

Single Scripture, Multiple Meanings:

I - The Judaeo-Christian Divorce in the First Century and What It Means for the Twenty-First*

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The Divorce between Judaism and Christianity

No two religious communities irritate one another more than do Judaism and Christianity: the continuation of Judaism despite Christianity, the formation of Christianity in the face of Judaism. In trying to explain for ourselves the division between Judaism and Christianity, we have experimented with metaphors deriving from families: parent/child religions, friendly or rival siblings, and the like. Each metaphor serves its purpose. Christianity is represented as a daughter religion, Judaism as the mother. Or Christianity is represented as a rival sibling, an Esau to Judaism's Jacob, as in the reading of Genesis in the fourth century Rabbinic commentary, *Genesis Rabbah*. Then too, the metaphor of the divorce, in particular no fault-divorce presents itself as a way of conceptualizing how the faith-communities part company. It recognizes the fact that at one time Christians were part of Israel, the holy people, sharing the heritage of Scripture, and at another time, they were not. The metaphor of divorce admirably captures matters: Jesus was a Jew and taught Judaism, and Judaism and Christianity once were one, but now have been torn asunder.

That appealing metaphor – divorce — bears the merit of positing a unique relationship but is deeply flawed, and before I propose a replacement, let me say why the metaphor of divorce does not serve. I see several fatal flaws, of which two suffice.

First, in a no-fault divorce state, comparing the parting of Christianity from Judaism to a divorce obscures the profound differences that account for the estrangement. Some have argued that Judaism and Christianity addressed different messages to

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different groups and did not speak of a common agenda. Consequently, Christianity spoke of salvation, Judaism of sanctification, and their messages did not intersect, let alone conflict — thus, a no fault divorce. For who could find fault in severing the relationship of strangers. But that manifestly obscures the articulated sense of conflict between (in Paul’s language) Christianity’s view of Judaizers with their circumcision and their food taboos and all the rest, and the counterpart despair expressed in the judgment of Rabbi Tarfon that the Christians more than pagans defy God because Christians knew the Torah but denied it, while the pagans never knew it to begin with. These well-known points of conflict touch lightly indeed on the grounds of divorce and nullify the no-fault judgment. There was and is plenty of fault-finding for all concerned, as the prominence of “the Jews” as villains in the Gospels demonstrates.

Second, the metaphor of a no-fault divorce closes off recognition of the good reasons adduced by each party for the divorce action. At issue, after all, are not only the faults each party found in the other. Both Christianity and Judaism would discover good reason to affirm each its own autonomy and integrity. Judaism brings to the debate the teachings of the Torah and asks how Moses would respond to the claim that the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath. It defines its “Israel” — the holy community of the Torah — as a kingdom of priests and holy people, sanctified by the commandments, set apart by divine imperative. That forms an Israel after the spirit, which is the same thing as Israel after the flesh. Christianity (like Islam later on) would judge as exclusivist the Israelite insistence on knowing God through God’s self-revelation in the Torah given to Israel the people. Paul’s initial statement, anyone can know God through the Holy Spirit, carried within itself the distinction between Israel after the flesh and Israel after the promise. It invented the ethnic characterization of the Jews. Gentiles come to God through God’s own action, not through keeping the Torah’s laws, reduced in Paul’s system to the ethnic mores of a culture. Nineteen hundred years would have to pass before the Jewish people produced an ethnic definition of itself. With ethnic Jews Christianity has no argument.

So the metaphor of a divorce does not serve then because it finds no fault and obscures good reason. But most scholarship now recognizes, Christianity and Judaism do find fault with one another, which explains why Jews practice Judaism, not Christianity, and why Christians do not concede that to know God they must accept the Torah’s laws. What if each party to the long-term relationship has good and sufficient reason, within its premises, to find fault with the other? Then we need a different metaphor, one that more fittingly accommodates the complexity of Judaic and Christian worlds in antiquity (and afterward). If, as a matter of fact, the complex and

diverse testimonies of both Christianity and Judaism require us to speak of Judaisms and Christianities, a fresh metaphor is needed. Then what metaphor will capture our imagination to shape our vision of ourselves and of one another?

Our metaphor must permit us to recognize irreconcilable difference, the judgment of each that the other errs. It must allow us to discern in shared premises and a single logic the grounds for reasonable difference — the “good reason” for the no-fault divorce I mentioned a moment ago. And above all, it must make a place for the diversity of all Christianities and Judaisms, by which I mean, not only groups with distinguishing doctrines but communities that acknowledged as the true “Israel” of Scripture only themselves and no others claiming to form part of Israel.

These requirements are met by the complex metaphor of a family sharing a common inheritance. Christianities and Judaisms, with their (on the Christian side) diverse pictures of the historical Jesus, and (on the Judaic side) competing definitions of who and what is Israel the bearer of God’s blessing — all are accommodated when we compare all Christianities and all Judaisms to the third or fourth generation of a family — now all cousins, separated from a common ancestry by a sufficiency of generations to account for difference, but joined to that common ancestry by an indivisible legacy. Cousins do not divorce. But they do grow apart. They do not appeal to a once-upon-a-time carnal love, but they recognize a common ancestry that binds them through time and through eternity. There is no issue of no-fault divorce, because the ties that bind do not sever. There is ample ground for reasons why. And no one imposes a fabricated uniformity on a manifestly complex and diverse set of relationships.

All depends, then, upon that inheritance claimed by all parties and held in common by each together with all others: the metaphor of a family encompassing a shared legacy. How do I propose to account for the relationship between Christianities and Judaisms by appeal to the conflict of cousins over a common property? What corresponds to the heritage? To answer that question in the context of conflict, we turn to the writings of the ancient theologians of Christianities and of Judaisms. Where do we find conflict, recurrent tensions, the blatant points of emphasis, the indications of conflict and polemic? And where do Judaic and Christian writings intersect? To answer the question for the whole of the Judaic and Christian canons of the time, if we take whole and complete the writings of first and second century people claiming to form Israel or part of Israel and ask what they all stress as a single point of insistence, the answer is self-evident. Nearly every Christianity, and nearly all known Judaisms, appeal to the Scriptures of Ancient Israel, their laws and narratives, their prophecies and visions. To Scripture all parties appeal — but not to the same verses of Scripture. In Scripture, all participants to the

common Israelite culture propose to find validation — but not to a common theological program subject to diverse interpretation. From Scripture, everyone takes away what he will, but not with the assent of all the other cousins.

A single example of meeting and parting company in Scripture will serve, even in abbreviated form. Take the matter of healing on the Sabbath. The Gospels make one point, the Halakhah of the Mishnah and the Tosefta makes an entirely different point, and treating the same subject the two bodies of tradition simply part company. Matt. 12:9–14 = Mark 3:1–6 = Lk. 6:6–11 show Jesus challenged to heal on the Sabbath. Mark has, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” In Matthew he answers, “What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep. So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” The premise throughout is, it is lawful on the Sabbath to save life, as indeed, the law of the Mishnah and the Tosefta and the exegetical readings of the pertinent passages in the Written Torah all concur is the fact. But saving life is not at issue in the story, only doing good. Tat brings us to the Halakhic premise of the statement of Jesus: what about the animal in a pit?

Tosefta-tractate Shabbat 14:3

For a beast which fell into a pit they provide food in the place in which it has fallen, so that it not die, [and they pull it up after the Sabbath].

The rule is given anonymously; it is not subject to dispute but is normative. But then how are we to understand the certainty with which Jesus asks, “What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep. So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” The Halakhic definition of doing good on the Sabbath is feeding the beast in the pit, not raising it up. It would carry us far afield to pursue the issue that separates Judaism from Christianity in regard to the Sabbath; it suffices to point out that they meet in Scripture — in the Torah — and there they go their separate ways.

Cousins do not divorce, but they do not necessarily intersect. Some families assemble and maintain relations for generations, sharing common cemeteries for example. But most Christianities and most Judaisms in antiquity found possible a common discourse. They conducted a long-term debate, reaching into the Middle Ages and their disputations. No one misses the setting of those theological disputations, with a condescending Christianity and a disingenuous Judaism pretending to conduct a dialogue and a debate. But the engagement of the two families of religious traditions cannot be gainsaid. So what of the future?

Where can and should that common conversation take place? In my view the family begins in Scripture. Both sectors appeal to ancient Israelite Scripture, the written Torah of Judaism, the Old Testament of Christianity. That is, as Judaism has always maintained for holy Israel and as Christianity has insisted in its catholic, orthodox formulations, the common point of origin and the shared heritage. And what the cousins, close and many times removed, have in common is the record of God's self-manifestation to holy Israel in the Torah. How do we know that that forms the point at which most Judaisms and most Christianities met in antiquity — and can reconvene today?

Open any ancient Judaic religious text and what do you find if not a systematic response to Scripture, its law, narratives, and prophecies? The Rabbinic literature of the formative age focuses not only on the amplification of Scripture's laws but on the recapitulation of its narratives. The ancient rabbis composed a massive demonstration that their law and doctrine simply replicated those of Scripture, the single pervasive proposition of the Rabbinic canon. For their part the Gospels find the meaning of Jesus's words and deeds in the context of Scripture, and there is no understanding Rabbi Jesus (in the elegant formulation of Professor Chilton) without constant reference to Torah and prophecy. The letters of Paul, the pastoral epistles, the letter to the Hebrews — all conduct a dialogue with Scripture. And all documents accord high priority to the scriptural foundations of the Gospel.

What difference do we find in the shift of metaphors, from divorce to a family sharing a complex inheritance? I conceive the task of Judaisms and Christianities in dialogue to compare and contrast their many-splendored readings of the Scriptures of ancient Israel. To begin with, what will emerge is an exchange of information. But in time the range of choices facing the founding generations of Christianity and Judaism will register, and Judaisms and Christianities will come into a common focus: facing a common set of choices, each heir of Scripture made its choices. And when we compare and contrast the ways not taken, we make some sense of those that each sector of the family elected to follow.

Judaisms claim in their post-scriptural formulations to set forth the message of the written Torah of Sinai and validate their respective ways of life and world view by appeal to the Torah. The theology of Rabbinic Judaism forms one powerful example of that fact, with its reading of Israelite history as a recapitulation of that of Adam and Eve. But other Judaisms made the same case for themselves. Not to be outdone Christianities claim that with Christ the promises of Israelite prophecy were kept. Catholic, orthodox Christianity therefore affirmed the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament, precursor of the new. Even Christian Gnostics had to come to grips with the Creator-God made known in the Hebrew Scriptures. So from Rabbinic Judaism on the one side, through normative catholic

Christianity in the middle, to Gnostic Christianity on the other side, all parties appealed to the common heritage of Israelite scripture.

What implications do I find in the claim that where Christianities and Judaisms over the centuries intersect and share a common heritage, it is in Scripture? Here is where I find a program for Judaeo-Christian dialogue, the shared encounter with ancient Israel's heritage. To that encounter the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew contributes an account of the Messiah of prophecy and realization, Paul's letter to the Romans provides a profound meditation on the election of Israel, the Letter to the Hebrews takes up the salvific power of faith, beginning with Abraham. To that same encounter the Talmud of Babylonia in tractate Sanhedrin expounds the Messianic promise in the setting of the resurrection of the dead, the classical Siddur or Prayerbook of Judaism expounds the election of Israel in the setting of the Sabbath, and the Mishnah and the Tosefta show how deeds embody the quality of faith. The two religions, classical, catholic and orthodox Christianity and its competition, classical, normative, and Rabbinic Judaism, do intersect: they turn out to be debating about issues in common, drawing on a shared body of holy books, and appealing to universal reason and a single logic.

These simple facts validate the appeal to the metaphor of a family struggling to sort out the issues implicit in multiple claims on that common heritage — of brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, first cousins and fourth cousins, competing for the love of grand parents and parents. What is at stake, what makes the conflict consequential, is what lies at the apex: ultimately approaching the initial father and mother, seeking in the end that love that knows no limits.

II - Covenantal divide¹

Bruce Chilton

From the time of the ancient Near East, the term covenant (*berit* in Hebrew) has referred to a bond of agreement and of affection. Solemnized by means of sacrifice, covenants bound one person

¹ St Patrick's Day 2005: a forum with Jacob Neusner and Donald Senior sponsored by the Fordham University Center on Religion and Culture, the Leo Baeck Institute, and the Tannenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan.

The covenantal divide Judaism and Christianity trace in relation to one another helps us to discern a change of emotional tenor as one moves from Judaism's covenant to Christianity's. The Torah offers an access that is as deliberative and engaged in its joy, as the joy of Christianity delights in the interruption of human mortality. Which of these joys will prove to be heaven's? Are the two somehow inherent in one another? Our two religions know themselves better by the way of comparison, and by mutual understanding they better acquire the patience to await answers they themselves cannot give, because they are God's alone.

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