

Introduction

When Christians Were Jews: On Judeo-Christian Origins

Not long ago, everyone knew that Judaism came before Christianity. The story would go that Christianity developed out of the “orthodox” Judaism of the first century, rabbinic Judaism, and either deviated from the true path or superseded its ancestor. Interestingly, it was more or less the same story for both Christian and Jewish scholars.

The Old Paradigm: Religions as Kinfolk

In order for this myth to work at all, there has to be an assumption of a self-identical religious organism. Jacob Lauterbach’s characterization of Judaism and Christianity as “mother and daughter” is typical of how the myth works.¹ Judaism is the “mother” from which another self-identical religious organism, Christianity, the “daughter,” can be “born.” As Philip Alexander has described the received opinion: “Two main approaches have been adopted in order to lay down the baseline from which the divergence of Christianity can be measured. The first involves retrojecting rabbinic Judaism into first century Pharisaism and argues in effect that Pharisaism is identical with normative Judaism. . . . The second approach involves trying to determine the essence of first century Judaism, the irreducible common denominator of all, or most of, the Jewish sect[s] or parties.”²

In other words, in order to imagine a single mother religion that could give birth to a daughter religion, we have to find some way of reducing the diversity of Jewish religious life in the pre-Christian era to a single object that we can then designate as Judaism. This, as Alexander makes clear, has been accomplished in one of two ways. According to the first, one later

form of Judaism, the Judaism of the Rabbis, which we know from the second century on and which achieved hegemony quite a bit later than that, is retrojected back onto the Pharisaism of the first century, and that first-century Pharisaism is then treated both as virtually identical with its later “descendant” and as the dominant or even correct and true form of Judaism. According to the second, Pharisaism is not given such anachronistic and theologically determined preeminent status, but all of the known forms of first-century Judaism—except for Christianity—are assumed to have had some common features that joined them all into a single “religion.” Out of either of these versions of Judaism in the first century, a different religion was born. Hence, Christianity as the daughter of Judaism.

More recently, scholars have begun to recognize that the historical picture is quite a bit more complicated than either of these approaches allows. In the Jewish world of the first century, there were many sects competing for the name of the true Israel and the true interpreter of the Torah—the Talmud itself speaks of twenty-four such sects—and the form of Judaism that was to be the seedbed of what eventually became the Church was but one of those sects.³ Abandoning both of the apologetic accounts described by Alexander, scholars have come to see that if we are to speak of families at all, we need to speak of a twin birth of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism as two forms of Judaism, and not of a genealogy in which one—Judaism—is parent to the other—Christianity.

After the destruction of the Temple, the current story goes, two “daughter” religions were born out of this congeries, rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, thus modifying the terms of Lauterbach’s conventional metaphor.⁴ As Israel Yuval has written of the Lauterbachian commonplace: “The Jewish view [Christian, as well] that sees early Christianity only as influenced and not as influencing certainly has a theological background, namely, thinking of Judaism as the mother religion of Christianity. But historical criticism has to bring us to the conclusion that early Christianity and the Judaism of the Mishna are, in a manner of speaking, sister religions that were crystallized in the same period and the same background of enslavement and destruction.”⁵ As a figure for this simultaneous birth of Christianity and Judaism, Alan Segal mobilized the verse: “And G-d said to her: there are two peoples in your womb.” The two sibling religions are thereby configured now as twin sons, the children of Rebecca, Jacob and Esau.⁶

The purpose of this new family metaphor is clear. Instead of seeing the religious formation(s) that were to become the Church and the religious formation(s) that were to give rise to the Rabbis in a diachronic relation to each other, they are both seen as having arisen more or less together historically out of the old biblical religion of ancient Israel after the crises that attended the people of Israel in the first century.⁷

In the midrash of the Rabbis, Jacob is, of course, Israel, and Esau is frequently simply an eponym for Rome.⁸ After 312, Esau, or Edom, his descendant, are most often read as the Christian Church, or as the Rabbis themselves put it: “The Principate turned to sectarianism” [TB Sotah 49b and parallels].⁹ This transfer has surely been made by the time of the following Palestinian talmudic statement: “Rabbi Aḥa said in the name of Rav Huna: In the future, Esau the wicked will wrap himself in his tallit and sit with the righteous in the next world, and the Holy Blessed One will drag him and throw him out from there.”¹⁰ An Esau who wishes to sit with a prayer shawl and study Torah with the righteous in heaven is almost obviously a Christian, not, I think, a Roman “pagan.”

This midrashic equation of Esau with Christianity is very rich, but also very problematic. It is very rich because it incorporates in a powerful symbol the sense of the highly fraught family relationship between Jews and Christians, eventually between Judaism and Christianity, between the Rabbis and the Church. If for the Church Judaism ultimately was a superseded ancestor of the true heir to the promise, for the Rabbis, the two entities were more like constantly struggling twin siblings. This metaphor, however, also is deeply and productively problematic for two reasons. It shifts the gender of the descendants from sisters to brothers, and more importantly, since, according to the biblical narrative, Esau was the elder of the two twins, and Jacob, who is Israel, was born holding on the heel of his elder brother, it implies paradoxically that of the two new religious entities, Christianity is the elder and Judaism the (slightly) younger. The symbolic resonances of the recognition that Judaism and Christianity, or perhaps Israel and Christendom, are not very irenic brothers were abundant, but the chronological paradoxes of making Esau be the elder must have been palpable as well. The Rabbis, it seems, resolved this problem in part by thinking of Esau as an elderly Rome become lately Christian. But some Christian writers saw here other opportunities, naming “the Jews” as the elder

son, Esau, and the ultimately dominant Jacob as the younger, “the Christians.” If this interpretation seems forced *vis-à-vis* the text of the Torah, it certainly already would have seemed quite plausible *vis-à-vis* the historical situation by the third century.

One of the clearest early instances of the patristic tradition of reading Esau as “the Jews” and Jacob as “the Church” is in Tertullian:

For thus unto Rebecca did God speak: “Two nations are in thy womb, and two peoples shall be divided from thy bowels; and people shall overcome people, and the greater shall serve the less.” Accordingly, since the people or nation of the Jews is anterior in time, and “greater” through the grace of primary favour in the Law, whereas ours is understood to be “less” in the age of times, as having in the last era of the world attained the knowledge of divine mercy: beyond doubt, through the edict of the divine utterance, the prior and “greater” people—that is, the Jewish—must necessarily serve the “less;” and the “less” people—that is, the Christian—overcome the “greater.”¹¹

According to Tertullian’s reading of the verse, then, which includes a version of the Hebrew subtly different from the way the Rabbis read the verse, one of the peoples was to overcome the other, and since the greater would serve the less, then obviously, it is the less who overcome. Since the Christians already were both younger and more powerful than the Jews by Tertullian’s time (cf. Justin for similar claims), it would have seemed obvious to Tertullian that only the Christians could be read as Jacob, that is, as Israel.¹²

Such patristic claims help us to explain a difficult midrashic passage. In *Genesis Rabbah*, the midrash wards off the problem of Christianity as Esau’s apparent senior (and perhaps, as well, the Christian readings) by reading the awkward verse not about Jacob and Esau at all, but about the twelve tribes that would issue from Jacob:

And G-d said to her: there are two peoples in your womb. . . . “Two peoples,” behold two. And “two nations,” behold four. “And one nation will struggle with the other,” this makes six. “And the elder will serve the younger,” behold eight. “And her days became full for giving birth, and behold there were twins in her stomach,” this is ten. “And the first was born ruddy,” this is eleven. “And afterwards his brother was born,” this makes twelve.¹³

The midrash has thus taken the verse entirely out of its literal sense and entirely out of the usual equation—for this very same midrash—of Jacob with Israel and Esau with Rome. Suddenly, Esau ends up being one of Jacob's twelve sons, since the “two peoples” in Rebecca's womb are translated midrashically as two of the twelve tribes of Jacob, and a displacement effectively erases Esau.

I suggest that it was the difficulty of the stark sequence of elder and younger and the ways that Christian writers could exploit these that led to this drastically distorted reading. Quite astonishingly, but understandably, not one of the three major medieval Jewish biblical commentators, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and the Ramban, make even an attempt to interpret this verse. Ibn Ezra mysteriously says that “the elder” here is a verb, and that he will explain the verse somewhere else, but doesn't, to the best of my knowledge.

Here, then we have an example of precisely the phenomenon that I wish to begin exploring in this book, the ways that rabbinic Judaism has been influenced by its slightly older brother, Christianity. In some ways and fashions, the midrashic equation of Esau with Rome, which became the Christian Church in the midrashic imagination, as in history, gave rise to a paradox. In what follows, I would like to exploit the temporal paradoxes of the midrashic equation of Esau with Christianity in order to explore a historical problem—to produce, as it were, a midrash that never was.

The central paradox that I have in mind is the following: While Jews and Christians both have thought of something called Judaism as the elder religion and something called Christianity as the younger, the midrashic implications of the verse are that Christianity is the elder and Judaism the younger. This would suggest that rabbinic Judaism was born on the heels, indeed, holding the heel, of its elder brother, the Church.¹⁴ The possibilities hinted at (and suppressed) by the midrashic reading offer a method of investigating both the complicated temporalities of the historical relationship between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity as religious entities and the complex intertwinings of three histories: the history of Israel, the history of Rome, and the history of the Church. Esau and Jacob, I will argue, continued “jostling each other in her womb” at least well into late antiquity, and perhaps will do so forever. Like many twins, Judaism and Christianity never quite formed entirely separate identities. Like closely related siblings, they rivaled each other, learned from each other, fought with each

other, perhaps even sometimes loved each other: Esau, the elder, supplanted somehow by Jacob, the younger, who fed him.

If the younger fed the elder, in many ways, the elder served the younger, as well. The image suggests that for at least the first three centuries of their common lives, Judaism in all of its forms and Christianity in all of its forms were part of one complex religious family, twins in a womb, contending with each other for identity and precedence, but sharing to a large extent the same spiritual food, as well. It was the birth of the hegemonic Catholic Church, however, that seems finally to have precipitated the consolidation of rabbinic Judaism as Jewish orthodoxy, with all its rivals, including the so-called Jewish Christianities, apparently largely vanquished. It was then that Judaism and Christianity finally emerged from the womb as genuinely independent children of Rebecca.¹⁵ As Rosemary Radford Ruether put it a quarter of a century ago, “the fourth century is the first century for Christianity and Judaism.”¹⁶

I want to emphasize as well, however, the messiness of the metaphor of Jacob, rabbinic Judaism, born holding on to the heel of Esau, the Church—its refusal to quite work, even the ways that it contradicts itself in its figuring of elder and younger.¹⁷ This messiness serves to plot the untidiness of the train of thought and the train of history in the new midrash proposed herein. It is not a single, unambiguous, clear, linear story, but one of doublings and doublings back, of contradictions and obscurities.

The So-Called “Parting of the Ways”

Even scholars who have recognized that Christianity can hardly be derived as a “daughter” religion from Judaism have still tended to assume a distinct “parting of the ways” sometime in the first or second century, after which there was hardly any contact between the two religions. Philip Alexander has written: “Since there are clearly radical aspects to early Christianity the tendency has been to see the parting of the ways as having taken place early, usually in the first or early second century C.E. Some analyses so stress the radicalism of early Christianity as to suggest that the parting of the ways occurred almost *ab ovo*.”¹⁸ Many would place this final break as early as 70 A.C., after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.¹⁹ Others put it somewhat later. One of the leading Israeli historians has put it thus:

“With the Bar Kokhba rising the final rift between Judaism and Christianity was complete.”²⁰ And as subtle and critical a scholar as Gerson Cohen writes that “the official establishment of the Christian Church as the religion of the empire made no discernible impression on the Jews of the fourth century, for by that time the chasm between Judaism and Christianity had grown so deep and wide that the alignment of the machinery of state with the Church was of no greater moment than the succession of one emperor by another.”²¹

There has been a kind of general collusion between Jewish and Christian scholars (as earlier between the Rabbis and the Doctors of the Church) to insist on this total lack of contact and interaction, each group for its own reasons.²² This mutual stake has been described, once more by Alexander: “The attempt [to lay down a norm for Judaism in the first century] barely conceals apologetic motives—in the case of Christianity a desire to prove that Christianity transcended or transformed Judaism, in the case of Jews a desire to suggest that Christianity was an alien form of Judaism which deviated from the true path.”²³ Indeed, the very distinctness of Judaism has been articulated by Jews as its distance from a “syncretistic” Christianity whose defining feature is that it is somehow a composite of Judaism and Hellenism.²⁴

Alexander has provided a simple, graphic metaphor for an alternative approach: “If we picture Judaism and Christianity as circles we can graphically represent how we reached the present state of affairs as follows. Today the circles stand side by side essentially in self-contained isolation. If we move the horizon of time backwards this monadic relationship remains more or less constant until we come roughly to the fourth century of the current era. Then an important development takes place: we observe the circles approaching and beginning to overlap.”²⁵ It is to Alexander’s credit that he complicates the picture of a simple “parting of the ways” that took place once and for all, but his Venn diagrams provide too simple a model for the reconfiguring that needs to be done.

Changing Paradigms: Religions and Family Resemblance

The breaking down of the cultural boundaries between groups in close spatial contact is a point at issue not only in the writing of histories of late

antiquity, but in our understanding of cultures and their interactions in general.²⁶ The newly developing perspective on Judaism and Christianity as intertwining cultures is thus dependent on a developing climate of opinion or even *Zeitgeist*. As Homi Bhabha has written, “The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”²⁷ Bhabha, in other words, suggests that cultures are never bounded and singular entities.²⁸ In accord with much current cultural theory, with its focus on hybridity, and in accord with models of identity construction that are favored today, I will be offering here a revised model for understanding the historical relationship of the two “new” religions of late antiquity, Judaism and Christianity.

First of all, I suggest that the kinship metaphors need to be abandoned, for they imply, ipso facto, the kinds of organic entities and absolute separations that it is precisely the work of this text to displace, or at any rate, to call into question. Instead, I think that we might usefully substitute something like Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance as a semantic, logical category. All Judaisms and all Christianities share features that make them a single semantic family in the Wittgensteinian sense. This logical category has its historical analogue, as well. Rather than parallel, but essentially separate histories, I propose a model of shared and crisscrossing lines of history and religious development.²⁹

In order to make sense of how such developments could take place, we need to imagine the modes by which new religious ideas, practices, and discourses could be shared. I tend to think of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity as points on a continuum. On one end were the Marcionites, the followers of the second-century Marcion, who believed that the Hebrew Bible had been written by an inferior God and had no standing for Christians and who completely denied the “Jewishness” of Christianity. On the other were the many Jews for whom Jesus meant nothing. In the middle, however, were many gradations that provided social and cultural mobility from one end of this spectrum to the other.

To use a linguistic metaphor, I am suggesting a wave theory of Christian-Jewish history. In one form of linguistic historiography, groups of languages are taken as descended from a common ancestry, a “protolanguage,” from which they have diverged as their populations separated from each other. Similarities between the resulting languages are ascribed to their common ancestry. This is called the *Stammbaum*, or family-tree model, which we so often see in handbooks. According to this model, for example, all of the Romance languages are daughter languages of the vernacular spoken Latin of European late antiquity. Notice the kinship metaphor employed, similar to the kinship metaphors used until now for describing the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.³⁰ In the traditional *Stammbaum* model of Jewish-Christian history, only divergence is possible after 70 A.C., or in some versions, 135 A.C.³¹ According to another model, however, the languages in a given group might very well have similarities that are the product of convergence, of new developments in one that have passed to the others, because the languages are still in contact with each other. This is called wave theory, on the assumption that an innovation takes place at a certain location and then spreads like a wave from that site to others, almost in the fashion of a stone thrown into a pond. In this model, convergence is as possible as divergence.

Separate languages, on this theory, are merely artifacts of the official canonization of a particular dialect as the official language of a given group. An example may be helpful. If one were to travel from Paris to Florence speaking only the local dialect in each town or village, one would not know when one had passed from France to Italy. There is no linguistic border “on the ground.” The reason that we speak of French and Italian as separate languages is precisely because the dialect of Paris and the dialect of Florence have been canonized as the national languages. Similarly, I would suggest, social contact and the gradations of religious life were such that, barring the official pronouncements of the leaders of what were to become the “orthodox” versions of both religions, one could travel, metaphorically, from rabbinic Jew to Christian along a continuum where one hardly would know where one stopped and the other began.³²

This model allows us to see Judeo-Christianity (not in its modern sense of a homogenized common culture) as a single circulatory system within which discursive elements could move from non-Christian Jews and back

again, developing as they moved around the system. My perspective here is very close to that of Galit Hasan-Rokem, who writes:

I base my discussion on a cultural model which a) prefers to look at interaction between cultures in terms of dialogue rather than ‘influence’ (often defined, . . . according to a unidirectional conceptualization) . . . b) deals with exchange rather than polemics (Lieberman’s model) . . . c) instead of opposing canonical vs. noncanonical texts, looks at the constant dynamics between them as represented in the interaction between oral/literal, religious/secular. . .

The discursive model which has been the implicit or explicit basis for most discussions on intergroup relations in rabbinic literature, namely the one which conceptualizes intergroup relations as polemic, stems from a very elitist view of the formation of the texts, and does not reflect the full complexity, multivocality and dynamic points of view introduced in the folk narrative texts themselves.³³

Following this model, there could be and would have been social contact, sometimes various forms of common worship, all up and down the continuum of “Jews” and “Christians.” This social continuity provided for the possibility of cultural interaction and shared religious development. Thus, for instance, H. J. Drijvers has argued that “Christianity” in Edessa had virtually nothing to do with “Judaism” until the end of the third century, when connection with and influence of the Jewish “conversation” expanded dramatically.³⁴

A further corollary to this revised model of Jewish and Christian history is that there might very well be a gap between the explicit claims of certain texts that groups are different and separate and the actual situation “on the ground,” in which there was much less definition, much more fuzziness at the borders, and thus much more possibility of converging religious and cultural histories than otherwise would seem the case. Such gaps between people’s perceptions or articulations of social relations and what can be observed are a commonplace of cognitive anthropology and would be even more expected in the highly charged situation of formative religious groups.³⁵ Indeed, as both Virginia Burrus and Dina Stein have emphasized to me, denials of sameness are precisely what we would expect in situations of difficult difference.

I am not suggesting, for instance, that there was no distinction at all be-

tween “Judaism” and “Christianity” by the second century, only that the border between the two was so fuzzy that one could hardly say precisely at what point one stopped and the other began.³⁶ “It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism,” thunders Ignatius, thus making both points at once, the drive of the nascent orthodoxy to separation and the lack thereof “on the ground” [Magnesians 10:3].³⁷ The monster, it seems, was very lively indeed. It is important, moreover, to emphasize that in order to assume convergence as well as divergence, we hardly have to assume noncompetitive or irenic relations between subgroups.³⁸ As Israel Yuval has written of the intersecting developments of Passover and Easter liturgies: “Parallel development of two different narratives about the same Festival among two rival groups living in close proximity necessarily produces great similarity together with mutual tensions.”³⁹

All of these considerations raise serious terminological problems, because at the same time that I wish to deny the early existence of separate Judaism and Christianity, I am also speaking of the relationship between two entities that are, in some senses, recognizably different.⁴⁰ I shall accordingly try to be careful and not speak of “Judaism” and “Christianity” as single entities in what follows, but of *rabbinic* Judaism and *orthodox* Christianity, or sometimes, when contextually appropriate, of Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews (a reversal of the usual Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians) as the two formative entities, in the sense of the ones that were finally “successful” within this system.⁴¹ Finally, in accord with the usage of the third-century Syriac text, the *Didascalia*, I shall (at least erratically) refer to “Judaism” and “Christianity,” not as religions, but as “conversations,” thus capturing, somewhat anachronistically to be sure, the sense of nondifferentiation that I wish to emphasize.⁴²

I think that we need to take seriously the extent to which non-Christian Jews and Christians were themselves “in conversation” with each other at many sites throughout the Roman Empire, including notably in Palestine, Antioch, and Rome itself, for instance, but not only in those places, of course. More scholars are beginning to adopt the perspective articulated so well by Wayne A. Meeks and Robert L. Wilken: “For the understanding of early Christianity, it is necessary to study Judaism, not only as it existed in the so-called ‘intertestamental period,’ i.e., as ‘background’ to Christianity, but as a vital social and religious force during the early centuries of the

Common Era. Its presence as an independent religion alongside Christianity during this period helped to shape the context in which Christianity developed."⁴³ The same is true, of course, in the reverse direction. But I would go even a bit further. These religio-cultural histories were inextricably intertwined to the point where the very distinction between syncretism and "authentic" Judaism, Christianity, and "paganism" finally seem irrelevant.

There are some colorful examples of various types and various weights that support this hypothesis. W. H. C. Frend has noted that, according to a document preserved in Eusebius's church history, the famous martyrs of Lyons of 177 had been eating kosher meat, which they must have been purchasing at "a kosher market established for the Jews, and this in turn indicates fairly close personal relations between the Jews and Christians in the city."⁴⁴ Although in this case, we can hardly speak of shared observance, since the Lyonnais Christians were merely following apostolic rules preserved in Acts, nevertheless, if Frend is correct in his assumption that they purchased the meat from a "kosher" butcher, this observance brought them into intimate contact with Jews.

An example of quite a different type is the general observation of both Saturday and Sunday as holy days among fourth-century Eastern monastics.⁴⁵ According to Eusebius, this double observance is precisely the marker of the so-called Ebionite heresy: "They observed the sabbath and the other Jewish customs . . . yet, on the other hand, each Lord's day they celebrated rites similar to ours, in memory of the Saviour's resurrection."⁴⁶ In other words, in the very heartland of developing Eastern Orthodox Christian life, the monasteries and hermitages of Egypt and Palestine, something that Eusebius would regard as a "Judaizing heresy" and as belonging only to the past was central to the religious actuality.⁴⁷ It becomes much easier now to understand why there would be Christians who would attend synagogue services on the Sabbath and church on the Lord's Day. This puts a somewhat different cast on the problem of those who followed such "syncretistic" practices, one faced by both Origen and Chrysostom.⁴⁸ Jerome complains as well that the Christians imitate the liturgy of the Jews.⁴⁹ In the martyrology of Pionius (the presumed mid-third-century Asian martyr), a text notoriously hostile to Jews, it likewise seems striking that it is emphasized that the day of the martyrdom is Saturday, and that "they had prayed and taken the sacred bread with water."⁵⁰ In spite of Eusebius, here

was yet another “orthodox” Christian group who took the Eucharist on the “Jewish” Sabbath.⁵¹ Polycarp’s martyrdom, upon which so much of Pionius’s is modeled, also takes place on a Saturday.

This brings us to the most important case of Christian-Jewish intimacy in late antiquity, the fact that many Christian groups, the Quartodecimani who observed Easter at Passover, were dependent, symbolically and practically, on Jews to establish the date of Easter.⁵² After all of the scholarly discussion of the “Great Sabbath” upon which both Polycarp and Pionius were martyred, does it not seem possible that it is the very Sabbath that is called the “Great Sabbath” by the (latter-day) Jews that is meant, the Sabbath before Passover, which, according to the Quartodecimani, would be the Sabbath before Easter as well, and a most appropriately liturgical occasion for martyrdoms?⁵³ The only reason for rejecting this interpretation is that given the other indications of dating in the text, it would make Passover come out improbably early in that year.⁵⁴ However, if we do not assume that in every respect this was an actual report of the events but a highly stylized, theologized account, then the desire to associate the martyrdom of Polycarp with the Passover becomes compellingly plausible, particularly in the light of the evident associations between martyrdom, the sacrifice of Isaac, and the Passover in the text.⁵⁵ These associations are particularly powerful in those churches that continued the older practice and celebrated Easter on the 14th or 15th of Nissan, the day of the Jewish Pesah, because for those churches, the Quartodecimani, the associations between the Crucifixion and the Passover sacrifice were apparently most powerful.⁵⁶ For these Christians, Easter or Pascha was simply the correct way to observe the Pesah. The second-century Bishop Melito of Sardis’s sermon *Peri Pascha* is perhaps the most compelling Asian example of this nexus.

This is not only of significance owing to the implied analogy between Easter and Passover that I have mentioned, but actually implies that these Christians were in some sense followers of the Jewish religious leadership, as well. We find the following astonishing text attributed to the apostles by the Quartodecimani: “As for you, do not make calculations. But when your brothers of the circumcision celebrate their Passover, celebrate yours also . . . and even if they are wrong in their calculation, do not worry about it.”⁵⁷ Polycrates, the leader of the Quartodeciman bishops, writes explicitly: “And my kinsmen always kept the day when the people [the Jews] put

away the leaven.”⁵⁸ Since the Jewish festival was movable with respect to the solar Christian year, this would implicate Christians in a kind of interaction with the Jewish community with respect to the establishment of the date of Easter on a year-to-year basis.

This would, of course, especially be the case if these folks were among those apparently not so rare instances of Christians who attended both Jewish Sabbath worship and Sunday Christian worship. It wasn't until the Council of Nicaea in 325 that this question was settled in favor of the Roman (and Alexandrian) practice of setting Easter on the first Sunday after the solar month following the equinox. Not until then was Easter universally perceived as other than a Christianized version of Pesah.⁵⁹ At that point, the Quartodecimani became heretics, and like many heresies, theirs, too, was a form of “Judaizing,” the description of a process that is almost emblematic for the ways that Christianity and Judaism were finally almost forcibly riven apart from each other.

Some of the most striking examples of Jewish-Christian interaction come from actually shared worship, admittedly rarely attested, but not the less significant for that.⁶⁰ In fifth-century Minorca, “Theodore and his relatives stood at the head of a community where Jews and Christians had learned to coexist, sharing, for instance, in the same haunting beauty of their chanted psalms.”⁶¹ At Mamre, the site of the Abrahamic epiphany, Jews, Christians, and pagans were carrying on a common religious festival, apparently also as late as the fifth century, according to the Palestinian church historian Sozomen, in which

the inhabitants of the country and of the regions round Palestine, the Phoenicians and the Arabs, assemble annually during the summer season to keep a brilliant feast; and many others, both buyers and sellers, resort there on account of the fair. Indeed this feast is diligently frequented by all nations: by the Jews, because they boast of their descent from the patriarch Abraham; by the pagans, because angels there appeared to men; and by Christians because He who has lately revealed himself through the virgin for the salvation of mankind once appeared there to the pious man. . . . Some pray to the God of all; some call upon the angels, pour out wine, or burn incense, or offer an ox, or he-goat, a sheep or a cock . . . [and] all abstain from coming near their wives.⁶²

This description presents a remarkable picture. Not only do the three religious groups that Sozomen describes gather together for a common fair, but they celebrate what is essentially the same feast together, a festival in honor of Abraham's angelic epiphany, each with a slightly different explanation for the feast and each with slightly different practices, including practices of one conversation that theoretically would be anathema to the others. We have no reason to suppose that such "regional cults" were common, but this description is certainly indicative, as late as the Sozomen in the fifth century, of social conditions within which religious interaction was possible between the so-called separated religions in Palestine.

In short, without the power of the orthodox Church and the Rabbis to declare people heretics and outside the system it remained impossible to declare phenomenologically who was a Jew and who was a Christian. At least as interesting and significant, it seems more and more clear that it is frequently impossible to tell a Jewish text from a Christian text.⁶³ The borders are fuzzy, and this has consequences.⁶⁴ Religious ideas and innovations can cross the borders in both directions.

These border crossings sometimes can take place where we least expect them. In her Hebrew work *The Web of Life*, Galit Hasan-Rokem has analyzed a fourth-century Palestinian midrash text that tells of the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.⁶⁵ Hasan-Rokem demonstrates that this story comes from a level that might be called, for want of a less anachronistic term, the folk literature of the Jews of Palestine, and has been adopted and canonized, as it were, in a high Rabbinic text. The choice of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah is based on the same midrash on the same verse (Micah 5:1) as the midrashim upon which Matthew and Luke based their birth narratives, and indeed, the stories are alike in many narratively significant details: the Messiah is revealed by a traveler, there are three wise men, there are gifts for the mother and the child, and the mother is destitute. In a brief English version of this discussion, Hasan-Rokem emphasizes: "The preservation of this legend both in the Talmud and the midrash attests to the fact that the consolidation of the gospel tradition did not result in an elimination of the legend from the Jewish folk literary corpus, as could have been expected. As far as I can see, the rabbinical inclusion of the tale does not direct itself to the polemical potential of the text. It may rather be interpreted as a folk literary dialogue, an oral intertextuality be-

tween two interpretative paradigms of the same plot,”⁶⁶ and thus: “[This collection] indicates that there is not necessarily a polemic or imitation here, but similarity of details which is typical of folk narration. It seems to me that this is a parade example of folk traditions that are common to Jews who belong to the majority of the people and to the minority who believe in the Messiahship of Jesus and join the early Christian Church, whose main social base is Jewish.”⁶⁷

However, Hasan-Rokem goes even further: “If, however, we prefer to explain the appearance of the legend in the Jewish corpus as ancillary to the gospel tradition rather than parallel to it, then the absence of polemical overtones leads us to a view . . . [that] some of the narrative and idiomatic alternatives developed by ecclesiastical Christianity into dogmas echo folk narrative elements extant in Jewish, both Rabbinical and early Christian, communities in Palestine and its vicinity in the first centuries of the Christian era. The midrash texts include them in their exploration of potential sources of consolation in a troubled era.”⁶⁸ Hasan-Rokem’s analysis suggests strongly that Jews and Christians were not just confronting each other, determined to shore up their identities as well as to triumph over the other. They also were listening to each other and learning, indeed, sharing traditions and even, frequently enough, a common fate.⁶⁹

Living on Borderlines

In this extended essay, I shall be modeling my investigation of the murky and problematic differentiation between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity on some of the subtle research that has been done on the strikingly similar mestizo borderland between Christianity and so-called paganism, as well as on increasingly sophisticated investigations of the ways that Christian orthodoxy produced itself via the making of heresy and heretics.⁷⁰ Robert Markus has pithily put it: “The image of a society neatly divided into ‘Christian’ and ‘pagan’ is the creation of late fourth-century Christians, and has been too readily taken at face value by modern historians.”⁷¹ And Walter Bauer has argued in his study of orthodoxy and heresy: “Thus even into the third century, no separation between orthodoxy and heresy was accomplished in Egypt and the two types of Christianity were not yet at all clearly differentiated from each other.”⁷²

Similarly, I suggest, through the third century, for much of the eastern Mediterranean, neither was the separation accomplished between Judaic orthodoxy and its prime heresy, Christianity, and the two types of Judaism were not yet at all clearly differentiated from each other.⁷³ As Ruth Anne Clements has written: “The un-critical use of the terms ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian’ may suggest a uniformity of faith and practice, as well as a self-aware distinction between two different sharply defined faith groups, which is anachronistic if applied to the first three centuries of the Common Era. For a growing number of historians of early ‘Christianity,’ this realization is leading to a historical-theological reconceptualization of many of the earliest Jesus-believing groups as Jewish in their own self-conception and religious practice.”⁷⁴

What is required here is a deconstruction, in the full technical sense of the word, of the opposition between Judaism and Christianity, a deconstruction in which the name “Jewish Christian” is pulled in from the marginal cold of “those who owe something to both religions and set up camp in the territory between the two,” in Marcel Simon’s words. It needs to be understood as the third term that unsettles the opposition between the “two religions.”⁷⁵ The evidence that we have for the presence of Christians and other sectarians in the synagogue and the efforts of the Rabbis to detect them and prevent them from serving as preceptors suggests that the problem of “Who is a Jew?” was as fraught for the Rabbis as the question of “Who is an orthodox?” was for the Christians. Jerome’s important notice that the sect of Nazarenes are to be found “in all of the synagogues of the East among the Jews” and that they consider themselves both Christians and Jews, but are really “neither Christians nor Jews,” is highly revealing.⁷⁶ Once again, we see that Christianity and Judaism could be kept apart and thus produced as separate religions, only by fiat, whether from Rabbis or Doctors of the Church.

There is no reason, a priori, for instance, why believing that Jesus was the Messiah would be considered as beyond the pale of rabbinic Judaism, any more than Rabbi Akiva’s belief in Bar Kolchba as Messiah rendered him a heretic. Only the later success of Christianity determined, retroactively, that in its earlier relations with the Rabbis it was a separate religion. It took the historical processes of what we might call the long fourth century before the “parting of the ways” was achieved, and along that road, there was

as much shared religious life and development as partition, as much consensus as dissensus. The religious histories intersect and intertwine.⁷⁷

The set of changes that we refer to as the Christianization of the Empire, the formation of Christian orthodoxy, and other cultural changes entailed by it, made an enormous difference for emerging rabbinic Judaism as well, a difference that in many ways defined the shape of rabbinic Judaism for its entire future existence, just as much, perhaps, as Christianity was fashioned by its ongoing connection with Judaism. The fourth century seems particularly rich in the proliferation of technologies for the production of self and other: Christian orthodoxy versus its other, so-called heresy (including prominently the “Judaizing” heresies);⁷⁸ rabbinic Jewish orthodoxy versus its major (br)other, Christianity and Christian Judaism (its “twin”); and even the ongoing issue of the fuzzy separation between Christianity and so-called paganism.⁷⁹ Markus has written: “In the religious history of Europe, especially of Western Europe, the half century from 380 to about 430 marks a watershed. On the surface lie the great debates: the debates between pagans and Christians as well as those within the Christian group. In one way or another the debates of these decades all revolved around the question: what is it to be a Christian? What gave the question urgency was the rapid and far-reaching process of christianisation of Roman society which was reaching a climax at this time of dramatic change.”⁸⁰ This question, for Christians, also had effects on non-Christians: “In so far as a particular section of Roman paganism acquired some sort of homogeneous identity—as did that of some groups of Roman aristocrats in the last decades of the fourth century—it was a response to the growing self-confidence and assertiveness of a Christian establishment.”⁸¹

Not surprisingly, these developments had chain-reaction effects for Judaism as well.⁸² It seems reasonable to surmise that it was not until the fourth century, when Christianity became the hegemonic religion of the Empire and Christian “orthodoxy” was set, that rabbinic Judaism solidified and emerged in its own orthodoxy and hegemony, as Judaism *tout court*. Clements has argued: “We may conjecture that by the latter half of the [third] century the Caesarean rabbis had assumed some functions which made them distinctive among their contemporaries, in direct response to the challenge presented by Origen in his role as biblical expositor and disputant. . . . Among Caesarean Jews, the debates helped to consolidate the

authority of the rabbis as spokesmen for the larger Jewish community in the realm of religion as well as those of politics and economics.”⁸³ And Tessa Rajak has suggested: “It is probably right to see the development of rabbinic Judaism, and perhaps also its beginnings, as in some way a response to the Christian challenge.”⁸⁴ Of course, this hardly constitutes a claim on Rajak’s part, nor on mine, that every aspect of rabbinic Judaism is a response to formative Christianity; indeed, I shall argue explicitly that the lines of influence and dialogue go in both directions.

The Plan of the Essay

This short book intends to be the beginning of a new investigation of the religious histories of rabbinic Jews and Christians in late antiquity.⁸⁵ It is to be read more as a series of hypotheses than as a series of conclusions. Some of these hypotheses already seem well-founded. Some will require much further investigation to test them.

I use two different strategies in order to support the “wave theory” of Christian-Jewish history. In the first three chapters, I employ close and thickly contextual reading of a single extended passage from the Babylonian Talmud, together with its Palestinian and Christian intertexts.⁸⁶ After introducing the first chapter with a Christian and then a rabbinic text that directly thematize the Jewish-Christian junction, I try to show how the Talmud text reveals the blurred boundaries between Judaism and Christianity at the very moment that it is trying to insist on the clarity of those boundaries. Much of the discussion in this chapter involves close contextualized reading of a story about a single rabbinic legendary figure, Rabbi Eli’ezer.⁸⁷ This is a story of a martyrdom, or rather of a martyrdom cunningly evaded, and thus prefigures the theme that will be a leitmotif of this book. This story, which is found in different versions in various rabbinic texts from different centuries of the crucial era, also is one important touchstone for rabbinic interactions with Christianity.⁸⁸ In this chapter, I try to demonstrate the plausibility of the claim that Christianity held much more attraction for the Rabbis of the talmudic period than our canonical texts are prepared to “admit,” and that there was much more contact, and even convergence, between the Rabbis and the Christians long after these contacts frequently are held to have ceased.

Rabbinic literature strikingly, stunningly, seems to ignore the presence and eventual world-shaping growth of Christianity, the Christianization of the Empire. This has been called “the most thunderous silence in Jewish history.”⁸⁹ Here and there, however, there are texts that construct the reaction of the Rabbis to the enormous religious events that were taking place around them. In order to establish my discussion in the following chapters on martyrdom as a shared historical “invention” of rabbinic and Christian Judaism (which is not the same as Jewish Christianity, but rather an intentionally startling name for Christianity *simpliciter* as the “brother” of rabbinic Judaism, one of Rebecca’s children), I focus in this chapter on a complex of stories about this central rabbinic figure, Rabbi Eli’ezer ben Hyrcanus, otherwise known as Rabbi Eli’ezer the Great, or just Rabbi Eli’ezer. What interests me here is the function that the icon of Rabbi Eli’ezer and this story about him plays in the figuring and negotiations of contact between Jewish Christians and rabbinic Jews in the third, fourth, and even later centuries.

I then continue, in the next two chapters, with an interpretation of the sequel to that passage in the Talmud, by which I hope to show that reading the talmudic text in the light of concurrent Christian writing illuminates it in various ways. This clarification via Christian context supports, I hope, my hypothesis that there was much more going on in the interaction between nascent Jewish and Christian orthodoxies than argument, dialogue, and debate between intellectuals—indeed, much more than confrontation.⁹⁰

Since the entire passage that is read in the first three chapters hovers around the fraught question of martyrdom, in the fourth chapter, I shift gears somewhat, and enter a more directly historiographical mode. The major motif of this chapter is the entanglements of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity with the discourse of martyrdom and its role in helping them invent themselves as separate identities.⁹¹ In this chapter, I test the model offered in the previous ones and show how it enables us to produce an account of the history of martyrology and its Christian and Jewish sources that is different from the ones that are current in the scholarly literature. This essay on martyrology constitutes, therefore, a case study and an experiment toward new ways of thinking about religious histories in late antiquity.

Galit Hasan-Rokem has written of Jewish martyrologies in midrashic texts from the talmudic period: “The intertextual connections that are ex-

pressed in these stories do not remain enclosed within the inner-Jewish, Hebrew, and rabbinic borders. In these stories are revealed also the connections with universes of discourse with which rabbinic literature carries out ambivalent, tense and even openly polemic relations.”⁹² Martyrdom, even more than tragedy, is *Thanatoi en tōi phanarōi*, “deaths that are seen,” murders in public spaces.⁹³ Insofar as martyrdom is, then, by definition, a practice that takes place within the public and, therefore, shared space, *martyria* seem to be a particularly fertile site for the exploration of the permeability of the borders between so-called Judaism and so-called Christianity in late antiquity. Accordingly, I have started there.⁹⁴