

I deal only in affirmative matters, so I ask, Are the rabbis of the Oral Torah right in maintaining that they have provided the key to Scripture? To answer that question in the affirmative, sages would have only to point to their theology in the setting of Scripture's as they grasped it. The theology of the Oral Torah set forth by the Rabbinic sages tells a simple, sublime story, *and it is the same story told by the Written Torah:*

[1] God created a perfect, just world and in it made man in his image, equal to God in the power of will.

[2] Man in his arrogance sinned and was expelled from the perfect world and given over to death. God gave man the Torah to purify his heart of sin.

[3] Man educated by the Torah in humility can repent, accepting God's will of his own free will. When he does, man will be restored to Eden and eternal life.

In our terms, we should call it a story with a beginning, middle, and end. In the sages' framework, we realize, the story embodies an enduring and timeless paradigm of humanity in the encounter with God: man's powerful will, God's powerful word, in conflict, and the resolution thereof.

I claim, therefore, that no one can reasonably doubt that the Rabbinic sages' reading of Scripture recovers, in proportion and accurate stress and balance, the main lines of Scripture's principal story, the one about creation, the fall of man and God's salvation of man through Israel and the Torah. In familiar, though somewhat gauche, language, "Judaism" really is what common opinion thinks it is, which is, "the religion of the Old Testament." If, as Brevard Childs states, "The evangelists read from the New [Testament] backward to the Old,"¹ we may say very simply, — and, when I say, the sages were right and that Judaism owns the Bible — this is what I claim to have shown: *the Rabbinic sages read from the written Torah forward to the oral one. And our religion is built upon the Torah, whole and complete and perfect.*

The Response of Christianity and its Counter-Claim

Bruce D. Chilton

In asserting his four facts, Professor Neusner also puts pointed questions to Christianity, every one of them both serious and telling. Answering them involves spelling out the facts of revelation as they are perceived and taught by the Church.

First, "Why should they even want to claim to own Scripture at all, if they do not keep important commandments that Scripture sets forth?" This question strikes accurately at a sensitive spot. During the second century a teacher in Rome, Marcion, insisted that the New Testament should stand alone as Scripture, and that anything connected with Judaism should be expurgated from the one Gospel he liked (Luke) and Paul's letters. He has had pale imitators ever since, but the Church then and now has authoritatively rejected the idea that the Old Testament can be dispensed with.

The letters of Paul, which Marcion made the basis of his views, undermined his position. The teacher whom the Church regarded as "the Apostle", once its primary constituency was non-Jewish, himself emphasized that Israel has a permanent place in the history of salvation. Why should that be the case? Because, he said, from the Israelites came "the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Romans 9:5). If you want to know what these things are, you need the Scriptures of Israel. Paul understands that all these gifts are only fully realized in the final gift of Israel: the coming of "Christ according to the flesh" (Romans 9:6). But you cannot perceive what Christ fulfils unless you appreciate what he fulfils, and that tale is told only in Israel's Scriptures.

In these texts, the Holy Spirit has always spoken. By reading them with accurate sympathy, that same Spirit is awakened in believers, so that this Spirit, identical the Spirit of Christ, becomes active in them. A teacher of the second century, Justin Martyr, spells this out (*Dialogue with Trypho* 7):

Long ago... there lived men more ancient than all the so-called philosophers, men righteous and beloved of God, who spoke by the divine Spirit and foretold things to come, that even now are taking place. These men were called prophets. They alone both saw the truth and proclaimed it to men, without awe or fear of anyone, moved by no desire for glory, but speaking only those things which they saw and heard when filled with the Holy Spirit. Their writings are still with us, and whoever will may read them and, if he believes them, gain much knowledge of the beginning and end of things, and all else a philosopher ought to know. For they did not employ logic to prove their statements, seeing they were witnesses to the truth....They glorified the creator of all things, as God and Father, and proclaimed the Christ sent by him as his Son....But pray that, before all else, the gates of light may be opened to you. For not everyone can see or understand these things, but only he to whom God and his Christ have granted wisdom.

For Justin and for Christianity after him, the Scriptures of Israel are fundamentally prophecies, and only incidentally books of law. Of course commandments are included in them, as reference to made to differing political authorities and widely varying arrangements for worship. But their idiom throughout is that they articulate that Holy Spirit which is humanity's only real hope.

Just as the reading of Christianity is attuned to awakening the Spirit within the texts and their interpreters alike, so the Church sees only a spiritual definition of Israel as absolute. For that reason the second question, "Why should they want to own Scripture so focused as it is on Israel, the people of the Torah?" misses the point. Every single person who believes in the way that Abraham believed in God becomes a child of Abraham (Galatians 3:6-9), and therefore an Israelite. Genesis itself says (15:6) that faith alone was Abraham's righteousness, and that is a prophetic truth for us, as well. Genealogy doesn't matter; because Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and females are yesterday's divisions, which are to be dissolved in the future glory of God's kingdom (Galatians 3:28). As the Epistle to Diognetus (5.6) puts the matter, if the world is to be carved up between the race of the Greeks and the race of the Jews, then Christians are a third race, foreigners in every country and patriots of every land. Boundaries of race, class, and country are artificial structures of a corrupt world that is now in the process of passing away.

In-house debates in the New Testament between mostly Jewish followers of Jesus and the opponents they styled "the Jews" became so vehement, Gospel texts (especially in Matthew) provoked violence once Christians found themselves in positions of power. Many of these texts have encouraged and occasioned Anti-Semitism. But let's not make the elementary mistake of confusing "the Jews" as opponents of the gospel with "Israel," which is always the context of salvation. Also, let us not forget that Paul never imagined that Jewish followers of Jesus would be required to reject the Torah. On the contrary, he boasted that he could preach Christ both with Moses' law and without Moses' law (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), because to his mind the legitimate customs of every people attest the truth of God in their own way (Romans 1:18-23).

So the Old Testament is every Christian's story, whether "Jew or Greek" because it is the record of how faith came to fruition, how it grew and developed like a plant, bobbed and weaved like a boxer, and broke through to the promise of a new heaven and a new earth in the poetry of vision. That faith is the promise Christ fulfils, and for us the patriarchs and prophets and psalmists equally sing our song — and sing it in our words.

It is next objected that in Christianity “The entire revelation at Sinai is now relegated to ‘it was said.’ And this in contrast to ‘I.’” That is true in the Sermon on the Mount, an editorial compilation in Matthew, and it also characterizes Jesus’ own position. After all, he appears to his disciples in conversation with none other than Moses and Elijah, and at the close of that discussion, a divine echo identifies him alone as God’s “Son” (see Mark 9:2-8). Here, of course, we come to the heart of the matter, and to what from the point of view of Rabbinic Judaism can only appear arrogance within Jesus’ position.

The ways of fathers and sons, parents and their children, are remarkably constant. Among the many elemental features that travel over time and across cultures, one stands out vividly in the mind of any parent of an adolescent: children talk back. They interrupt. They get upset at you for no good reason. Remember that when the prophet Hosea (11:1) said, “Out of Egypt I called my son,” he was talking about the Israelites, and in the same breath complaining about their lack of constancy. Simeon ben Shetach said something similar about Choni (Taanit 23a): God listened to his prayers because he spoiled him like a child. Children behave like children, Jesus included.

The Spirit of God in his case brought a life of rigour and passion and vision and commitment, but also of doubt, anger, suffering, and loneliness. The Gospels do not conceal any of that; they celebrate it all, although the celebration is too much for the pseudo-orthodox of modern America (including a journalist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*). Tertullian went to the length of describing Jesus as short, squat, and ugly. Why? This genuine humanity means that the sonship of Jesus, his intimacy with Spirit, is a model for our receiving of the Spirit, for all our own ugliness. At baptism, Paul says, the Spirit cries out to God, “Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:4-7; Romans 8:14-17) as happened when Jesus was immersed by John the Baptist. Sonship is ours; it comes to us from Israel’s inheritance with our own immersion in Spirit, our own crosses to bear, our own transformation into eternal life.

Sonship belongs to us because it belongs to Jesus, and vice versa. Sonship is what the whole story of God with his people is about. “I am sure,” said Paul (Romans 8:38-39), “that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

That is the real content of revelation: the story of God’s ceaseless longing to bring home his vagrant children in every time and place. As Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, wrote in his longest treatise, *The City of God*, the whole of human history takes place in the

dreadful caesura between humanity's catastrophic confusion between passion and self-indulgence, between love of God and love of self (*City of God* 14.28):

So two loves have constituted two cities — the earthly is formed by love of self even to contempt of God, the heavenly by love of God even to contempt of self. For the one glories in herself, the other in the Lord. The one seeks glory from man; for the other God, the witness of the conscience, is the greatest glory....In the one the lust for power prevails, both in her own rulers and in the nations she subdues; in the other all serve each other in charity, governors by taking thought for all and subjects by obeying.

By book 18, Augustine arrives at his own time, and repeats that the two cities “alike enjoy temporal goods or suffer temporal ills, but differ in faith, in hope, in love, until they be separated by the final judgment and each receive its end, of which there is no end” (*City of God* 18.54).

He wrote at the same time Genesis Rabbah was being compiled, and like the sages of that Midrash, Augustine synthesized Scripture with his view of the world and salvation as a whole. Unlike the sages, his perspective was not one of a repeated pattern. Augustine teaches us something about Christianity that Christians themselves often have trouble seeing, so I am not surprised when those looking at our faith from outside miss the point. To the naked eye, it can seem that Judaism and Christianity are fighting over words: you say the Scripture is about Torah, I say it is about Christ. As Margaret Thatcher once said of her opponents, “They would say that, wouldn't they?” At some level, our disputation has to come down to that. But Augustine shows us plainly why the issue here is not merely a matter of words.

Jesus' sonship leads not to restoration, but to resurrection. This is not just a matter of afterlife somehow sometime, a wish for the pleasant parts of the status quo to keep on going or a return to nostalgia as it used to be. Rather, Jesus in the most ancient creed of the Church was raised to a new order of spiritual being at the *right hand of God*, such that believers also strive for a transformation into life in the Spirit, rather than the flesh. The focus the Christian orientation express in the Apostles Creed is precisely that resurrection of the spiritual bodies of believers (so Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:12-54), a new and transformed life that the world has only glimpsed before in the case of Jesus.

So yes, it must be the case that Christians read the Bible backward. When you are moving forward at great speed, maps tell you

where you have been, and provide only an inkling of where you are going. The heavenly Jerusalem that is our true home is not objectively there in the text at all; our intimacy with that Jerusalem, she who is our mother (Galatians 4:26), comes only with the Spirit that the Scriptures attest and awaken. We search not for patterns that always have been and will be, nor for any city ever on earth, but for directions to that city whose constitution is a kingdom not of this world.

Writing to Philippi near the end of his life, Paul made perhaps his greatest contribution to the movement he had spliced his life to. After years of saying that various readers should imitate him, just as he imitates Christ — a touching imperative if you liked Paul, another example of arrogance if you did not—without preamble he tells the Philippians what the whole process of faith is about (2:5-8):

Let this thought prevail among you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in God's form, did not consider the presumption of equality with God, but emptied himself, taking a servant's form; existing in men's likeness, and found as a man in shape, he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, death on a cross.

This language is so resonant, it has been described as a hymn, and attributed to a local tradition that Paul refers to. But even if it is, Paul is the author who uses this language deliberately, to speak of Jesus as God.

The simplicity of the whole achievement is staggering. Paul can now write what is commonly used as a blessing at the close of many, many Christian liturgies, "The peace of God that passes all understanding will keep you hearts and thoughts in Jesus Christ" (4:7). Jesus now becomes the centre of gravity of the entirety faith, because he is divine, and is acknowledged as such, so that "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth, and in the underworld" (2:10): *he* receives the honour due God himself in the words of Isaiah (45:23), as—the Church believes—had been the Father's intention all along.

1 *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, p. 720.