



Reading the Hebrew Scriptures in the First Century: Christian Interpretations in Their Jewish Context

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It is a commonplace among Christians that the authors of the New Testament understood and interpreted the ancient Scriptures of Israel primarily in the categories of promise and fulfillment. Most of us have been brought up with this viewpoint and schooled in it, and we emphasize it in our teaching and preaching and in the liturgy, especially during Advent, Christmas, and Lent. The ministry of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus, and the events of the passion are perceived as the fulfillment of the messianic oracles of the prophets.

As is often the case, the commonplace reflects a basic truth, but it oversimplifies and obscures a more complex state of affairs. First century Christians did believe that in Jesus of Nazareth, God was keeping ancient promises and fulfilling past prophecies. Nonetheless, these early Christians read their Scriptures in other keys, and they saw a *variety* of relationships between the events of their time and the subject matter of the Scriptures. That they should do so is not surprising. The Jews interpreted the Scriptures in many modes, and first century Christians were either Jews themselves, or they had been taught by Jewish-Christian teachers.¹

I shall survey some types of New Testament interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, noting how these interpretations stand in continuity and discontinuity with contemporary Jewish interpretations. My discussion will begin with methods and texts that bear on the fundamental Christian assertion that “the time is fulfilled” and will then treat three other types of texts and interpretations. In each section, I shall discuss Jewish methods of interpretation and then

¹I cannot discuss here the problem of what constituted the Scriptures of first century Judaism and the primitive church. The definition of the canon was in flux in this period.

turn to relevant material in the New Testament. Of interest are the ways in which early Christian interpreters drew on their Jewish heritage and the ways in which they modified it. This modification, as we shall see, is almost always related to the church’s understanding of the person and activity of Jesus.

Our sources for first century Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures are numerous and lengthy. The so-called Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls, together with the works of Philo and Josephus, constitute a corpus larger than the New Testament. The rabbinic writings, which contain many traditions that date from this period, are even more extensive. Here we shall draw our evidence from the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls. Although some of these texts antedate the rise of Christianity, their contents and methods of interpretation were constitutive parts of the Jewish matrix of early Christianity.²

I. THE FULFILLMENT OF PROMISES AND PROPHECIES

Fundamental to Jewish biblical interpretation was a perceived relationship between past and present. What God said of old, and what was subsequently written in Scripture, was relevant to God's people in the present time. God made covenantal promises to Abraham, and these were fulfilled in Israel, through the possession of the land and the multitude of his descendants. God also spoke through the prophets. As modern biblical scholarship has come to understand, the prophets spoke to their contemporaries. Although Jews of the first century recognized this fact, many of them were more concerned with the implications of their belief that the prophets spoke about events in the end-time. To no small degree, prophecy was perceived as prediction.

One of the clearest expressions of this idea occurs in the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk.

And God told Habakkuk to write down the things that will happen to the last generation, but the consummation of time He did not make known to him....The interpretation of [Hab 2:2] concerns the Teacher of Righteousness to whom God made known all the secrets of his servants the prophets. (1QpHab 7:1-5)

For the writer of this text and the authors of other Qumran commentaries, the end-time was at hand; they were living in "the last generation." Therefore, the ancient prophecies pertained to their own time and to specific persons and events in the history of their sect. Prophecy, moreover, was not limited to the books that comprised the second part of the emerging Hebrew canon, the Prophets. Moses was a prophet (as we shall see in a moment), and texts from the Book of Psalms were interpreted as prophecies fulfilled in the present time.

Biblical commentaries were not the only texts that expressed the belief that prophecies were being fulfilled in the present time. The author of Daniel, writing during the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes (ca. 165

²For introductory details on the writings treated below, and for reference to available texts, the reader is referred to relevant parts of the author's book, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

B.C.E.), applied to this Syrian king Isaianic texts originally uttered against Assyria. The *Testament of Moses* also dates from the time of Antiochus. It purports to be a secret revelation that Moses transmitted to Joshua shortly before his death. Actually, it is a paraphrase of the last chapters of Deuteronomy, in which the author fleshes out the historical scheme in Deuteronomy 31-34 with explicit reference to the events of his own time. Israel's sin of Hellenization has been punished by God through the Antiochan persecution. When repentance takes place, God will avenge Israel's enemies. He and his archangel will appear to execute judgment and usher in the new age, in which the whole creation will be subject to the reign of God.

Many Jewish texts of our period anticipate the fulfillment of *messianic* prophecies. When the Davidic dynasty was not restored after the Babylonian Exile, many Jews began to reinterpret royal oracles in 2 Samuel, the Psalms, and the prophets. Texts that originally referred to a reigning monarch, or one who was imminently expected, were now applied to an awaited descendant of David. The *Psalms of Solomon* 17, a lengthy prayer, written in the wake of the

Roman annexation of Palestine in 63 B.C.E., pleads for the restoration of the Davidic dynasty and the defeat of Rome. The author assumes the validity of God's promises about the eternity of the Davidic dynasty, and in his description of the awaited deliverer he weaves together expressions and phrases from the oracles and prophecies in Psalms 2 and 89, Isaiah 11, and Ezekiel 34.

Authors of the texts from Qumran anticipated a variety of eschatological figures foretold in Scripture: the Davidic Messiah; the eschatological prophet like Moses (cf. Deut 18:15-18); and, of special importance, an anointed (messianic) high priest. The author of the *Testament of Levi*, interestingly, describes this eschatological priest with language drawn from biblical oracles about the Davidic king.³

Daniel 7 was a crucial text for Jewish speculations about the end-time. Although it was composed early in the second century B.C.E., long after the last of the books that came to comprise the second part of the Hebrew canon, many Jews considered its supposed author, Daniel, to have been among the prophets. In Daniel 7:14 a human-like figure, "one like a son of man" is enthroned in heaven after the final judgment. He is Israel's angelic patron, whose rule in heaven will correspond to the earthly dominion of "the people of the saints of the Most High." This vision is reinterpreted in the Parables of Enoch (*1 Enoch* 37-71), a Jewish text from the turn of the era.⁴ For this author, the enthroned figure will appear not after the judgment, but in order to be the judge. Moreover, through a remarkable exegetical tour de force, the son of man is identified

³See Jonas C. Greenfield and Michael E. Stone, "Remarks on the Aramaic Testament of Levi from the Geniza," *Revue Biblique* 86 (1979) 45; and in a bit more detail, George W. E. Nickelsburg and Michael E. Stone, *Faith and Piety in Early Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 168-70.

⁴On the problems connected with this dating, see G. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, 221-23; and David Winston Suter, "Weighed in the Balance: The Similitudes in Recent Discussion," *Religious Studies Review* 7 (1981) 217-19. On the interpretation below, see George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Harvard Theological Studies 26; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1972) 70-78.

with the exalted servant of Isaiah 52-53 and is also described in language drawn from the royal oracles in Psalm 2 and Isaiah 11.

Promise and fulfillment or prophecy and fulfillment are common New Testament interpretive principles. Like many other Jews, the first Christians believed that they were living in the last times, when God's former words were coming to pass. This eschatological consciousness derived from Jesus himself, who described his ministry and message as an integral part of the coming of the kingdom. For the church, the proclamation of Jesus was confirmed and reinterpreted in his resurrection and in the presence of the Spirit. Resurrection was a constitutive part of many Jewish scenarios of the end-time, and the presence of the Spirit was viewed as an eschatological phenomenon. Thus, the early Christians believed that they were living on the brink of the new age, and they anticipated its imminent consummation in the glorious return of the exalted Jesus.

In this conviction of fulfillment and with this sense of expectancy, early Christians reinterpreted the scriptural promises and prophecies. Like the members of the Qumran sect, they believed that the prophets had foretold the events taking place in their midst. More specifically, they reinterpreted the ancient prophecies in terms of Jesus, who was identified with the plethora

of anticipated eschatological figures: the Davidic Messiah; the Levitic Messiah; the prophet like Moses; the enthroned Son of man, who was to appear in glory to judge humankind. Davidic psalms about the suffering of the righteous one were interpreted as predictions of the events of the Messiah's passion.

All of these affirmations about Jesus are present in the early strata of the New Testament texts. Here I shall mention only a few New Testament writers and documents that employ the interpretive principle of promise or prophecy and fulfillment.

Paul's conviction that he was living in the times of fulfillment pervades his epistles. Two related passages exemplify this conviction. Galatians 3-5 is a lengthy and detailed argument for the abrogation of the Torah and the primacy of Christ. The thrust of the argument is temporal. God made certain promises to Abraham. They were held in abeyance during the time of the Torah. Now, in "the fulness of time"—the eschatological moment—they have been fulfilled in the appearance of *the* descendant of Abraham and the Son of God, who makes it possible for the gentile Galatians also to be sons of God and children of Abraham. Notably missing is any indication that the covenantal promises were fulfilled in the existence of Israel, who understood themselves as descendants of Abraham. Paul takes a broader view in Romans 15:8-12. Christ came to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs. These promises included Paul's mission to the gentiles, but as Paul's argument in Romans 9-11 makes clear, it was the Jews who had chronological pride of place as God's covenant people.

In Matthew's view, Jesus was the promised Davidic Messiah (1:1). He repeatedly emphasizes this point by introducing passages from Scripture with his well-known citation formula. Certain events happened, that "it might be fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet..." (1:22; 2:23; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54; 56; 27:9). A similar citation formula is employed on occasion in the Fourth Gospel (12:38; 13:18; 17:12; 18:9; 19:24, 36).

The Epistle to the Hebrews is replete with scriptural quotations, although

the terms for fulfill and fulfillment never occur. Most notable are the attribution of messianic oracles to Jesus and the quotation of Jeremiah 31 in 8:8-12—the longest running quotation of a scriptural passage in the New Testament. For this author, Jesus is the promised Davidic Messiah, the eschatological high priest, and the enactor of the promised New Covenant.

Like many of their Jewish contemporaries, then, the early Christians interpreted Scripture in terms of prophecy and fulfillment. Like the Qumran sectarians and others, they believed that these prophecies were being fulfilled in their own midst. What differentiated them as a group was their belief that fulfillment was bound up with the person of the crucified and risen Jesus.

In the context of our discussion, can we hazard any explanations as to why many Jews did not share the conviction of these followers of Jesus? Here two observations are crucial. First, biblical exegesis as practiced by first century Jews was in many respects a highly subjective exercise. As a reading of the rabbinic writings indicates, there could be a number of different interpretations of a given text, and the hermeneutical principles by which one arrived at these interpretations were debated. The kind of exegesis found in the Qumran commentaries was all the more problematic, because it was deductive. The exegete's *premise* was that he was living in the end-time. On the basis of that premise, he searched the Scriptures for prophecies that he believed were now being fulfilled. Much Qumranic exegesis would have failed to convince Jews

outside the community. A similar situation pertains to the biblical interpretation of the early church. It began with the conviction that God had acted in Jesus of Nazareth and that the *eschaton* was at hand. For those who did not share this prior conviction of Paul or Matthew or others, their interpretations of Scripture, and the hermeneutical principles that underlay them, were unconvincing. Secondly, as we have noted, Jews held many different opinions about the scenario of the end-time and the divine agents that would appear then (God himself, his angel, the Son of man, the Davidic and Levitic Messiahs, the eschatological prophet). It was inevitable that Jesus did not fulfill the expectations of many.⁵ This was the more so in view of his revolutionary preaching and lifestyle and, above all, his crucifixion. These are matters to which we turn in our next two sections.

II. THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

Well known for its influence on New Testament Christology is the Deutero-Isaianic figure of the Servant of Yahweh, particularly as he is described in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. With considerable justification from the New Testament itself, we often speak of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of this last Servant poem of Second Isaiah. In this section we shall sketch some first century Jewish interpretations of the Servant figure and some early Christian utilization of those interpretations.

The last Servant poem begins as the prophet announces the Servant's coming exaltation in the presence of the kings and the nations, who behold him

⁵For a brief treatment of some relevant New Testament passages and their Jewish counterparts, see G. Nickelsburg and M. Stone, *Faith and Piety*, chapter 6.

in astonishment. In the long speech that follows, they recall how they previously construed his suffering and death as divine punishment for his sins. Now they retract that opinion and interpret his exaltation as divine vindication of his innocence; his suffering had been on their behalf. This pattern of condemnation, suffering, and vindication appears also in the Servant poem in 50:4-9. The identity of Second Isaiah's Servant is disputed among scholars. In some texts, he is the nation; in others, a part of the nation or an individual with a mission to the nation and the gentiles. Important for the present discussion is the fact that Second Isaiah depicts the Servant in personal terms, as a suffering prophet.

Jewish interpreters of the second and first centuries B.C.E. took up the theme of the suffering, exalted, and vindicated servant/prophet and identified him with the protagonists in stories about the persecution, exaltation, and vindication of wise courtiers—righteous persons who were spokesmen for God: e.g., Joseph in Genesis 34ff.; the three youths in Daniel 3; and Daniel himself in Daniel 6. In these stories the hero provokes a conspiracy against himself, and his enemies accuse him before the king or at least see to it that he is condemned to death. This death serves as an ordeal to determine whether or not the protagonist's conduct and his claims about himself were justified. God rescues his righteous one from death, and he is exalted in the royal court and vindicated with respect to the charges that were brought against him.

The interpretation that identifies the Servant of the Lord and the heroes of these court tales with one another is preserved for us in chapters 2:1-3:9 and 4:16-5:14 of the Wisdom of Solomon, a composition from the opening decades of the Common Era. The author of these

chapters employs the form and outline of the court tales with some significant nuances and changes. In the first part of the story (ch. 2), the righteous man incites the wrath of his opponents by criticizing their sins against the Law, claiming that he is a “son” or “servant” of God under the divine protection of his Father. His enemies condemn him to death, and when he does die, they are certain that his claims were unfounded. The second part of the story (4:20-5:14) is a scene of exaltation and vindication heavily influenced by Isaiah 52-53. When his enemies die, the righteous one confronts them in the heavenly courtroom as their judge. Now they must acknowledge that he stands among the angels, the “sons of God.” They confess their sin and anticipate their coming damnation. For the author of this text, the significance of the last Servant poem lies in its pattern of suffering, exaltation, and vindication. Notably lacking is any reference to vicarious suffering or death (cf. Isa 53:4-6, 10, 11 with Wis 5:4-8; 3:6). In keeping with the Servant poem, and in distinction from the court tales, the hero in Wisdom actually dies and is exalted and vindicated in the heavenly court, in spite of his death.

Of whom does the author of Wisdom 2-5 think when he describes his protagonist? Different from the authors of the court tales, he does not set his story in a specific time or place, nor does he give his characters proper names. The righteous one is a *type* of person; the Servant is not a single figure who will appear at a given time as the fulfillment of Second Isaiah’s prophecy. This typological interpretation of the Servant figure constitutes a *traditional* exegesis that appears in a number of Jewish texts in the historical period with which we are concerned. In Daniel 12:3, the language of Isaiah 52:13 and 53:11 applies to

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the wise teachers who encouraged pious Jews to stand fast in Antiochus’ persecution and who will be exalted to special glory in the heavenly court. A similar interpretation of the Servant songs occurs in two of the Qumran hymns, with reference to their author(s). In 1QH 4:5-5:4 the author (probably the “Teacher of Righteousness”) employs language from Isaiah 52-53 to describe his suffering and his anticipated deliverance and exaltation. In 1QH 8:35-36 the language of Isaiah 50:4-9 describes the author’s vocation as teacher.

Second Maccabees 7 is a final example of this traditional interpretation of Isaiah 52-53. It recounts the story of a mother and her seven sons, who rebuke Antiochus Epiphanes and are put to death because they refuse to obey the king’s command that they violate the Torah. The author employs the Servant tradition to flesh out his theology of resurrection. The protagonists are persecuted spokesmen of the Lord. In obeying the Torah they disobey royal law and thus forfeit their lives. However, they believe that the heavenly King will vindicate their conduct and their claims by raising their mutilated bodies. One particular exegetical technique is noteworthy. The author uses elements from the Servant poems to create narrative details in his story. The brothers are scourged (7:1; cf. Isa 50:6); the third brother makes reference to the tongue which the Lord has given him (7:10-11; cf. Isa 50:4); and the king is astonished at the brothers’ perseverance (7:12; Isa 52:14-15).⁶ Flexibility is an important feature in the Jewish use of exegetical traditions. Here, different from Wisdom 2 and 5, the author appears to make use of the motif of the vicarious suffering or death (7:38).

We have traced a Jewish exegetical tradition that interprets Isaiah 52-53 as the story of the persecuted but exalted and vindicated spokesman of the Lord. Here we may touch on the early church’s use of that tradition with reference to the death and resurrection/exaltation of

Jesus. We begin with traditional formulae, creeds, and hymns. New Testament passages about the “vicarious” death of Jesus are well known, and some of them may draw on the language of Isaiah 53 (e.g., Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3; Mark 10:45; 14:24).⁷ Less frequently noted are passages that interpret Jesus’ death as an evil thing from which God rescued him by exalting and vindicating him in the resurrection. Significant is the formula: “The God (*or* He) who raised Jesus *from the dead*” (e.g., Rom 4:24; 8:11; 1 Pet 1:21). The parallelism in Romans 10:9 defines the resurrection as Jesus’ exaltation:

If you confess with your mouth that *Jesus is Lord*,
and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,
you will be saved.

Death and resurrection as persecution, exaltation, and vindication are typical of formulae in Acts, for example:

⁶In similar fashion, Deutero-Isaianic passages and traditions about Mother Zion and her sons are here narrativized to interpret the author’s theology of resurrection.

⁷For an alternative explanation, which sees New Testament passages drawing on pagan Greek ideas, see Sam K. Williams, *Jesus Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept* (Harvard Dissertations in Religion 2; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975).

God made him both Lord and Christ—
this Jesus whom you crucified. (2:36)

Through the resurrection, God has vindicated in his court the one who was condemned to death in a human court. While all these passages may not derive from an interpretation of Isaiah 52-53, the Isaianic tradition alerts us to their pattern of persecution and vindication-whatever its source.

The Isaianic tradition is clearly present in the early hymn quoted in Philippians 2:6-11. Because Jesus, the Servant, obediently humbled himself to death, God exalted him and bestowed on him the name of Lord. Usually Jesus’ obedience is construed as his submitting to the necessity of his vicarious death. The lack of such a motif in Wisdom 2-5 suggests another interpretation. As God’s spokesman, Jesus pursued his vocation—a course of action that led inevitably to his death. This interpretation is consonant with elements in the passion narratives, which have been composed as stories of persecution and vindication.

A brief summary of the Markan passion narrative will illustrate this point.⁸ Like the stories of Joseph, the three youths, Daniel, and the righteous man in Wisdom 2 and 5, the narrative begins as Jesus provokes a conspiracy against himself (11:15-18), proceeds through trial, accusation, condemnation, and death, and concludes with his vindication. At issue in the story are Jesus’ condemnation of the Temple and his claims to be Messiah and Son of God. His crucifixion is an ordeal to test his claims (see 15:29-32), and his death (i.e., his inability to save himself) convinces the onlookers that his claims are fraudulent. However, the rending of the Temple veil and the centurion’s confession that he was “Son of God” vindicate him (cf. Wis 5), and, as he predicted in 14:61-62, his enemies will recognize this, when he confronts them, exalted as their judge. Three other aspects of the Markan passion narrative are significant in this

context. The first is Mark's integration of Jesus' status as Messiah with his vocation as the persecuted and vindicated righteous one—or in his terms, the Son of man who must be put to death and rise again. Jesus' acquiescence in Gethsemane and his refusal to save himself on the cross are acts of the Servant's obedience unto death, mentioned above. Second, this messianic vocation to be crucified confounds Peter, the disciples, and everyone else in the Gospel. The cross is a scandal. Third, there is a matter of literary technique. Elements from the Servant poems and from Psalms of the suffering and vindicated righteous one (e.g., Pss 22 and 69) become narrative details in the story: Jesus is scourged; Pilate is astonished; Jesus' garments are divided, and he is given vinegar to drink.

Two factors control and characterize the early Christian re-use of the Jewish traditions under discussion. First, titles and figures from a number of sources and traditions are identified with one another and conflated. The persecuted one is exalted as Son of man, Messiah, and Lord. Conversely, these traditional exalted figures are identified as the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Second, and related to this, the Servant figure—a *type* of Jewish tradition, realized at various times in various suffering righteous spokesmen of the Lord—is here uniquely identified with Jesus of Nazareth, who is considered to be the personi-

⁸For details see my article, "The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980) 153-84.

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fication of a number of eschatological figures and hence the fulfillment of prophecy. This coalescing and identification of eschatological figures with the crucified Jesus was an important factor in the inability of first century Jews to accept the church's high Christological claims.

III. TORAH AND WISDOM

Fundamental to Jewish self-understanding was their status as God's people, chosen and called into a covenantal relationship with him. Within that covenant, their obligation was to obey God's will, which had been revealed in the laws and commandments of the Torah. Alternate responses of obedience and disobedience would result in life or death—the blessings and curses of the covenant. Because of their crucial place in the life of God's people, the laws and commandments of the Torah were the focus of a great deal of Jewish biblical interpretation. If God's will was to be obeyed, it was essential to know his will. Jews differed, however, in their interpretation of the Torah. The Sadducees—the conservative, aristocratic priestly class—claimed that only the letter of the five books of Moses was authoritative, though doubtless they had traditional interpretations of specific laws. The Pharisees were religious liberals, who constantly sought to interpret the Torah in the light of new circumstances. *Halakhah* was the term applied to interpretation that spelled out the details of the laws. These interpretations comprised an oral tradition, which the Pharisees traced back to Moses and to which they ascribed an authority equal to that of the Pentateuch. Most of our information about these interpretations comes from rabbinic texts that were written down in the second century C.E. and thereafter.

Developments and diversity in the interpretation of Torah were not limited to disputes between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Writings from the second and first centuries B.C.E., such as the Epistle of Enoch (*1 Enoch* 92-105), the *Book of Jubilees*, and the Qumran Damascus Document amply attest halakhic diversity and, in some cases, bitter sectarian division that

stemmed from the belief that obedience to particular interpretations of the Torah was necessary for salvation, i.e., covenantal blessing.

An important development in Jewish theology in the last centuries before the Common Era was the identification of Wisdom with the Torah. Proverbs 8 depicts Wisdom in personalized form, as a member of the heavenly court. She was God's first created being and was his instrument for the creation of the world. The idea is elaborated in a poem in chapter 24 of the Wisdom of Joshua the Son of Sira, the so-called book of Sirach (198-175 B.C.E.). Wisdom descended from heaven and made her abode in Torah; she dwells in Jerusalem, where she is expounded in the Temple. In the teaching of ben Sira (and other sages), she is dispensed to the eager hearer, and through obedience to this teaching one obtains life—the blessing of the covenant. The poem in Baruch 3:9-4:4 expresses a similar viewpoint. It is a mythicized version of covenantal theology. One speaks not of the giving of the Torah in past history on Mount Sinai, but of the present existence of life-giving Wisdom in the Torah. A parody of this theology occurs in *1 Enoch* 42. Wisdom descended to earth but found no abode and so she returned to heaven, leaving unrighteousness behind. Accord-

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ing to *1 Enoch* 94:5, Wisdom could not find a dwelling place because she was evilly treated, probably when the wicked ignored or persecuted her spokesmen.

The gospels ascribe to Jesus two different attitudes toward the Torah. On the one hand he disregards Pharisaic halakhoth about the observance of the Sabbath, table fellowship, and fasting, and his communion with sinners outrages the pious. On the other hand, he categorically forbids divorce (Mark 10:2-9) thus opting for a strict interpretation akin to the Essene viewpoint (cf. CD 4:19-21).

Early Christian attitudes toward the Torah varied widely, although, for the most part, they constituted the church's most radical departure from its Jewish heritage. For some Jews who believed that God had acted in Jesus of Nazareth—persons like James and the Pharisaic Christians—the Torah continued to be an important fact of religious life. A similar position was taken by the Judaizing opponents of Paul, with whom the apostle disputed in Galatians and Philippians 3. The opposite viewpoint is reflected in the traditions in Mark in which Jesus and his disciples are criticized for not observing Pharisaic halakhic practice. These stories reflect Jesus' own radical views toward Torah and its practice; however, they were preserved and transmitted in the early church because they were relevant for the conflict between the Pharisees and those early followers of Jesus who were not observing Pharisaic practice.

The theologian of a torah-free Christianity was, of course, the apostle Paul. In the context of his extensive mission to the gentiles, he proclaimed that Christ, was the end of the Torah. He expounds this position in Galatians 3-4, where he asserts that the Torah was valid only between the time when the promises were given to Abraham and the fulness of time when they were fulfilled. At that time God sent his son—the pre-existent Wisdom—to bring the covenantal blessings that were not possible through the Torah. In a radical departure from Jewish tradition, the apostle asserts that Wisdom became incarnate in Jesus; it was not “inbookified” in Torah as the poems in Sirach and Baruch asserted. Since Christ has taken the place of Torah, access to the covenant (justification) and status as a descendant of Abraham is not by the deeds of the Torah (specifically the initiatory rite of circumcision and observance of food laws), but by faith in

Christ, *the* descendant of Abraham and the Son of God.

The identification of Jesus with the pre-existent Wisdom is a central assertion of much New Testament Christology. The hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 recounts the story of Wisdom's incarnation, enfolding the Isaianic pattern of persecution and exaltation into the Wisdom myth. Jesus is the maltreated spokesman of Wisdom. The exaltation which follows his persecution is also Wisdom's return to heaven. The pattern of descending and ascending Wisdom is basic to the Christology of the Fourth Gospel and is sketched out in the book's prologue, which contrasts Jesus, in whom Wisdom made its dwelling among us and the giver of grace and truth, with Moses, the giver of Torah (1:14-17). For the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, God's Son, the divine Wisdom (1:1-4; cf. Wis Sol 7:25), has brought a new covenant and the end of the dispensation of the Torah. In summary, early Christians took up a ready-made Jewish myth of salvation (Wisdom, the creative instrument, descends to the creation to bring it life) and identified the presence of life-giving Wisdom as Jesus of Nazareth rather than the Torah. Here, as before, the person and activity of Jesus of Nazareth was decisive and definitional for Christians.

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Neither the preaching of Paul nor the aforementioned Wisdom Christologies eliminated Christian advocacy of the Torah. Matthew took a point of view decidedly different from that of Paul. For him Jesus was the fulfillment of Law as well as the prophets, and not "the least of these commandments" is to be nullified. The precise interpretation of this group of sayings in 5:17-20 is hotly disputed, but as a programmatic statement it indicates a much more sympathetic view toward the Torah than Romans 10:4.

The author of the First Gospel envisioned a church that would be predominantly gentile in its membership, and the Gospel itself was preserved by such a church. In such a context, however, Paul's viewpoint prevailed, and Matthew's sympathy for the Torah was ignored or reinterpreted. Christians who continued to observe the Torah became a diminishing minority.

Because we are heirs of the Pauline tradition of a Torah-free Christianity, and take it for granted, it is difficult for us to understand how inevitable it was that Torah would become a bitterly divisive issue between Christians and Jews. When Paul and those of a similar mind argued that the Torah was *passé*, or in some sense an *adiaphoron*, they struck at the heart of Jewish religion. Schism between Jews and Christians was inevitable. The schism was exacerbated by the radical claim that the crucified Jesus was the incarnation of divine Wisdom—the Son of God.

IV. PATRIARCHS AS PARADIGMS

Jewish concern with right and wrong conduct, which is at the heart of the Torah, is expressed in narrative traditions that elaborate on biblical stories, especially in the Pentateuch. These traditions, many of which are preserved in the Pseudepigrapha, describe the patriarchs as paradigms of virtues and vices. This description of human conduct in terms of certain abstract virtues and vices has its origin in the thought of pagan Hellenistic writers and philosophers.

Stories about Abraham ascribe to the patriarch a variety of virtues and vices. As one might expect, Abraham's faith is especially proverbial. According to Genesis 15:6, the patriarch was declared righteous because he trusted in God's promise that he would have descendants. This motif undergoes a significant transformation in *Jubilees* 17-18, the account of the sacrifice

of Isaac. The story from Genesis 22 is here framed by a pair of scenes in heaven, which are reminiscent of Job 1-2. Satan disputes Abraham's faithfulness to God, and the sacrifice becomes a trial of that faithfulness, which ends with Satan's defeat and Abraham's vindication. Thus a biblical story that never mentions Abraham's faith is retold to epitomize obedient *faithfulness* put to action. Moreover, the event is said to have been one of ten trials in which the patriarch showed faithfulness and its twin virtue, patient endurance (17:17-18).

The *Testament of Abraham* (1st century C.E.) is mixed in its description of Abraham. The virtues of quietness, gentleness, righteousness, and hospitality are ascribed to him, but when God summons Abraham's soul to go forth (cf. Gen 12:1), he refuses. For purposes of instruction, the author imputes to Abraham a lack of faith, and as the story progresses, he depicts the dark underside of

Abraham's righteousness: self-righteousness that cannot understand or countenance the sins of others.

The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is a collection of testaments ascribed to the sons of Jacob in the closing days of their respective lives.⁹ In these testaments, the patriarch recounts events from his life that illustrate certain virtues or vices, which he exhorts his sons to emulate or eschew, as the case may be. Taken together, these vices and virtues are parallel to lists in the New Testament and in Greek philosophical writings. Noteworthy are: fornication (Reuben and Judah); drunkenness and love of money (Judah); sexual continence (Issachar); jealousy (Simeon); anger (Dan); hatred (Gad); moderation, endurance in trial, and brotherly love (Joseph).

Some Jewish texts compile lists of biblical figures who exemplify a single quality. In his deathbed speech to his sons, Mattathias, the father of Judas Maccabeus, recalls the exploits of the fathers (1 Macc 2:51-64). These heroes of Israelite history, led by Abraham—who was faithful when tested—acted zealously for the Lord and received their reward. In typical testamental fashion, Mattathias exhorts his sons to follow suit.

Exhortations to right conduct permeate the New Testament. Although the apostle Paul argues that the Torah is *passé*, he devotes perhaps the majority of the space in his epistles to the subject of the Christian life. Human conduct and its consequences are of central concern in Galatians 5:13-6:10, a section that follows his lengthy argument that the time of the Law is past. First he exhorts his readers to reject “works of the flesh” and to produce the “fruits of the spirit,” which are catalogued in traditional lists of vices and virtues. Then he refers to the results of these two ways of life: eternal corruption and eternal life, the consequences of a judgment based on deeds.

Hebrews 11-12 employs a paradigmatic interpretation of Scripture. In general form and in function the passage parallels the speech of Mattathias in 1 Maccabees 2. For the purpose of exhortation, the author compiles a list of heroes and heroines which begins with Abel and ends with Jesus. The virtue common to these people is faith—trust in God's promise that leads to obedience and results in divine approval and the fulfillment of the promise. Not surprisingly, Abraham and Sarah play a prominent role in this list of heroes and heroines, and Abraham's obedience in sacrificing Isaac is duly noted. The list climaxes with Jesus, who endured the cross and is exalted on high. As they struggle with sin and hostility, the readers are to emulate this faithful endurance in anticipation of their invisible inheritance. Thus the Christological theme of

Jesus' suffering and exaltation serves the ethical exhortation that governs the list as a whole. A similar exhortative use of the Christological theme of Jesus' suffering and exaltation occurs in Mark 10:45; Philippians 2:1-11; and 1 Peter 2:18-25, which employ Servant theology as a basis for exhortations to humility, obedience, and submission.

Common to the texts that we have been discussing is a Christologizing of Jewish traditions and interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures. For Paul the

⁹The *Testaments* draw on Jewish testamentary traditions and are typical of this literary genre. In their present form, they are a Christian composition and constitute a remarkable example of how the genre and its interests and techniques persisted in the church of the early patristic era.

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dynamic of the virtuous life is the Spirit, by definition—the Spirit of the risen Christ (cf. Rom 8). For the author of Hebrews and others, the faithful, obedient, suffering Jesus is the example *par excellence*.

V. SOME CONSEQUENCES

First century Christian interpretations of Scripture had deep roots in Jewish tradition. The church's resurrection faith and the estimation of Jesus of Nazareth that resulted from it governed the nuances of the church's interpretations of Scripture and their divergence from Jewish tradition. Characteristic of these interpretations are unique blends of eschatological beliefs and radical claims about the Torah, which would have been far from self-evident to many first century Jews. We need to keep this in mind in our preaching and teaching, when we comment on "why the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah." The same pertains to our estimation of Jews in our own time and our relationships with them. Our roots in Judaism call us into dialogue with Jews. In this dialogue, however, historical honesty and a catholic sense of continuity with the past require that we not minimize the Christological issue and its implications.

Variety is an essential characteristic of Jewish biblical interpretation, and the early church picked up on that characteristic. Christological titles and models vary, as do their functions. Jesus' death and resurrection have a number of different nuances. Abrogation of the Torah hardly means a lack of seriousness about the consequences of human conduct—something Lutherans sometimes forget.

The cross is central to early Christian proclamation, as is evident from the prevalence of Servant theology. At issue is the problem of vindicating the unlikely. Not only does the Servant suffer, but outsiders interpret this suffering as the result of divine displeasure with the Servant's actions and lifestyle. The Servant's vocation, however, is to persist, even at the cost of further suffering. Vindication is a consequence of suffering; it does not short-circuit it. The *scandal* of Christianity was the cross. Its glory was precisely the reason for its rejection. The scandal remains and cannot be covered up by romanticized portrayals of Jesus or of the cross. In the view of much New Testament theology, the vocation of the Servant was bestowed upon the followers of Jesus. Servant theology has fallen out of favor in some quarters. Its devaluators should recognize, however, that they strike at the heart of New Testament proclamation and parenthesis. A perversion of Servant theology does not justify its total dismissal. In the biblical view, the Servant is never the other person, to be taken advantage of. New Testament portrayals of Jesus depict him as both the proponent of radical liberation and the embodiment of servanthood. The

model is appropriate for the inner life of the church and for the church's activity and proclamation to the world. God's power is enacted in weakness and through persisting in the vocation of the servant—in spite of the scepticism and rejection of others, but in the certainty of divine vindication.