

## **How Judaism and Christianity Influenced Each Other in the Early Centuries**

Torleif Elgvin

Professor in Biblical and Jewish Studies, NLA University College, Oslo

This article presents lines of development and inter-relations between Judaism and Christianity in the early centuries, with consequences for these religions' self-understanding and relation to the other until today.<sup>1</sup>

I come to this field of scholarship as a Christian biblical scholar that through decades has worked closely with Jewish scholars. I took my Ph.D. in Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls at a Jewish university, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with two Jewish professors as tutors. Since then I have been working closely together with Jewish scholars in the fields of Hebrew Bible, Dead Sea Scrolls, New Testament, and the history of Jews and Christians in the early centuries. Thus my own odyssey is closely related to the theme of this article.

I work with texts from the Old and New Testament, from the early church and early Jewish tradition. I encounter the ancient texts as a scholar and, at the same time, a person of faith that is open for the dimension of revelation, as were the authors of these texts. The authors and editors of the ancient texts lived within a community of faith, trusting in God's revelation through human messengers. I do not see myself less scholarly if I try to go to the texts with a similar worldview. At the same time, I come to the texts as a critical scholar and historian. As a believer in God with personal experience of prayer and what I perceive as the vibrating presence of God, I go to texts written by early Israelites who claimed they were powerfully touched by God and subsequently they proclaim what they have listened to in their time of filled silence in the divine presence.

In the early centuries Jews and Christians lived with the same presuppositions: there is a God with whom we claim to be in touch, and we try to follow him in faith, and to develop and write out the consequences of this faith. These two groups shared the same basic scriptures, the Old Testament, by Jews called the Hebrew Bible. This made them competitors, not colleagues, even though they were the only monotheists in the Roman empire.

This article have two main sections. 1) The Jewish Roots of Christianity; 2) The Christian Roots of Judaism. The first sentence has been commonplace for centuries. The second has only been formulated since the mid-90s, but it is now commonplace among scholars in the field, less so in church or synagogue.

### **The Jewish Roots of Christianity**

The church grew out of Judaism. Jesus was no Christian, he was a Jew, through and through. The last generation of scholarship in the gospels, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Judaism of the time of Jesus has underscored how Jewish the man from Nazareth was. Jewish and Christian scholars alike have stressed this. Jesus was born a Jew, circumcised as a Jew, he made pilgrimages to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and taught much like the later Jewish rabbis. He acted as a Jewish prophet, although he had a self-consciousness that went beyond that of

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a lecture at the Institute of Biblical Literature, Hunan University, September 17, 2015.

any Jewish prophet before him. His high self-consciousness, where he placed himself closer to God than any others,<sup>2</sup> were ultimately perceived by the high priests as blasphemous, leading to his execution on the cross.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, my special field of research, has showed us a Jesus in Jewish clothing, speaking Hebrew and Aramaic like other Judeans, teaching in Hebrew and using concepts he would find in the Old Testament and the Jewish traditions of his days. The same could be said about New Testament authors such as the evangelists, the author of the letter to the Hebrews, James, and the Revelation of John.

### A pluriform Judaism

In the time of Jesus, the first century, Judaism was pluriform. There were different groups, each with their own theological emphasis, fighting for influence among the Jews in the Land of Judea. In the gospels we hear about Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots. Other sources add the Essenes, the conservative, puritan group behind the Dead Sea Scrolls. On the periphery we found the Samaritans, viewed as a Jewish sect by outsiders such as the Romans, but by the Jews themselves seen as heretics and a different nation.

From the death of Jesus in AD 30, the *Jesus movement* develops as a Jewish group among other groups. Together with the Zealots they can be described as a messianic movement, waiting for God's end-time intervention for his people.

Different from other Jewish groups at the time, the Jewish Jesus movement decided to receive gentiles, non-Jews, into their fellowship without requiring them to become Jews. The latter option would have meant circumcision for the men, a proselyte baptism, and a promise to follow Jewish customs and commandments. The decision to include non-Jews was only taken in the Jesus camp after long deliberations and heated discussions (see Acts 8:4-17; 8:26-39; 10; 15:1-31), and it became a crucial factor in the later parting of the ways between Jews and Christians.

### The Jewish Christians as transmitters into the church

The first and second centuries saw two Jewish revolts against the Romans, in 66 - 70 – a revolt that led to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple; and then in 132 – 136, leading to the devastation of Judea by the Roman armies. The second revolt has been named after its leader Bar Kokhba, regarded as a messiah by many of his followers. “Bar Kokhba” means “Son of the Star” and is a messianic designation taken from Num 24:17.<sup>3</sup> Many Judeans saw in this man the one who could throw the Roman occupiers of the land and rebuild the temple. His initial success enabled the priests to start offering sacrifices at the place of the destroyed temple.

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<sup>2</sup> Jesus probably saw himself as closely related to divine Wisdom, portrayed in Proverbs 1–9, God's voice and his assistant in creation (see Matt 11:19.25-30). New Testament authors develop the theology of Jesus as divine Wisdom: John 1:1-18; Fil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-19; Hebr 1:3; Rev 1:17.

<sup>3</sup> The leading rabbi at the time, Akiva, said, “The star rising from Jacob—that is Kosiba rising from the people of Jacob. He is the king Messiah” (*Jerusalem Talmud, Taanit* 4.5 68d; *Lamentations Rabbah* 2.2).

The Jewish Christians did not take part in these two revolts. With regard to the second, they may have said “This is not our messiah, and not our revolt”. Two early Christian sources reveal that Bar Kokhba put some of them to torture and death since they did not join his forces.<sup>4</sup> He and his men perceived them as traitors against the people of Israel. Here we have another factor isolating the Jewish Jesus movement within the people of Israel.

Although the gentiles soon became the majority in the Jesus camp, up to AD 150 the movement remained remarkably Jewish flavored. The mother church was in Jerusalem or central Judea up to the second revolt. The writings of the New Testament that slowly were gathered together and given authority by churches all over the Roman empire as well as in the Persian East, all these writings were written by Jews, Jews who saw Jesus as their Jewish messiah. Some scholars have claimed that the gospel of Luke was written by a non-Jew – I disagree, this gospel is so penetrated by Jewish thought and knowledge of first century Israel that it is hard to imagine it being written by a gentile. The Norwegian New Testament scholar Jacob Jervell calls the Jewish Christians “the mighty minority” within the church. This minority put a definitive stamp upon the Christian church: the church can only understand itself and their messiah through the Jewish scriptures and Jewish tradition.

Jewish Christians were probably influential when the church decided to receive the Jewish Bible as authority – now redesignated “the Old Testament”. In the mid-second century a Christian leader in Rome, Marcion, wanted to throw the Hebrew Bible out of the church. He was definitely voted down, and had to leave as a heretic. The churches all over the Mediterranean region proclaimed, “We receive the Scriptures of Israel”!

Jewish Christians functioned as a bridge that also transmitted other Jewish writings into the churches. A collection of Jewish writings from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC sieved into the church, were translated from Hebrew to Greek, were widely circulated, and became popular among scholars and laymen alike. In the end these were added to the Bible codices of the 4<sup>th</sup> century together with the Old and New Testament. Later we have called them “The Old Testament Apocrypha,” they include books such as Sirach and 1 – 2 Maccabees, and the novels Tobit and Judith. Sirach is a wisdom book in the style of Proverbs, while the books of Maccabees describe the Jewish revolt that led to an independent Judean state in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. This group of books may have been included in the codices because they were so popular among lay believers, although most Christian thinkers regarded them as a secondary group compared with the writings of the Old Testament.

Other Jewish writings were transmitted through the same channels, the Jewish Christians, the mighty minority of the church. We talk about writings such as *I Enoch*, a book that set its stamp on a number of New Testament writings without getting into the Bible (only the Ethiopian church gave this book authority). There were many other books that wanted to rewrite and comment upon Old Testament writings and figures. Since many of these were published in the name of an ancient biblical sage, we have conveniently designated these books “The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha” – they were not written by sages such as Enoch, Moses, or Jeremiah, although they carried their names.

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<sup>4</sup> *Apocalypse of Peter* 2; Justin, *First Apology* 31.6. See Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple. Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2002), 201-02.

Without 1) learned Jewish Christians and 2) later Christian scribes and transmitters, all these Jewish writings would have been lost and erased from history. We are indebted to Christian scribes and monasteries for having preserved these important writings for posterity. Other Jewish writings written in Greek in the first century, such as those by the historian Josephus and the Alexandrian thinker Philo, were also transmitted by Christians and therefore not forgotten.

### Two monotheistic competitors

Both Judaism and Christianity were missionary religions. Both proselytized and worked actively to recruit new members. In the polytheistic setting of the Roman Empire both were outsiders, but that did not make them friends or allies. Judaism was a missionizing religion for centuries, until they were forbidden by the state to proselyte others. But even the clear prohibition of the law of the Roman emperor Theodosius in 380 did not uproot Jewish proselytism, and in the non-Roman East it continued.

The Jews had received legal permission to be exempt from the polytheism and cult of Caesar that was compulsory for all others in the Empire. The Christians were not exempt, and were at times heavily persecuted by the authorities. A “No” to sacrifice to the emperor was perceived as illoyalty towards the State. It did not stimulate warm relations between these two groups that Jews at times encouraged Roman or Persian authorities to persecute the Christians.<sup>5</sup>

The two religions slowly drifted away from each other during the early centuries. In the middle we had groups of Jewish Christians, who more and more came in squeeze between the synagogue on one side, and the more gentile dominated church on the other. They were challenged to choose between the two larger camps, and not continue to combine faith in Jesus with a life according to Jewish customs. From the church fathers we hear about designations such as “ebjonites” i.e. poor ones, and “Nazarenes”, i.e. those following the man from Nazareth.<sup>6</sup> In rabbinic writings they are designated *minim*, i.e. heretics. In the Land of Israel these groups, squeezed in the middle between church and synagogue, disappear soon after AD 400, in Syria we hear about them until the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

After AD 150 many church thinkers became increasingly skeptic to the Jewish people and the traditions of the synagogue – the Jews should have accepted Jesus, and most of them had not done so! Bishop Meliton of Sardes in Asia Minor (c. 170) stressed the disbelief and disloyalty of the Jews who did not see the messiah in the crucified one. In the late 4<sup>th</sup> century St. Chrysostomos of Antiochia held a number of sermons called “Sermons against the Jews”. In these sermons he warns Christians against going to the synagogues and celebrating Sabbath and festivals together with Jews. Thus we learn that in Syria of his time many Christians kept a close relation to their Jewish neighbors, visited them and did not heed the warnings of their

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<sup>5</sup> This may explain the designation of the local synagogue as the “synagogue of Satan” in Rev 2:9; 3:9. Similar incidents are reported from Syria in the 4th century, reflected in writings of the church fathers Aphrahat and Ephrem.

<sup>6</sup> Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: from the end of the New Testament period until its disappearance in the fourth century* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); *Jewish Believers in Jesus. The Early Centuries* (O. Skarsaune, R. Hvalvik, eds.; Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2007); *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered. Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (M. Jackson-McCabe, ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

church leaders to distance themselves from the Jews. We may call these lay people Christian Philo-Semites.

Until the great synodal meeting in Nicea in 324 many Christians (such as Meliton) celebrated Passover and Easter according to the Jewish calendar. The bishops of Nicea, now with support from the emperor Constantine, decided that this should no longer be allowed.

#### Mutual influence, borrowing and learning from each other

With this historic background in mind, we would expect clear lines of separation and little contact between Jews and Christians. But that is not what the historians find reflected in the sources. The Christian Philo-Semites who visited synagogues and Jewish homes in Syria in the late fourth century, two generations after Nicea, are not unique.

From New Testament times Christians celebrated the Jewish festivals of Passover and Weeks, even though they reinterpreted them. The Feast of Weeks was renamed Pentecost, and celebrated more as a memory of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit than a memory of the giving of the Law on Sinai - as the holy spirit was poured on the early disciples in Jerusalem during this festival, as told in the Book of Acts.

The Christian celebrating of the Lord's Supper, Jesus' last Passover meal, remained heavily indebted to Jewish sacrificial tradition. Also in this case Old Testament concepts of sacrifice and atonement were reinterpreted in light of Jesus' words and actions.

Christian liturgies grew out of synagogue and temple. The monotheistic faith itself was inherited from the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament.

Thus, for centuries scholars have said that in the church we find a *polemic reception* of Jewish thought and tradition. The church received central elements of faith and practice from the Old Testament and the people of Israel, but at the same time reinterpreted it, in a way that often polemized against "the older brother."

## **II The Christian Roots of Judaism**

Earlier scholars thought that Judaism in these centuries kept clear and pure, in distance from the church, and developed from internal factors alone. Today we see that this historic image was flawed. It presupposed that Judaism was uniform, that the synagogue soon after AD 70 was fully led by the rabbinic movement who fostered synagogue as well as Jewish prayer and liturgy - a rabbinic movement that led the way in redefining Judaism as a religion without a temple, where prayer took the place of bloody sacrifices. The line of thinking among the rabbis was: "Our fathers offered bloody sacrifices before God, we come before him with our prayers - they are a bloodless sacrifice before Him."

Further, if Christian scholars had claimed that early Judaism was influenced by Christianity, it would have been perceived by Jews as a kind of Christian triumphalism, executed by the stronger party over the minority group.

But since 1995 Jewish scholars have drawn up another picture, there is now a new paradigm: Judaism and Christianity develop as sister religions, both drawing from common roots in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism. They polemize against the other, but at the same time they learn from the other and adopt elements of the theology of the other.

And a main factor in the development of Judaism from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century is a conscious departure from the Jewish Christians and faith in Jesus. The Judaism of the synagogue is not the Judaism of the days of Jesus, it is in fact a post-Christian phenomenon.

A primary example of this process is the celebration of Passover and the Passover liturgy, celebrated once a year in Jewish families. Biblical scholars of my generation learned during our study days that Jesus' last meal followed the liturgy of the Jewish Passover meal. Then Jesus added some interpreting new words on the bread and the wine. We have Christian sources to Jesus' last supper in three of the gospels, in Paul in the early 50s, and then continuing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century with Meliton from Asia Minor and others.

In contrast, the Jewish sources to the Passover liturgy are some words in the *Mishnah*, codified around 220, and then in biblical commentaries from the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. A general rule in historic research is that the earlier source preserves tradition that precedes that of the later source.

This was the starting point when Jewish scholars such as Israel Yuval from the mid-90s challenged the old paradigm.<sup>7</sup> There was hardly any Passover liturgy at the time of Jesus, only scripture reading, a cup of wine, eating of the Passover lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs, as prescribed in Exodus 12, which reports about the departure of Moses and the people from Egypt. Jesus is the first who adds a word of interpretation over bread and wine: "This is my body, this is my blood, shed as atonement for many when I soon will die." In reaction to these words of Jesus, transmitted by Jewish Christians, by Meliton and others, the early rabbis add their contrasting words of interpretation over the unleavened bread: "This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in Egypt."<sup>8</sup>

Since the Christians stressed the role of Moses as a forbearer of Christ as tool of redemption, and of the punishing angel who would kill the firstborn of the Egyptians as another pre-image of the heavenly Christ, it became important for the rabbis to downplay the role of Moses and the angel in the drama of the Exodus. A third century commentary on the book of Exodus proclaims: "It is I who walk through Egypt, not an angel, a seraf or a messenger, I am Him and no other."<sup>9</sup> This can only be understood as a reaction to Jewish Christian preaching of the

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<sup>7</sup> The most important contributions that developed the new paradigm are: Israel Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb. Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: the Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> On the Jewish Passover liturgy as a post-Christian development, see Israel Yuval, "Easter and Passover as Early Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (P.F. Bradshaw, L.A. Hoffman, eds.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 98-26; Lawrence A. Hoffman, "A Symbol of Salvation in the Passover Seder," *Passover and Easter: The Symbolic Structuring of Sacred Seasons* (P.F. Bradshaw, L.A. Hoffman, eds.; Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 109-31.

<sup>9</sup> *Mekilta de Rabbi Yishmael* to Exod 12:12-13.23.29; 13:14.

connection between Moses and Christ, and between the angel and Christ. And this sentence soon found its way into Passover liturgy, and is still recited.

The same goes for a parable on four sons, one wise and three less prudent: one is “the godless son who places himself outside the community.” This early part of the Passover liturgy is a word against the Jewish Christian, who still wanted to be part of the people of Israel, and were denounced through the power of liturgical words, words that exclude him from the liturgical community.

The Passover lamb, the most important element of this celebration in biblical times, becomes invisible in the rabbinic Passover liturgy. Well, it should only be slaughtered in the courtyards of the Temple, and the Jerusalem temple was not there anymore. But a continued line of interpretation of the lamb is not found in the Passover liturgy. We understand the reason for this silence when we know how central the image of Christ as the ultimate Passover sacrifice is in Christian tradition.

Then to some other elements:<sup>10</sup> some time in the second century the rabbis add a nineteenth prayer to the daily prayer that since its inception soon after AD 70 carried the name “the Eighteen Prayer”, and the name remained even after the 19<sup>th</sup> section was pasted in the middle. This added section is a curse of the heretics who is without heritage in the world to come – a curse that only receives its meaning as a denouncing of Jewish Christians who still were coming to the synagogue and keeping close links with their people.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time the Ten Commandments were a regular part of synagogue liturgy. A rabbinic statement tell us that it was taken out “because of the heretics” some time in the second century.<sup>12</sup> The logical explanation is probably this: Jewish Christians regularly went to the synagogue and took part in the liturgy, even though synagogue leaders could signal that they rather would be without them. When the liturgy reached the point of reciting the Ten Commandments, this group in the corner would take the lead and recite with loud voice, thinking in their heart, “These are the commandments confirmed by our Lord Jesus.” To get rid of this annoying experience, synagogue leaders decided to delete these commandments from the liturgy.

A predecessor of the new paradigm was Jacob Neusner. This American Jewish scholar, the foremost expert on rabbinic writings from the preceding generation, did not think the Jewish Christians were a large group and a real challenge for the rabbis who made the *Mishnah* (early third century) and its companion the *Tosefta* (early fourth century) — this viewpoint is now challenged by scholars such as Israel Yuval and Peter Schäfer.

But, according to Neusner, this changed with the Constantine era: when Palestine from 326 was ruled by Christians, learned priests, bishops, and scholars started to proclaim: we are here in the promised land, we Christians are the right heirs to the Old Testament and the promises to Israel, and Jesus is the Jewish messiah promised in the Old Testament. As a response the

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<sup>10</sup> For the following, see *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, 665-97.

<sup>11</sup> Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 102-7. Sources: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 137; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 29 9.2; Jerome’s biblical commentaries; *Babylonian Talmud*, *Berakot* 28b. The earliest Jewish reference is the the early fourth century *Tosefta*, *Shabbat* 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Jerusalem Talmud*, *Berakot* 1.3c. See *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, 675-6.

rabbis needed to develop their own thinking, and surely they did from the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>13</sup>

Christians claimed that heavenly Wisdom, portrayed in the Proverbs 1–9 as God’s partner and assistant in the act of creation – this is the preexistent Christ, who received human clothing in the man Jesus from Nazareth. In response the rabbis developed the concept of Torah: the heavenly Wisdom is identical with the Books of Moses, which are the earthly counterpart of a heavenly book, preexistent with God and the model after which he created the world. In parenthesis we may note that early muslim tradition inherited this idea from the Jews and applied it to the Quran, asserted to be the copy of an eternal heavenly book in Allah’s presence.

Christians claimed that Jesus and the church are the right heirs of Moses, Joshua, and the prophets, and they interpreted the Old Testament in light of the New. In response fourth century rabbis developed the concept of “oral Torah”: in addition to the written Books of Moses God gave Moses hidden information, passed on through the generations as oral teaching, and finally given to the rabbis of the second century. According to the new picture the rabbis for the first time put the “oral Torah” into writing in their book the *Mishnah* – the 3<sup>rd</sup> century foundation document of rabbinic Judaism. Since only the rabbis have access to this oral Torah, they are the rightful heirs of Moses, not the church. And the doctrine of the oral Torah is for the first time documented in rabbinic writings from the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century (first in commentaries to the Books of Moses and then in the *Jerusalem Talmud*). According to Matthew 15, the Pharisees discussing with Jesus refers to “traditions of our fathers” – some of these traditions indeed survived and were included in the *Mishnah*. But mishnaic tradition was never called “(oral) Torah” before the late fourth century.

So, as historic events such as the Jewish revolts against the Romans of the first and second centuries led to speeding up the growing separation between Jews and Christians, other historic events connected to the Constantine era, led to radical development of Jewish theology.

Greco-Roman religion was never a challenge for Jewish rabbis, while Christianity indeed was. This is true both for the ruling Christianity in the Byzantine empire from Constantine onwards, and the Eastern churches who spread without state support. A later rabbinic collection of sayings on the messiah and the last days lays the following “prophecy” in the mouth of a second century rabbi: “In the last days the Empire will go over to heresy”<sup>14</sup> – a statement fulfilled when Constantine made Christianity the preferred religion of the Empire.

Jews and Muslims often denounce Christianity for having compromised the pure monotheistic faith. But also Jewish scholars have recently pointed to a plurality in the Godhead, both in the

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<sup>13</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986; 2nd edition, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991). Neusner summarizes his thesis in the 2nd edition, pp. ix-xx. See also his *Torah. From Scroll to Symbol in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: Messiah, Israel, and the Initial Confrontation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 97–99.

Hebrew Bible and later Jewish writings.<sup>15</sup> So the doctrine of a trinity within the Godhead can be seen as a sharpening of concepts already present in Jewish tradition: God is One, but he reveals himself as 1) Father/Creator, 2) Son/Messiah, and 3) Holy Spirit.

Many years ago I lectured to my son's Jewish class in secondary school in Jerusalem, and the theme given me was "Jesus and his Jewish disciples." In the midst of the teaching I was interrupted, "you, father of our classmate, do you believe in three gods?" My answer was: "No, I believe in one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a God who reveals himself to men in three faces: as the creator, as messiah, and as God's spirit."

In Dan 7:9-14 we encounter a figure called the Son of Man, coming with the clouds and receiving ultimate power from God, "the Ancient of Days." I see the Son of Man as some kind of a heavenly messiah who is enthroned at the side of God's own throne and given power over all the earth.<sup>16</sup> Jesus consciously calls himself "the son of man", and the New Testament identifies him with this Danielic figure: at his resurrection and ascension he becomes seated at God's right hand and is given "all power in heaven and on earth," words Jesus takes into his mouth after the resurrection, according to Matt 28:18-20.

The rabbis responded: the Danielic figure is not a messiah, but an elevated angel, with the second position after God in the heavens. He is often called *Metatron* (Greek: "he on the throne"). One late text (*3 Enoch*) even calls him "Jahve junior", the lesser God!

One late rabbinic text from the 7<sup>th</sup> century (*Pesikta Rabbati*) portrays the messiah as preexistent in heaven. Before the time of creation God foresaw that mankind would fall into sin and asks his messiah if he is willing to become a man and atone for the sins of men by taking their yoke and punishment upon himself. Messiah agrees, becomes a man, and goes into punishment carrying an iron bar on his shoulders, dies and is elevated to heaven. Henceforth he is the source for the redemption of Israel. The Christian scholar Peter Schäfer (who works closely with his Jewish colleague Israel Yuval) concludes that this daring Jewish interpreter has created a close to complete counterpart to the Christian image of Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

In the prayer book used by oriental Jews on Yom Kippur, the yearly day of atonement, there is a statement on such a messiah, alluding to Isaiah 53: "Messiah, our righteousness has departed from us. The yoke of our sins is heavy upon us. *He* was wounded for our transgressions, he carried our faults on his shoulders. By his wounds we have been healed, there are forgiveness for our sins, and hope for a new creation. Let us hear his voice again!"<sup>18</sup>

My last point is Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, called "the binding of Isaac" by the rabbis. In Jewish tradition Isaac is understood as the first Jewish martyr, who consciously was willing to die as a sacrifice. Isaac is therefore portrayed as a grown-up young man. His

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "Two Powers in Heaven; or, the Making of a Heresy," *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation. Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (JSJSup 83; H. Najman, J.H. Newman, eds.; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 331-70; Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus*, 55-159.

<sup>16</sup> Torleif Elgvin, "Messianic ideas in the Hasmonean Period," forthcoming in *The Seleucid and Hasmonean Periods and the Apocalyptic Worldview* (L. Grabbe, ed.; London: T&T Clark, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus*, 236-71.

<sup>18</sup> Risto Santala, "The Despised Messiah and His Despised People," *Mishkan. A Journal of the Gospel and the Jewish People* 3/2005, 16-24.

sacrifice is a prototype of the later Temple sacrifices and has deeper implications, and it is indeed carried out on the place of the later Temple. The importance of Isaac's sacrifice and bleeding wounds for the future people of Israel lasts after the abolition of the temple sacrifices in the year 70.

In the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century the Christian interpreter Meliton responds:<sup>19</sup> No, Isaac is but *one* of the prototypes of Jesus and his sacrifice. Each of these two is the only son, the beloved son, whom the father is giving as sacrifice, and both are given back to their fathers “on the third day” (in Isaac's case: the third day after his and Abraham's departure from the camp; in Jesus case, the third day after his suffering). Jesus is much more than Isaac, his sacrifice fulfils and transforms the earlier sacrifices, by Isaac and in the Temple.

Thus the ball is thrown back to the turf of the rabbis. The third century rabbinic commentary *Mekilta* on the Book of Exodus sees the blood of the Passover lamb as an echo of the blood of Isaac, the most important sacrifice in the history of Israel.<sup>20</sup> Some later commentaries speak about Isaac dying and being three years in Paradise before he returns. We see that the rabbis construct Isaac as an atoning redeemer who returns, not after three days in the grave, but after three years in Paradise.

The ancient sources reveal that Jewish and Christian thinkers listen to each other. One learns from the other, adapts from his teaching, polemizes against it and creates counterparts to central faith issues of the other. When such a dialogical and polemical reception is found on high literary level, we understand that both learned and less learned Jews and Christians met each other, discussed the scriptures and gave testimony to their faith – hopefully in respect for the other, also created in the image of God.

### Outlook for today

In the encounter with the sister religion both Judaism and Christianity received new “clothes” from the other, clothes they put on during the early centuries in the Ancient Near East. As Christianity spread throughout Asia it kept its ancient roots but took on new clothes from the local cultures as it moved Eastwards. Nestorian Christianity in China of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries is a good example of this adaptation to local culture and tradition, a Christianity that dared to express biblical truths in Chinese concepts. That remarkable venture can perhaps not be copied today. I do not know today's China well, so I only raise the question: will Christianity in China find its way as a true local movement, well aware of its ancient roots, but also listening to the surrounding culture in respect and dialogue, to emerge as Christianity in Chinese clothing, not a clone of European or Western churches.

A similar contextualization – adaptation to the local context and culture - can be noted among Jews and Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus in many countries around the world, but without renouncing their mother faith or culture. Groups identifying themselves as “Messianic

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<sup>19</sup> *On Pascha and Fragments: Melito of Sardis*. Texts and translations edited by Stuart George Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> *Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael* to Exod 12:13, which refers to Gen 22:8.14 and 1 Chr 21:15.

Jews” and “Muslim followers of Jesus” have emerged, the first since the 1970s,<sup>21</sup> the other mainly the last twenty years.<sup>22</sup> And Messianic Jews may indeed bridge some of the ancient divisions between the church and the Jewish people. The Jewish Christians of the early centuries disappeared, but the last generation has seen a movement emerge with a similar self-understanding, a movement that reminds the church of its Jewish roots, roots the church should not be allowed to forget.

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: a constructive approach* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Paul-Gordon Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road. Exploring a New Path between Two Faiths* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam. How God is drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Colorado: Wigtake, 2014).