

The Claim of Judaism Correctly to Interpret Scripture in accord with Scripture's own Imperatives and Narrative

Jacob Neusner

The claim of Judaism to own the Bible rests on four facts, and one further claim. No reasonable person can deny the facticity of the facts I shall adduce in evidence of the Judaic claim of possession. The claim is a matter of interpretation of Scripture: who is right about its main point, as I shall explain.

The first fact is, Judaism takes seriously and keeps the laws set forth in Scripture. In contemporary Judaic life there are disagreements on details, but no one who affirms the authority of the Torah denies the commandments. Take the Sabbath for example. It is the seventh day of the week, sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. We keep that law. Christians do not. Take the matter of the covenant of circumcision, beginning with Abraham. We keep that law, Christians do not. Christians focus on their liberation from the law of the Torah; they do not keep the Sabbath as God commanded it; they eat forbidden food; they do not observe the laws of the Torah. Why should they even want to claim to own Scripture at all, if they do not keep important commandments that Scripture sets forth?

The second fact fundamental to the Judaic claim to own the Bible turns from law to theology, specifically, Scripture's theology of Israel, defined as the people called by God to his service in the Torah. The Jewish people today as for all the centuries from the beginning of Scripture to the present finds in Scripture its story of itself. The Jewish people regards itself as the "Israel" of which Scripture speaks. We take personally every chapter of Scripture and find ourselves in each one. That is not a matter of personal opinion. It is the norm declared at the Passover Seder for the Exodus from Egypt. How do the Jews they see themselves? These words, from the *Haggadah*, or Narrative, of Passover answer the question:

We were the slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt; and the Lord our God brought us forth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not brought our fathers forth from Egypt, then surely we, and our children, and our children's children, would be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. And so, even if all of us were full of wisdom and understanding, well along in years and deeply versed in the tradition, we should still be bidden to repeat once more the story of the exodus from Egypt; and he who delights to dwell on the liberation is a man to be praised.

That is what it means to take Scripture personally, as the story of one's own family origins. By contrast, the Christians have long since ceased to regard themselves as part of the Israel of which Scripture speaks. We see our story, even to the present moment, in prophecy and narrative of Scripture, ourselves in Isaiah 53 for example. And that connection is both genealogical and spiritual. The Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, speak of "the Jews" as alien and wicked; they do not claim to speak to Israel or for Scripture but despite and against Israel. Why should they want to own Scripture so focused as it is on Israel, the people of the Torah?

Third, the Christians' conception of the Messiah contradicts the expectations of the Messiah put forth in the Torah. The Messiah is supposed to be a master of the Torah, and, in the language of Matthew 5:17, not to destroy but to fulfil the Torah. But the key is, Jesus "taught them as one who had authority" on his own. . It is one thing to say on one's own how a basic teaching of the Torah shapes the everyday: "let the other's honour...the property...be as precious to you as your own...." It is quite another to say that the Torah says one thing, but I say..., then to announce in one's own name what God set forth at Sinai. And for much of the Sermon on the Mount, that is what Jesus does. I am troubled not so much by the message, though I might take exception to this or that, as I am by the messenger. The reason is that, in form these statements are jarring. Standing on the mountain, Jesus's use of language, "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..." contrasts strikingly with Moses's language at Mount Sinai. Sages cite the Torah, and they say things in their own names, but without claiming to improve upon the Torah.

The prophet, Moses, speaks not in his own name but in God's name, saying what God has told him to say. Jesus speaks not as a sage nor as a prophet. Note, when Moses turns to the people at Mount Sinai, he starts with these words: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Moses speaks as God's prophet, in God's name, for God's purpose. So how am I to respond to this "I," who pointedly contrasts what I have heard said with what he says. The Torah does not prepare me for a message contrasting what the Torah has said with what "I" say, nor does the Torah help me to understand a message framed in such a way that the very source of the teaching that has been said, the Torah itself, is sidestepped. The entire revelation at Sinai is now relegated to "it was said." And this in contrast to "I."

The fourth fact is, Judaism interprets Scripture in Scripture's own context, and Christianity removes Scripture from its Israelite context.

By that I mean, Judaism finds in Scripture the pattern of the history of the Jewish people, which is Scripture's own manifest programme and intent. But Christianity does not.

Take for example the Judaic reading of the book of Genesis by *Genesis Rabbah*, the Rabbinic commentary of the fifth century. *Genesis Rabbah* transforms the book of Genesis from a genealogy and family history of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, then Joseph, into a book of the laws of history and rules for the salvation of Israel. Scripture's stories are treated as examples of laws, and genealogy is turned into social history. In *Genesis Rabbah* the entire narrative of Genesis is so formed as to point toward the sacred history of Israel, the Jewish people: its slavery and redemption; its restored Temple in Jerusalem; its exile and salvation at the end of time. The powerful message of Genesis in *Genesis Rabbah* proclaims that the world's creation commenced a single, straight line of events, leading in the end to the salvation of Israel and through Israel all humanity. Israel's history constitutes the counterpart of creation, and the laws of Israel's salvation form the foundation of creation. Therefore a given story out of Genesis, about creation, events from Adam to Noah and Noah to Abraham, the domestic affairs of the patriarchs, or Joseph, will bear a deeper message about what it means to be Israel, on the one side, and what in the end of days will happen to Israel, on the other. That is what I mean by, finding in Scripture the pattern of the history of the Jewish people.

There is a fifth claim, which subsumes the four points that I have already registered. I claim that Judaism, not Christianity, understands the intent of Scripture. To frame matters in terms of debate, Which religion reads Scripture in its own terms and framework. Is it Judaism, which reads forward from Abraham and Moses to our own days, a continuous story through time? Or is it Christianity, which reads backward, from Jesus and episodes in his life toward the Israelite Scripture that, Christians believe, foretold Jesus's advent and mission? Now, in this context, why do I maintain that the Rabbinic sages — hence Judaism — are right about Scripture or, in the language of the issue debated here, Judaism owns the Hebrew Scriptures?

The Judaic camp finds in Scripture the story of the formation of holy Israel as God's party in humanity, signified by access to knowledge of God through God's self-manifestation in the Torah. They then present the exile of Israel from and to the Land of Israel as the counterpart to the exile of Adam from Eden and the return of Israel to the Land. A great many of us interpret the restoration of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel within the pattern of exile and return first set forth in Scripture. We find in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones the

renewal of the Jewish people in its return to the Land and creation of the State of Israel. Scripture forms the pattern of our life as Israel, the people of God.

Consider the story of the exile from Eden and the counterpart exile of Israel from the Land. We on our own did not invent that paradigm. Scripture's framers did. Translate into propositional form the prophetic messages of admonition, rebuke, and consolation, the promise that as punishment follows sin, so consolation will come in consequence of repentance. We on our own did not fabricate those categories and make up the rules that govern the sequence of events. The prophets said them all.

Knowledgeable Christians deny the authority of the Rabbinic sages in reading Scripture, affirming instead their own tradition. But our sages only recapitulated the prophetic propositions with little variation except in formulation. The sages simply asked Scripture's question of events that conformed to Scripture's pattern. Identify as the dynamics of human history the engagement of God with man, especially through Israel, and what do you have, if not the heart of the Judaic doctrine of the origins and destiny of man. Details, amplifications, clarifications, an unsuccessful effort at systematization — these do not obscure the basic confluence of sages' and Scripture's account of last things.

Judaism owns the Bible because it teaches practising Jews to read Scripture as a letter written that morning to them in particular about the world they encounter. That is what it means to possess the Torah: to be possessed by it. That is because for them the past was forever integral to the present. So they look into the Written part of the Torah to construct the picture of reality that is explained by world-view set forth in the Oral part of the Torah. They find their questions in Scripture; they identify the answers to those questions in Scripture; and they then organize and interpreted the contemporary situation of holy Israel in light of those questions and answers. That alone explains the power within the community of Judaism exercised by the return to Zion and the building of the state of Israel, which many describe as *reshit semihat geulatenu*, the beginning of the advent of our redemption. Only within Scripture can the world make sense of the meaning of that event in our history and in the world's history.

This brings me to the main claim in behalf of Judaism: We own the Bible because ours alone is the Oral Torah that explains Scripture and frames its meanings. We Jews mediate Scripture through Oral Tradition, the Oral part of the Torah. Christians mediate the same Scripture, which they know as the Old Testament, through the New Testament. They take no part of the Oral Torah. Who is right?

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.