet the realization that most of his teachings were in line with those of his rabbinic colleagues will permit Jews to discover a new level of esteem for this native son of Judaism. On the other side, understanding the historical Jesus can only enhance a Christian's faith and help eliminate anti-Semitism stemming from misinterpretation of the Younger Testament regarding Jesus's Jewishness. How do we know that Jesus was on the leading edge of the most creative transformation of Judaism in his day? We can't be certain, of course, but from the anecdotal evidence in the Younger Testament it seems that Jesus was recognized by at least a few synagogue leaders and rabbis as an inspired teacher. Consider these passages:

> **Matthew 4:23** Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

> **Mark 5:22** Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet.

> **Luke 4:16** When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read. . . .

For most of the past two thousand years, the uncertainty about Jesus's fidelity to Judaism has been a rational, survival-based response by many Jews to the attitude of Christians toward Judaism. In the name of Jesus, terrible brutality has been aimed toward Jews for stubbornly holding fast to the commandments of the Mosaic covenant. Is it any wonder that Jewish people have a negative reaction to the idea of embracing Jesus as an authentic rabbi?

The Jewishness of a rabbi named Joshua has been mostly suppressed until recently. The Jesus of Christian theology has too often been portrayed as someone who wanted to replace the "old" covenant with a "new" covenant. Recognizing Jesus for what he was—a religious Jew—it becomes far less likely that he ever intended supplanting the Mosaic covenant with any

"new covenant" spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah. We know with certainty that Jeremiah also never considered the possibility that any future covenant would replace any of the existing covenants. Dr. Brad H. Young writes:

> The religion of the Jews in the first century is the root, which produced the fruit of Christian faith. Faith in Jesus, however, has sometimes made it difficult for Christians to understand and appreciate the faith of the Jews. The religion of Jesus and his people was Judaism. Christian faith in Jesus sometimes has alienated Jesus from ancient Judaism and exiled him from his people. . . . Theologians have read the Gospels as Christian literature written by the church and for the church. When Jesus is viewed among the Gentiles, the significance of Jewish culture and custom is minimized or forgotten altogether. But when Jesus is viewed as a Jew within the context of 1st century Judaism, an entirely different portrait emerges.[6]

Jesus must be understood as a Jewish theologian. His theology is Jewish to the core. The tragic history of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity makes it difficult to hear his forceful voice. The attacks of the church against the synagogue have stripped Jesus of his religious heritage. As Christians we have been taught wrongful prejudices about Jews and Judaism. Hatred of the Jewish people has erected a barrier separating Jesus from his theology. Ethnically he may be considered a Jew, but religiously he remains a Christian who failed to reform the corrupt religious system of the Jews. Such an approach fails. Jesus is Jewish both in his ethnic background and in his religious thought and practice.

In line with most first-century teachers, both Jesus was critical of religious hypocrites, and there were plenty of them back then, just as there are today in churches, synagogues, mosques, and ashrams. When Jesus warns the people in Matthew 5:19 about breaking "the least of these commandments," he seems to be talking about upholding both the ritual and moral mitzvot of the Torah. In Matthew 23:1–3 when Jesus instructs his followers

to "do" and "follow" whatever the leaders tell them, he seems to be referring to the rulings that were part of the prerabbinic judgments and rulings of his day.

In Matthew 5:23–24 Jesus is likely basing his remarks on the well-known rabbinic tradition of his day that requires a person to reconcile with a neighbor before bringing an offering to the Temple. In Acts 20:16 it is written that Paul observed the Jewish festival called *Shavuot* (literally "the Festival of Weeks"). Even after the resurrection, when some Christians say that sacrifices were no longer necessary, Paul offers a sacrifice, as reported in Acts 21:26, in order to demonstrate that he, like Jesus before him, upheld the Torah. Paul said, "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Romans 3:31).

Renowned New Testament scholar, Dr. David Flusser, adamantly places Jesus as a religious Jew who lived, taught, and died as a Torah-observant Jew, and who instructed his fellow Jews to keep the commandments of the Torah as well. He wrote:

> Jesus regarded the Torah . . . as a world complete in itself, on which the existence of the real world depended (Matthew 5:17–20). And he was therefore faithful to the Torah in its entirety. Like many members of the school of Hillel, Jesus gave the Torah a humanitarian explanation, at the same time taking the view that the smallest commandment weigh as heavily as the greatest. . . . Jesus's position is made clear in the fifth chapter of Matthew. There he speaks of keeping the Torah. . . . Anyone transgressing against the least commandment will not enter the kingdom of heaven, and anyone who keeps the "minor" commandments and teaches others to keep them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. He emphasizes that the righteousness of his disciples in keeping the commandments must be greater than that of the scribes, or else they shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . The Christian sources, of course, provide us with

> the contrast between Jesus and the Jewish law. Matthew presents the views of Jesus as opposed to the views of the sages. The truth of the matter, however, is that there is no difference between the views of Jesus and authentic Jewish tradition.[7]

Contemporary scholars have a clear sense of what caused the rift between Christianity and its mother religion soon after the first century was over. One variable was the explosion of the Pauline doctrine, and the increased number of Gentile believers who had no ancestral allegiance to the Torah's ritual commandments. When faced with Jesus's powerful and consistent allegiance to even the "least" of the commandments, and the oral tradition as well, Christian theologians faced a dilemma—how to reconcile Jesus's allegiance to the *mitzvot,* and Paul's demand that Gentiles be "free" of such obligations. Dr. Flusser assesses the situation as follows:

> It would be a mistake . . . not to recognize the unease experienced by many Christian thinkers and scholars. They have felt obliged to deal with the fact that the founder of their religion was a Jew, faithful to the law, who never had to face the necessity of adapting his Judaism to the European way of life. For Jesus there was, of course, the peculiar problem of his relationship to the law and its precepts, but this arises for every believing Jew who takes his Judaism seriously.[8]

In the Gospels, we see how Jesus's attitude to the law has sometimes become unrecognizable as a result of "clarification" by the evangelists and touching up by later revisers. Nevertheless, the synoptic Gospels, read through the eyes of their own time, still portray a picture of Jesus as a faithful, law-observant Jew. Few people seem to realize that in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus is never shown in conflict with current practice of the law.

The Younger Testament is filled with explicit and implicit statements indicating that Jesus, his family, and *talmidim* were in the mainstream of Jewish life. There are contradictory passages as well, so it's impossible to make a blanket

statement and say that Jesus fully observed Jewish law. But the general sense is that Jesus and his followers honored Sabbath, kosher dietary laws, laws of modesty (e.g., outside of the family, men and women do not touch each other), and the purity laws (e.g., washing hands, using a *mikvah* for ritual bathing). Again, consider what Scripture says:

Mary and Joseph have Jesus circumcised as commanded by Torah:

> **Luke 2:21** After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Mary immerses herself in the ritual bath as commanded by Torah:

> **Luke 2:22** When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

Jesus and his family observe the Passover as commanded by both Torah and the Oral Law:

> **Luke 2:42** And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival.

Jesus wore *tzitzit*—religious fringes on his garment as commanded by the Torah:

> **Matthew 9:20** Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak.

Jesus instructs his followers to keep the commandments of the Torah:

> **Matthew 19:17** If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.

Jesus instructs his followers to bring a Temple offering as commanded by the Torah:

> **Matthew 8:4** Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.

Jesus celebrates Hanukkah:

> **John 10:22–23** At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple. . . .

Why did they do these things? Because Jesus and his family were religious Jews, dedicated to fulfilling the Torah's commandments, just as religious Jews do today. If the Last Supper was a Passover seder, it's important to know that Jesus was celebrating the festival using a form (*matzah*, wine, seder meal, etc.) that comes from the oral tradition, and not the Torah. Even after the resurrection, we see his disciples fulfilling commandments, bringing offerings to the Temple, and living in accordance to Judean social and religious culture.

When Jesus talks of a "new commandment" to his Jewish students, he clearly seems to imply that this new mitzvah is in addition to, not in place of, the other mitzvot: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another" (John 13:34). When the synoptic Gospels are read without historical context, most readers focus on points of disagreement that Jesus had with his contemporaries, rather than seeing those disagreements as the leading edge of constructive, insider debates within first-century Judaism.

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine offers an example: "The popular push to depict Jesus as a Galilean and see Galilee religiously and ethnically distinct from Judea winds up conveying the impression that 'Judaism,' with its Temple and its leadership, is quite distinct from the Galilean Jesus. . . . Worse, the lingering view that Jesus dismissed basic Jewish practices, such as the Laws concerning Sabbath observance and ritual purity, turns Jesus away from his Jewish identity and makes him into a liberal Protestant."[9] In reading the Younger Testament, it's as important to "read between the lines" to truly understand what is actually written. In other words, much is implied rather than explicitly stated. For example, attending synagogue services and reading the words of the prophets as he does in Luke 4:16 is a "custom" of rabbinic Judaism that Jesus follows.

As a Christian becomes more familiar with the basic tenets of Judaism, many of Jesus's teachings will reveal their Jewish roots. There are dozens of examples in the Younger Testament that express the connection between Jesus's teachings and teachings recorded in later centuries that are part of

the Oral Torah. As one more example (among many), when Jesus's opinion about healing on the Sabbath was in line with the emerging Jewish consensus of his day. Similarly, Jesus was a miracle worker in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha, and his teachings were in line with the powerful words of the prophets.

TWO

A Jewish Gospel

The word *gospel* comes from an Old English translation of a Hebrew word meaning "good news," first spoken of by Isaiah: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation" (Isaiah 52:7). The notion of a gospel is Jewish in origin, even though Jews are reluctant to use that term because of its connotation within Christianity. What is the Jewish good news? God so loved the world that he gave his only Torah at Sinai. It is a Torah of redemption, revelation, forgiveness, and hope for humanity. It's a gospel of joy about serving God and being part of the holy work to repair and sanctify our broken world. Then, when monotheism branched out in novel ways through Christianity and Islam, each new religion brought its own version of "good news" to billions of new adherents.

As God has grafted Christians onto the olive tree of Israel (Romans 11:17), they abide by their "new" covenant, which grew out of the earlier covenants. Many sincere Christians have asked me over the years why Jewish people don't accept the gospel. Answering a question with a question, Jewish people ask, "Why don't some Christians accept the reality that the Jewish people already have a gospel?" As Jesus said, "Salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). A clear goal of many of the biblical prophets was to remind the Jewish people to fulfill their part of the covenant, and to spread the good news of the existence of a God of love and justice. In Malachi 1:11, God says, "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering . . . says the Lord of hosts."

There's no question that Gentile followers of Jesus were instrumental in helping to spread the Torah's principles of ethical monotheism, albeit packaged in a new form, to people around the world. However, the question of whether a Christian is under the law, under some of the law, or free from the law has been debated within Christianity since the beginning. From a Jewish reading of the Younger Testament, it certainly seems that there are universal commandments that must continually be fulfilled by all people. John does not appear to be abrogating the commandments of the Torah when he explains the two "love" commandments in the Torah: "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:21). Judaism also teaches that under the covenant of Noah (Genesis 9:3–9), all humanity is obliged to fulfill the same moral commandments.

The psalmist assures us, "For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage" (Psalm 94:14). And Paul does the same in the Younger Testament: "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" (Romans 11:1). Speaking about the Jewish people Paul says, "As regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors" (Romans 11:28). Finally Paul warns his Gentile students not to become arrogant concerning Jews who are not followers of Jesus. Using an exquisite metaphor of Israel as an olive tree, he teaches: "But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you" (Romans 11:17–18).

For most of two thousand years, it's been difficult for many Jews to see Jesus even as a wonderful rabbi since his name was associated with the most terrible forms of prejudice. When Jesus is presented as someone who left Judaism, he is seen as someone who betrayed Judaism. Most Jews respect Christian theology as long as it is separated from coercion, the notion of

exclusive salvation, and backed up by the force of the Crusades and pogroms. Martin Buber put it this way:

> God is our help in all need and none outside of him. But this was also—of this I am certain—the faith of Jesus himself. I do not believe in Jesus, but I believe with him. I firmly believe that the Jewish community, in the course of its renaissance, will recognize Jesus; not merely as a great figure in its religious history, but also in the organic context of a Messianic development extending over millennia, whose final goal is the Redemption of Israel and of the world. But I believe equally firmly that we will never recognize Jesus as the Messiah Come, for this would contradict the deepest meaning of our Messianic passion. . . . Standing, bound and shackled, in the pillory of mankind, we demonstrate with the bloody body of our people the unredeemedness of the world. For us, there is no cause of Jesus; only the cause of God exists for us.[10]

The idea that Israel is to be a light unto the non-Jewish nations (Isaiah 42:1; Isaiah 42:6; Isaiah 60:3) is a recurring metaphor to the prophet Isaiah, whom Jesus quotes so often. An excellent example of this is Isaiah 49:6: "[The Lord] says, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'" In the Younger Testament, Isaiah's image of Israel as the servant is allegorically extended to Jesus. Jesus recognized a covenantal duty to help bring the Jewish message of God's unity, ethical monotheism, and redemption to the non-Jewish world.

Matthew seems to support the notion that the gospel was *from* Israel and not *to* Israel. Concerning Jesus, he writes, "This was to fulfill what has been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased . . . and he will

proclaim justice to the Gentiles'" (Matthew 12:16–18). Paul seems equally clear that the newly emerging Christ covenant was for Gentiles since Jews already had an intact covenant between themselves and God. Paul writes, "In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14). Within Judaism, Paul's "promise of the Spirit" was never based on the profession of a creed or membership in a particular religion—it is based solely on God's mercy. Paul's teaching about salvation is universal. He never imagined Jews leaving their native Judaism and converting to another faith.

The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE accelerated the transformation of the sacrificial system into the rabbinic Judaism that is practiced today. As will be explained later in the book, the commandments regarding grain, fruit, monitory, and animal offerings were brilliantly interpreted by the rabbis to apply to personal, family, and synagogue rituals. Many of these rabbinic innovations directly influenced Christian rites as well. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is clearly teaching from within the world of an emerging rabbinic Judaism.

Echoes of Torah

Hanging above our fireplace at home is a hand-painted, eighteenth-century ceramic plate from Italy. The painting is of Miriam standing next to Pharaoh's daughter as she takes baby Moses from his basket on the Nile. I cannot count the number of people who want to know what a painting of baby Jesus is doing hanging in the home of a rabbi. Explaining that it is baby Moses always elicits amazed smiles from our friends. Yet in all the years we have owned this ceramic painting, it never occurred to me until recently that there was a parallel between the birth stories of these two great Jewish men.

Anyone reading the biblical texts will discover unmistakable overlaps within the birth narratives of Moses and Jesus. There are also echoes within the betrayal stories of Jacob's son Joseph and Jesus—both are acts of duplicity done for silver by those who were supposed to loved them. There are even

overlaps in the miracle stories of Jesus and the early prophets Elijah and Elisha. Finally, there's an echo in the death stories of Moses and Jesus: neither lived to see his dreams fulfilled in this world. Both died with a great "promise" in front of them.

Judaism and Christianity are unique, distinctive, and different religions, but for too long the differences were emphasized while the far greater territory of their similarities has been ignored, suppressed, or simply unknown. If you try holding the stories of Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus in your mind at the same time, you might experience what a Jew in the time of Jesus may have felt as he or she heard some of the stories in the Younger Testament being told—similarity, echo, overlap, emulation, and an identical moral imperative.

The master stories within Judaism and Christianity are, of course, uniquely different, but there are exquisite resemblances and contrasts in their details. While the Joshua of the Elder Testament is a warrior hero and leadership heir to Moses, the Joshua of the Younger Testament is a spiritual warrior claimed by Christianity as their Messiah. Jesus's mother's Hebrew name is Miriam, and Moses is rescued and protected by his big sister Miriam. Elijah and Elisha are miracle workers who are used by God to heal the sick, raise the dead, float an axe head on water, and multiply food. The miracles of Jesus echo the earlier Hebrew prophets (e.g., compare Luke 7:11–17 to 1 Kings 17:17–24). Finally, just as Jesus dies and is resurrected, there's a parallel midrash about Isaac being sacrificed by Abraham and then being resurrected.

Beyond these larger themes, there are many other parallels between the Testaments. In Exodus 1:22 Pharaoh orders the death of every Hebrew male baby through drowning in the Nile, and in Matthew 2:16 Herod orders a massacre of all Jewish babies in Bethlehem under two years of age. When Herod's murderous decree goes out, the Younger Testament (Matthew 2:18) quotes the lamentation from Jeremiah 31:15, "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted, because they are no more." Could the first-century

Jewish followers of Jesus make a link between Rachel's son Joseph (Genesis 30:25) and Mary's husband Joseph?

In Exodus 2:15 Pharaoh wants to kill the adult Moses, who fled for his life from Egypt to Midian. In Genesis 37 we learn that Joseph, the son of Jacob, was a dreamer. In Matthew 2:13–14 an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to flee to Egypt to save his life. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine points out, "Matthew 1:16 lists Joseph's father as Jacob and so connects Jesus' adoptive father to that earlier Joseph, son of Jacob."[11] Listen to the echo in the stories of when Moses is told to return to Egypt (Exodus 4:19), and when Joseph (Mary's husband) is told to return to Judea (Matthew 2:19–20).

The coming of the messiah in Judaism is to be foretold by the miraculous return of Elijah. The prophet Malachi says, "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Malachi 4:5). In the Younger Testament, some priests and Levites ask John the Baptist if he is the reincarnation of Elijah: "And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not'" (John 1:21). When John the Baptist says he's not Elijah, he's asked to identify himself (John 1:23). His response is to quote from Isaiah 40:3, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.'"

In Genesis 37:26 it was Judah who saves his brother Joseph's life by suggesting to his other brothers that they sell him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. The other brothers were ready to leave him to die. In Matthew 26:15 it was Jesus's disciple Judas who betrays his rabbi for thirty pieces of silver. The stories of the final moments in the life of Jesus (Matthew 27:50) and the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5) are both so sad.

Finally, many of the rituals, modes of worship, and liturgy within Christianity are variations of Jewish spiritual practices. The Tree of Life images used in Proverbs 3:17–18 and Revelation 22:2 have an almost identical function in linking the Creator to the creation. The image of the Church as God's bride in Revelation 22:17 is taken from Hosea 2:19 where Israel is called God's bride. The notion of the election of the Church is taken from Deuteronomy 14:2–3, when God chose Israel.

Here is a look at just a handful of hundreds of parallels in the Younger Testament that have been drawn from the Elder Testament. Using Paul's metaphor of roots and branches, I use the term *Root* to refer to Jewish sources (Jewish Scriptures and Oral Torah) for these passages, and *Branch* to refer to verses on the Younger Testament.

Parallel Miracles of Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus

Multiplying oil and food

Root:

2 Kings 4:43–44 "How can I set this before a hundred people?" "So he [Elisha] repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.

Branch:

Matthew 15:36–37 He took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.

Healing infertility and infection

Root:

2 Kings 4:8–17 The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her.

2 Kings 4:40–41 While they were eating the stew, they cried out, "O man of God, there is death in the pot!" They could not eat it. He said, "Then bring some flour." He threw it into the pot, and said, "Serve the people and let them eat." And there was nothing harmful in the pot.

Branch:

Matthew 4:23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Resurrection of the dead

Root:

2 Kings 4:34 Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child . . . and the flesh of the child became warm.

1 Kings 17:22 The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.

Branch:

Luke 7:15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Healing the body

Root:

2 Kings 5:14 So he [Na'aman] went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God [Elijah]: his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Branch:

Matthew 8:6–7 "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." And he [Jesus] said to him, "I will come and cure him."

Appointing Disciples

Root:

Numbers 11:25 Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. . . .

Branch:

Luke 10:1 After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.

Matthew 10:1 Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

Miracles with water

Root:

Exodus 14:21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.

2 Kings 6:5–6 His axe head fell into the water . . . he [Elisha] cut off a stick, and threw it in there, and made the iron float.

Branch:

Matthew 14:29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

Quotes, Parallels, and Echoes from the Bible and Oral Law

Most of the teachings of Jesus were quite familiar to his fellow citizens. There are literally hundreds of instances when a speaker in the Younger Testament quotes directly from the Elder Testament. Whenever you read, "as it is written" in the Younger Testament, it is a quote from the Elder Testament. Jesus seems to cite directly, or create variations of, the teachings of the sages before and during his lifetime. Some of the Jewish teachings below were known before Jesus's lifetime; others were contemporaneous, and some were first recorded centuries later, but were possibly known in oral form during the first century. Although it cannot be proven that Jesus was quoting from his contemporaries or the sages who preceded him, it's also difficult to deny that his teachings are in line with normative first-century rabbinic pedagogy. As Christianity was developing and gaining a foothold in the Roman Empire, it is likely that the rabbis were influenced and inspired by Jesus's teachings and particular aspects of Christian theology. We cannot dismiss the reality of Christian influence on the rabbinic writings.

When I quote from the Talmud (first published as a unified text in the fifth century), it's simply intended to return Jesus's teachings to their Jewish theological context. Jesus is obviously not quoting from a text written hundreds of years after his lifetime. Regarding such teachings, Rabbi David Wolpe makes an astute observation: "Today . . . Christian scholars are beginning to understand that much of what Judaism preserved is what Jesus would have known. It may be that a fifth or sixth-century rabbinic *midrash* perpetuates a tradition that Jesus would've taken for granted in a world of oral transmission."[12]

Jesus maintained his observance of the Torah's mitzvot until the end of his life, when he was murdered along with tens of thousands of other Jews who died at the hands by the Roman Empire. The following selections place Jesus's teachings squarely within the rabbinic tradition during the centuries before and after his lifetime.