

## HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION



# HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION

*A Gift of Jewish Wisdom for Christians and Jews*

RABBI YECHIEL ECKSTEIN

FOREWORD BY  
DR. LLOYD OGILVIE, CHAPLAIN, U.S. SENATE



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*About the Cover:*

The image on the cover of this book is an example of early Castilian illuminated manuscripts taken from the Cervera Bible. The image depicts the vision of the prophet Zachariah. The restored Jewish state, symbolized by the menorah, receives oil from two olive trees representing the renewed lineage of King David and of the High Priest.

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To my Christian friends who  
inspired me with their faith  
strengthened me with their support  
and enriched my life with their friendship.



*How good and how pleasant it is for  
brethren to dwell together in unity.*

PSALM 133:1

*Give thanks to the Lord for He is good,  
His steadfast love endures forever.*

PSALM 136:1



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*Foreword*

A GIFT OF JEWISH  
WISDOM FOR CHRISTIANS  
AND JEWS

Recently, Jewish and Christian Senators of the United States gathered in the Capitol for a Seder dinner. The Rabbi invited to lead the Seder was the distinguished author of this book. Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein led us through a delightful, inspiring, informative evening. We experienced profound shalom as Yechiel led us in singing and an in-depth explanation of the Seder. We relived the Exodus, the first Passover, and the traditions passed down through the generations. He forged a bond between us all and helped us in grateful praise to the God of liberation and hope in whom we all believe.

This is what Rabbi Eckstein does throughout this book. I have found it one of the most helpful tools in my ministry to both Jews and Christians in the Senate. It has helped me compose my prayers for Jewish holy days and holidays to be prayed for the Senate. This book is rich in information Christians need to know to be responsible and affirming friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens to Jewish people.

Most important of all, this book is brimming with Jewish wisdom that will enrich and strengthen your faith. Your knowledge of God will be deepened and your appreciation of Judaism will be heightened.

Yechiel Eckstein has become a close and trusted friend. It is a privilege to work together on Christian and Jewish relations and the soul-sized issues that confront our American society and the world scene. He is my brother, friend, and fellow adventurer in the exciting pilgrimage of spiritual growth we share.

I commend this book to you. It will become one of the most valued and used books in your library.

*Lloyd John Ogilvie  
Chaplain, United States Senate  
Washington, DC  
June 1997*

## *Preface*

*Kol hatchalot kashot*, all beginnings are difficult, claim the rabbis, and fostering more favorable relations and better understanding between two peoples who have been estranged from each other for almost two millennia is no exception. Just as physical birth and spiritual growth involve pain, effort, and a profound dimension of mystery, so too is the creation of a relationship between Christians and Jews, whose historical interaction has, more often than not, been fraught with polemic, misunderstanding, intolerance, and even bloodshed.

We should be pleased with the advances that have taken place, awed and humbled by the mystery of this continuously evolving relationship, and increasingly encouraged to pursue it further. Admittedly, there is much yet to be done. But while the rabbis of Jewish tradition maintained that all beginnings involve difficulty, they also insisted that the greater the degree of hardship, the greater the reward—in this case, the deeper and more fruitful the relationship. It is important to remember that Christian-Jewish dialogue is still in its infancy stages. When seen in that light, the achievements that have already been made in bringing about a genuine reconciliation between the two groups can only be described as truly remarkable.

There is a Jewish story told of a young man who visited his rabbi and became so overwhelmed by the emotional experience

that he cried out, “Rabbi, I love you dearly.” The rabbi, who was both touched and amused by his student’s sincerity, asked him, “Tell me, my son, you say that you love me, but where do I hurt? What ails me?” To this the perplexed young man responded, “I do not know where you hurt, Rabbi, but, nevertheless, I love you dearly!” The rabbi then replied, “But how can you say you love me when you do not even know where I hurt and what brings me pain?” This touching story illustrates well the truth that our first obligation in dialogue is to explain to one another the nature of our faith communities—who we are and what we believe—and to tell of that which brings us joy and of that which brings us pain.

Errors will undoubtedly be made and sensitivities unwittingly trampled upon as Christians and Jews pursue dialogue and rapprochement in what is still essentially uncharted terrain. Language can become a source of either comfort or grief, pride or embarrassment. Words invoked in the context of one group can, in the context of another, have nuances that are biting and inappropriate and even offensive. A pastor at whose church I had just spoken and where I was greeted with an enthusiastic response followed my remarks by saying, no doubt with tongue in cheek, that he would bring me back to speak at one of their crusades. He was totally unaware of the image of death and martyrdom conjured up in my mind by the mere mention of the word “crusade.” Conducting a crusade may be the most natural display of Christian faith for a Baptist. For the Jew, however, such language evokes an entirely different response. It reminds him of the slaughter and suffering of his ancestors over the centuries.

In another instance, I overheard a Christian minister ask a friend who had haggled with a merchant over the price of an item in a Jerusalem marketplace whether he had “jewed him down.” Knowing the minister as I do, I am certain that his comment did not reflect a deep-seated, unconscious contempt for Jews, because it was not the least bit characteristic of him to associate Jews in particular with cheating or haggling. Rather, I believe it came from a complete unawareness of the derivations

and implications of his remark. We will have to be patient with one another as we become more aware of the full extent of our words and sensitive to how they will be received by members of another community.

Catholic thinker Ed Flannery tells in his book *The Anguish of the Jews* of his shock in learning that the associations most Jews have with the crucifix and the cross are radically different from those of Christians. What for him was an object of love and reconciliation was for Jews a symbol of fear and revulsion, a reminder of their past persecution and suffering under Christianity.

Christians are also surprised to learn that Jews tend to lump all non-Jews together as Christians without recognizing that not only are Christians not monolithic, but unlike the Jewish condition, they are not born into their faith. Contrary to the predominant Jewish impression, all non-Jews are not Christians. Moreover, some are only nominally Christian.

A further source of difficulty in dialogue is the fact that even fundamental entities and terms such as *the Bible* have different nuances for Christians than they have for Jews. The term *Old Testament*, for example, implies the existence of a “new” one, something Jews do not acknowledge. It has become common, therefore, for Jews and many Christians to refer to it as “the Hebrew Bible.” The same is true with regard to designations such as B.C. and A.D., which define time in Christological terms and are not acceptable to most Jews. Instead they use B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (for Common Era).

However, potential areas of agreement between the two communities should be explored and should lead to joint efforts. Such issues as religious liberty, crime, hunger, the family, the aged, as well as more theologically oriented themes such as the dignity of man, God’s love for man, and the centrality of Scripture, can all provide fruitful ground for dialogue and, hopefully, coordinated action. Even when there is a clash in views, conversations should continue, perhaps especially then. Both groups should try, at least, to understand what is motivating each other’s positions.

And while genuine dialogue asks that both Christians and Jews be open to modifying their positions, it does not call for them to bend or accommodate their views to the point where they compromise their integrity and threaten their individual identities in the process. For at the heart of true dialogue is the commitment to respect its parameters.

For centuries, the preeminent Christian view was that Jesus came to the world to bring mankind the possibility of salvation and eternal life. Without a belief in him, man could not reach the Father or be freed from the shackles of sin. What this viewpoint meant for Judaism, which gave birth to Christianity, is that, with the dawn of the new Christian faith, Judaism ceased to exist and was instead displaced by a triumphalist Christianity. Thus, in the new scheme of things, Christians became the new “people of God”; the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh became the “Old Testament,” and Christianity became the exclusive *ortho doxo* system through which one could achieve proper living and relationship with God.

Paul in Romans 9–11, on the other hand, seemed to rail against such theological hubris and usurpation when he declared that God’s promises to Israel are irrevocable. He warns Jesus’ followers not to become haughty with their new-found spiritual possession, for the root supports the branch, not the branch the root. Tragically, Paul’s warning was not heeded. For centuries, Christians adopted this “displacement theology,” as it has come to be known, casting Judaism aside as though it died on the cross along with Jesus.

The situation today is not much better. While all Christian seminaries teach about Judaism in the biblical period, those that teach about Jewish life after the first century are few and far between. Voltaire and the historian Arnold Toynbee reflected this triumphalist spirit best when they characterized Judaism as a relic, a “fossil religion,” with no relevance or instructive purpose today.

What are the forces underlying such a condescending and arrogant theology? Are they Oedipal in their origins? A rebellion

against one's Jewish parentage? Are they part of an attempt to form one's own distinct identity by denying one's parent's legitimacy? Whatever their origin, this exclusivist theology led to the Marcian movement, which, in the patristic period of the early church, attempted to eliminate all vestiges of Christianity's Jewish roots—including the Hebrew Bible (*aka* Old Testament). Ultimately, the church rejected Marcian's view, though not entirely. Indeed, it continued to belittle and degrade the Jewish faith along with the practitioners of that faith. They insisted there is no salvation outside the church, and there is no coming to the Father except through the Son.

For centuries, Christianity effectively denied its Jewish roots and rejected its heritage, to Christians' own detriment as well as to that of the Jewish people. The fact that Jesus was a Jew was buried under the rubble of polemic and fratricide. For centuries, Jews suffered oppression and persecution at the hands of followers of Christ—and in his name—for the sin of rejecting the Christian faith. That this displacement theology, which reduced the Jew and his faith to "pariah" status, led to violence against Jews over the centuries is clear. What haunts us today is the realization that it also may have created the groundwork and context in which the Holocaust was spawned.

In recent decades, there has been a dramatic change in the church's relationship with the Jewish people and also with Christians' awareness of the Jewish roots of their own faith. Christians (and Jews, for that matter) are just beginning to come to grips with the fact that Jesus was a Jew and that they cannot be truly Christian without drawing sustenance from their Jewish roots. Put differently, Christians cannot begin to comprehend Jesus the Christ without first confronting Jesus the Jew of Nazareth.

This movement to recover Christianity's roots in Judaism comes precisely at the time that the interfaith and ecumenical movements have become important forces in American life. We live today in a pluralistic American society in which it is

both inevitable and advantageous that we learn of one another—who the other truly is, not as we have come to stereotype them—and gain greater insight into one another’s respective lives of faith.

This book is my attempt to find common ground between Christians and Jews and teach greater understanding of the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. It brings to the fore the ancient wisdom of Judaism both before and after the rise of Christianity.

One of my favorite verses in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) is “He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). *How Firm a Foundation* gives the reader, Christian and Jew alike, the gift of Jewish wisdom over the centuries. More specifically, it teaches them how they can best fulfill Micah’s pithy dictum.

It is my hope and prayer that this book might mark the beginning of our common search not only for wisdom but also for how we might better uplift our souls and walk in the straight path, deepening our bonds of love with one another and strengthening our relationship with God and devotion to him.

Christians owe the Jewish people a debt of gratitude—for giving them their God, their Bible, and the way to achieve salvation. In this book, I try to share another gift—the vision and wisdom of Judaism—with all who wish to partake. Now Christians (and Jews) can recover that dimension of holiness and Jewish spirituality described in our classical sources which had been buried and lost to Christians for centuries under the rubble of polemic. It is a gift we Jews gladly share with others and hopefully study ourselves so that we might all merit spiritual renewal and holiness in our lives. Indeed, for Jews, there is no greater good deed and commandment than to study Torah, God’s blueprint of how we ought to lead our lives in the here and now of this world. And so, let those who thirst for knowledge of the Lord and eagerly await the day

when “when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9), come and imbibe from the wisdom of Judaism.

My primary objective in writing this book is to provide Christians and Jews with a resource from which they can glean a better understanding of and appreciation for Jews and Judaism. It is also a primer for dialogue, one that I hope will advance the cause of Jewish-Christian relations. Telling the story of the Jewish people—their faith and experiences—has been a most humbling experience. Although I have tried to make it as comprehensive as possible, it is necessarily limited. I had to be ruthlessly selective in what to include and exclude. Even those themes that are treated merit much greater elaboration, as each could easily constitute a book in itself.

This book is written unabashedly from a traditional (Orthodox) point of view. It strives to convey the essential unity of the Jewish people—their shared memories, values, ideals, and experiences—and to outline my conception of Jewish authenticity, although it also tries to respect the diversity of Jewish expressions. I hope that the reader will see in it the reflection of a person for whom religion and spirituality are not only static entities but ones of dynamic growth, as well. Parts of this book may even appear as apologetics. Certainly my goal is to present a favorable image of Jews and their faith. But I also have tried to avoid idealizing either.

It is extremely difficult for people standing outside a system to peek in and fully grasp what is going on. They may even find it impossible to appreciate all that the system means to the person experiencing it from “within.” A Jewish story is told of a musician who was playing for a wedding celebration at a local inn and whose music so enthralled the gathering that they all began to dance. At that very same moment a deaf man happened to pass by. As he looked into the window and saw them jumping wildly up and down, he muttered, “Madmen, all madmen,” and proceeded to go on his way. Indeed, only those who hear the music can truly appreciate its sweet melody.

This book, with all its limitations, hopes to provide Christians and Jews with a glimpse into the Jewish world. It seeks to serve as a window through which the reader might come to view the Jew, understand his faith, and learn of that which brings him joy and pain.

It seems to me that much of the understanding Christians have of Jews arises from a knowledge of biblical history from the time of Adam to the times of Jesus and the rise of Christianity. In contrast, this book attempts to portray the *living* Jew and to convey his experiences over the past two millennia.

When a Gentile came to the great Rabbi Hillel (who was roughly a contemporary of Jesus) and asked him to explain all of Judaism while standing on one foot, Hillel responded by paraphrasing the biblical verse “love thy neighbor as thyself” and said, “What is hurtful to you do not do unto others.” The essence of Judaism today is captured, as it always has been, by that biblical phrase.

In writing this book I felt an awesome sense of responsibility, knowing that my words might influence many Christians’ views of my people and my faith. I often felt as if whatever I wrote would be inadequate to the task. For this reason, I ask that all the limitations inherent in this book be attributed to me, and not to the people and tradition I am attempting to portray. I write with great reservation and trepidation, but in the spirit of the rabbis who, acknowledging the enormity of such challenges, stated, “Not upon you is the requirement to complete the job. But neither are you free from beginning it entirely.”

It was in working with the Christian community that I came to realize the pressing need for such a comprehensive handbook on Jews and Judaism. The book is intended for a wide range of Christian readers—clergy, academicians, and laypeople alike. At the same time, I know it will be of benefit to those Jews seeking a deeper understanding of their own faith, as well. Indeed, as the late Abraham J. Heschel wrote, “Faith

must precede interfaith.” My deepest prayer is that it create greater harmony and understanding between Christians and Jews, two groups of people who have been estranged from each other for too long; my most profound hope is that it be a source of blessing and enrichment to both communities.

Who are these people, “Israel,” the Jews, I try here to portray? They are a unique people, a sanctified people, pragmatists, and idealists. They are realists who draw inspiration from their past, meaning from their present, and hope for their future. They are a chosen people and a choosing people—doubters, questioners, and even quarrelers with God. Indeed, they are the seed of Abraham!

Jews are a battered people—shattered, traumatized, and martyred—whose lives often remain threatened and insecure. They are a tenacious, stubborn lot—a stiff-necked people—committed to bearing testimony, despite adversity, to the existence and oneness of God and to the fact that the world has yet to be redeemed; they are both instruments of God’s will and actors on the stage of history; they are a people who feel God’s spirit moving in their lives and in the world, but who question his absence, too. They are a group that refuses to despair or to allow their will to survive to be consumed; they are a covenanted people composed of mystics and rationalists, Orthodox and Reform, even “culturalists.” They are a people who not only pray, dream, and yearn for Messiah and the world’s salvation, but also insist on actively preparing the world for his coming by alleviating human suffering in the here and now; they are a people who thirst for peace but who have had to engage in war to survive.

Who are these people, Israel, the Jews? They are God’s witnesses in the world. They bear testimony to his presence and love even at times of his concealment. They are “a people who dwellest alone,” but one who seeks to be a source of blessing for all humankind. They are, as Abraham Heschel wrote, “a spiritual order in which the human and the ultimate, the natural and the holy enter a lasting covenant, in which kinship with

God is not an aspiration but a reality of destiny.” They are the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, and Leah—they have struggled with both God and man—and they have overcome. They *are forever*, “Israel”!

According to the Bible, when God spoke to Moses his voice was heard from between two cherubic figures that rested atop the tabernacle. The figures faced each other with hands uplifted to God and outstretched toward each other. Only when we Christians and Jews are willing to “dialogue” with one another, in its etymological sense of “to speak through,” and to face each other with hands outstretched toward God as well as toward one another will *either* of us hear the voice of God speaking to us “from between” the cherubs.

This book is my way of stretching out my hands in friendship toward my Christian neighbors with the hope that they, in turn, will extend their hands lovingly toward the Jewish people, my faith community. I believe very deeply that through such a relationship both will be blessed and that within such a fellowship both will come to hear the voice of God.

*Praise the LORD, all nations!  
Extol him, all peoples!  
For great is his steadfast love toward us;  
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.*  
(Psalm 117)

*May the LORD open up my lips,  
May the words of my mouth be pleasing,  
and the meditation of my heart before thee,  
May my mouth sing his praises . . .  
the LORD is my rock and redeemer.*

*May the LORD give strength unto his people;  
May he bless his people with shalom, peace.*

4 SIVAN, erev Shavuot, 5757  
June 9, 1997

# ABBREVIATIONS

A.Z.	.....	Avodah Zarah
B.T.	.....	Babylonian Talmud
B.	.....	Bava
B.C.E.	.....	Before the Common Era
Ber.	.....	Berakhot
Bik.	.....	Bikkurim
C.E.	.....	Common Era
Git.	.....	Gittin
Hag.	.....	Hagigah
Hul.	.....	Hullin
Kidd.	.....	Kiddushin
Meg.	.....	Megillah
Men.	.....	Menahot
Rab.	.....	Rabbah
Sanh.	.....	Sanhedrin
Shab.	.....	Shabbat
Shev.	.....	Shevuot
Suk.	.....	Sukkot
T.Y.	.....	Talmud Yerushalmi
Y.S.	.....	Yalkut Shimoni
Yev.	.....	Yevamot





*Part 1*

JEWES AND JUDAISM



# FOUNDATIONS OF JEWISH BELIEF

## *Torah*

To speak of the Jew and his faith is to focus on the quintessential dimension of that faith, Torah. It is the Torah that brings solace, inner strength, and spiritual fulfillment to the Jew during times of joy, security, and prosperity, as well as during periods of wandering, suffering, and adversity. It is the Torah that guides the Jew's path, shapes his character, and links him with ultimacy. The Torah is the lens through which the Jew perceives life and reality; it is that which unites him indissolubly with his fellow Jew. The Torah is the very lifeblood of the Jewish people.

The term *Torah* has a variety of connotations. Etymologically, it means "teachings," not "law," as it is so often mistranslated. In its broadest sense, Torah means "correct" or "properly Jewish," as in "leading a Torah way of life." More narrowly, it refers to all Jewish religious writings, including the Hebrew Scriptures, Talmud, *responsa* literature, rabbinic commentaries, and others. The term is most generally used, however, in reference to the Bible or written scriptures that Jews refer to as the *Tanakh* and Christians refer to as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. In its narrowest sense, the term *Torah* refers to the five books of Moses, or *Pentateuch*.

The traditional view of the Torah in its narrowest sense is that it is the embodiment of God's word par excellence; the *sine*

*qua non* of our knowledge of God and of the divine will for man. Although given to the people of Israel at a particular juncture in history, it is, nevertheless, eternally valid and authoritative. Everything there is to know about life, claim the rabbis, can be derived from the Torah. “Turn it around and inside out and everything is in it.” As the psalmist declared, “the law [Torah] of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul” (Ps. 19:7). Without the Torah man has precious little knowledge of God and the divine intent, nor of the means by which he might link up with them.

The Torah is divine in the sense that every word and letter—even the designs or “crowns” on top of the letters as they appear written in the parchment scrolls—are believed to have been revealed by God. The rabbis regarded the concept of *torah mishamayim*, or “torah from heaven” (i.e., its divinity), as one of the most central of all Jewish affirmations. (The term *the rabbis* is used throughout this book in reference to the collective body of rabbis through the centuries, but particularly those in the Talmudic Period. See below.) They tell a *midrash* (a homiletic story) of how Moses sought reassurance from God that all his efforts in bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt and giving them the Torah would not be in vain and that the Torah would continue to be studied and practiced long after him.

God, according to the midrash, took Moses in a time machine centuries ahead to the second century C.E. (Jews often do not use the acronyms “B.C.” and “A.D.,” which implicitly define time in terms of the birth and death of Jesus. Rather, they refer to these periods of time as “B.C.E.,” or “before the Common Era,” and “C.E.,” or “Common Era.”) There Moses sat in the talmudic academy of the great sage and Torah scholar Rabbi Akiva, who was deriving laws exegetically from the crowns on top of the Torah letters. The *Talmud*, or oral tradition, states that Moses was so confused by Rabbi Akiva’s intricate discourse that he could not even recognize that the rabbi was commenting on the same Torah he had brought down from

Sinai! Moses was shocked and filled with grief. Finally, a student asked Rabbi Akiva how he derived a particular law from the Torah text. He responded, “It is a law to Moses from Sinai” that was passed down (orally) through the generations. At that, concludes the talmudic story, Moses became reassured that God’s Torah, the very same one revealed to him at Sinai, would remain forever with the people of Israel and would, in fact, be studied intensively and applied to daily life long after he died (B. T., Men. 29b).

The Torah is written on parchment and tied together in a scroll. It is the holiest ritual object in Judaism in that it contains both the name and message of God. The Torah is to be treated with utmost reverence and respect, not lightly or frivolously. It may not be desecrated or defiled. Indeed, there are numerous laws pertaining to the sanctity with which we are to treat the Torah. Scrolls that are old or torn, for example, may not be discarded but must be buried in the earth like human beings. If a Torah scroll accidentally falls, a fast day is decreed for all those who saw it drop. (Charity may be given in lieu of the fast.) If a printed Torah text drops, we kiss it as a sign of our respect. The meticulous care involved in writing a Torah scroll, letter by letter (writing a scroll takes, on the average, one full year), is another reflection of its sacredness in the eyes of Jews.

How did God reveal his word through the Torah? Did he “dictate” it verbatim to Moses on Sinai? Was Moses “inspired” to write it down? Was it all written by man and then sanctioned retroactively by God? These and many other explanations are proffered as to how God actually communicated his will to man. In whatever way traditionalists understand the mechanics of the Sinai theophany, however, they all regard the Torah as we have it today as the primary source of our knowledge of God’s word to man, and indeed, of God himself. It is, in the words of the Jewish liturgy, “given to the children of Israel from the mouth of God through the hand of Moses.”

God is not a physical being mortal man can ever come to fully know, nor can we expect to completely comprehend his

immutable ways. Even Moses, the greatest of all prophets who talked with God “face to face” (Exod. 33:11), was allowed to “see” only God’s “back” (Exod. 33:20, 23). (These, as well as other instances in which the Torah describes God’s physical attributes, were considered by the rabbis to be anthropomorphisms, written in that manner since “the Torah speaks in language man can understand.”) But if the Torah is, in a very real sense, God’s word, we can come as close as humanly possible to “knowing” God himself by studying its content. The term “to know” in biblical Hebrew—*ladaat*—is often used in the Greek sense connoting not only cognitive and speculative knowledge, but unification and attachment as well, as in the verse, “Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife” (Gen. 4:1, emphasis added). This principle guided Maimonides (1135–1204), whose opening words in his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, are, “The foundation of foundations and pillar of wisdom is to *know* that there is a God. . . .” It is the Torah that enables us to truly know God and to unite with him as much as humanly possible.

By immersing ourselves in the sacred act of Torah study, we can come to better understand both the content and source of that divine word. For this reason Jewish education, and particularly *Talmud Torah*, or “study of the Torah,” is one of the most important *mitzvot*, “religious duties,” in all of Judaism. The Talmud states that good deeds such as honoring parents, acting kindly toward strangers, visiting the sick, attending the dead, devotion in prayer, and bringing peace among people are all important, but that “the study of Torah excels them all.” (See B. T., Shab. 127a.) Its supreme importance lies in the fact that, in the words of the rabbis, “an ignorant person cannot be pious.” Daily, the Jew links his love for God with his love for God’s Torah. He prays, “With an eternal love hast thou loved thy people, the house of Israel; Torah, commandments, good deeds, and laws hast thou imparted to us. Therefore, O Lord our God, when we lie down and when we rise up, we will ponder thy laws and rejoice in the words of

thy Torah and commandments. For they are our lives and the length of our days and upon them will we meditate day and night” (from the Jewish prayer book). The study of the Torah is the Jew’s loftiest spiritual pursuit.

In Judaism, the intellectual and the spiritual are inseparable; the heart *and* the mind must be applied in the service of God. Even Jewish prayer and devotion are interlocked with Torah study. For this reason, a portion of the Bible is read publicly in synagogue each Shabbat (Sabbath) so that over the course of a year the entire five books of the Torah will have been completed and everyone who attended prayer services will have heard and studied it. (This emphasis on Torah study may also have contributed to the fact that Jews historically have been a highly literate people.)

Traditional Judaism affirms that the Torah is not only God’s revealed word to man, but it also has been passed on to us from generation to generation without error. This doctrine of inerrancy underlies the traditional Jewish hermeneutic which derives laws and theological concepts from each word (and, at times, from each letter) in the Torah. The validity of this exegetical method rests upon the belief that every word in the Torah as we have it today is divine, without error, and consequently, imparted to man for an express purpose. (The possibility of error is, indeed, reduced since Torah scribes must be pious individuals who work slowly and meticulously in the arduous task of transcribing each letter of the Torah onto the scroll parchment. If a scribe makes even the slightest mistake in writing the name of God, for example, he must undergo ritual acts of purification.) Seen from this perspective, the Torah cannot be redundant, can have no missing words, nor can it contain mistakes since God would not repeat or contradict himself without reason. Biblical critics, of course, might disagree. It remains left to man to interpret such textual “irregularities” through the use of the oral tradition (see below). Thus, for example, the three-fold repetition of the phrase “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Exod. 23:19, 34:26; Deut. 14:21) was

explained by the rabbis as a threefold prohibition against cooking meat and milk together, eating them together, or deriving any benefit from such a mixture.

The Torah constitutes the primary component of the Jewish “written tradition,” which also includes the *Neviim* (prophets) and *Ketuvim* (writings comprising the Scrolls of Esther, Psalms, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Ruth, Lamentations, and Proverbs, as well as the Books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles). This written tradition, more widely known by its acronym, *Tanakh* (*T* for *Torah*, *N* for *Neviim*, *K* for *Ketuvim*), came to a close roughly after 586 B.C.E. with the destruction of the first temple and end of the prophetic period (Ezra and Nehemiah are considered the last prophets). It was not canonized, however, until after the first century C.E. Christians generally refer to the Tanakh, or written tradition, as the Old Testament, although many, in deference to Jewish sensitivities, have come to use the term *Hebrew Bible* since *Old Testament* implies the existence of a *New Testament*, something that Jews deny.

The Jewish hermeneutical treatment of the Torah is fundamentally different from that of the rest of the Tanakh (Bible). For while all other holy writ in the Tanakh (i.e., the prophets and writings) are sacred and divine, none carries the same authoritative force as the Torah, wherein every word is regarded as divine and inerrant and, consequently, is to be interpreted by man. In the case of the rest of Scripture, only the concepts are sacred and divine. Laws cannot be derived exegetically from every word or letter.

While the Jewish view of the inerrancy of the Torah suggests that its every word is from God, portions, such as the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden, can legitimately be interpreted allegorically rather than literally. In contrast, a conservative Christian view of inerrancy might not suggest that each and every word and letter of the Torah is to be interpreted exegetically (much like the Jewish view of the rest of Scripture), although it would be inclined to claim that they are to be under-

stood literally. In Judaism, the Torah, which is inerrant, is interpreted through the eyes of the rabbis and oral tradition (see below), which at times treat certain portions allegorically, though always as the embodiment of the word of God.

Biblical authority, which serves as the foundation for traditional Jewish authority as a whole, is premised on the belief that the Torah was “revealed”—however one understands that term—by God. The Sinai theophany was a unique moment in human history: “For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?” (Deut. 4:32-33). The Torah is the repository of divine truth and is, therefore, binding and authoritative upon humanity: “Keep them and do them [i.e., the statutes of the Torah]; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deut. 4:6).

Unlike most other faiths that are founded upon the revelatory experiences of an individual, Judaism was born out of a divine revelation to a collective people. For while the Torah was written by Moses, the Sinai theophany was experienced by the entire Jewish people (see Exod. 20:19). There is a midrash that suggests that the whole world, including all the animals and birds, heard God speaking the Ten Commandments, and another claiming that the souls of all Jews not yet born at the time were also present then at Sinai (see Deut. 5:3 upon which this idea is based).

The very concluding phrase in the Torah, “in the sight of all Israel” (Deut. 34:12), points to the centrality of this concept within Judaism. By addressing the people of Israel collectively and directly, God sought to teach them that Moses was his trusted servant and that all that he would speak and write in God’s name would equally be his word (see Exod. 19:9). In

other words, Moses' position of authority as transcriber of the word of God was vindicated by God's having revealed himself to the community of Israel and publicly endorsing Moses as such. According to the midrash, Moses' stature became so great and his voice so authoritative, God feared that the Jews might come to regard him as divine. For this reason, states the midrash, God told Moses to "go down" the mountain (Exod. 19:21) so that the people would see that he was really human. Only then did God begin speaking the first of the Ten Commandments, declaring, "I am the LORD your God" (Exod. 20:2). Moreover, lest Moses become deified posthumously by Israel and his gravesite turned into a venerated place of worship, God did not disclose its location "to this day" (Deut. 34:6). For while man can be godly, only God is God.

While revelation presumes a revealing God, it also presumes a receiver, man. Indeed, in many respects, the question of how we hear and interpret God's word is of far greater importance than that of how God revealed it. For although man may acknowledge the Torah as the repository of divinely revealed wisdom and truth, he can also distort and abuse that word. Man has the power to mold the Torah into either a holy Bible or an instrument for idolatry.

The partnership of God and man as revealer-receiver is exemplified by two verses in the Torah's account of revelation, "And the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai" (Exod. 19:20) and "And Moses went up to God" (Exod. 19:3). It is at the point of encounter between God and man when, in Martin Buber's terminology, the "I" meets the eternal "Thou" that genuine revelation takes place. God makes himself immanent by moving "down the mountain" and meeting man halfway. In Christian terms, this is his act of grace. On the other hand, man, his copartner, elevates himself and spiritually goes "up the mountain" to greet the Lord. The midrash states that if man initiates even a slight movement toward God and creates an opening in his heart the size of a needle, God will respond magnanimously by enlarging it so that even chariots could pass through.

While affirming man's need for divine grace, the rabbis insisted that the initiative for this turning and reconciliation must come from man who is eminently capable of uplifting himself and initiating such a return. Man must open up his heart to God, repent of his sins, and observe the laws of the Torah (see the section on the High Holy Days in chapter 4). The Hasidic expression "Where is God? Wherever we let him in" is a reflection of the Jewish conviction that man possesses the ability to initiate a movement toward God who, through his love and grace, responds a thousandfold. For Judaism maintains that man is a dignified being, created with free will and an innately pure soul (see chapter 2).

In contrast, the predominant Christian view is that man is shackled by his sinfulness and incapable of self-regeneration. It is God, through an act of love and grace, who initiates the movement toward man. While Judaism and Christianity indeed differ on this matter, their differences are often grossly exaggerated and very much misunderstood. Certainly, Judaism professes that it is not man's works, observance of the law, or merit *alone* that bring him closer to God, but God's love and act of grace in response to his initiative, despite man's unworthiness, as well. Daily, the Jew recites in his morning prayers, "Not out of our righteousness do we appeal to you, but because we rely on your mercy. What are we? What value are our lives? Our righteousness? . . ." And while Christianity, indeed, emphasizes God's initiative of grace in spite of man's sinfulness, it, too, regards man's deeds and works as essential. "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

Clearly, while traditional Jews and conservative Christians may share much in common on the fundamental question of the divinity and inerrancy of Scripture (at least, the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible portion of it), differences abound regarding how we exegetically interpret that divine message and relate it to our life of faith. The differences become especially pronounced when we consider the question of the oral tradition.

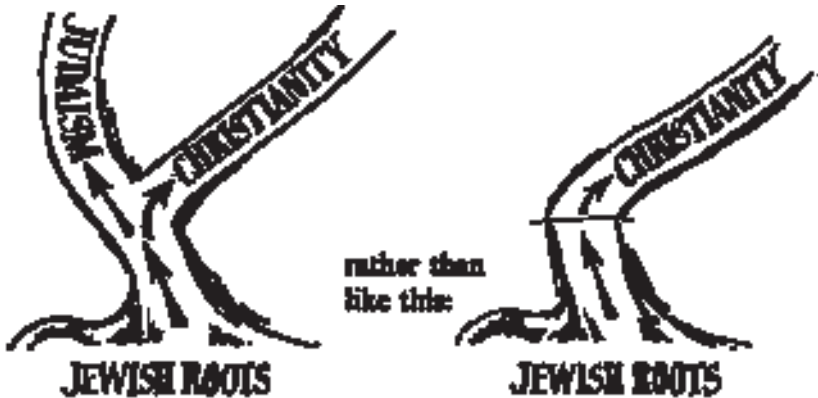
### *The Oral Tradition*

There are Christians who maintain that Judaism came to an end as a viable religion after the coming of Jesus and was then displaced by Christianity. Some also claim that the overwhelming Jewish rejection of Jesus (who, after all, came to bring the message of salvation to them) resulted in their being cut off from the divine covenantal olive tree and in the Gentiles' being grafted on in their place (see Rom. 11). Indeed, there are even those who maintain that God has cast away the Jews as a punishment for killing Jesus (see Matt. 21:39, 43). Christians, according to this line of thinking, supplanted the Jews as the true (spiritual) descendants of Abraham (see Rom. 9:6-9) and as the new covenantal people of God. This point of view, which treats Jews and Judaism as fossils of the past (to use the English historian Arnold Toynbee's expression), is quite prevalent among Christians, despite the fact that the Christian Bible itself seems to regard the Jews' election and belovedness as eternally valid since "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29; see also Rom. 9:4-5; 11:1-2).

Such New Testament passages attesting to the continued vitality of the Jewish people and those passages in the Hebrew Bible affirming the eternal nature of Israel's covenant contradict Christian claims that Jews no longer remain God's "chosen people" and that their Jewish faith has ceased to be valid. Rarely do Christian seminaries teach about Jews or Judaism, for example, and those that do, generally treat them only up until the first century C.E. There are few (if any) evangelical institutions, in particular, offering courses or lecture series on the subject of Jews, Judaism, or Jewish-Christian relations *after* the time of Jesus. It is as if the entire Jewish story from the time of Abraham on came to a halt with the coming of Jesus. It is as if Jews and Judaism became totally (and triumphantly) displaced covenantally by Christians and Christianity.

Such subtle, and often unconsciously distorted, approaches to history and theology reinforce the prevalent Christian view that Jews can achieve fulfillment only through Christianity.

Jews, however, maintain that they were never cut off from God's promises and that their covenant with their Father was never displaced. Jews insist that they continue to serve as God's witnesses in this world—as Jews even after Jesus. In the words of the Bible, “Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God” (Lev. 26:44). The past two millennia of Jewish history are regarded as a direct, unabridged continuation of the first two thousand years before Jesus and, needless to say, are treated as equally valid and compelling. Using the Pauline analogy described in Romans 11, Jews would characterize themselves diagrammatically like this:



There exists among Christians a widespread lack of awareness of the fact that Jewish life, scholarship, and religious expression flourished, rather than diminished or abruptly ended, after the time of Jesus. Indeed, the first five centuries of the Common Era were, in many respects, the most religiously creative and culturally productive years Jews have ever had. Much of the very foundation on which Jewish life as it has been understood and practiced ever since the first century was established then. To better appreciate how Judaism developed in its own right after the time of Jesus, and by extension, how the Jew conducts his religious life today, it is important that one be

aware of one of the most significant aspects of Jewish life and faith over the centuries: the oral tradition.

Of the various Jewish groups in existence at the time of Jesus, only the Pharisees collectively survived the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. (The followers of Jesus, who also survived, did so in the form of what later became a new religion, Christianity.) This was largely due to the fact that the principal modes of Pharisaic spiritual life and expression—the synagogue, rabbi, prayer, Torah study—were not entirely dependent on the existence of the Jerusalem temple, but were extremely versatile and adaptable to the new Jewish condition of exile and to the traumatic loss of the temple and Jewish sovereignty. The synagogue became the Jews’ “miniature, transportable temple,” accompanying them into exile. Moreover, claimed the Pharisees, the *Shekhinah*, or “Divine Presence,” went into exile along with them. By the end of the second century, Pharisaic Judaism had become normative Judaism; its overall theology and religious institutions continue to be valid and compelling for Jews today.

One of the central ingredients of Pharisaic doctrine was the affirmation that already from the time of Moses and Sinai there was an oral tradition elucidating and accompanying the written one. This oral tradition, or at least the hermeneutical framework from which it evolved, was believed also to have been revealed by God to Moses (see, for example, Exod. 18:20; Deut. 5:28) and was expounded upon and applied by rabbinic scholars from generation to generation. The Torah states, for example, that on the holiday of *Sukkot* we are to take the fruit of “a beautiful tree” and dwell in a *sukkah*, or “hut.” It was left to the oral tradition, however, to clarify the meaning of the written word and to explain what it referred to. The cryptic references of the Torah, therefore, seem to presume and to prove the existence of an oral tradition expounding upon the written one. Thus, the oral tradition injects into the written tradition both content and relevance, thereby enabling the Jew to use it as a guide for his daily life. It was to remain fluid, and resilient

to change and adaptation in light of the conditions of the times. The oral tradition was God's word and continuing revelation both to man and *through* him.

Within a century or so before the Common Era one component of that oral tradition, *midrash* (homiletic literature that often used allegory to illuminate the moral teachings of the Torah and constituted the "sermons" of the time), came to be written down. Jesus, in all likelihood, was quite familiar with this rich body of Jewish literature, and many scholars maintain that he drew heavily from it, as well. Midrashic material continued to develop well into the Common Era and, indeed, is still written today. The overwhelming majority of the oral tradition, particularly the vast legal tradition, was not committed to writing but instead to memory by "scribes." It was carefully transmitted orally from rabbi to student from generation to generation and was studied in the various seminaries and talmudic academies of Palestine and Babylonia, which served as the main centers of Jewish learning during the first few centuries.

The decentralization and dispersion of Jews to different parts of the world, and the overwhelming amount of material that had accumulated as part of the oral tradition by the third century, contributed to the growing fear that aspects of that tradition would become distorted or forgotten. It was these conditions that finally prompted Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) of Palestine to commit a skeletal outline of the oral tradition to writing (circa 250 C.E.). The *Mishnah*, meaning "teachings," as it came to be known, was written entirely in Hebrew. It is a concise commentary on the Tanakh, or written tradition, and was transmitted orally from generation to generation until finally written down in the third century. For example, it clarifies the concept of *lex talionis* ("an eye for an eye"), which the oral tradition had always understood as meaning that the *value* of the eye be ascertained and paid, not that the eye itself actually be removed. The Mishnah, therefore, codifies the meaning and intent of the Torah in light of the generations-old oral tradition.

Although written in Palestine, the Mishnah was accepted as authoritative by the prominent Torah academies in Babylonia, as well. And while Rabbi Judah was the one to compile and edit it, it was Rabbi Hillel, another Pharisee, whose views became most often cited in it and whose legal decisions became its cornerstone. Hillel moved from Babylonia to Israel around 30 B.C.E. and lived there at the time of Jesus. He was a patient, loving, and generous human being, a tolerant individual, always seeking to help the outcasts of society. Whether or not he and Jesus ever met is uncertain. They did, however, share many qualities such as a gentle temperament and a strong moral sense. Even some statements attributed to them are similar. Unlike Jesus, however, whose later followers parted with Judaism and the Jewish community and founded a new religion, Christianity, Hillel and his students remained within the ideological Jewish fold and constituted the mainstay for the preservation of Judaism.

Another prominent and well-respected Pharisaic Torah scholar of the time, Shammai, opposed Hillel's views on a variety of legal matters. Both Hillel and Shammai had large followings of Torah students, although in almost every instance in which they differed, the law was decided in Hillel's favor, which usually was the more lenient position.

The Talmud tells the story of a pagan who once came to Shammai asking to learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot (i.e., in a few minutes). Shammai considered the request so brazen and foolhardy he threw the pagan out. The pagan then went to the home of Hillel who welcomed him and patiently responded, "What is hurtful to you do not do unto others." He added that the rest of the Torah was commentary and said, "Go study it!" The striking similarities between Jesus' and Hillel's congenial, irenic dispositions and the fact that both insisted that the essence of the Torah lies in the biblical commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) are, in all likelihood, more than coincidental. This supports the view that Jesus, like Hillel, came out of the Pharisaic tradition, which was

more open to the masses and more tolerant and democratic than other Jewish groups at the time.

The skeletal outline of the oral tradition provided by the Mishnah, however, soon became insufficient to meet the needs of the Jewish people. By the fifth century there had developed an extensive body of unwritten rabbinic commentaries on the abbreviated Mishnah, stemming from the discussions that had taken place in the major Torah academies during the intervening years. Fearful lest this too be forgotten or distorted, Rabbis Ravina and Ashi of Babylonia decided to compile the material and commit it to script. They wrote in Aramaic, the spoken language of the time, and completed their work sometime in the early part of the fifth century. The *Gemara*, as it came to be called, is a direct and far more extensive commentary on the Mishnah, which itself is an abbreviated commentary on the Tanakh. A separate Gemara commentary on the Mishnah was written in Jerusalem in Palestine, although it is very similar to the one compiled in Babylonia.

Rabbis living at the time of the Mishnah are called *tannaim*, and the period (roughly 70–250 C.E.) is referred to as *tannaitic*. Rabbis living later on at the time of the Gemara are referred to as *amoraim*, and the period (roughly 250–450 C.E.) is referred to as *amoraic*. The Mishnah, along with its commentary, the Gemara, are together referred to as the *Talmud*. The span of those few centuries (roughly 70–450 C.E.) is often called the “Rabbinic” or “Talmudic” Period.

The Talmud is divided into tractates, each dealing with a different subject matter. Together they comprise hundreds of pages of text. The Jerusalem Talmud, comprising the Mishnah as well as the Gemara commentary edited in Palestine, never achieved the same prestige and authority that the Babylonian Talmud did. For the religious stature of the Babylonian Jewish community waxed greatly between 300–500 C.E., while the influence of the Palestinian Jewish community waned. Today, Jews study the Babylonian Talmud almost to the exclusion of the Jerusalem one.

In summary, the oral tradition, one of the principal Pharisaic contributions to the survival of Jewish life after the destruction of the temple, revolves around the written tradition, or Tanakh. It comprises the Talmud and Midrash, as well as *responsa* literature (i.e., questions and answers pertaining to law that arose over the centuries and that continue to be written today). The traditional belief dating back at least as far as the time of the Pharisees is that the principles, and perhaps even the content of this oral tradition, while written down in the first few centuries of the Common Era, were actually imparted by God at Sinai. Accordingly, the oral tradition is treated as constituting the word of God just as the written Tanakh does. Jesus, in all likelihood, was intricately familiar with the oral tradition since it was studied then in the synagogues. In all likelihood, he also participated in the discussions of the law and oral Torah that took place in the academies at the time. However, he seems to have been particularly influenced by the rabbinic *midrashim*, many of which are strikingly similar to his parables.

### *Religious Authority*

While the Torah was revealed by God, the interpretation of that Torah, the oral tradition, is “revealed” (in its etymological sense of “uncovered”) by man. It is man who assumes the prominent role of final arbiter of God’s will and intent. The Talmud tells a homiletic story of a disagreement that arose between Rabbi Eliezer and other rabbinic sages of his time concerning whether or not a particular stove was kosher and could be used (see B. T. B. Metzia 59b). The standard rule in *halakhah*, or Jewish law then operative, was that such questions were to be resolved by a majority rabbinic vote. (This is based on Exod. 23:2.)

Rabbi Eliezer was so convinced that the stove was kosher, however, that although he differed with the majority of other rabbis, he resorted to miracles in order to prove that he was correct. “If the law is like me,” Rabbi Eliezer exclaimed, “let

the tree outside move.” Lo and behold, the tree became uprooted and moved twenty yards away. The rabbis did not change their opinion. Rabbi Eliezer, according to the talmudic story, then called upon the roof of the academy to tilt, and lo and behold, it tilted! The rabbis stood aghast but continued to maintain that the law was according to the majority and that the stove was not kosher. Rabbi Eliezer then said, “Let the river change its course and flow downhill if I am correct,” and the river changed its course! The rabbis in the academy still did not budge from their positions. Finally, Rabbi Eliezer appealed to God himself to disclose who was correct, and behold, a miracle occurred—a voice from heaven loudly proclaimed that Rabbi Eliezer was, in fact, correct and that the stove was kosher! At that, continues the talmudic story the rabbis turned to the heavenly voice and, invoking the verse from Scripture that “it [the Torah] is not in heaven” (Deut. 30:12), declared (in paraphrase), “God, you already gave us the Torah at Sinai and we, therefore, no longer take heed of such revelatory voices. Did not you yourself write in the Torah that the law is determined by the majority?”

The story concludes with a depiction of God as being pleased with the rabbis and amused by their argument. God declared, “My children are correct, they have beaten me” (i.e., at my own game).

This delightful talmudic story provides a powerful insight into the Jewish concept of religious authority. God revealed himself and gave his Torah to Israel on Mount Sinai. It is now the rabbis’ right and obligation to interpret that divine word according to the proper hermeneutical principles of the oral tradition that God himself ordained. Biblical authority rests not with God, but with the rabbis who were given that authority by him. “If any case arises requiring decision . . . any case within your towns which is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go . . . to the . . . priests, and to the judge who is in office in those days, you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they

declare to you . . . and you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you” (Deut. 17:8-10).

God has spoken. The people of Israel possess the written and oral traditions, the divinely sanctioned tools by which they are to interpret God’s will. And so, even though the stove in question in the above story may, in fact, have been kosher as Rabbi Eliezer claimed, God “admitted” that the rabbis were correct and that his law was to be determined now by man on the basis of the scriptural guidelines, which state that the majority rules. Even God cannot (i.e., would not) contradict his own word as revealed to man in the Torah.

Moreover, even if the Sanhedrin (the highest rabbinic court before 70 C.E.) accidentally selected the wrong day as the beginning of the new month, God nevertheless “sanctions” the decree since man, in his finitude, is the final arbiter of the divine word (see B. T., Ber. 19b). While today the months of the Jewish year are determined by a set lunar calendar, in ancient times scouts were sent out to view the new moon. In the event of cloudy or inclement weather, they might not have seen the new moon and their calculations could have been wrong by as much as one or two days. This could have thrown the entire holiday season off schedule so that Passover, for example, which is supposed to be celebrated on the fourteenth of the Hebrew month of Nisan, would have been observed on what actually was the fifteenth or sixteenth of Nisan.

According to the same principle, one who declares himself to be a prophet but who violates the laws of the Torah or proclaims something contrary to it is declared a fraud (Deut. 13:1-6). It is a heresy to suggest that the laws of Shabbat, for example, are no longer valid and are to be permanently suspended, since that would run counter to the divine word as revealed in the Torah. This idea is instructive for the question of how Jews view Jesus. For God, according to this principle, would not reveal a “new testament” that contradicted elements of his previous one as the New Testament appears to do, especially on the issue of the validity of Jewish law.