A Legacy of Learning

Essays in Honor of Jacob Neusner

Edited by

Alan J. Avery-Peck, Bruce Chilton, William Scott Green,
and Gary G. Porton

BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

Contents

Judaism and Christianity

American Judaism

World Religions and Philosophy

The Academy

Parting of the Ways that Never Parted: Judaism and Christianity in the Work of Jacob Neusner

Elliot R. Wolfson

Writing about any topic tackled by Jacob Neusner presents a problem that should be apparent to anyone even vaguely familiar with his scholarly achievements. Given the sheer volume of textual production, it is inevitable that one will fail to gather all the relevant data. Consequently, even before embarking on the journey, one is beset by insecurity and the looming sense of not being up to the task. But there is another and perhaps even more methodologically daunting issue. The historian, as Neusner articulated the matter in *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah*, "must err on the side of radical nominalism, as against the philosophical tolerance of something close to pure realism."[1] It follows that scholarly presentations—and this extends to Neusner himself—are at best intellectual constructs that serve a heuristic and pedagogical purpose; they are not definite categories that capture the full complexity and/or ambiguity of the relevant social realities to which they supposedly refer. The one who undertakes historical research, therefore, must be ever mindful of the existential intricacies and variations that put into question the adequacy of every explanatory model to recount the narrative of what actually transpires in a temporal field demarcated by the intersection of the diachronic and the synchronic.[2] On balance, Neusner rejects the historicist theory of explanation and adopts instead a literary-structuralist interpretative algorithm that shifts the focus from determining what really happened to the question of the didactic message that allows us some access to the social setting wherein a text was produced. Neusner does not read rabbinic sources as if they were "an account of one-time events, history in the old sense." On the contrary, the textual artifacts reveal "persistent traits of social culture and of mind, history in a mode congruent to the character and purposes of the evidence."[3] The hermeneutical code that informed Neusner's thinking is summarized in the statement, "The history of Judaism is the story of successive arrangements and revisions

1 Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah*, second edition (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 23.

2 See the passage from Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1980), pp. xxi–xxii, cited in Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence*, p. 309.

3 Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence*, pp. 310–311.

 | DOI 10.1163/9789004284289_018

of available symbols."[4] Symbols, not chronoscopic events, are the stuff of the history of religion. With these stipulations in mind, let me delve cautiously into the subject of this study, the relationship of Judaism and Christianity in Neusner's work.

In the last years, there has been significant discussion among scholars of Late Antiquity regarding this relationship, referred to in previous generations by the shorthand locution of the parting of the ways. The rejection of this paradigm—epitomized in the 2007 collection of essays *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*—is predicated on presuming a fluid notion of hybridity whereby the boundaries separating the two foci of identity construction are more porous, such that identifying one as Jewish did not come at the expense of identifying oneself as Christian; on the contrary, for many it was entirely plausible that their understanding of being Jewish was dependent on their being Christian, just as their understanding of being Christian was dependent on their being Jewish.[5] In my judgment, Neusner's contribution to this conversation has not been sufficiently appreciated with the exception of two notable points. First, he is credited with insisting that we replace the monolithic term Late-Antique Judaism

4 Jacob Neusner, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 8.

5 For an application of this methodology to two treatises classified as Gnostic, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Inscribed in the Book of the Living: *Gospel of Truth* and Jewish Christology," in *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007), pp. 234–271, esp. 236–237, and idem, "Becoming Invisible: Rending the Veil and the Hermeneutic of Secrecy in the *Gospel of Philip*," in April D. DeConick, Gregory Shaw, and John D. Turner, eds., *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature: Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 113–135, esp. 116–120. A similar approach is taken with respect to the fourth-century Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* by Annette Yoshiko Reed, "Rethinking (Jewish-) Christian Evidence for Jewish Mysticism," in Ra'anan Boustan, Martha Himmelfarb, and Peter Schäfer, eds., *Hekhalot Literature in Context: Between Byzantium and Babylonia* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp. 349–377, esp. 364–365. A useful summary of the methodological argument is offered by Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), pp. 7–22, and idem, "A Jewish Reader of Jesus: Mark, the Evangelist," in Neta Stahl, ed., *Jesus among the Jews: Representation and Thought* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 6–17. See also the taxonomic discussions in Oskar Skarsaune, "Jewish Believers in Jesus in Antiquity—Problems of Definition, Method, and Sources," in Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), pp. 3–21; James Carleton Paget, "The Definition of the Terms Jewish Christian and Jewish Christianity in the History of Research," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, pp. 22–52; Simon Claude Mimouni, *Early Judaeo-Christianity: Historical Essays*, translated by Robyn Fréchet (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), pp. 25–53.

with the plural Judaisms,[6] and, second, he is acknowledged as one of the scholars to insist that it is not until the fourth century—the age of Constantine and the Christianization of the Roman Empire—that we can speak of a cultural split that advanced the need for Jewish and Christian self-definition,[7] a conception that Neusner himself attributes to Rosemary Radford Ruether's 1972 essay "Judaism and Christianity: Two Fourth-Century Religions."[8]

In light of this stance, we can ponder Neusner's rather audacious claim in *Jews and Christians: The Myth of a Common Tradition* that there has never been a genuine dialogue between the two religions. The denial of dialogue is based on the further assumption—evident from the title of the book—that the very conception of a Judeo-Christian tradition is a myth.[9] Needless to say, Neusner

6 Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam H. Becker, "Introduction: Traditional Models and New Directions," in Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 15; Robert A. Kraft, "The Weighing of the Parts: Pivots and Pitfalls in the Study of Early Judaisms and Their Early Christian Offspring," in *The Ways That Never Parted*, p. 88.

7 Reed and Becker, "Introduction," p. 17, n. 56; Daniel Boyarin, "Semantic Differences; or, 'Judaism'/'Christianity'," in *The Ways That Never Parted*, p. 66. See also Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 5. In that context, Boyarin distinguishes Neusner's view with his own surmise that at a period earlier than the fourth century we should assume themes common to the "two Judaic dialects, inflected differently for each." As this study will show, a more nuanced position may be elicited from Neusner's oeuvre.

8 Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. x, n. 2. The study of Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Judaism and Christianity: Two Fourth-Century Religions," appeared in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 2 (1972), pp. 1–10.

9 One is here reminded of the title of the collection of essays by Arthur A. Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition and Other Dissenting Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). In the opening paragraph of the introduction, p. ix, the author summarizes his opinion: "The Judeo-Christian tradition is a myth. It is, moreover, not only a myth of history (that is, an assumption founded upon the self-deceiving of man) but an eschatological myth which bears within it an optimism, a hope which transcends and obliterates the historicism of the myth. As myth it is therefore both negative and positive, deathly and dangerous, visionary and prophetic at one and the same time." Compare ibid., p. xi, where Cohen articulates the irreparable divide between Judaism and Christianity that is in basic agreement with Neusner's position: "I say all this to suggest that the Jewish and Christian relation was in ancient times much too serious an engagement to become . . . an assumed tradition. The ancient world expected a redeemer; the Jews expected a redeemer to come out of Zion; Christianity affirmed that a redeemer had come out of Zion, but that he had come not alone for Israel but for all mankind. Judaism denied that claim, rejecting the person of that redeemer, calling his claim presumption and superarrogation, denying his mission to them." See ibid., p. xx: "The Judeo-Christian tradition

does not deny the obvious fact that the two faith communities have a shared scriptural foundation—the basis that facilitated polemical exchanges and debates over such crucial theological issues as the messiahship of Jesus[10]—but he provocatively insists nonetheless that they

> share no common agenda and have conducted no genuine dialogue. Scripture can provide an agendum—but one that leads only to division, since the Old Testament for Christianity serves only because it prefigures the New Testament, and the written Torah for Judaism can be and should be read only in the fulfillment and completion provided by the oral Torah. To measure the distance between Christianity and Judaism, therefore, you have to traverse the abyss between the New Testament and the oral Torah (the Mishnah, the two Talmuds, the Midrash-compilations).[11]

Even in the present moment, Jewish-Christian dialogue amounts to a "surface conversation" that "covers over mutual incomprehension." The predominant attempt of New Testament scholars to highlight the Jewish origins of the historical Jesus yields an apologetic for Christianity and a condemnation of Judaism. And conversely, the prevalent Jewish attitude toward Christianity treats it "within the metaphor of a family, as 'the daughter faith'; or it regards that religion with condescension . . . or it deems only the historical Jesus (not the theological Christ) as worthy of serious attention." Recycling the positions routinely enunciated in medieval disputations, Jews maintain that their

---

is an eschatological myth for the Christian who no longer can deal with actual history and a historical myth for Jews who can no longer deal with the radical negations of eschatology." And p. 20: "At the same time as Western investment in 'the Judeo-Christian tradition' continues to accumulate, it should be noted that for the Jew there is not (rightly understood) such a tradition and for the Christian what is taken as Jewish is either a caricature of Judaism or a new construction of it. In neither alternative is there essential connection, although both communities survive the demands and exactions which each makes upon the other." See below, n. 17.

10 Lawrence Lahey, "Evidence for Jewish Believers in Christian-Jewish Dialogues through the Sixth Century (excluding Justin)," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, pp. 581–639.

11 Jacob Neusner, *Jews and Christians: The Myth of a Common Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 1991), p. ix. An orientation more sympathetic to Neusner and at odds with the current trend is found in Richard L. Rubenstein, "What Was at Stake in the Parting of the Ways between Judaism and Christianity?" in Zev Garber, ed., *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), pp. 131–158. Rubenstein elucidates the alleged schism between Judaism and Christianity by focusing on religious sacrifice, a topic that has commanded a fair amount of scholarly attention.

religion is the authentic faith of ancient Israel, while Christians maintain that their religion represents *Verus Israel*, the true ideal of Judaism, to which all people, including practicing Jews, must aspire.[12]

Neusner has insightfully grasped that the very supposition of identity is what has fostered a climate of acrimony through the centuries. To move beyond that impasse, it is necessary to accept the inimitability of the two cultural formations, an acceptance that would align contemporary scholars more closely with the Christian theologians and rabbinic teachers of the fourth century. As Neusner put it,

> It seems to me only when Christianity can see itself in the way in which the Church fathers saw it—as new and uncontingent, a complete revision of the history of humanity from Adam onward, not as a subordinate and heir of Judaism—and when Judaism can see itself in the way in which the sages of the oral Torah saw it—as the statement of God's Torah for all humanity—that the two religions will recognize this simple fact: they really are totally alien to one another. *Dialogue will begin with the recognition of difference*, with a search for grounds for some form of communication, rather than with the assumption of sameness and the search for commonalities.[13]

Only by embracing the autonomy of Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism and the autonomy of Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity will it be possible to have an unapologetic conversation that disavows supersessionism on the part of Christians and superciliousness on the part of Jews.

Beyond the specific case of the two Abrahamic traditions, Neusner's reflections touch upon a larger philosophical point regarding the "incapacity of religious systems to think about the other or the outsider."[14] In Levinasian terms, one might retort that it is precisely the inaccessibility of the other that makes the other accessible, that the presence of the inassimilable other, if the other can indeed be made present in its inassimilability, must be given as the absence

12 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, pp. 118–119. For a useful survey of the quest for the Jewish Jesus in modern Jewish historiography, see Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jews and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 13–60. See also the collection of essays in *The Jewish Jesus*, and especially Shaul Magid, "The New Jewish Reclamation of Jesus in Late Twentieth-Century America: Realigning and Rethinking Jesus the Jew," pp. 358–382.

13 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 119 (emphasis added).

14 Ibid., p. xi.

of the other. It is not clear, however, that this mode of givenness—or perhaps nongivenness would be more appropriate since the other can give itself only as that which is not given—leads anywhere but to the effacement of alterity. The heterogeneity here implied would ostensibly defeat the possibility of genuine dialogue. And this brings us back to Neusner's point: how can a liturgical community—or what he would call a *religious system*, which comprises the triadic structure of a cogent ethics (way of life), an ethos (worldview), and an ethnos (social entity)[15]—think about the other without either reducing the otherness of the other to the same or demonizing that otherness if its irreducibility is preserved in tact? Against this background we can appreciate Neusner's insistence on accentuating the disparities between Judaism and Christianity so that the similarities can be better appreciated, and particularly the ethical mandate to love one another in the wake of the catastrophes of hate that dominated and darkened the landscape of the twentieth century.[16] The "new foundation" for dialogue must be based on the presumption that "the only way for a Judaic believer to understand Christianity is within Judaic terms, and the only way for a Christian believer to understand Judaism is within Christian terms. Since Judaism and Christianity form quite different religions with little in common, it is time for each religion to try to make sense of the other—but to make sense of the stranger wholly in one's own terms."[17] The conceptual viability of this mandate, *to make sense of the stranger wholly in one's own terms*, is not self-evident.[18] Is it possible for one to envision the other when the other is envisioned necessarily through the prism of one's own self?

---

15 Ibid., p. 23.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 120. Here, again, I note the affinity between Neusner and Cohen, *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, p. xxi: "This is a time—and the time of the apocalypse is always such a time—when men must speak *out* of their differences and over the chasm that separates them. It is not that Christians should suspend their faith that they may learn to speak well and learnedly with Jews or that Jews should inhibit their eccentric singularity that they may learn to identify the better with Christians. It is that Christians must learn to speak through Jesus Christ to that in the world which is untransformed and unredeemed and Jews must learn to speak out of Torah with a sagacity and mercy which brings the world closer to its proper perfection" (emphasis in original).

18 It is of interest to recall the title of Neusner's monograph *Stranger at Home: "The Holocaust," Zionism, and American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). The expression "stranger at home" entails the same conjunction of familiarity and alienation implied in Neusner's instruction "to make sense of the stranger wholly in one's own terms."

Despite the logical implausibility of this directive, Neusner does not waver from the conviction that conversation is feasible only when it is understood that Judaism and Christianity are "completely different religions" and not "different versions of one religion."[19] Note the following generalization elicited from the specific example of the gap separating the hypothetical gatherings of Jewish sages and Christian theologians in the fourth century:

> For the things on which religious thinkers focus concern the religious community at hand. The outsider takes a place on the edges of thought, not at the center, and debate with the outsider ordinarily proceeds along lines that radiate from the center. . . . The real question is not why religious intellectuals of one circle do *not* intersect with those of another. . . . The more difficult question is why religious intellectuals of one side *ever* discuss issues that engage religious intellectuals of the other side. . . . When different people talk about different things to different people, we have no reason to wonder why. When different people talk about the same things to different people, we do.[20]

The fundamental incapacity of one group to understand the other stems from the fact that they represent two incongruent views on the nature of Israel, even though they both originate in scripture. This discrepancy is surely so in their embryonic state but it applies as well to the later stages of their respective chronologies. Looking at the evidence from the vantagepoint of the first century, those who followed Jesus construed Israel as a family and focused on the matter of salvation in historical and political terms; the Pharisees, the forerunners of the rabbinic sages, viewed Israel as a way of life and thus they concentrated on the matter of sanctification in cultic and moral terms.[21] This claim, of course, is counterintuitive: one would have expected the Christian identification of Israel to be the more universal and less genealogical, the more interiorized and the less externalized.[22] Leaving that aside, the key point

19 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 1.

20 Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, p. 143 (emphasis in original).

21 Ibid., p. 4. Compare Jacob Neusner, A *Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (revised edition; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), pp. 149–150.

22 Neusner's position curiously dovetails with the reversal of the standard view offered by Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), vol. 3, p. 1259: "Indeed precisely the gnostic-Docetic dissolution of Christ into pure logos, light, life and other hypostasis which is only beginning in the Gospel of St John would undoubtedly have succeeded completely if it had not been for the historical-real resistance which the person of Christ put up. . . . Thus

is that, according to Neusner, the two groups inceptually were incapable of making sense of the other in spite of the incontrovertible truth that the various manifestations of Judaism in first-century Palestine provided the milieu whence the initial followers of Jesus emerged as a discernible community of Israelite faith.[23]

The operative metaphor invoked by Neusner is that of a "family quarrel" between two brothers, siblings who hate one another "deeply" but nonetheless accept and tolerate each another "impassively."[24] Jews and Christians, already in the formative period, were "different people talking about different things to different people," two groups "pursuing programs of discourse that do not in any way intersect."[25] In contrast to the more recent efforts to obscure or to dissolve the boundaries between the two, Neusner confidently argues that from the very outset they are to be distinguished: "Christianity came into being as a surprising, unprecedented, and entirely autonomous religious system and structure, not as a child, whether legitimate or otherwise, of Judaism. The representation of Jesus in the Gospels constantly surprises us, even amazes one familiar with other reports of the Judaism of the time."[26] Brushing against the more typical historiographical sketch of the Jesus movement and Christian origins—and it is precisely for this reason that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, eventually coronated as Pope Benedict XVI, was impressed with *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*[27]—Neusner resists the commonplace assumption that the Gospel

---

Christian faith more than any other lives from the historical reality of its founder, it is essentially the imitation of a life on earth, not of a cult-image and its gnosis. This real memory acted over the centuries: the imitation of Christ, however great the internalization and spiritualization, was primarily a historical and only as such a metaphysical experience. This concrete nature of Christ was important for his believers, it gave them, in stunning simplicity, what no cult-image or heavenly image could have given them" (emphasis in original).

23 Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Given the plethora of scholars who have weighed in on this topic, I will refrain here from delineating bibliographic references.

24 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 2.

25 Ibid., p. 5.

26 Ibid., p. 120.

27 In addition to the blurb that Pope Benedict XVI provided for the first edition of Neusner's book (published in 1993), he dedicates a fuller discussion of this work in Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pp. 103–127. Neusner's approach is summarized succinctly on p. 104: "The dialogue is conducted with great honesty. It highlights the differences in all their sharpness, but it also takes place in great love. The rabbi accepts the otherness of Jesus' message, and takes his leave free of any rancor; this parting, accomplished in the rigor of truth, is ever mindful of the reconciling power of

narratives do not ascribe to Jesus characteristics that are antithetical to other expressions of Judaism of his time. Neusner thus accepts at face value the contrast that Jesus makes between his teachings and those of other Jewish sages in the Land of Israel and draws therefrom the conclusion that "the Christ of theology begins with the Jesus of history. . . . any distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, whether invidious or favorable, ignores not only the explicit claims of the Gospels themselves but also the genuinely surprising character of the representation of Jesus in the context of any Judaism known to us today."[28] This approach stands in marked contrast to the prevailing trend

---

love." The relationship between Neusner and Ratzinger caught the attention of the wider media. See, for instance, David Van Biema, "The Pope's Favorite Rabbi," in *Time Magazine*, May 24, 2007, available at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1625183-2,00.html. See also Andrea Monda, "The Pope at the Synagogue? An Important Event," in *L"Osservatore Romano English Edition*, January 27, 2010, available at http://www.ewtn.com/library/christ/intrneusner.htm. And see the critical comments of Meir Soloveichik, "No Friend in Jesus," in *First Things*, January 2008, available at http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/12/002-no-friend-in-jesus-25.

28 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 120. For a different formulation that grants that many of the ethical statements attributed to Jesus were commonplaces in other versions of Judaism, see Neusner, *Messiah in Context*, p. 7. Neusner's refusal to accept the distinction between the historical Jesus as human and the incarnate Christ is in sync with the recent argument of Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, pp. 6–7, that "Christ too—the divine Messiah—is a Jew. Christology, or the early ideas about Christ, is also a Jewish discourse and not—until much later—an anti-Jewish discourse at all. Many Israelites at the time of Jesus were expecting a Messiah who would be divine and come to earth in the form of a human. Thus the basic underlying thoughts from which both the Trinity and the incarnation grew are there in the very world into which Jesus was born and in which he is first written about in the Gospels of Mark and John. . . . I suggest that Jesus and Christ were one from the very beginning of the Jesus movement . . . the idea of Jesus as divine-human Messiah goes back to the very beginning of the Christian movement, to Jesus himself, and even before that." See ibid., p. 22: "By now, almost everyone recognizes that the historical Jesus was a Jew who followed ancient Jewish ways. . . . What is less recognized is to what extent the ideas surrounding what we call Christology, the story of Jesus as the divine-human Messiah, were also part (if not parcel) of Jewish diversity at this time." The critical difference between Neusner and Boyarin is that the former maintains that the belief in the divine Messiah was a departure for Jews whereas the latter maintains that it was not a "radical innovation" on the part of some Jews living in first-century Palestine but rather "a highly conservative return to the very most ancient moments within that tradition" (p. 47). See ibid., p. 53; and Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaisms: Meṭaṭron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," in *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 41 (2010), pp. 323–365, esp. 328–329, 335–336, 343–344, and idem, "Is Metatron a Converted Christian?" in *Judaïsme ancien / Ancient Judaism* 1 (2013), pp. 13–62. See as well the evidence adduced by Moshe Idel, *Ben:*

of Jewish constructions of Jesus, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, based on a clear-cut distinction between the historical Jesus and Jesus as Christ.[29] For Neusner, since Judaism and Christianity are "utterly distinct and different families of religions," there is no primary bridge that links them. Only when we concede this point can "the work of attempting a dialogue begin."[30] Any rapprochement must be based on an "unapologetic dissent" and the willingness to take to heart the "points of substantial difference." Dissent, on this score, is a "gesture of respect" and honoring the other's faith.[31] But more than being a gesture of respect, the dissent is the mechanism by which affinities can be assessed. The "fundamental difference between the two religious traditions" can be brought to light, therefore, by "pointing out what really does make parallel the formulation of the Judaism of each."[32]

And what is it that makes them parallel? Christianity and Judaism both appropriated the "inherited symbolic structure of Israel's religion" and thus worked with the same categories of what Neusner calls the "encompassing classification system." They did so, however, in such a fundamentally incongruous fashion that each drastically redefined the substance of those categories to the

---

Sonship and Jewish Mysticism (London: Continuum, 2007), pp. 108–193. Although Idel readily admits the role of binitarianism in rabbinic and kabbalistic theologoumena from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (p. 192, n. 312), and thus is willing to speak of the parallelism—as opposed to symmetry—between divine sonship in Judaism and Christianity (p. 585), he steadfastly denies the viability of utilizing the word "incarnation" to describe the phenomenon in Judaism (pp. 57–69, 99–101, n. 180, 101, n. 182). For a partial response to Idel's reluctance to apply this nomenclature to Jewish sources, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body: Abraham Abulafia's Polemic with Christianity," in David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Elliot R. Wolfson, eds., *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 189–194.

29 The point is expressed quite lucidly by Leora Batnitzky, "Jesus in Modern Jewish Thought," in *Jesus among the Jews*, pp. 159–160: "I certainly do not mean to suggest that all modern Jewish claims about the Jewish Jesus are the same; there certainly are differences. However, I do think it is fair to say that almost all modern Jewish constructions of a Jewish Jesus implicitly, if not explicitly, rest on a distinction between the historical Jesus (as opposed to a Christian Jesus), who makes possible the reimagination of Judaism, and Jewishness in the modern world. . . . Jesus is a solution (and not a problem) for modern Jewish thinkers because modern Jewish thinkers are not concerned with the question of the nature of God . . . Rather, they are interested in the question of the nature of the human being."

30 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 120.

31 Neusner, A *Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, p. 4.

32 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 5.

point that "conversation with the other became impossible."[33] Significantly, the primary resemblance that Neusner marks is the motif of incarnation—Christ embodies God and the sage the Torah—a theme that he developed more fully in *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism*. In that monograph, Neusner traces the evolution of the idea of the sage as the embodiment of God in the canonical sources of rabbinic Judaism, or what he calls the Judaism of the dual Torah, reaching its fullest expression in the narratives of the Babylonian Talmud. The doctrine of incarnation—for Neusner the term denotes the representation of God in human form as it relates to body, soul, attitude, and deed—is a consequence of the scriptural legacy of anthropomorphism;[34] indeed, Neusner goes so far as to say that anthropomorphism is the genus of which incarnation constitutes a species.[35] Without leveling out the differences between the Christian account of Jesus as God incarnate and the rabbinic stories about God's assuming the personhood of the sage, Neusner maintains that this concept can contribute to the comparative study of the two religions,[36] whose ecologies[37] commence to take shape in earnest in the fourth century with the ascendancy of Christianity as the foremost socio-political force in the Roman Empire.[38] According to Neusner's historical-textual reconstruction, the incarnation of God could be expressed most fully in Iranian Babylonia under Sasanian rule because in that geographical and cultural context there was no immediate threat of Christianity and hence the Christological notion of divinity and humanity meeting in Jesus was not the impediment that it was in previous centuries in Roman-Byzantine-Christian Palestine.[39]

---

33 Ibid.

34 Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 4.

35 Ibid., p. 11.

36 Ibid., pp. 18–19. See my review of Neusner's *The Incarnation of God*, in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 81 (1990), pp. 219–222, and the more expanded critical assessment of Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "Judaisms and Incarnational Theologies: Mapping Out the Parameters of Dialogue," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 39 (2002), pp. 219–247.

37 By ecology Neusner means the "interplay between a religious system and the world that gives it shape and meaning." See Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 1.

38 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, pp. 30–33; idem, *Judaism in the Matrix*, pp. 1–12, 15–25; idem, *Judaism and Christianity*, pp. x–xi, 13–28.

39 Neusner, *The Incarnation of God*, pp. 166, 195. Neusner's position is the opposite of the one taken recently by Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 12–13: "The distinction

The basic difference between Christian and Jewish incarnational forms centers around eschatology: Christ allegedly brought salvation on a universal scale, and the talmudic sage, although also committed to the prophetic promise of salvation for all humanity, concentrated instead on the sanctification of the people of Israel. Whereas the principle of salvation potentially effaces the boundaries that separate disparate ethnic and cultural identities, the criterion of sanctification requires the binarian dichotomy that pits holy against unholy, sacred against profane, Jew against Gentile. The most formidable obstacle prohibiting a resolution of the argument between Jews and Christians was the transvaluation of values that made the familiar strange, that is, the radically divergent manner in which the common heritage was interpreted and applied.[40]

I note, parenthetically, that the portrayal of postbiblical Judaism proffered by Neusner resonates especially well with the perspective of Franz Rosenzweig, and indeed he even utilizes the critical term *metahistory*, which was employed by the German-Jewish thinker to depict the unique status of

---

between Palestine and Babylonia is crucial: whereas the later Babylonian rabbis . . . were indeed exposed to the growing attraction of two divine figures, the situation in third-century Palestine remains different. The early Palestinian amoraim did indeed witness nascent Christianity, but they were still quite 'innocent,' with regard both to recognizing the developing theological intricacies of Christianity and to being drawn into them." According to Schäfer, the Babylonian Jewish sages mounted a more rigorous response to the theological challenges posed by Christianity, demonstrating concomitant repulsion and attraction. See ibid., pp. 141–148, where the argument is framed more specifically in terms of the figure of Metatron. Schäfer's position is summarized on p. 143: "Instead of regarding 3 Enoch's Metatron as part of the fabric from which the doctrine of the trinity was woven (and even less so as part of the fabric from which the New Testament Jesus was fashioned), we do better to understand the figure of Metatron as an *answer* to the New Testament message of Jesus Christ" (emphasis in original). There is, however, an affinity between Neusner and Schäfer insofar as the latter maintains that the emerging Christianity defined itself by making recourse to Judaism and the emerging rabbinic Judaism defined itself by making recourse to Christianity. See Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus*, p. 9: "Yet it seems safe to say that the main 'opponents' of the rabbis were 'pagans' on the one hand (that is, Greco-Roman polytheism in all its diversity) and 'Christians' on the other (again, in all its heretical variety and with its own struggle to define its identity). This means that, whereas the emerging Christianity defined itself by making recourse to contemporary Judaism as well as to all kinds of groups and movements within itself, the emerging rabbinic Judaism defined itself by making recourse to *Christianity* (as well as to all kinds of groups and movements within itself)."

40 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 6.

Israel in the world as the people beyond time existing within time.[41] The pervasive rabbinic view, which has its roots in priestly sources, is expressive of this metahistorical posture, the sanctification of the mundane and the quest for eternity in the here and now of the spatio-temporal realm, in contradistinction to the prophetic-messianic orientation, underlying the apocalyptic sensibility of the early Jesus-movement, which sought to craft a *new reality beyond history*.[42] To be sure, Neusner emphasizes that Judaism's taking leave of history and becoming apolitical came to full fruition in the century that Christianity went in the opposite direction by becoming politically ascendant, a process set off by the conversion of Constantine and the eventual blurring of the line separating the domains of Caesar and Jesus.[43] The tone, however, was set already by the sages of the Mishnah, tellingly designated by Neusner as philosophers[44] or as lawyer-philosophers,[45] since their analytic skill exhibited a penchant for "systematic theology built on the foundation of Scripture . . . in quest of generalization."[46] The philosophical inclination of the tannaitic sages is nowhere more palpable than in their preference for taxonomic classifications over the narratological recounting of historical events. The "labor of taxonomy" on display in the Mishnah neutralized the disruptive character of history by subsuming one-time events under more general categories of order. History is thereby described as a "didactic intellectual construct."[47]

Elsewhere Neusner argues that the sages of the rabbinic canon cultivated a paradigmatic as opposed to an historical mode of thinking. The rhythms of Israel's holy life are configured from the vantagepoint of the "free-standing

41 Many scholars have discussed the metahistorical role that Rosenzweig ascribed to Judaism. For my own analysis of the topic, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Facing the Effaced: Mystical Eschatology and the Idealistic Orientation in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig," in *Zeitschrift für Neure Theologiegeschichte* 4 (1997), pp. 39–81, esp. 55–63.

42 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, pp. 11–13. On the priestly conception of the world promulgated by the framers of the Mishnah, see Neusner, *Messiah in Context*, p. 24.

43 Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix*, p. 3.

44 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 39.

45 Ibid., p. 40. See Jacob Neusner, *Death and Birth of Judaism: The Impact of Christianity, Secularism, and the Holocaust on Jewish Faith* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 56, where the tannaitic sages of the Mishnah are referred to as the "second-century philosophers."

46 Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Theology and Israelite Prophecy: Primacy of the Torah, Narrative of the World to Come, Doctrine of Repentance and Atonement, and the Systematization of Theology in the Rabbis' Reading of the Prophets* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008), p. ix.

47 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, pp. 38–39. Compare Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence*, pp. 41–42.

structure comprised by God's way of telling time" rather than by the linear or cyclical time set forth in nature or history. According to this "atemporal model" of temporality, distinctions between past, present, and future are obliterated.[48] Indeed, as Neusner is quick to point out, the very notion of paradigmatic time is an oxymoron, for what is notionally distinctive about a paradigm is that it is determined by a pattern completely indifferent to temporal fluctuation.[49] Rabbinic Judaism is thus depicted as atemporal and ahistorical, categorizations that Neusner calls "both accurate and irrelevant."[50] The key point to underscore is that atemporality is a deepening of and not a repudiation of time, an idea that Neusner formulates by comparing the rabbinic view to Augustine's notion of the eternity of the present, the *nunc stans*, in which past, present, and future are fulfilled.[51] From the standpoint of the "generative theology" of the rabbis, Israel transcends the movement of history and lives in a perpetual present tense,[52] taking as its premise the "simultaneity and fungibility of events superficially deemed sequential."[53] Alternately expressed, the fundamental tenet of the rabbis (already detectable in the Mishnah) is that Israel must construct for itself *a life beyond time that is lived in time*. For Neusner, this notion of paradigmatic time bears the quality of the lived dream, which he

48 Jacob Neusner, "Paradigmatic Versus Historical Thinking: The Case of Rabbinic Judaism," in *History and Theory* 36 (1997), pp. 353–377, esp. 354–355. For an elaboration of this conception of atemporal temporality, see Jacob Neusner, *The Presence of the Past, The Pastness of the Present: History, Time, and Paradigm in Rabbinic Judaism* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 1999); idem, *The Theology of the Oral Torah: Revealing the Justice of God* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), pp. 241–279; idem, *Handbook of Rabbinic Theology: Language, System, Structure* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 179–198; idem, *The Idea of History in Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 45–68, 193–230; idem, *Theological and Philosophical Premises of Judaism* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008), pp. 35–58. I hope one day to write a full analysis of Neusner's reflections on time in rabbinic thought, but for the time being, see my brief remarks in *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 208, n. 21. See also Kevin P. Edgecomb, "An Appreciation and Précis of Jacob Neusner's *Theology of the Oral Torah: Revealing the Justice of God*," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Documentary History of Judaism and Its Recent Interpreters* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010), pp. 71–82, and the discussion of Neusner's conception of paradigmatic time in Lynn Kaye, "Law and Temporality in Bavli Mo'ed," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2012, pp. 7–9, 192–193.

49 Neusner, "Paradigmatic," p. 359.

50 Ibid., p. 360.

51 Ibid.

52 Neusner, *Theological and Philosophical Premises*, p. vii.

53 Ibid., p. 35.

even identifies as the "embodiment of paradigm."[54] Just as time and memory bear no meaning to the dreamer, so the rabbinic sages "formulated another and different reading of history from the historical one; aware of the one, sentient of the other, they transcended history and cast off the bounds of time."[55]

We can see this dialectical move most conspicuously in the messianic teaching expounded by the rabbis of the second century, which Neusner pithily labels *teleology without eschatology*. The "Messiah myth" is transformed in the rabbinic system

> into an essentially ahistorical force: if people want to reach the end of time, they had to rise above time—that is, history—and stand off at the side of great movements of political and military character. . . . Israel must turn away from time and change, submit to whatever happens, so as to win for itself the only government worth having; that is, God's rule, accomplished through God's anointed agent, the Messiah.[56]

Somewhat ironically, rabbinic Judaism is considered a "deeply messianic religion" only insofar as it affirms that the end of time is attainable by rising above time.[57] In this matter, there is another interesting parallel to be drawn between Neusner and Levinas, who similarly promoted—partially in the wake of both Cohen and Rosenzweig—a messianism divorced from eschatology, encapsulated in his affirmation of an awaiting without an awaited, that is, a waiting that can never be consummated by the arrival of the one for whom one is waiting.[58] I do not accept Judith Butler's assertion that the Levinasian point of view leaves history and politics arbitrary, unjustified, and absurd.[59] The conception of temporality implied by the harboring of a messianic belief that cannot be realized in time—the awaiting without an awaited—is precisely what renders the historical and the political meaningful, justified, and sensible.

---

54 Neusner, *The Idea of History in Rabbinic Judaism*, p. 193.

55 Ibid., p. 198.

56 Neusner, *Death and Birth of Judaism*, p. 56.

57 Ibid., p. 57. Compare Jacob Neusner, *Major Trends in Formative Judaism Third Series: The Three Stages in the Formation of Judaism* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 77; idem, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 12–16, 18–19; idem, *Theological and Philosophical Premises*, pp. 55–58.

58 Elliot R. Wolfson, "Echo of the Otherwise: Ethics of Transcendence and the Lure of Theolatry," in James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes, eds., *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 285–293.

59 Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 42.

In the terms laid out by Neusner, this is what differentiated the path of the rabbis from the followers of Jesus, the former insisting on sanctification and the latter on salvation.

The position staked by Neusner is more subtle and complex than either those who categorically view Christian origins as an extreme reformation of Judaism or those who insist that inceptually there is no real break. Only by properly demarcating the difference between Christianity and Judaism can we appreciate that the two comportments are "aspects of Israel's common piety," operating within the "same continuum of faith and culture," which distinguished the Jews from all other people. "The common piety of the people of Israel in its land defined the program of religious life for the Judaism and the Christianity that emerged after the caesura of the destruction of the Temple. The bridge to Sinai—worship, revelation, national and social eschatology—was open in both directions."[60] Neusner's history of Judaism and Christianity as religious phenomena is predicated on perceiving them as two fundamental recastings of a piety that turns about the three foci of sage, priest, and messiah. Through the figure of the messiah, Jewish piety took the form of Christianity for the Gentiles; through the figure of the rabbi, Jewish piety took the form of Judaism for Israel. This leads Neusner to assert once more the fundamental chasm that separates the two: "Once they understand that simple fact, Christians can try to understand Judaism in its own terms—and Jews can do the same for Christianity. For they have, in fact, nothing in common, at least nothing in common that matters very much."[61]

The earliest disciples of Jesus were undoubtedly Jews, but in time Christianity evolved into a distinct religious system that impacted the evolution of nascent Judaism as much as Judaism had impacted the evolution of nascent Christianity. Neusner's work will stand the test of time as advocating the reciprocal need to study formative Christianity in the context of formative Judaism and formative Judaism in the context of formative Christianity.[62] Dialogue cannot be based on apologetic capitulation. Just as Judaism constitutes something other than Christianity without Christ, so Christianity should not be conceived as either a superior or an inferior version of Judaism. Judaism is not simply not-Christianity nor is Christianity simply not-Judaism.[63] Repeating his mantra, Neusner asserts that "Judaism and Christianity respectively stand for different

60 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, pp. 13–14.

61 Ibid., p. 15.

62 Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning*, p. 10.

63 Neusner, A *Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, p. 6.

people talking about different things to different people."[64] The catastrophic consequences of the Nazi assault has put an end to the confrontation between the "subordinated, patient Judaism" and the "world-possessing Christianity" and thus has ushered in a "new epoch of relationship" that has the potential to open the space of dialogue and "mature reconciliation" established on the irreducible difference of the two religions that seemingly believe in and worship one and the same God.[65] One cannot underestimate the significance of the atrocities of the Holocaust in the shaping of Neusner's thinking.[66] In the Preface to *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity*, he wrote explicitly that the questions pertaining to the knotty relationship of Judaism and Christianity "draw attention in our own setting, in modern times, after the Holocaust in particular, because, at last, the two great faiths of the West join together to confront a common challenge of renewal. So Judaism and Christianity work together in mutual respect, as never before, in the service of one humanity in the image of one God."[67] I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that Neusner's historical-philological scholarship is the medium through which he could formulate a post-Holocaust theology.

Here it is apposite to recall the closing comments in the Preface to *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine*:

> I place myself in the tradition of those who, by rereading the past, imagine that they can find a direction for the future. This project does not pretend to deserve the exalted status of theology. . . . Still, my original motive in turning toward these sources rather than others, or to another way of life rather than the scholarly one altogether, was theological.[68]

Neusner goes on to delineate his relationship to Jewish tradition by citing Goethe's observations about the criterion of what it is to be modern from *Faust*, 682–683, "Whatever you have as a heritage from your fathers / You must earn it if you would possess it." What distinguishes the modern predicament is that the preservation of the legacy of the past is not guaranteed;

64 Neusner, *Jews and Christians*, p. 28.

65 Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, p. xiii.

66 For discussion of the impact of the Holocaust on Neusner, particularly his argument that this historical event has dominated the identity-formation of American Jewry, see Shaul Magid's chapter in this volume and, idem, *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 199–209.

67 Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning*, pp. 10–11.

68 Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*, p. xii.

one must make it one's own. Tradition is thus no longer a matter of "self-evidence" but rather a consequence of "self-consciousness." In virtue of this need "to earn, possess, and so make our own what reaches us as heritage" in the aftermath of the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi persecution, Neusner concludes, "We affirm where we are and what we are: to be ourselves, unashamedly, unregretfully, children of a wretched but challenging century. Our time of radical turning is more like the fourth century than, I think, any time in between. This is my message in this book."[69] That Neusner would frame his research in this way is striking and well attests to the overriding constructivist dimension of his scholarly pursuit. As he reminds the reader in the prologue to *Judaism's Theological Voice: The Melody of the Talmud*:

> For theology in Judaism, which is the study of the Torah as a mode of receiving God's giving of the Torah, forms the welcome task of every generation of the faithful, and, each in its way, every generation has fulfilled its task. How Israel found God in the Torah varies from age to age, but it is the simple fact that, outside of the Torah, holy Israel has never conceived God to have been made manifest.[70]

Only a tone deaf reader would not take heed of the intonation that Neusner has added to the chorus of Jewish exegetes who have heard the divine voice reverberate in the words of the Written Torah refracted through the prism of the Oral Torah. The many contributions he has made, I suggest, are all part of a constructive-theological inquiry, a "rigorous thought" about the religious truths of Judaism "aimed at forming a systematic and cogent, philosophically valid structure of propositions" that prove "a reasoned account of what the faithful in full rationality know about God."[71]

In conclusion, let me return to the central question of this inquiry regarding Judaism and Christianity. Parting of the ways or the ways that never parted? For Neusner, we can speak of the former if we are cognizant of the latter; that is, the parting of the ways is predicated on the fact that the ways not only never parted but that their mutual entanglement has always been essential to their respective configurations. The convergence sheds light on the divergence, two branches that stem from one root. To quote Neusner's own words:

69 Ibid., p. xiii.

70 Jacob Neusner, *Judaism's Theological Voice: The Melody of the Talmud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. xii–xiii.

71 Ibid., p. xv.

> While Christianity began in the matrix of Judaism in the first century, Judaism reached its present definition in the matrix of Christianity in the the fourth. . . . In point of fact the ecology of Judaism in its formative century finds definition in the ecology of Christianity in the century that marks the first in its history as the formative power in the history of the West: the fourth century. Judaism and Christianity interrelate intensely and continuously from the beginning to the present.[72]

That Christianity arose from within the people of Israel and remained a form of Judaism for centuries is well known; less acknowledged is the fact that in the fourth century, each of the systematic aspects of Judaism—canon, teleology, and symbol—were framed by the politically triumphant Christianity.[73] The rectification of this asymmetry is in no small measure due to the pioneering work of Neusner. As is often the case, what was once groundbreaking becomes conventional, so much so that the one responsible for breaking the ground goes unnoticed. And so it is with respect to Neusner, whose contributions to the depiction of Judaism and Christianity as distinct but intimately interconnected religious systems has served, albeit for the most part tacitly, as a foundation upon which many other scholars have built their arguments. By insisting emphatically on the dissimilarity, Neusner has provided the way forward to bridge what must be kept apart. Dialogue will replace confrontation only when it is realized that Jews and Christians are the same in virtue of their difference. Once more I refer to Levinas, who taught that the notion of an "absolutely universal," which constitutes the essence of spiritual life, "can be served in purity only through the particularity of each people, a particularity named enrootedness."[74] Otherness is what makes the other the same; what I share with the other is that we are different. The identical credo, in my view, may be educed from Neusner's copious and astute speculations on Judaism and Christianity.

---

72 Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix*, p. 2.

73 Ibid., p. 3.

74 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 136.