

# Christ Through Jewish Eyes<sup>1</sup>

MARK L. SOLOMON

## Introduction

It is rare, in most interfaith dialogue, to venture to offer a frank and constructive view of the central doctrines of one religion from the perspective of another. Perhaps it is not attempted because it is a foolhardy and presumptuous thing to do, or because of the fear of causing offence, where the aim is to build up understanding and trust. So we talk to one another about our own religions, or about issues of mutual concern, or about interesting historical items, rarely venturing a comment about how we *see* the other.

Between Jews and Christians a special dynamic exists, driven by the idea that Christianity grew out of Judaism, and the memory of centuries of persecution, that means that the dialogue is all-too-often one-way—Jews explaining Judaism to respectful Christians, who are often timid about explaining Christianity back. A number of Jewish scholars are beginning to advance the view that, within some circles, we have built up sufficient trust and confidence to take our dialogue to a deeper level, where we can share our deepest convictions without fear of being misunderstood, explain what the beliefs of the other might signify for us, and reflect on our meaning for each other.

For many years, and particularly in the post-War period, Christian theologians have formulated personal theologies of Judaism, attempting to replace the old anti-Jewish doctrines and stereotypes with something more positive, that can take account of the guilt and horror of Auschwitz. On the institutional level, several Churches have issued collective statements embodying a new theology of the Christian-Jewish relationship. Until very recently, this endeavour had found little echo on the Jewish side.<sup>2</sup> A major step forward was taken with the publication in 2000 of *Dabru Emet*, the first modern collective Jewish statement about Christianity, written by a group of American Jewish academics and subsequently endorsed by numerous rabbis and scholars around the world.<sup>3</sup> The beginnings of a Jewish theology of Christianity have appeared, but in the dialogue encounter the need continues to be felt for Jewish voices that can make positive spiritual sense of Christianity for other Jews from within the Jewish rabbinic tradition.

The following ideas are offered as a partial and preliminary attempt to formulate a Jewish theological understanding of the significance of Jesus Christ for Christians. It is the fruit of many years' reflection on my own profound encounter with Christianity, whilst trying to remain true to my understanding of Judaism. Some may feel that, in trying to find positive theological space for the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a talk originally given to the Central London Branch of the Council of Christians and Jews, at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, on 3rd May 2001.

<sup>2</sup> A relatively early and fascinating essay in this direction is Eugene Borowitz's *Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response*, New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> The text of *Dabru Emet*, and a superb series of theological essays on the issues it raises, can be found in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel and Michael Signer, Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2000.

Christ of Christian faith, I have strayed too far from the Jewish historical consensus. No doubt I still have much to learn, and this article is offered as a contribution to an ongoing discussion, through which we might continue and deepen our shared learning process.

### The Jewish Jesus

Perhaps the most moving and important level of Jewish-Christian dialogue has centred on the person of Jesus, and in particular on getting “behind” the theological picture of Jesus built up over centuries of Christian dogmatics, to rediscover the man Jesus, and above all the Jew Jesus. One of the pioneers of this great work, in this country, was Claude Montefiore. This extraordinary scholar, who died in 1938, exhibits in his many writings, including his great two-volume commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, a love and respect for Jesus that can still take the breath away. To him, Jesus was above all a prophet, “in the genuine succession to Amos and Isaiah.” Montefiore calls him “the prophet of inwardness,” and he certainly saw in Jesus a prototype for the Liberal Judaism he was labouring to create. He writes, “As Liberal Judaism derives so greatly from the prophets, is it not wonderful that it should rightly find much to admire and use in the prophet of Nazareth.”<sup>4</sup> Many other scholars, both Jewish and Christian, have delved into the Jewish context and identity of Jesus, including more recently Geza Vermes. Some emphasise Jesus as a quasi-Pharisaic teacher, some as an Essene-type dissident, some as a wandering healer and *chassid* (holy man), some as a messianic aspirant. Thanks to their work, it is becoming less and less common, in intellectually respectable circles, to hear Jesus spoken of as though he were quite separate from the Judaism and Jewish people of his time.

Vital as this insight is, however, and spiritually nourishing as I believe it has become for many Christians, it is, in a way, a dead end in dialogue. However Jewish Jesus may have been, and however inspiring we find the idea of the deep unity of Judaism and Christianity in his person, the fact remains that, for the vast majority of Christians in the world, the significance of Jesus does not lie in the fact that he *was* a Jew, or a prophet, or even a teacher and healer. The significance of Jesus is that he *is* the Christ, the Son of the living God, the saviour of the world and the second person of the Holy Trinity. It seems to me that real progress in dialogue can only come when Jews acknowledge the importance, the *meaningfulness* of these ideas for Christians, and find a way to respond to them from within Judaism.<sup>5</sup> That is why I have entitled my contribution “*Christ through Jewish Eyes*,” not “Jesus through Jewish eyes,” to indicate that I want to grapple, not with Jesus the man, but with Christ the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from *The Old Testament and After*, London 1923, pp. 229-32

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi John D. Rayner, in a letter to the present writer of 16 May 2001, commented, “I have often thought that the theological Christ *should* be discussed from a Jewish perspective, since otherwise one is not really talking about Christianity at all.”

<sup>6</sup> By coincidence, in the year this talk was first delivered, a book appeared entitled *Jesus Through Jewish Eyes: Rabbis and Scholars Engage an Ancient Brother in a New Conversation*, ed. Beatrice Bruteau, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001. The focus is firmly on the Jewish Jesus, and the designation of Jesus as “brother” is probably an echo of the memorable statement of Martin

## Messiah

Even the word Christ, though, is problematic, for as we all know Christ means “the anointed,” the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *mashiach* – messiah, and Jesus’ status as Messiah is another dead end in our dialogue. That is not to say that Jesus’ messianic role is not of central importance to Christians. It is just that Jews and Christians mean such utterly different things by the word “messiah” that the question, “was Jesus the messiah?” leads, and has always led, to hopeless muddle and misunderstanding. My own answer, which will not clear up the muddle right away, would be – *of course* Jesus was not, and is not, the Messiah for the Jews, but *of course* he was, and is, the Messiah for Christians.

I am quite sure that, in the first century, there were many and varied beliefs circulating, some of them quite esoteric, about the nature and function of the Messiah; and it may be that, for Jesus’ earliest Jewish followers, the role Jesus played in their lives and their faith was one to which the name Messiah naturally attached itself. As Judaism and Christianity continued to develop, however, the meanings of Messiah diverged dramatically. For Christians it came to mean the one who delivers the individual from sin and death, while for Jews, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple, it meant the one who would deliver the people from Roman oppression, gather in the exiles, restore Jewish sovereignty under the Davidic dynasty, rebuild the Temple, and, having vanquished Israel’s foes, reign over a just and peaceful world. Messiahship is not where Jews and Christians should look for shared, or at least increased, understanding of the significance of Jesus. The Messiah of Rabbinic Judaism, above all, was a mortal human being, albeit a great and holy one, whereas the risen Christ of Christianity came increasingly to be regarded as a divine being, indeed, in the words of the Nicene Creed, as “Light from Light, true God from true God.” It is to this very divinity that we must look now for light.

## Intermediaries

Jews and Christians have both built up, throughout their centuries of coexistence yet estrangement, many comfortable myths about one another’s faiths in relation to their own. One of the favourite Jewish myths about Christianity is that Christians only approach God through intermediaries, from the priest in the confessional, to the Saints and the Blessed Virgin, to Christ himself, while we Jews, God’s elect children, approach the Father directly, face to face, without any need for intermediaries whatsoever. There is, of course, a kernel of truth in this picture, but even more falsehood, and that on both sides of the picture. I won’t comment here on the extent to which many Christians may encounter God the Father directly in prayer. It is the other side of the coin that concerns us more: the assertion that Jews don’t need intermediaries to approach God. This is a deep

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Buber, “From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Saviour has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which ... I must endeavour to understand.” (Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951.)

misconception. Jews indeed address their prayers and confessions directly to God, but their image of God, their conception of themselves in relation to God, and the very words of the prayers they say, do not spring ready made from the mind of the individual Jew. We learn about God, and our relationship with God, through our sacred texts and our people's religious tradition, to which we give the name Torah – God's teaching.

I would argue that this is a universal law of spiritual life: no finite being has direct, unmediated access to the absolute, the infinite and unknowable God. Every spiritual tradition provides a sacred bridge to link us to the One, the source and ground of all being. I shall not take time here to attempt to substantiate this assertion for all religions, but it is clear enough, I think, that for Christians the vital bridge between humanity and the divine is found in Jesus Christ. I will argue that for Jews the bridge is the Torah, and that many of the functions (if I may so put it) served by Jesus in Christianity, are performed by the Torah in Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>7</sup> Jews, therefore, can best understand and appreciate the theological role of Jesus for Christians, by delving into the significance of the Torah in their own religion.

## Logos

The similarity in the roles of Christ and the Torah in Christianity and Judaism respectively goes beyond the fact that they are, in the two religions, the sacred bridge between the finite and the infinite. The two are actually linked together profoundly in the way the beliefs about them developed in the early Church and early Rabbinic Judaism. The clearest articulation of these beliefs is found, for Christianity, in the Gospel of St John, and for Judaism, in the teachings attributed to the circle of Rabbi Akiva, the central figure in the Rabbinic movement that created Judaism as we know it after the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabbi Akiva flourished as a teacher between about 90 and 135 CE, precisely the period during which most New Testament scholars place the authorship of the fourth Gospel.

Both these authorities seem to have based their teaching on ideas that began in the wisdom books of the Bible, such as Proverbs and Job, were further developed in Hellenistic Judaism in such books as Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, and were given philosophical expression by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus. These ideas centred on Wisdom or Reason as the first creation of God, before the universe began, which became God's companion, instrument or plan in the creation of the world, and also the way for human beings to encounter the transcendent God. In Philo's Greek, the reason or order of God is called the *logos*, which is most commonly translated

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<sup>7</sup> For the presence of angelic intermediary figures, sometimes functioning as God's vicegerent, in ancient and mediaeval forms of Judaism, see G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, New York, 1960, ch. 7. Many Rabbinic texts stress the vital role of the ministering angels in carrying the prayers of an individual up to God. For a halakic application of this idea, see Babylonian Talmud (=BT) *Shabbat* 12b.

“word.”<sup>8</sup> For Christians, the word and wisdom of God became incarnate in Jesus; for Jews, the word and wisdom of God were, and remained, embodied in the Torah. I shall now look at each of these, to try to discern their similarities, which are profound, and their equally profound differences. I shall do so with the help of the threefold rubric which is commonly used in modern Jewish theology to describe the main ways in which God relates to the world and the individual: creation, revelation and redemption.

### Torah and Christ in Creation

The seminal text regarding wisdom in the creation of the world is in Proverbs, where wisdom speaks:

The Eternal One created me as the beginning of his way, the first of his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, before ever the world came to be ... then I was with him as a skilled workman, and I was daily all delight, playing always before him ... Happy is the one who hearkens to me ... for whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favour from the Eternal One. (Prov. 8:22–3, 30–31, 34–5)

By the time of the writing of the apocryphal books, in the second and first centuries BCE, wisdom is already identified with the Torah,<sup>9</sup> but the first explicit statement in Rabbinic literature is the saying of Rabbi Akiva in the Mishnah: “Beloved are Israel, for to them was given the precious instrument; even greater is the love, for it was made known to them that they were given the precious instrument with which the world was created, as it says: For I give you good doctrine; forsake not my Torah.”<sup>10</sup> The Rabbis taught that the Torah pre-existed the creation of the universe<sup>11</sup> and that “God looked into the Torah and created the world.”<sup>12</sup>

The fourth Gospel famously opens, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... all things were made through him ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us.” (John 1:1, 3, 14) This belief was included in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ ... through whom all things were made.”

So both the Torah and Jesus were seen, in strikingly similar terms, as God’s creative Word. The difference between these conceptions – and it is a big difference, at least at first sight – is that, already in John, the Word is not just *with* God, it *is* God. Nowhere does Rabbi Akiva, or any Rabbi, state that the Torah is God, although that step is indeed taken in mediaeval Jewish mysticism, which sees the Torah as an aspect of the Godhead itself.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, as we

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, iv-vi (16-20).

<sup>9</sup> See Ben Sirach 24; Baruch 3:9-4:4.

<sup>10</sup> *Avot* 3:18

<sup>11</sup> See *Bereshit Rabbah* 7:2; *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Zohar* II, 60a: “The Holy One, blessed be He, is called Torah ... and Torah is nothing but the Holy One, blessed be He.” See Gershom Scholem, “The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism,” in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York: Schocken, 1965, especially p. 44; and see Elliot Wolfson, “Female Imaging of the Torah: From Literary Metaphor to Religious Symbol,” in *Circle in the Square*, Albany: SUNY, 1995.

shall see soon, the difference even in formative Rabbinic Judaism may not be as great as it seems at first.

### Torah and Christ as Revelation

For Jews and Christians alike, the nature of God is not to remain forever hidden from humanity. God reveals, not just divine laws, but as much as human beings can bear to receive of the divine being. For Jews, God's self-revelation is contained in the Torah, the expression of divine will and wisdom, but also of divine love and mercy. In the daily evening service, Jews bless God for giving the Torah, in the words: "With everlasting love have you loved your people the House of Israel. Torah and commandments ... have you taught us." The corresponding morning blessing reads: "With abounding love have you loved us, Eternal One our God; great and exceeding grace have you bestowed upon us..."<sup>14</sup>

Jesus too, for Christians, is the supreme revelation of God's loving nature: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." (John 3:16) In the life and character and redemptive sacrifice of Jesus, Christians find the ultimate revelation of God's love.

It is intriguing that, as Rabbis and Church Fathers alike reflected on God's revelation between the first and fifth centuries, they both came to the conclusion that it is of a dual nature. Christ, as defined by the councils of the fifth century, is one person in two natures, both fully human and fully divine.<sup>15</sup> The Torah, for the Rabbis, is one Torah in a twofold revelation: the Written Torah, which came, as it were, straight from heaven and consisted of God's words alone; and the Oral Torah, which was the unfolding human interpretation of the written text.<sup>16</sup> The intuition of both sets of sages was that revelation is never a one-way process, imposed by God. It calls forth, and depends upon, human co-operation for its completeness and success.

### Torah and Christ as the Way to Redemption

While most Jews would think of the Torah primarily as revelation, it can probably be said that most Christians would see Jesus primarily as their redeemer. Theologians have differed, over the centuries, about the precise manner of the redemption wrought by Jesus. Some, especially in the Western churches, have emphasised the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus' death on the cross, atoning for the sins of the world and particularly for the original sin of Adam and Eve – that is, the

<sup>14</sup> Texts according to the Ashkenazi rite. The formulation "with everlasting love" alludes to Jer. 31:2, and begins the "Blessing of the Torah" in both evening and morning services according to the Sephardi rite. See BT *Berakhot* 11b; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin, Philadelphia: JPS, 1993, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> The dogma of the two natures was defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.

<sup>16</sup> The doctrine of the two Torahs has traditionally been ascribed to the Pharisees, but recent scholarship has shown that, although the concept of authoritative oral traditions can be traced at least to the Tannaitic period (before 220 CE), the term *Torah she-be'al Peh* "Oral Torah" first appears in texts dating from around the fifth century.

inherently sinful disposition of all human beings.<sup>17</sup> Jesus' supreme sacrifice liberates those who accept it from guilt and death. Other Christian theologies, especially in the East, have laid more stress on the transfigured Christ as the type of glorified, perfected, divinised humanity, showing the rest of us the way to divine life.<sup>18</sup> In Teilhard de Chardin's phrase, Jesus is "Omega Man," the goal and destiny of all humanity.<sup>19</sup>

Original sin is one Christian doctrine which Jews commonly reject absolutely. We are not born with any inherited taint, destined for damnation if left to our own devices. One Jewish scholar went so far as to describe Judaism's belief as "original virtue."<sup>20</sup> There is some truth in this, and we certainly say in our morning prayers, "My God, the soul you have given me is pure" – but that does not exhaust Judaism's teaching on the subject. The Rabbis maintain that we are born with a *yetser ha-ra*, or evil inclination, and even say that it holds undisputed sway over us in our earliest years, until, with the birth of the *yetser ha-tov* (good inclination) around puberty, we develop a sense of altruism and learn to control our selfish instincts.<sup>21</sup>

The evil inclination, for the most part, has little to do with the sin in the garden, but is part and parcel of God's creation, and, as such, is fundamentally a good thing. When, after creating humanity on the sixth day, "God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good," (Gen. 1:31) a remarkable midrash comments: "good" means the good inclination, but "very good" includes the evil inclination as well; for without it, no-one would build a house, marry and beget children, or work for a livelihood.<sup>22</sup> The *yetser ha-ra*, then, is our life force with its basic drive for self-preservation. It is positive and vital, but being self-centred it habitually, and inevitably, leads us to put ourselves first, to seek our own gratification, even at the expense of others, and hence to do evil. There is little to distinguish this doctrine from some versions of the idea of original sin. The question is, how can we overcome our selfish, sinful tendencies? Here the two religions seem to differ radically. Jews will say, we have it in ourselves to act rightly, follow God's laws, and work out our own salvation, while a Christian might say that we are unable to free ourselves from the grip of our selfish nature, and only God, through Jesus' pure, voluntary atoning sacrifice, can free us and bring us to eternal life.

Once again, the difference is not as great as it seems, for the Rabbis do not teach utter self-reliance in our struggle with evil. For them, it is only God's gift of

<sup>17</sup> This dominant view in Western Christianity was given its definitive statement by St Anselm (d. 1109) in his work *Cur Deus Homo?*

<sup>18</sup> In the Western Church this view was upheld by Duns Scotus (d. 1308) and St Francis de Sales (d. 1622), among others.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (d. 1955) in his works *The Divine Milieu* (NY, 1960) and *The Future of Man* (NY, 1964).

<sup>20</sup> S. Levy, in *Original Virtue and other Short Studies*, 1907, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See BT *Sanhedrin* 91b; *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* A, 16; *Kohelet Rabbah* to Eccles. 4:13. On the concept of original sin in Judaism, see Samuel S. Cohon, "Original Sin," in *Essays in Jewish Theology*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1987, pp. 219-272 (originally published in 1948).

<sup>22</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 9:7, to Gen. 1:31.

the Torah that offers us the chance of self-mastery and salvation. As one famous Rabbinic saying puts it, “The Holy One, blessed be he, says to Israel: My children, I have created the evil impulse, and I have created the Torah as the antidote to it; if you occupy yourselves with Torah, you will not be delivered into its power.”<sup>23</sup> Another saying runs: “If that base fellow” – meaning the evil inclination – “should waylay you, drag him to the House of Study: if he is stone, he will melt, if he is iron, he will shatter.”<sup>24</sup> An even more radical expression of the idea – and one which most Jews nowadays, if they ever heard it, would probably reject with outrage as “too Christian” – is the oft-repeated Rabbinic legend that the serpent in the Garden of Eden injected Eve with filth, which is passed on to all her descendants, and only when Israel stood at Sinai and accepted the Torah was their filth removed.<sup>25</sup> Sinai, then, is our Calvary, and only the Israelites’ collective surrender to the will of God, when they declared “we will obey and we will learn,” (Ex. 24:7) liberates us from our baser nature. As Hillel put it, “One who has acquired words of Torah, has acquired for himself the life of the World to Come.”<sup>26</sup>

The most profound Rabbinic statement on atonement is attributed, once again, to Rabbi Akiva, and comes at the very end of the Mishnaic tractate *Yoma*, on the laws of the Day of Atonement. It reads:

Happy are you, O Israel! Before whom do you purify yourselves, and who is it that purifies you? Your Father in heaven, as it is said (Ezek. 36: 25) ‘I will cast on you pure waters, and you shall be pure’, and it says (Jer. 17: 13), ‘The Lord is the hope (*mikveh*; read: ritual bath) of Israel.’ Just as the bath purifies the defiled, so the Holy One, blessed be He, purifies Israel.<sup>27</sup>

It is easy to miss the full force of this statement, and the trenchant polemic it contains against early Christianity. Let us consider the literary and historical context. The preceding seven chapters of tractate *Yoma* dealt in detail with the Temple ritual of Yom Kippur, which was seen as vital to the annual reconciliation between God and Israel. But the Temple had been destroyed; the High Priest, the Holy of Holies, the sacrifices and the scapegoat were no more. Israel was bereft of its divinely appointed means of atonement. There were those in the Church, by the early second century, declaring to the Jews that God had rejected them because they had rejected their Messiah. The only hope for sinful Israel was to embrace the salvation offered through baptism in the faith of Christ, the Son

<sup>23</sup> BT *Kiddushin* 30b.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See BT *Yevamot* 103b; *Avodah Zarah* 22b; *Shabbat* 145b-146a; it is attributed to Rabbi Yochanan, the leading Palestinian sage of the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century.

<sup>26</sup> Mishnah, *Avot* 2: 8.

<sup>27</sup> Mishnah, *Yoma* 8:9, conclusion. The opening phrase alludes to Deut. 33:29, which speaks of Israel’s salvation by God. In *Pesikta de-R. Kahana* (ed. Buber 157b) the saying about the bath is attributed to R. Eliezer, R. Akiva’s teacher, while in *Midrash Tehillim* 4:9 and *Yalkut Psalms* 627 it is attributed to R. Eliezer b. Jacob, probably R. Akiva’s disciple of that name. For a discussion of this *mishnah* (with different conclusions from those offered here) see Judah Goldin, “Reflections on a Mishnah” in *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, ed. B.L. Eichler and J.H. Tigay, Philadelphia: JPS, 1988, pp. 141-9.

of God. Into this misery steps Rabbi Akiva, and proclaims, “Happy are you, O Israel!” – not rejected or abandoned – “Before whom do you purify yourselves, and who is it that purifies you?” Atonement, indeed, is not wholly in our own hands, nor yet wholly in God’s, but is a joint endeavour.<sup>28</sup> He answers, not as one might expect “the Holy One, blessed be He,” or the like, but “Your *Father* in heaven,” that is, not the Son whom others preach, but the Father alone.<sup>29</sup> We do not need baptism in a pool for salvation, but immersion in the purifying waters of God alone, the waters only God can sprinkle on us to free us from the defilement of death.<sup>30</sup> God, our pool of water, is our all-sufficient hope – a play on the word *mikveh*, which has both meanings.

But *how* is God our pool of water? Rabbi Akiva no doubt expected his students to be familiar with his other teaching, which became a watchword of Rabbinic life: “There is no water but Torah.” Torah is the well-spring of life-giving, purifying water, which all who are thirsty can come and drink by studying its teachings.<sup>31</sup> Immersion in God, then, means immersion in God’s Torah.

Rabbi Akiva did not only preach this message, he lived it. The story is told that, when the public teaching of Torah was banned during the Hadrianic persecution on pain of death, Rabbi Akiva defied the ban and continued to teach. A friend rebuked him for his folly, asking why he could not yield for the time being, rather than risk his life. Rabbi Akiva answered with a parable. Once, he said, some fish were swimming in a river, when a fox came to them and said, “Why are you swimming in the river, O fish? Do you not know that fishermen are there waiting to catch you in their nets? Come out, and I will carry you away to safety on my back.” To which the fish answered, “O wily Mr Fox, do you not realise that, if we are in danger here in the water, which is our element, how much more will we be in danger if we leave our element altogether?” Even so, said Rabbi Akiva, with the Jews: if we are in danger when we learn Torah, the source of our

<sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Rabbi John Rayner for his suggestion, in the letter cited in note 5 above, that one could adduce here, for example, the words of Malachi 3:7, “Return to Me, and I will return to you.” For the Rabbinic parable elaborating on this mutuality of *teshuvah*, see *Pesikta Rabbati* (ed. Friedmann, Vienna 1880) 184b-185a.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. R. Akiva’s saying in *Avot* 3:18, quoted above, which in an earlier clause states, “Beloved are Israel, for they are called children (or: “sons”) of God ... as it is said: You are children of the Eternal One your God.” (Deut 14:1) I think this is a polemic against the Christian claim that Jesus is, in a special sense, the Son of God.

<sup>30</sup> Sprinkling of water, containing the ashes of the red heifer, was the rite of purification for those who had been defiled by contact with death. Ezekiel 36:25 is playing on this image, as noted by Rashi ad loc. R. Akiva is pointing out that God alone acts the priest’s part in the purification of Israel; cf. Hebrews 9:11-14.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g. *Sifrey Devarim* 48, *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1, 2b, 3, *Midrash Tehillim* 1:18. Note the formulation in *Sifrey Devarim*: “Just as water elevates the impure from their impurity, so words of Torah elevate the impure from their impurity.” (Cf. *Tanchuma, Ki Tavo* 3.) See also the striking statement in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* and *Mid. Tehillim*, “Just as the waters cover the nakedness of the sea, as it is said: As the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9), so the Torah covers the nakedness of Israel, as it is said: Love covers all transgressions (Prov. 10:12)” – where it is clear that “love” is taken as a synonym for Torah!

life, how much more will we be in danger if we cease to learn.<sup>32</sup> In due course, Rabbi Akiva was indeed arrested and died a martyr's death.<sup>33</sup>

So much, then, for the Jews – what about the rest of humanity? Part of the answer, it seems to me, is clear: God gave himself, in the Torah, to the Jewish people for their salvation; and then God gave himself, in Christ, for the salvation of the gentiles. I see no reason why a Jew should not affirm joyfully, in the words of St. Paul, that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.” (II Cor. 5:19)<sup>34</sup> Christ is the Torah incarnate, the living word of God spoken to the nations, enabling them to participate equally in the same covenant God made with Abraham and Israel.<sup>35</sup>

## Communion

Why God acted in just this way, I will venture to speculate in a moment. First, I would like to reflect on the way our beliefs are reflected in our liturgy, and in the idea of communion. I have to admit, here, that the Christian liturgy I am most familiar with is the Eucharist, and Protestants for whom the Eucharist is not central to their faith may not identify with some of what I will say here.

Jews and Christians alike may commune with God in their hearts, in prayer. Each community, however, has a pre-eminent act of communion, which, for many, is central to its life and identity. For Christians, it is the sharing of Christ in the Eucharist. For Jews, it is Torah study, represented in the liturgy by the ceremonial reading of the Torah. The two rituals display some remarkable similarities, that reinforce the idea that the Torah fulfils, for Jews, the role that Jesus performs for Christians. In the Eucharist, prayers and scriptural readings – the “Liturgy of the Word” – form the introduction and lead-up to the culminating and most sacred part of the service, when the real presence of God becomes manifest in the bread and wine, and is shared by the worshippers.<sup>36</sup> In the main service of the Jewish week, on Shabbat morning, as well as on Monday and Thursday mornings, the climax of the *shacharit* service is reached with the read-

<sup>32</sup> BT, *Berakhot* 61b.

<sup>33</sup> On Jewish and Christian martyrology, and the early interaction between Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, see Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. On texts concerning the martyrdom of R. Akiva, see especially pp. 102–113.

<sup>34</sup> For many Christians, the saying of John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me,” is a major obstacle to religious pluralism. Perhaps, however, it could be understood as meaning, not “I, Jesus of Nazareth, am the sole embodiment of the way, and without me no one can come to the Father,” but instead, “I, Jesus, am one manifestation of that way, the true and living Word, which, in its many forms, is the route by which all people come to the Father.”

<sup>35</sup> I am trespassing here on the ground of a vigorous debate amongst contemporary Christian theologians, whether Christ's coming ushered in a “new covenant,” even though the covenant with Israel may still be valid, or whether Christians were “grafted on” to the same covenant God had made with Israel; cf. Romans 11:17 ff.

<sup>36</sup> Even the structure of the Liturgy of the Word reflects the centrality of Christ, with the Gospel reading in the final and most honoured place, and the congregation standing. In the Jewish liturgy, the order is reversed, with the more sacred reading from the Pentateuch preceding that from the prophets. I am aware that, especially in post-conciliar Catholic teaching, the Liturgy of the Word has been presented as equal in importance to the Eucharist.

ing of the Torah. It is taken from the Ark, clothed in splendour; carried in procession and venerated (although not in many Liberal Synagogues), and, like the host in the Catholic mass, elevated on high to be seen and honoured by the congregation. The tabernacle, in which the consecrated host is kept in Catholic churches, is strikingly like a miniature Ark. Of course, there are differences: nobody would say that the Torah scroll can be worshipped as God, and each of these ceremonies has its own separate history and development. On a phenomenological level, though, the similarities reveal a great deal about the inner meaning of these rituals for the communities that perform them.<sup>37</sup>

On a deeper level, the Rabbis insist that, wherever the Torah is studied, the *Shekhinah* —divine presence— is there<sup>38</sup>—which reminds one strongly of Jesus’ assurance in Matthew: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt. 18:20)<sup>39</sup> In later Jewish mystical literature, the study of Torah is spoken of as spiritual food in language reminiscent of that applied to the Eucharist.<sup>40</sup>

### God’s Reasons

A question that naturally occurs is, why did God, in the divine wisdom, choose to reveal the Word in one way to the Jews, and in quite a different way to Christians? I would add, as well, that I believe God reveals his word and light to every people in a way appropriate to them: the Qur’an for Muslims, the Vedas and other scriptures to Hindus, and so on. But our focus here is on Jews and Christians. I certainly cannot claim to have fathomed the divine mind, for as we know, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Eternal One.” (Isa. 55:8) Nevertheless, the following speculation has occurred to me, which I would like to share with the reader. For me, as a Jew, there is something supremely beautiful, precious and inspiring about the Torah, and the centuries of devoted scholarship that have created the Talmud and Midrash which we call the Oral Torah. The process of studying, questioning, debating and discussing, the restless curiosity, marvellous creativity and intellectual adventurousness of Judaism: without these the universe would be a poorer and duller place, and something of divine – and human – wisdom and splendour would remain forever unknown. So God gave us the Torah, as our sacred bridge to the infinite, and our means of helping to perfect the world. But to participate in the life of Torah one needs to be able to speak the language, to belong, as it were, to the elite scholarly society, and have around one a community that, even if it can’t share fully in that process, has the tradition and dedication to foster it. It is no

<sup>37</sup> The fact that, even in the most liberal Jewish communities, there is great stress on the Torah being read from an unvocalised, hand-written parchment scroll, strongly suggests the supra-rational, “sacramental” quality of the act of reading, which would not apply if the portion were read from a printed text.

<sup>38</sup> See *Avot* 3: 3, 7.

<sup>39</sup> A further dimension, which there is not room to explore here, is the sense in which the Jewish people and the Church, respectively, come to embody the Torah and Christ, and thus manifest the divine presence and action in the world.

<sup>40</sup> See Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutey Amarim (Tanya)*, Ch. 5, and the references cited there.

accident, therefore, that the Jews are “the fewest of all the peoples,” (Deut. 7:7) a kind of godly experiment in creating, out of a band of slaves, a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:6) Since we are only human, the experiment has never definitively succeeded, but at least we, and God, have kept it going for nearly three-and-a-half thousand years, and it is still going, yielding new and interesting results all the time. But the word could not remain in this esoteric, if beautiful, form, if it were to be communicated to the masses of humanity who don’t speak Hebrew or Aramaic and haven’t cultivated a taste for Rabbinic dialectics. God, therefore, chose one Jew to become the vehicle for a renewed revelation that would bring the light of Torah, in a modified form, to the peoples of the world. Since a book can only be read by those who can read, know the language and are used to intellectual thought, God chose a medium of revelation that every human being can understand, that is, a human life – and a human death.

The Rabbis, at least from the time of Rabbi Akiva onwards, knew that God was with them in their human suffering, for thus they interpreted the verse in Isaiah: “In all their afflictions, he was afflicted,” (Isa. 63:9)<sup>41</sup> and they taught, “Wherever the people of Israel go into exile, the *Shekhinah* goes into exile with them.”<sup>42</sup> Rabbi Meir, the pre-eminent disciple of Rabbi Akiva, even went so far as to state that whenever any human being feels pain, the *Shekhinah* also cries out in pain.<sup>43</sup>

This faith in God’s presence and participation in our human condition, however, was given perhaps its most moving and powerful expression in the idea of the Incarnation. For, once the word ceased to be a body of teaching, and entered into a body of flesh, it had to come to be regarded as God. The alternative was to worship a being other than God, which is idolatry, so however hard it is to understand, it was natural that Christians came to regard Jesus, by the third or fourth century, not just as a divine being, but actually as God, and thus was born that stumbling block to Jewish-Christian (and Muslim) understanding, the doctrine of the Trinity, which is too much for me to deal with in this article.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Following the *kere* version of the Masoretic text. This is the final verse of the *haftarah*, or prophetic reading, on the Sabbath preceding the Jewish New Year; in other words, the final prophetic word of each Jewish year.

<sup>42</sup> BT *Megillah* 29a; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Bo 14; *Sifrey Bemidbar* 84.

<sup>43</sup> Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 6:5. While no normative form of Judaism has ever held that God can appear in a human *body*, the assertion that God cannot be manifest in human *form* is a product of mediaeval, especially Maimonidean, rationalism. It is contradicted by the pervasive anthropomorphism of the Bible, with its assumption that the prophets’ visionary experience of God takes human shape (cf. Ex. 24:10, Isa. 6:1, Ezek. 1:26, Amos 9:1, etc.). For visionary anthropomorphism in Rabbinic Judaism, cf. BT *Berakhot* 7a, the saying attributed to Rabbi Akiva in *Mekhilta*, *Shirta* 3, the *Shiur Komah* and the profound anthropomorphism of mediaeval Kabbalah. See Elliot Wolfson, “Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. T. Frymer-Kensky et al., Westview, 2000, pp. 239-54.

<sup>44</sup> Jewish difficulties with the Trinitarian idea seem to me to arise from two main causes: on the one hand, the prominence the doctrine attained in Christian liturgy, which in turn arose from the centrality of the incarnate Christ in the Christian experience of God; and on the other hand, the Maimonidean philosophical interpretation of divine unity, which became normative from the Middle Ages onwards. Classical Rabbinic Judaism presents significant analogues to Trinitarian

## Modern conceptions of Torah and Jesus

To conclude this article, it is important to acknowledge that the beliefs here described as constituting Judaism and Christianity may not be ones with which all Jews and Christians identify, or with which they are comfortable. The fact is that neither Jewish nor Christian beliefs are static and unchanging. Both have evolved over the centuries and are still evolving. From a modern point of view, shared by the present writer, all religious beliefs arise mainly – some would say solely – in the human mind. That does not mean that they are not divine, or do not partake of ultimate truth. It simply concerns the way in which God works, which I believe is primarily from within us. As a Liberal Jew, I do not believe that the five books of Moses came down from heaven, or that every word in them is God’s own truth; and the same certainly applies to the teachings of the Rabbis. Nevertheless, these are our sacred traditions in which we have found, and are still finding, new truths and inspiration, even as we discard what we see as outmoded or unhelpful beliefs and practices. I know that many Christians see their own tradition in a similar way, and that, just as Jews debate the nature, purpose and divinity of the Torah, so Christians are debating the nature of Jesus and his divinity.

If we can come to recognise that the same God who gave light to us, in a way appropriate for our character and culture, has given light to others also, fitting to their culture and character, the result can only be an ever deeper appreciation of the boundless greatness, generosity and lovingkindness of God, and increased understanding, harmony and peace between human beings.

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thinking, for example in the frequent collocation of God and God’s twin attributes of Justice and Mercy, forming a dynamic and dialectic entity; and epithets like *Shekhinah* and *Ruach ha-Kodesh* (Holy Spirit) as manifestations of God’s presence and inspiration. The mediaeval Kabbalistic doctrine of the *sefirot*, which include divine hypostases entitled Father, Mother, Son and Daughter, is (as some of its mediaeval Jewish critics noted) difficult to distinguish conceptually from some versions of Trinitarian theology.