

The First Christian Theologians

An Introduction to Theology in
the Early Church

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Christian Theology and Judaism

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To compare "Christian theology" and "Judaism" is difficult, because the terms do not quite correspond: "theology" is a particular type of philosophical enterprise; "Judaism" is an umbrella term for the social and religious activities of ancient Jews. Systems of thought do not influence or interact with each other: people do. To address our topic, then, we need to do both intellectual history and social history; to consider not only ancient ideas, but also ancient people, in their social contexts. The picture that emerges from our consideration will, necessarily, be complex. And that complexity attests, in turn, to the vigor, vitality, and variety of Christian/Jewish interactions in antiquity.

The Context: The City, Paideia, and Theology

In modern parlance, "theology" often functions to mean something like "religious thoughts." In antiquity, the term had greater precision. Its component words reveal its original meaning. *Theos* in Greek means "divinity" or "god"; *logos* – a term with a very broad semantic range – means "word, order, reason." "Theology," then, means something like "rational discourse on the nature and function of divinity." The point of theology was to present, in a systematic and coordinated manner, conceptualizations of the ways that divinity related to other aspects of reality: cosmos, soul, mind, body, and so on. Its dependence on rational categories and systems of thought meant that, intellectually, theology was from the beginning a species of philosophy.

Philosophy provided the tools and principles for constructing theology. But traditional narratives of profound cultural and political importance – initially, the various myths of classical antiquity – provided theology's occasion and, in a sense, its incentive. The High God of the Hellenistic curriculum was conceived as radically stable, impassive, incorporeal, eternal, free from change; these categories defined "good" in a metaphysical (not necessarily ethical) sense.¹ The more he (or "it": either pronoun could serve) became transcendent, the more the gap – metaphysical and moral

– between him and the universe became filled with various intermediaries: stars and planets; lower gods; angels; demons; the demiurge (“craftsman”) or *logos* who ordered the cosmos according to divine principles. But the great ancient epics, poems, and dramas of the Greeks presented divinity as personalities: characters who appeared to have bodies; who forgot and remembered; who grew angry or calm; who plotted, raged, raped. These divine characters did not oblige the categories of philosophy.

To spin the straw of traditional religious narrative into the gold of philosophically coherent and elevating theology, Hellenistic intellectuals availed themselves of *allegory*. (*Allos* in Greek means “other”; *agoreuein* means “to speak.”) Allegory enabled the enlightened reader to see through the surface level of a text to its spiritual message, to understand what the text truly meant in contrast to what it merely said. Grammar, rhetoric, philological finesse: all these tools of classical *paideia* might be brought to bear on an ancient story to turn it into a philosophically lucid statement of timeless truth.² The curriculum of the urban *gymnasia* that educated young men to become leaders in their cities saturated them with all these literatures, philosophical, rhetorical, mythological. As civic leaders, they would fund, legislate, and oversee the cults connected with the traditional gods; as educated men, they might conceive such worship as expressing philosophical truths. In brief, theology in antiquity was first of all an intellectual expression of pagan culture, dependent on a post-classical pedagogy that rested socially and literarily on the ancient gods.³

Jews and, eventually, Christians (whether Jews or Gentiles) in their turn, produced theologies also. To do so, they depended on educations that were intrinsically, profoundly pagan. The Jewish encounter with and internalization of pagan *paideia* preceded by some four centuries the Christian encounter. In many ways, educated Jews rehearsed the experiences, convictions, and arguments of the later Christians.

Jewish populations of the fourth and third centuries BCE had followed Greek ones in the wake of the armies of Alexander the Great. In the new Hellenistic urban foundations diffused throughout Asia Minor, Egypt, and the Near East, immigrants as well as conquered indigenous peoples moved from their native vernaculars to Greek. Migrating Jews took their sacred writings with them. When their community shifted vernaculars, their Scriptures shifted too. By 200 BCE, in Alexandria in Egypt, a huge collection of Jewish sacred writings, originally written in Hebrew or, occasionally, Aramaic, was becoming available in the international language. The Semitic-language “Tanakh” (Torah, the “five books of Moses”; *Nevi'im*, “prophets”; and *Ketuvim*, “writings”) had become the Greek Septuagint (LXX).

Translation invariably affects meaning, no matter how accurate translators strive to be. The God of Israel, newly available in Greek, took on new aspects. The divine name revealed at the Burning Bush became $\delta \text{ } \Omega \nu$, “the Being” (Exod. 3:14); when this god established the heavens, he did so $\tau \omega \text{ } \lambda \omicron \gamma \omega$, “by the Logos” or “Word” (Ps. 32 (33):6). Philosophical concepts, thus, did not need to be read into Scripture: they were already there, by virtue of the new language of the text.

The Greek text of the Bible in turn presented new interpretive opportunities for educated Hellenistic Jews. Many Jews in the Diaspora acquired their education through the *gymnasium*, nurtured, like their pagan counterparts, on grammar, rhetoric, and poems and stories about the classical gods. And again like their pagan counterparts, Jewish intellectuals also had to struggle to make systematic sense of their own

ancient religious literature. Biblical stories no less than Homeric ones depicted divinity in ways that contrasted sharply with the principles of philosophy. Thus, and again like their pagan counterparts, many Jewish intellectuals relied especially on the interpretive techniques of allegory. Allegory enabled Greek-speaking, educated Jews to retrieve philosophical meaning from the stories constituting their own religious and ethnic patrimony.

But western Jews did much more than acquire paideia, or apply it to their own traditions. They utterly appropriated paideia, and claimed it as their own. Again and again the theme emerges in Hellenistic Jewish literature: what the Greeks got right – mainly philosophy, but also mathematics, or music, or astronomy – they actually got from the Jews.⁴ Plato, some Jews argued, had studied Torah and developed his doctrines in Egypt, from a (lost) Greek translation of the Bible made several centuries prior to the LXX.⁵ One Jewish writer depicted Abraham as the bringer of culture to the Egyptians – another argument for superiority, in a culture where older was better.⁶ Hellenistic Jews forged pagan prophecies, wherein ancient sibyls praised Jewish ethical and religious culture in proper Homeric hexameters.⁷ Others presented “histories” according to which the LXX was translated at King Ptolemy’s request; he had wanted this renowned book of Jewish wisdom to grace his library in Alexandria.⁸ In one account, the young Moses received instruction from the wisest teachers both Egyptian and Greek, but of course outstripped them all; in another, Moses taught music to Orpheus. Jews turned out Judaizing verses while ascribing them to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and other heroes of the classical curriculum. Centuries later these turn up, piously repeated in the writings of the church fathers.⁹ In all these ways, educated Hellenistic Jews gave philosophy, and thus theology, a new “native” culture: their own.

Centuries later, by the second century CE, some Gentile Christians in their turn began to theologize. That is, they strove to make systematic, philosophical sense out of the revelation of Christ as they saw it mediated in the LXX and, eventually, also in various specifically Christian texts. To think about the Bible theologically and, thus, philosophically, they drew deeply from the springs of Hellenistic Jewish apology. Many of these Hellenistic Jewish texts (such as the entirety of Philo’s exegetical opera) survive exclusively in Christian recensions.¹⁰ Indeed, in some cases scholars remain undecided whether a particular text should be labeled “Jewish” or “Christian.” And when arguing against Gentile pagan contemporaries, Gentile Christians readily availed themselves of this Hellenistic Jewish arsenal. Their utilitarian appreciation in fact accounts for the patristic preservation of these originally Jewish apologetic traditions.¹¹

These Christian theologians and apologists of the second and third centuries waged a hermeneutical battle on many fronts simultaneously. They fought to define their community and to establish the superiority of their own understanding of philosophy and paideia against Gentile pagans.¹² They also strove to establish their readings of the LXX, and the practices that they saw enjoined there, against the understandings of other Christians,¹³ as well as against those of the various Jews. All of these arguments affected all the others. Our concern here is to trace the particular development of the arguments *contra Iudaeos*.

Here, as we shall see, the battle was waged over the text and the interpretation of Scripture, the LXX. The Christians’ faith in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the

promises of the Bible and as the key to its meaning determined their rejection of any "Jewish reading." Allegorizing the LXX by their own lights, they condemned Jewish readings as insufficiently philosophical. Advocating "spiritual" over "carnal" interpretations of biblical texts, they renounced Jewish practice as literal-minded, thus missing the intent of the text's divine author. As they read Jewish scriptures through the lens of Christian Passion traditions, these churchmen condemned the Jews as murderers of Christ. Indeed, they urged, using the prophets as proof text, the Jewish murder of Christ confirmed his status *as* Christ.

Finally, some Gentile Christian writers turned the vicissitudes of Palestinian Jewish history in the early Roman period to their own advantage, arguing that current events sustained the Christian view. Roman armies had destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in the course of the First Revolt (66–73 CE). Later, the bar Kochkba revolt led to the erasure of Jewish Jerusalem (132–5 CE). Hadrian established a pagan city, Aelia Capitolina, on its ruins. Why else would God have permitted such disasters unless he, too, had lost patience with Jewish practice, Jewish custom, and the general Jewish refusal to acknowledge the truth of Gentile Christian claims?¹⁴

This antagonistic theme within Gentile Christianity has been much studied.¹⁵ Its near-ubiquity in our surviving ancient sources, and its relationship to and resonance with the violent anti-Judaism of recent European history, enhance its visibility to the point that much of the positive social and religious interaction between Jews and Christians – as between Jews, pagans, and Christians – lies obscured or overlooked.¹⁶ We know from many of these same sources that Christian theologians consulted with Jewish scholars on the meanings of words and phrases in their shared Scriptures, and also for the meaning of Aramaic or Hebrew words appearing in the New Testament.¹⁷ We also know that Gentile Christians – as well as Gentile pagans – frequented Diaspora synagogues, where they would hear Scriptures, take vows, worship together, and eat with Jews. There they would seek cures, as also in pagan temples, by "incubating" overnight, that is, sleeping in or near the sanctuary in order to receive healing or celestial advice.¹⁸

Long after one stream of Gentile Christianity became a form of Imperial Roman culture – a process that begins and proceeds, in fits and starts, throughout the fourth century – the canons of church councils still provide oblique testimony to the free social and thus religious interactions between members of all these groups, the pronouncement of the ideologues notwithstanding.¹⁹ Indeed, this comfortable intimacy between groups may well have spurred the increasing shrillness and invective of official – especially episcopal – theological screeds on Jewish religious and moral degeneracy: the heat of their polemic betrays their frustration in trying to effect a principled separation of communities. Patristic theology conveys a clear separation of ("true") Christianity from ("false") Christianities, from paganism, and from Judaism. Real life blurred these distinctions.

Thus throughout late antiquity, pagans, Jews, and various Christians continued to mix in synagogues; to encounter each other at civic athletic and cultural events; to meet in town council halls and at the baths. Those of the upper economic and cultural strata, further, were bound together also by the intellectual principles of philosophical and rhetorical *paideia* even as they were divided by the particular texts that they regarded as vessels of revelation. These elites also shared a prime social

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matrix of high culture: urban institutions of education. This cultural connection perdured well after the conversion of Constantine. Augustine's *Confessions* (397 CE) present one glimpse of this shared universe. The son of a fervently Catholic mother and catechumen father, Augustine learned through mastering a literature peopled with such characters as Dido, Aeneas, and the old Roman gods.²⁰ The letters of Libanius, the great pagan rhetorician of fourth-century Antioch, provides yet another glimpse. He writes to the Jewish patriarch Gamaliel to console this *vir clarissimus* about his son's lack of academic aptitude; the boy, sent by his father from Tiberias to further his rhetorical education, had skipped out on Libanius' lectures.²¹

Theology and Identity: Defining "Being Jewish"

In what way, then, can we speak of Christianity and Judaism as "rival" traditions? To do so is to adopt a perspective from which the relationship between the two can only be seen as competitive socially and antithetical theologically. Yet to assess such a perspective we must first establish context.

The earliest "Christian" texts – a portion of which were collected and canonized as the New Testament over a period extending into the fourth century and beyond – are irreducibly "Jewish." This is so both because they are thoroughly indebted to Scriptural tradition (the LXX), and because they rely on contemporary patterns of Jewish interpretation and thought. Written in Greek, they belong to the Hellenistic Diaspora.²² Indeed, it is partly for this reason that these writings do not belong themselves to a distinctive Christian *theology* so much as to its sources.²³

Distinctive about these is the various ways in which they configure allegiance to Christ within an understanding of the biblical covenant with the people Israel, shaped by the promises to Abraham and by the giving of the Torah to Moses at Sinai. Paul's characterizations of Israel "according to the flesh," John the evangelist's antithesis of Jesus' community to that of "the Jews," the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews' presentation of a "new covenant" that "has made the first obsolete" (8:13): within a first-century intra-Jewish context, all these arguments would sound like claims about the right way to be Jewish. That right way would be the way urged by the Jewish writer of the text. Thus the high rhetoric of these sectarian Jewish texts – not unlike that of their near-contemporary Judean counterparts, the Dead Sea Scrolls – denies any legitimacy to a construction of "Israel" or of the "people of God" or the "children of light" at odds with the new movement's own self-understanding. "Non-Christian" understandings of Judaism seem at least disavowed, if not actually repudiated.

Read by later generations of Gentiles independent of or alienated from the traditions of the synagogue, these texts established the main themes and patterns of antithesis that so characterized subsequent Christian theology. One such antithesis emerges already in the letters of the late first-early second-century bishop, Ignatius of Antioch. It may be he who coined the term "Christianity" (*christianismos*), which he set over against "Judaism" (*ioudaismos*), a term he may have learnt from Jewish sources.²⁴ He imagines these positions, the Christian and the Jewish, as in opposition.

“Christianity,” he urges, “did not establish its faith in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity” (*Magnesiensians* 10.3). Yet Ignatius also takes for granted at least some continuity between Jewish scriptures and Christian proclamation. He urges his readers to run to Christ as to the one Temple or to the altar of God – both references to the Jerusalem sanctuary – and he assures them that “the truly divine prophets” – the ones, that is, whose stories stood in Jewish Scripture – “lived according to Jesus Christ” (*Magnesiensians* 7.2; 8.2).

It is difficult to determine precisely what the “Judaism” and the “Judaizing” that Ignatius excoriates actually were. His disapproving references to Gentile Christians’ keeping Sabbath and circumcision suggest that he objected to particular practices.²⁵ Yet he may have used these terms instead simply as slogans or code for what (good) Christians “did not do.” Paul, some fifty years before Ignatius, had taught that Gentiles-in-Christ were not responsible for the practices mandated by Torah: those were the exclusive responsibility and privilege of Israel (e.g. Rom. 9:4).²⁶ Justin Martyr, some fifty years after Ignatius, taught that not only Gentile Christians, but also Jewish Christians, were not to live “Jewishly.” Indeed, even for the Jews themselves such practices drew on a faulty, indeed a fleshly, reading of Scripture which, once understood spiritually, was seen not to prescribe behavior but rather to foretell Christ and his Church. However, he has to concede that there are Law-observing Christians of Jewish (and even Gentile) descent and that they may still be saved (*Dial.* 48). Ignatius, the chronological mid-point between Paul and Justin, enunciates no clear idea justifying his position that Gentile Christians are not to do what Scripture commands. (Again, at this point in time, the only collection of texts regarded as holy and authoritative by Greek-speaking Gentile Christians was the same as that used by the Hellenistic synagogue, that is, the LXX.) Yet his encounters with those Gentiles in the churches that he visited who were, in his terms, “Judaizing,” angered him greatly.

This interwoven, indeed simultaneous, pattern of theological condemnation and ecumenical behavior continued long after Ignatius’ period. Both Origen in the third century and John Chrysostom in the fourth denounced those in their congregations who attended synagogue on the Sabbath and celebrated various other observances with their Jewish neighbors, while Commodian scolded Jews for allowing pagans to co-celebrate with them.²⁷ This easy mixing of Gentiles (whether pagan or Christian) and Jews in the cities of the Empire seems not to have been an unusual phenomenon. And while ideologically articulate churchmen and much later modern historians might identify such patterns of behavior as “Judaizing,” to these ancient people, such socializing may well have been simply what it meant to live in a Mediterranean city.

“Judaizing” itself as a set of behaviors was unitary neither in practice nor, probably, in motivation. Visiting the synagogue; observing some of the practices laid down in Torah; expecting other Gentile Christians to do likewise; adopting Jewish traditions of exegesis; seeking to locate Jesus in relation to an understanding of the God of the Jewish Scriptures: all of these behaviors, individually or in combination, might be followed by persons or by groups and might be inspired by an equal variety of reasons, not all theological. Sometimes a Jewish community need not have been involved at all. A fifth-century North African Christian community against

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whom Augustine wrote, for example, seems to have been inspired to act "Jewishly" on the basis of its own understanding of the Bible.²⁸

Where such an ethos is theologically articulated and survives in literary sources (such as in the *Pseudo-Clementine* literature), scholars sometimes speak of "Jewish Christianity." Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and later writers like Epiphanius who speak of groups such as the Ebionites or Nazoreans, consider such Christians to be heretics. Some of these communities (such as ones that Epiphanius names) might themselves have been ethnically Jewish, others not. We have no clear view of how these groups would have constructed their relationship with non-Christian Jews. Nonetheless, they clearly belong to an account of the history of Christian theology, even if they represent positions that would be marginalized, at least in the West.

Yet the label "Jewish Christianity" is itself misleading if it is taken to suggest that its implied antithesis, "Gentile Christianity," is untouched by any "Jewishness." The problem with our scholarly language is that it obscures, through an excess of clarity, the social and intellectual past it seeks to describe. *All* ancient Christian writers were enmeshed in webs of continuity and discontinuity with their scriptural heritage and its subsequent interpretation. They had to account both for continuities and for discontinuities. They had to explain how they could lay claim to Jewish scriptures while eschewing, even condemning, the Jewish practices mandated therein. They sought to position themselves vis-à-vis both those who sought much more continuity (the "Jewish-Christian" response) and much greater discontinuity (the "Marcionite" response, which will be discussed below). And at the same time, they also had to give an account of themselves to those watching outsiders like the pagan polemicist Celsus, for whom the Jewish claim to being the true heirs of Jewish scriptural traditions seemed more convincing than these competing, Gentile claims.

Rivalry and Readings of the Scriptures

This tension between continuity and discontinuity marks much of the writing of Justin Martyr (d. c.167 CE). In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin explains at great length why (Gentile) Christians do not observe the Law of Moses or practice male circumcision. He also demonstrates the multiple ways in which the LXX foretells both Jesus' first and second comings, his death and resurrection, and God's rejection of the Jews in favor of the Gentiles. It is the Gentiles, argues Justin, who are the "true" Israel and, thus, the always-intended recipient of God's promises of redemption.

Throughout his *Dialogue*, Justin sharply dismisses alternative, Jewish understandings of Scripture. Yet he also seems indebted to Jewish interpretive traditions. For example, when he argues that it was not the High God, but rather Jesus as the pre-Incarnate Son, who appeared in the theophanies of Genesis 18–19 and who is to be identified as "Lord", he may be drawing on Jewish angelic exegesis (*Dialogue* 56–8).²⁹ Jews, too, substituted angels and other intermediaries when they read narratives about appearances of the biblical God, and Justin, too, sees Christ as (among other things) a chief angel (61). Justin further presents Trypho, rather implausibly, as persuaded by all this (63). His presentation may be motivated by his desire to refute those

other Christians who, as we shall see, distinguished between the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus, and so who disputed as Christians the religious value of what other Christians would eventually call the "Old Testament."³⁰

Justin goes on to argue that Psalm 45:7-13 establishes that Christ is to be worshipped and that the Gentiles are summoned to leave their ancestral way of life, which is idolatrous. When Trypho suggests, in light of this interpretation, that Jews who "already worship God as Creator" and not idols need not worship Christ, so that only Gentiles need recognize Christ as Lord, Justin reacts strenuously. Indeed, he responds, Trypho's suggestion only reinforces Justin's deepest doubts about the likelihood of salvation for "any of [their] race" (63-4). For Justin, as for most subsequent writers in his stream of Christian thought, there is no room for Jews who do not believe in Jesus, or for Jewish interpretations of the Scriptures, in the Christian understanding of God, Christ, and biblical revelation.

Justin represents a pattern followed by nearly all ancient Christian writers. He both relied on the LXX and used existing traditions of biblical "proof texts" to establish that Christ and the Church were the true subject of Jewish Scriptures. In debate, he had to acknowledge that Jews possessed the Scriptures - indeed, he may have had to consult their copies. Yet, faced not only with their alternative interpretations but even with their different, and probably more stable, versions of the Greek text, he reacted by insisting that they misunderstood their own Scriptures and indeed, to spite Christians, had probably mutilated them.³¹ To establish his Christological reading of the LXX against Jewish understandings, he relentlessly applied prophetic critiques of Israel's hard-heartedness and unfaithfulness to contemporary synagogue communities, while directing exclusively to his own church the prophetic promises of eschatological redemption.³²

Yet in his *Apology*, where he pleads his case before pagan outsiders, Justin takes a different path. There, the Jewish ownership of the Scriptures becomes an independent witness to Christian claims, legitimating the Christian appeal to antiquity and philosophical priority based on that of Moses (*Apology* 31.1-5; 59.1-60.11). A generation later, the pagan anti-Christian writer Celsus used this same argument in reverse: Christians, he claimed, were apostates from Judaism, forsaking the ancient Jewish heritage while retaining all the ancient Jewish vices.³³ In brief, for Justin as for the Christian tradition he represents and helps to establish, the presence of the Jews both challenged and legitimated Christian self-understanding, while the existence of Judaism both occasioned and focused crucial issues in Christian theology.

Both Valentinus (fl. 130) and Marcion (fl. 140), Gentile Christians in the generation before Justin, had responded to the theological challenge of Judaism in ways that differed from Justin's and that would contour his own response. All three men, well-educated in paideia, made the same assumption once they turned, as Christians, to Jewish Scriptures: the busy, active deity of the LXX could not, they knew, be the High God. However, while Justin, as we have seen, saw a unity of intent between the Maker of all things and that other God or Lord, the other two concluded that the Creator God of the LXX must, by definition, be a lower god. And unarguably, given the social location of this text in the synagogues of the Diaspora, that lower god presented in Genesis was the God of the Jews. What, then, was the relation of this lower god of the Bible to the High God, the Father of Christ their Redeemer?

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What did this Jewish text have to do with Christian revelation? What, indeed, did Judaism have to do with Christianity?

For Valentinus and for Marcion, this lower god was in some sense the Father's opponent, and thus also the opponent of his Son. Reading Genesis with this conviction, and enlightened by Christian revelation, Valentinus understood that the angry, intemperate deity in the Garden, the god of the Jews, represented the forces of darkness, matter, ignorance, fear – all that from which Christ had come to save his chosen. Valentinian Christians, and others of similar mind, whom scholars designate "Gnostics" (from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge"), canvassed the Jewish Scriptures and the burgeoning body of Christian writings to work out their theology based on this insight: namely, that the god of the Bible was actually the villain of the piece. Their theologians produced the first Christian commentaries on parts of the Jewish Bible, and on the Gospel of John. Just as their God and his Son had little to do with the material cosmos, and nothing to do with the Jews, so too these "knowing" Christians. They knew that their redemption was spiritual, not carnal; that their true "root" lay in the upper heavens apart from the Creator God's cosmos; that, through Christ, they had the knowledge of salvation, the revelation of the God above God. This was the message of Christian redemption encoded, even disguised, they maintained, in Jewish writings. To find it there one had to read them very carefully, very cannily, always guided by the Spirit.³⁴

Marcion, too, held that the lower deity of Genesis was the god of the Jews; that the High God was the Father of Christ; and that through Christ, the Christian believer had been redeemed from sin, flesh, death. But he took his cue most specifically from the rhetoric of Paul's letters. Accordingly, to the standard contrasting pairs of light/darkness, upper world/lower world, knowledge/ignorance, spirit/flesh, Marcion added what he took to be corresponding Pauline tropes, consigning to the negative pole both Law and the Jews. For Marcion, the God of the Jews proclaimed in their Scriptures was a harsh deity: dedicated unyieldingly to justice, even vengeance, and yet often inconsistent; demanding obedience through fear; threatening punishment for sin. But Christ, the Son, revealed the face of a different ("Stranger") deity, that of his father the High God. This God, through Christ, brought a message of love, not fear; forgiveness, not punishment; forbearance, not wrath; peace, not strife.

What did such a message have to do with Judaism? What indeed, asked Marcion, did or could such a message even have to do with Jewish books? In a demonstration of supreme confidence, Marcion argued for a new textual medium of Christian revelation. If Christ, as Paul taught, had freed the Christian from the Law, then the text of the Law, the LXX, had no standing as Christian Scripture. Marcion proposed a radical alternative: a collection of new, specifically Christian writings, namely the letters of Paul and one of the Gospels.³⁵ Let the Jews worry endlessly over food and circumcision and holy days and carnal things; let them pore over their Law and worship their lower god and await their messiah – who indeed, as they rightly maintained, had still not come. The Christian, in Christ, was free of all that.

It was these constructions of Gentile Christianity that Justin and others like him repudiated. Instead, they discovered within Genesis the pre-incarnate Christ, the Father's Son. Consequently they wrought a division deep throughout the scriptural record: the heroes of Jewish Scripture, like Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets,

they maintained, had known and acknowledged Christ as God. On the other side was a history of disobedience and rejection: the idolatrous sinners whom Moses and the prophets opposed; Jesus' contemporaries, who murdered him; later Jews up to and including these theologians' contemporaries, who repudiated Jesus' teachings as preserved in the preaching of this Gentile church – these did not and do not acknowledge Jesus as god. Instead, they remain mired in their carnal practices, enslaved to the Law. Accordingly, these theologians urged, the Jews, in some profound sense, had lost title to what had once been their own Scriptures. They did not and could not understand them *kata pneuma*, "spiritually," that is, in this particular Gentile Christian way. Unlike Valentinian Christians, this group could see a positive message in Jewish Scripture. Unlike Marcionite Christians, they did not need to repudiate Jewish Scripture. This group kept the Scriptures; they repudiated, instead, the Jews.³⁶

We have seen Justin's response to these alternative Christianities when tracing his complex relation to Jews and to Judaism. A similar complexity marks many other early Christian writers, who use "Jew" as the ultimate term of opprobrium while insisting that they, and they alone, have the true understanding of Jewish tradition. Thus, since Marcion apparently supported a non-Christological reading of Jewish Scriptures – the LXX, he had insisted, had nothing to say about Christ – Tertullian labeled him an ally of the Jews, something that was clearly not the case (*Marc.* 3.6.2). Rejecting Marcion's "solution" to the problem of the relation of Gentile Christianity to Judaism and thus to Jewish scriptures, other Christian writers, from Tertullian on, justified their retaining a text whose precepts they declined in principle to practice (Sabbath, circumcision, food laws) by increasingly lambasting the Jews. In short, they held, there was nothing wrong with Jewish Scripture; the problem was, rather, the Jews themselves.

These theologians strove to prove from Scripture itself the antiquity of the Jews' failure to understand their own text or to respond to God's call. Some writers even dated this failure not just to the advent of Jesus but to the very beginning of the nation. The *Epistle of Barnabas* argued that the Jews, because of their sin with the Golden Calf, had lost the covenant at the very moment when Moses was receiving it. The covenant did, and always had, belonged only to "us" (*Barnabas* 4.7). This mode of exegesis, prying the text loose from the synagogue while preserving its spiritual value for the Church, became enshrined not only in commentary but also in other Christian literary genres: sermons, parenesis, testimonies, martyr acts, hymns. This extreme devaluation of Jews and Judaism measured the younger community's positive valuation of Jewish scripture, and the importance of protecting a claim to the continuity of the new revelation with biblical tradition.

The "Jew" as the Christian "Other"?

The view presented thus far presupposes that Judaism presented an ideological challenge to the making of Christian theology. This challenge was inherent in the ambiguities of Gentile Christian attitudes toward the Jewish Scriptures, and was made all the more unavoidable because it was embodied in the continuing encounter with the flourishing Jewish communities of the Greco-Roman Diaspora. This recon-

struction is not uncontested. Other scholars have argued that, beginning from the second century, Gentile Christians had few contacts with – and thus little chance to learn from – contemporary, “real” Jews. For these scholars the “Jews” of Christian polemic, even Justin’s Trypho, are a construct, a theological abstraction, a way of dealing with the ideological problem of relation of Gentile Christianity to its Jewish past, a past frozen in the biblical text.

In support of this view, these scholars can point to the artificiality of the theological “Jew”; the thinness in descriptions of, or debate about, contemporary Jewish practices; and the overwhelmingly literary quality of Christian polemical portraiture, so dependent on images and language taken directly from Scripture.³⁷ Finally, two documentary voids both permit and encourage this scholarly opinion: the near-total absence of Jewish writings from the Greco-Roman Diaspora after the first or second century CE with which to compare Christian writings; and the absence of rabbinic interest in engaging in debate with Gentile Christians. These data conspire in presenting a picture of little or no real contact between these communities.

The making of Christian theology, like so much identity-construction, indeed seems to have demanded an “Other” against which to shape the self. And it was the “Jews” who repeatedly provided theologians with this “Other.” In this sense – the hermeneutical or ideological or theological sense – the “Jewish Other” is indeed a construct. This image was shaped by the dilemmas of Christian self-understanding, and these dilemmas included questions about the significance and meaning of Jewish Scriptures for Christian revelation. The “Jew,” in this discourse, was in many ways a theological abstraction, a construct made to served as the ultimate anti-type of the Christian. Fleshly, faithless, hard-hearted, obdurate, spiritually dull: the “Jew” of patristic polemic provided a reversed image of all that was desirable and laudable in the Christian. The hermeneutical Jew confirmed by contrast the desiderata of Christian identity.

Yet there is plentiful, even if often circumstantial, evidence that this “Other” was also constructed in the face of the fact of actual Jewish communities who were not only socially well-established but who also successfully maintained their own distinctive lives of communal and religious activity, including the creative interpretation of the Scriptures. Moreover, these Jewish communities attracted outsiders, both Christian and non-Christian. Donor inscriptions, other epigraphy, legal corpora both ecclesiastical and imperial, patristic writings such as we have already referred to – Ignatius, Origen, and John Chrysostom – all evince this contact. When these authors thunder that there *can* be no commonality between Judaism and Christianity, synagogue and church, they give us the measure of the power of an alternative social reality wherein some Christians and some Jews evidently *did* experience a great deal in common.

Yet we should not simply contrast social reality (“contact”) with theology (“separation”). Nor should we see theology as being only negatively shaped by the distancing from “Judaism.” Judaism also contributed positively to Christian formulations. It is self-evident that Christian theology has its roots in Jewish reflection on the Scriptures and on the nature of God as revealed there. Increasingly, scholars have recognized that even aspects of Christian thought once attributed to “Greek” or “Hellenistic” influence are not, in that measure, any less “Jewish.” Hellenistic Jews,

as Hellenistic pagans, thought in terms of a divine *logos*, and both pagan and Jewish concepts of divine unity, as later Christian ones, encompassed ideas of mediation and multiplicity.

Jews and Christians lived among each other in the cities of the Roman Mediterranean. Christian thought (in all its varieties) developed alongside of and in interaction with Jewish thought, this development involving both dialogue and argument. Early proto-orthodox accounts of martyrs, which did so much to shape Christian sensibility, betray this much more complicated picture. Only rarely in these stories do Jews feature as aggressors alongside hostile pagans (a role that some modern writers have also cast them in).³⁸ Yet, in other accounts, Jews feature as sympathetic witnesses to Christian suffering.³⁹ And the image of the Christian martyr – the glorious athlete winning the crown of and for Christ – appears, transposed into a Jewish key, in contemporary renderings of martyr stories in *4 Maccabees*.⁴⁰ The image of Isaac and the *akedah* (“binding,” in Genesis 22) provided both rabbis and Christian theologians with a biblical trope and type of atoning sacrifice. The rabbis even spoke of Isaac toiling beneath the wood of the offering “as one who carries his own cross”; Christians, of Isaac as the prefiguration of the sacrifice of Christ.⁴¹ Tertullian’s warnings about the dangers and difficulties of living among the idols in pagan cities (*Concerning Idolatry*) is framed in terms similar to those rabbinic warnings in the Mishnah’s *Avodah Zarah*.⁴² Indeed, the Hebrew title of the rabbinic tractate precisely corresponds to the Latin of Tertullian’s.

Conclusions: Are Siblings Always “Rivals”?

What then, finally, can we say about the relationship between Christian theology and Judaism in the first through fourth centuries? As we have seen, that relationship was complex, for many reasons. No single generalization – “hostile,” “dependent,” “sympathetic” – adequately encompasses the range of evidence.

We may, however, question the term “rival.” Rivalry implies competition. For what, then, did Jews and Christians “compete”? Modern scholarship has responded to this question variously over the course of the past century. At the turn of the last century, Christian scholars held that Second Temple Judaism (or “late Judaism”, as it was then called) had become a spiritually arid and inward-looking religion, separate and separatist, to which the Temple’s destruction in 70 CE had simply delivered the *coup de grâce*.⁴³ The force and ubiquity of antique Christianity’s *contra Iudaeos* tradition, in this view, arose from images of Jews and Judaism available in the Scriptures appropriated by the Church. In reality – so went this argument – the two religions scarcely even made contact, much less competed.

Especially in the wake of World War II, scholars challenged and revised this image. They interpreted the heat of Christian anti-Jewish polemic as an index of active and energetic competitive contact. In consequence, they reimagined Judaism, recasting it in the image of the Gentile Church. In this newer construct, Roman-era Judaism became a vigorous missionary religion, thus a genuine threat to the Church’s missionary efforts. Indeed, in this later view, Christianity and Judaism *were* rivals, competing for the allegiance of Gentile converts.⁴⁴

In the fifty-odd years since, the study of ancient Christianity and of ancient Judaism has been revolutionized by the development of the study of religion within the liberal arts or humanities. Anthropology, sociology, archaeology, theories of literary criticism, the methods and interpretative strategies from many other disciplines – all these fields and schools of thought have an impact on the study of ancient religion. The discovery of buried libraries – Qumran, Nag Hammadi – has enriched our understanding of intra-religious diversity. Progress in retrieving and amassing non-literary evidence – archeological artifacts, inscriptions – means that we now have more evidence, of different sorts, than at any point in the past. The study of ancient Mediterranean religions of all kinds is an interdisciplinary, non-denominational effort. No orthodoxy, whether ecclesiastical or academic, has been untouched by these changes.

For the issue at hand, the relationship between ancient Christians and Jews, as between ancient Christianities and Judaisms, is once again being reimagined. This chapter is a contribution to that effort. Historians of each tradition (neither of which is univocal) have had to learn to think about and with the other tradition in order to grasp the social reality of either tradition. And the specific concept of Jewish missions to Gentiles – whether in a purely pagan “market” or in a pagan/Christian one – has itself been decisively challenged.⁴⁵ Absent a competition for converts, then, in what way can ancient Jews and Christians be said to “compete”? And, absent this competitive market model, how do we usefully imagine them as representing “rival traditions”?

The external contest between traditions echoes, in a different key, the internal contest within traditions over the interpretation of the Bible. Which books were to be regarded as authoritative? In which languages? According to whose transmission? What were the criteria of authority? What were the social consequences of consensus or conflict on these issues? What were the limits of acceptable diversity, and who set them, who enforced them, who cared?

As James Parkes noted long ago, both Christianity and Judaism, as we imagine them, are fundamentally products of the fourth century.⁴⁶ It was the fourth century that saw the imperially-sponsored hegemony of one particular form of Christianity and the suppression of all others; and it was the fourth century that saw the beginnings of the rabbinic consolidation that would eventually have such a profound effect on post-Roman Jewish culture. The most intact textual records that we still have – the patristic canon; the rabbinic corpora – are the survivors of this historical moment, through which history’s winners both controlled their own futures (by suppressing diversity within their own communities) and determined our view of their past (by eradicating the textual evidence that may have provided us with the fuller picture).

Orthodoxies draw sharp boundaries, make clear distinctions, and assert the timeless integrity of the community’s own identity. Historical reality, unsurprisingly, is much more complex. If this chapter has undermined the seeming clarity of its own title, it will have moved the student to a more adequate appreciation of the rich diversity that characterized the very various relations between Jews and Christians – as indeed between Jews, Christians, and pagans – in the cities of Mediterranean antiquity.

Notes

- 1 On the High God of paideia in antiquity, see most recently the essays collected in Athanassiadi and Frede, 1999. On the ways that Hellenistic astronomy and the imagined architecture of the (geocentric) universe coordinated this theology with science, and reinforced the idea of necessary intermediation, see Dodds, 1970, ch. 1.
- 2 Whitman, 2000: esp. Whitman's introductory essay, pp. 3-44; also R. Lambertson, "Language, Text, and Truth in Ancient Polytheist Exegesis," pp. 73-88.
- 3 Jones, 1940, chs. XIV ("Education") and XV ("Religion and Games").
- 4 See esp. Barclay, 1996; Gruen, 1998, 2002. The following paragraph is much indebted to their discussions. See also the review of Hellenistic Jewish literature in Schürer, vol. III, pt. 1 (1986).
- 5 Aristobulus *apud* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 13.12.1-2 (E. des Place et al., *Sources chrétiennes* (Paris, 1974-91), on Plato's dependence on Moses and the existence of a Greek version of the Bible predating the Persian conquest (i.e., before 525 BCE!). As Barclay notes, Aristobulus intends by this claim not only to assert the priority of Jewish tradition, but also "to praise Plato for his assiduous attention to Moses" (1996, p. 151).
- 6 Artapanus *apud* Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 9.23.4, 27.4, 9, 12.
- 7 On the Jewish sibyllines, M. Goodman's discussion in Schürer, Vol. III, pt.1, pp. 618-54. For an appreciation of such "brazen inventiveness," Gruen, 2002, pp. 213-31.
- 8 The *Letter of Aristeas*, discussion in Schürer, Vol. III, pt.1, pp. 685-7.
- 9 See Schürer, Vol. III, pt.1, pp. 667-71; Droge, 1989.
- 10 On Philo's contribution to biblical exegesis generally, and to later Gentile Christian biblical exegesis in particular, see the relevant essays in Armstrong, 1970; Chadwick, 1966, which discuss Justin, Clement, and Origen in this connection; also Dawson, 1976, pp. 89-107.
- 11 See above, nn. 4-10; cf. too Origen's refutation of the pagan Celsus' critique, which drew on arguments originally generated in Hellenistic Jewish milieu, E. T. H. Chadwick, *Contra Celsum* (Cambridge, 1953).
- 12 On the Greek apologists see Young, 1999, pp. 81-104.
- 13 Thus a key theme in Justin's *Apology* (26; 56-8) is that so-called "Christians" (in particular Marcion) who deny that God the Father is also the Creator, and that Jesus Christ his Son is the Messiah spoken of by the prophets, are inspired by demons.
- 14 On these arguments and texts in which they appear, see Krauss, 1995; also Lieu, 1996. A patristic *locus classicus* for many of these arguments - Jewish excisions of Christological referents in the LXX, intrinsic Jewish philosophical muddle-headedness, the theological import of the revolts in Judea - is Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*.
- 15 The classic work of scholarship on this issue is Marcel Simon's great *Verus Israel* (1948).
- 16 Fredriksen, 2003, pp. 35-63.
- 17 Origen claims to have consulted with Jewish scholars, *Contra Celsum* II.31; *ep. ad Africanum* 6 for discussion with full references, de Lange, 1976. Similarly, Jerome - himself no enthusiast for Jewish practice - nonetheless was prepared to consult with and defer to Jewish scholars on textual issues; Kelly, 1975, pp. 159-60. See further Jacobs, 2003.
- 18 On the intimacy of Jewish-Christian social interaction, see Wilken, 1983, pp. 68-94.
- 19 This material is collected, annotated, analyzed, and translated in Linder, 1997.
- 20 *Confessions* I.xiii.20-1 refers specifically to Greek literature and to Virgil; I.xiv.23 to Homer. Much later in life, Augustine, though a Christian (that is, a Manichee), won a prestigious chair of rhetoric in Milan through the good offices of Symmachus, a Roman pagan.
- 21 The patriarch, as *vir clarissimus*, had highest senatorial rank. Libanius' correspondence with the patriarch regarding the Greek rhetorical education of the latter's son, *ep.* 1098, LCL.
- 22 Paul presumes that his Gentile audience, mid-first century, will understand the terms and arguments that he draws from Scripture: if he was right to do so, some assume that such biblically literate Gentiles would only be found in the penumbra of the Diaspora synagogue. Similarly, the Evangelists, to differing degrees, evince familiarity with the LXX (see above), a collection of texts available in the first century

- primarily within a synagogue ambit. See further Fredriksen, 2000, pp. 74–154.
- 23 Distinguishing these Jewish texts from their later, specifically anti-Jewish traditions of interpretation, e.g., for Paul: Stendahl, 1976, Stowers, 1994; for the Gospel of John, Bieringer et al., 2001; for Hebrews, Dunn, 1991, pp. 86–91, 208–11.
 - 24 2 Maccabees 2:21; 8:1; 14:38; 4 Maccabees 4:26. See further on the difficulties of constructing this term in Cohen, 1999, pp. 105–6. The date of composition of 4 Maccabees may be well into the Christian period: thus, its use of “Judaism” may reflect the influence of the term “Christianity,” Bowersock, 1995, pp. 77–81.
 - 25 *Mag.* 9.1; *Philad.* 6.1.
 - 26 Paul’s own practice and what he would have preferred Christians of Jewish background to observe are matters of dispute: 1 Cor. 9:19–21.
 - 27 Origen, e.g., *Homilies in Leviticus* V.8; *On Exodus* 12.46, *Fathers of the Church* 71 (Washington, DC, 1982). Chrysostom’s eight sermons against the Judaizers are analyzed and set into context by Wilken, 1983; an English translation of the sermons is available in the series *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 68 (Washington, DC, 1979). Commodian on the pagan *medius Iudaeus* who scurries between synagogue and traditional altar, *Instructiones* 1.24 (M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Writers on Jews and Judaism*, Jerusalem, 1974).
 - 28 *Ep.* 196.
 - 29 It should be noted that Justin begins his *Dialogue* by establishing, with Trypho’s agreement, the definition of the High God: “That which always maintains the same nature, and in the same manner, and is the cause of all other things: that, indeed, is god” (3). From this follows his overall exegetical point that the busy deity constantly showing up in biblical narrative and encountered by human characters there cannot, then, be the High God (whom he does, however, recognize as “Maker of all things”), but must be a *heteros theos*, “another god,” whom he will identify as the pre-incarnate Son (56).
 - 30 For the ways that anti-Jewish and Gentile intra-Christian debate affected each other and subsequent Christian theology, see Fredriksen, 2002, pp. 1–30.
 - 31 Justin, *Dial.* 68; 71.1–73.4; 83–4; 120; and Lieu, 1996, pp. 124–9.
 - 32 The classic study of this technique of Christian biblical interpretation is Ruether, 1974, with important historical corrections in Davies, 1979.
 - 33 See *Contra Celsum* II.1–4 for the Christians as having “left the law of their fathers,” and IV.23 for Celsus’ mockery of “the race of Jews and Christians” which leads into his denigration of the Jews (e.g. IV.31–5; V.41–53).
 - 34 For an excellent introduction to this sort of biblical exegesis, see the catechetical letter of Ptolemy to Flora, excerpted by the fifth-century heresiologist Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.3–7; English excerpt in Stevenson, 1987, pp. 85–91. On the hermeneutical processes involved, see Williams, 1996, pp. 54–79. Williams emphasizes that there was no single “gnostic exegesis.”
 - 35 Where Paul seemed to speak positively of the Law (“What is the value of circumcision? Much in every way,” Rom. 3:2; “Do we overthrow the Law by this faith? On the contrary, we uphold the Law,” Rom. 3:31; “Do I say this on human authority? Does not the Law say the same?” 1 Cor. 9:8, and similarly elsewhere), Marcion divined the hand of later Judaizers, and so expurgated what he held to be Judaizing interpolations. The credibility for contemporaries of Marcion’s views about the transmission of Paul’s letters on this issue, and of Justin’s, similarly, about the transmission of the LXX, reminds us of the known instability of texts in a manuscript culture.
 - 36 The proto-orthodox repudiated Marcion’s textual novum, a new canon of specifically Christian writings consisting of a gospel and the letters of Paul. Justin referred to such writings as the apostles’ “memoires” (*Dial.* 105); “Scripture” for him was the LXX, and especially Isaiah. Marcion’s idea eventually took hold among his opponents, however, and a larger “new” testament – Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters, four Gospels, a book of acts, various sermons presented as (pseudepigraphic) epistles, an apocalypse – took its place conjoined with the Jewish, “old” testament.
 - 37 Long after the destruction of the Temple in 70CE, for example, the *Letter to Diognetus* mocks Jews for offering blood sacrifices to God as if such offerings could honor him (*To Diognetus* 3.4). With the demise of the Temple, the cult in reality had long ceased.
 - 38 The accounts of the two martyrs in Smyrna, Polycarp and, a century later, Pionius, feature

- Jewish persecutors. Frend, 1965 and, more recently, Robert, 1994, take such accounts as historically descriptive; Parkes, 1934, pp. 121–50, and, more recently, Lieu, 1996, see them as narrative representations of the theological “Jew,” thus rhetorical rather than historical in orientation. Against the social plausibility of Jews joining with pagans against Christians in light of the Jews’ vulnerability to the same charge of “atheism” (since Jews, too, did not worship the emperor’s image), see Fredriksen, 2003, pp. 56–63.
- 39 E.g., Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine* 8.1; cf. *Pionios* 13.1 (*Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. H. Musurillo, Oxford, 1972), where Jews during a persecution invite Christians into their synagogues.
- 40 Bowersock, 1995, pp. 77–81; van Henten, 1997.
- 41 *Genesis Rabbah* 56.3. On the Christological and rabbinic usages of the Akedah, esp. Levenson, 1993.
- 42 *The Mishnah*, vol. 4, pp. 1–99, trans. P. Kehati (Jerusalem, 1987).
- 43 A classic account of this kind is offered by von Harnack, 1904, I, pp. 1–18, 81–3.
- 44 A classic statement of this position may be found in Simon, 1948. For an assessment of the motivations and implications of such views, see Taylor, 1995.
- 45 For example, McKnight, 1991 frames the question in the context of the first Christian generation; Goodman, 1994 prescinds from generalizing about the later rabbinic period, but challenges the idea for the first several Christian centuries; Cohen, 1999 dissolves the idea for the Hellenistic and Roman periods; Fredriksen, 2003 questions the entire formulation.
- 46 “[T]hough neither [Judaism nor Christianity] were born in this century, . . . both are to this day, in many ways, fourth century religions,” Parkes, 1934, p. 153.

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