

JUDAISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Practices and beliefs

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London and New York

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INTRODUCTION

Before we can define “Judaism” for the purpose of our study of the New Testament, we had best say what we mean by any religion, the genus of which Judaism forms a species (and, we shall argue, with earliest Christianity as a subspecies of that same species of religion). Defining religion comes before defining a particular religion, just as defining a particular religion takes priority over defining how two or more religions relate. Alas, as many definitions of religion circulate as there are those who have proposed to define religion.

One responds to the context of definition: for what purpose do we wish to define a religion? Since Christianity and Judaism address not isolated individuals but the entirety of the social order, and since both religions insist that matters of behavior, not only belief, make a great difference, the cases with which we deal dictate a general definition. It is, a religion sets forth a theory of the social order, for which divine or supernatural warrant is claimed, that defines what people are to do and explains how and why they are to do it: a way of life, a world-view, and a definition of the social entity – holy people, church, nation, for example – that embodies the way of life and appeals in explanation to the world-view. That definition presupposes that when we speak about a religion, we refer to a social group, that is, people who form a supernatural community by reason of their shared convictions, attitudes, and actions. So we see religion as fundamentally social, a mode of organizing humanity in community. Others may prefer to define religions as sets of beliefs that people share, still others may choose to emphasize the encounter with God as the starting-point for the definition of religion, and with them we have no argument.

But from our perspective, definitions that focus upon the intellectual or the psychological dimensions of religion pay

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insufficient attention to religion's power to create community and explain it; and we see as definitive of the religious reality the religious community, not the radically isolated individual facing God quite alone or the questing intellectual, sorting out God's truth. Hence our definition deliberately subordinates the intellectual and the experiential to the communal and the social.

Now we hardly need to wonder how one religion relates to some other, since, by definition, communities are self-sustaining and self-defining. It follows that, in general, the relationship of Islam to Christianity or Taoism to Buddhism hardly demands attention, except for the purpose of comparing and contrasting what each says about a shared agendum of topics, e.g. Islam's God is one, Christianity's triune. Nor does the relationship between one religion and another bear a self-evidently compelling interest for other than this-worldly, political reasons. That is to say, if we show that Christianity relates to Islam in one way, rather than in some other, is more like, or is like, the other in some detail, we do not on that account better understand either Christianity or Islam than we did before we made the comparison. It goes without saying, knowing that they conflict, or that the Nation of Islam and the Mystical Body of Christ have fought wars for a thousand years, conveys no deep understanding of either Islam or Christianity, such that a sustained discussion of how the one relates to the other yields any urgent insight. The upshot is, no self-evident purpose validates the kind of question we raise here, which is how one religion relates to another. That question, represented by the "in" of the title, *Judaism in the New Testament*, presupposes that we shall understand Christianity's first document better because of our grasp of the position of Judaism in the New Testament.

In the study of religion, no premise is better founded, by the testimony of all concerned, than that Christianity emerges out of Judaism. That is precisely how matters are represented from the very beginning. Not only so, but how Christianity relates to Judaism is universally taken to define a principal hermeneutical resource of New Testament studies. And the judgment is not a merely literary one, having to do with the interpretation of holy books. The Founder of Christianity, and all of his disciples and continuators, derived from Israel, believed Israel's Scriptures conveyed God's word, and understood this new way within Israel solely in terms provided by the Judaic setting. The way of life, world-view, and theory of the social entity or of "Israel" that earliest Christianity in all of its

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complex and rich diversity uniformly found definitive derived from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Torah for Jesus and Paul as much as for their contemporaries, Hillel and Yohanan ben Zakkai. Scarcely a line of the New Testament is to be fully and exhaustively understood without reference to pertinent passages in the Old Testament. So the inquiry into the practice of and belief in Judaism for purposes of understanding the New Testament surely rests upon deep and sturdy foundations.

Yet the framing of the inquiry on second glance presents a puzzle, and it is that puzzle that accounts for our fresh interest in a much studied question. If it is the fact – and it is – that the Founder of Christianity as portrayed by the authoritative Scriptures saw himself as an Israelite within the framework of the Torah (in secular language: a Jew who practiced Judaism), and if all of his disciples did too, then would they – could they – have understood the question this book proposes to answer? Imagine, if you can, someone who has heard the Sermon on the Mount and has approached Jesus with a personal question: “How does what you say relate to the Torah?” (or, in secular categories, how do your teachings relate to Judaism?). Nothing in the Gospels’ account of Jesus is more certain than his reply: “not to destroy but to fulfill,” means, what I say is the Torah’s message, and what I teach (in secular terms) is Judaism. No sage of the same time or place can have understood the question, since, for all, the Torah conveyed God’s exact words to Israel, made God manifest to the world through Israel. Should we turn to the apostle, Paul, with the same question, he too would have responded with that same incomprehension, if perhaps a bit less patience as was his way. For Jesus and all who carried on his teachings saw themselves as Israelites (in secular language, as Jews), and they drew upon that same Torah that all Israel invoked. So the question that strikes us as obvious – what can we say about Judaism in the New Testament? – is one that would have elicited incomprehension among those about whom we inquire.

If that fact is self-evident, then we have to ask ourselves how we have formulated as a standard approach to the reading of the New Testament a perspective on matters that so sharply conflicts with the New Testament writers’ own perspective. Insisting that they are Israel and teach the Torah, they would surely have rejected as not so much demeaning as simply uncomprehending a question resting on the contrary premise, namely, this teaching of theirs is not the Torah, and they are not Israel. And yet, two centuries of scholarship of a

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historical character, following close to eighteen centuries of scholarship of a theological character, sees matters differently. But understanding why that should be so hardly requires sustained reflection.

Because of long-standing divisions the New Testament is rarely understood as its Founder and his disciples conceived it to be, namely, as the Torah, or, in secular language, as Judaism. "Judaism" then is distinguished from "Christianity," and the two distinct religions are ordinarily spelled out, each in its own terms and categories, out of all relationship to the other. Certainly, in the passage of time, that is a perfectly natural path to take, since, after all, Christianity and Judaism do form the foundations of quite distinct and autonomous religious communities, each with its own world-view, way of life, and theory of the social entity (for a Judaism, "Israel"). Why then should anyone ever reconsider the simple and obvious "fact" that the writers of the New Testament composed the foundation-document for Christianity? And if the writings were generated within that setting, it must follow, their relationship to Judaism, their response to its teachings and utilization of its theology and law form valid points of analytical inquiry.

The multiplicity of Judaisms in the early centuries of the Common Era has made ever more parlous the insistence upon a single Judaism, from which Christianity took its leave and against which Christianity is to be contrasted (whether favorably or otherwise, depending on the polemical purpose) that still marks study of Judaism in the New Testament. No one has succeeded in so defining a single Judaism everywhere ascendant, unifying all the Jews and excluding everybody else, as to account for all of the conflicting evidence. A Judaism so general that it encompasses Enoch, the writings found at the Dead Sea, Josephus, Philo, the Elephantine papyri, and the Mishnah – not to mention the (uninterpreted) books of the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel ("the Old Testament") proves trivial. If so many diverse circles, all of them claiming to form "Israel" and to set forth God's message out of the Torah, each of them reaching conclusions not so much in disagreement with everybody else but out of all relationship with those of all other parties, are joined in a single conversation, taken all together, they yield a Judaism that covers everybody and turns out so thin and trivial as not to engage anybody. Whether, then, the Judaism adhered to by all Judaisms consisted of the belief in the unity of God, the Torah, the Temple, covenantal nomism, or what have you scarcely proves consequential when we realize nothing

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important to the various circles of Judaic faithful represented by the public, preserved documents in hand comes within that definition. A definition that appeals to the lowest common denominator serves in the end to include everything but to explain nothing. By contrast, when we recognize that each set of documents works out of its particular premises and presuppositions, representing a set of choices concerning urgent questions that demand response, self-evidently valid answers that require articulation, we can take into hand the entire corpus of evidence, without homogenization, harmonization, or, worst of all, trivialization.

At issue in the study of *a Judaism* – we can no longer speak of a single governing Judaism, any more than the diversity of earliest Christian writing sustains the view of a single Christianity – is the givens of its critical documents, and how these givens coalesce into an account of (a very particular) Judaism. If we speak of a Judaic system, rather than a Judaism, as we shall suggest in Chapter One and spell out concretely in Chapter Two, our task then becomes, how to describe, analyze, and interpret as a Judaic system a body of writings held by the faithful to cohere. And while the answer in the end proves not so much compelling as self-evident, the perspective turns out quite jarring and fresh. So in these pages we review familiar documents in a different perspective. And, as we shall see, that does make a considerable difference.

The difference emerges as soon as we reflect on how the conception of a single uniform Judaism affects the framing of the question of “the relationship of the New Testament to Judaism,” for as soon as we dismiss as hopelessly in conflict with diverse data the notion of a single uniform, operative, ubiquitous Judaism, the relationship of the New Testament to Judaism ceases to define a comprehensible issue at all. We revert here to the ancient insistence of Christianity that Christianity forms the natural next step from Sinai and the fulfillment of Sinai, not so much to precipitate a debate on whether or indeed how that statement is so, as to reflect upon the implication, for the prevailing formulation of matters. How shall we recast the issue of Judaism in the New Testament, practices and beliefs, when the issue is not how a new religion relates to, carries over or rejects an old one? The framing of matters changes when the issue is how a free-standing formulation of a received and shared heritage – the Hebrew Scriptures – has taken over and made its own statement through writings that others, also, have taken over and restated as well. It is no longer to their relationship with a single, alien Judaism

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“out there” that the New Testament writings attest. Rather, it is to how those writings have cast themselves into a Judaism. And since, as a matter of fact, we can understand a great deal of the New Testament writings out of the pages of what the New Testament handed forward as the Old Testament – not every word by any means, but a great, great deal – the reading of the New Testament’s Judaism – its own practices and beliefs – proves more to the point and fits tightly into context.

People take for granted that Judaism contributes a principal formative force for the emergence of New Testament Christianity. We understand the New Testament solely in the setting of Judaism. We propose, by contrast, that we understand the New Testament still better when we regard it *as the statement of Judaism*, that is, from its writers’ perspective, the New Testament at every point formed that very same Judaism that the Old Testament had adumbrated. In these pages we propose to examine the premises of a number of key documents, analyzed as we would analyze counterpart writings for any (other) Judaism, and what we uncover is the iron conviction that the writers set forth the Torah of Sinai. That conclusion will not have surprised any Catholic, or, later on, Reformation Christian thinker from the first century to the nineteenth; everyone understood that Marcion’s rejection of the Old Testament violated that pattern of Christian truth to which nearly everybody adhered. For Marcion, the second-century heretic, wanted to acknowledge only the New Testament, denying Christianity as a Judaism (or, in today’s conventional language, denying Christianity’s foundation in Judaism). These days, it is only those unChristian Bible Society editions of the New Testament and Psalms, omitting the rest of Christianity before Christ (in the language of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews), that conform to Marcion’s heretical view. The Pope, for Roman Christianity, and the leaders and governing bodies of all Protestant communions, as well as the heads of the Orthodox Christian churches, unanimously affirm otherwise.

But if as Christianity – Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformation – has always insisted, the two Testaments form one faith, and, in the nature of things, call it Judaism, call it Christianity, it is the single and exhaustive faith of Sinai, then the formulation of matters that presently prevails, which sees Christianity as separate from Judaism and not as a Judaism but an alien and new thing, must give way. Then arguing about the Jewishness of Jesus or of Paul or Peter or the Evangelists emerges as disingenuous; it is like asking about the

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influence of Judaism upon Aqiba or Hillel, Judah the Patriarch, who sponsored the Mishnah at the end of the second century CE, or upon Yohanan and Simeon b. Laqish, Joseph, Rabbah, Abbayye, and Raba, of the third and fourth centuries, who founded the Talmud and so defined the Judaism that has held the field from their time to ours. They took for granted that they continued the Torah of Sinai and its tradition, saying precisely what it meant then and for all time, and so did the Evangelists and Paul and the other New Testament writers. They deemed it a fact that theirs was the valid reading of the Torah, and so did their Christian counterparts. The category “Judaism” scarcely pertains, since for none, Christian or Judaic, was “Judaism” a native category.

But what difference does that observation, so entirely coherent with Christian self-understanding throughout history, make? Once we reject the premise that Christianity negates Judaism, and see that Christianity must be placed within its setting as a Judaism, alongside others, what follows is that the description of Christianity from the premise of its essentially alien and estranged relationship with Judaism (that is, other Judaisms, appealing to the same Scriptures) is worthless, because misleading and distorting. Recognizing a number of Judaisms of the same time and place, all of them adhering to a common structure but each different from the others at every important point, we no longer conceive the analytical category, “Judaism versus the New Testament,” to define a sensible inquiry. Instead, we try to see matters in such a way that we read the New Testament in its own Judaic context. It defines Judaism – its Judaism, speaking descriptively and after the fact – and how we read the document as a Judaism remains to be seen.

Here we argue that, since, from the perspective of the New Testament writers, theirs was the sole fully authentic statement of the meaning of the Torah (a.k.a., “the Old Testament”), the old premise misleads. For the premise of all accounts of Judaism in the setting of the New Testament rests upon the judgment that Judaism was one religion, Christianity another, different religion, taking shape out of, but against the grain of, the prior and continuing religion. One cannot proceed very far into any of the definitive documents of the New Testament without encountering a given that calls such a premise into question. Christianity did not understand itself as anything other than the natural continuation of the Judaism represented by the Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel. The plan of our work is simple. We begin with a clear account of the context in

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which we investigate the relationship of Judaism and the New Testament, covering Chapters One and Two. We proceed in Chapters Three through Five to take up important New Testament writings, now read as components of a Judaism. Every Judaism starts with the definition of its “Israel,” and so does that of our New Testament system. It is appropriate to begin with the earliest documents of the New Testament, the writings of Paul. We turn next to ask some fundamental questions about the way of life of the Christian system of Judaism, and those questions draw us to a rereading of important sayings attributed to Jesus by the Gospels. Here we find the system defining itself, its “Israel,” in yet another fashion, now as a way of inclusion and exclusion. Finally, we ask about the system’s world-view, and for that purpose we reread the reappropriation of Israel’s supernatural history by Christianity accomplished in the Epistle to the Hebrews. No one familiar with how “our sages of blessed memory” in the Rabbinic writings reappropriated that same history and made it their own will find the modes of thought of Hebrews unfamiliar or the result beyond plausibility. In this way we mean to offer an example of the Judaic reading of Christianity, the presentation of Christianity in its original writings as a Judaism. Success for this effort of ours will be signaled by other and different efforts at accomplishing the same exercise of religious history.

It remains to note that Mr Neusner wrote the first drafts of the Introduction and Chapters One, Two, Three, half of Four, and Six, Mr Chilton, half of Chapter Four and all of Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. Each author then revised the chapters initially written by the other. The book speaks for both authors at every point.

JUDAISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT OR THE NEW TESTAMENT'S PARTICULAR JUDAISM?

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY WITHIN JUDAISM

Diversities within religions come to expression in a variety of ways. Examining all evidences of Christianity or of Judaism, within some broad limits, we find everything and its opposite. The very diversity of the written evidence (not to mention the archaeological evidence) shows what is at stake. Two sets of statements suffice. The Pope, heir of Peter, is head of the Church; all Church authority rests with the local presbytery; there is no Church authority at all. The Torah is the literal word of God in all details, so that, therefore, all who wish to be “Israel” must keep the Torah precisely as it is worded. The Torah expresses God’s will and purpose for humanity, but the formulation is this-worldly. The Torah is the work of humanity, the record of aspiration, not revelation. The first three statements clearly belong to any description of Christianity, the issue being a solely, particularly Christian one. But the three statements cannot all be true, since each contradicts the other two. All three in context clearly speak for a Christianity, but not for Christianity in general. That is why we have to take account of not only the definition of Christianity but also the delineation, within Christianity, of Christianities. And the same clearly pertains to Judaism. A statement that purports to state the truth about the Torah obviously belongs to Judaism; but these three statements, all of which cannot be true, certainly require us to recognize that there are diverse Judaisms.

Now the question emerges: precisely where and how, on what basis, shall we identify data that coalesce to form a single Christianity or a single Judaism? How am I supposed to know which statements, which

I may find in a variety of writings, speak on behalf of one Judaism, which on behalf of another? And what is the starting-point?

A familiar definition of “Judaism” or of a Judaism responds to the rules of theology: one Judaism is right, another wrong. We therefore define Judaism by selecting those statements of truth, those norms of behavior and belief, that conform to a given theological position, and reject as irrelevant all contradictory statements, dismissing as heretical the books that contain them. So our work of defining Judaism commences with a theological principle, a fundamental idea governing the entire work of description. On that basis, we validate the resort to the-ism, that is to say, “Juda-ism,” by which we assume we refer to a systematic, orderly, coherent, proportioned, balanced, and authoritative statement of religious beliefs and norms of behavior.

This same “Judaism” can be analyzed (by appeal to its canon), advocated (by reference to arguments on behalf of its clearly defined propositions as to truth), and set forth in comparison and contrast to other religions, also presented as philosophically cogent theological systems. Indeed, nearly all definitions of Judaism derive from philosophical modes of thought and appeal in the end to a predetermined canon of accepted and authoritative writings. Then, to answer the question just now set forth, the data that instruct me on the positions of Judaism derive from the canon. We know the documents that bear weight because Judaism identifies those documents – and dismisses all others. And our starting-point is the intellectual construct, Judaism, itself.

That familiar, theological approach to the definition of a religion, here exemplified by Judaism, does not serve very well in describing a religion that contains a variety of writings that contradict one another and that self-evidently derive from diverse groups of persons. In the case of Judaism in the first centuries BC and AD, for example, we find a variety of documents that scarcely intersect. If we invoke any criterion we think likely to characterize a variety of writings – a single doctrine concerning the Torah, the Messiah, the definition of who and what is “Israel,” for example – we find no one answer present in all writings, and no point of agreement which unites them. Not only so, but both archaeological and text analysis insist that the various writings were produced by diverse groups and do not speak for one and the same community of persons at all.

If moreover we introduce conceptions paramount in prior writings, e.g. Scripture, or later writings, e.g. the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash-compilations, we may well discover that the writings of the

first centuries BC and AD do what they will with the former – there being no consensus on what any inherited ideas maintain – and exhibit entire ignorance of the latter. It follows that the theological approach to the definition of a religion, which utilizes philosophical methods in the search for a coherent statement of, and about, a religion, requires us to pick and choose among the data. But what, for purposes of a merely descriptive definition, validates doing so? And how are we supposed to know what to pick and what to discard?

It follows that where we find statements on behalf of Judaism, which clearly contradict other statements on behalf of Judaism, speaking descriptively and not theologically, we address not one right or true Judaism and another wrong or false Judaism but only two Judaisms. And everything that follows rests upon these two foundations: first, the definition of a religion is not a problem in theology, and, second, the definition of a religion takes account of diverse religious systems that all together form the data of that particular, encompassing religion. That is, first, if we hope to describe our data, leading to our work of analysis and interpretation, we shall find our work impeded if we introduce questions of truth or falsity. The reason is that answering those questions requires criteria of right and wrong, e.g. a clear definition of the character of revealed truth and the authority and standing of the Torah in particular. And, second, our task is to encompass all the data pertinent to a given religion, not only those data that cohere or that coincide with a particular theological, and anti-historical, presupposition or premise concerning description in general.

Doctrines of truth or error and the meaning, content, and character of revelation derive from theology; they are particular to the Judaism that appeals to those doctrines to validate its various positions on matters of conduct and conviction alike. If, then, we raise questions of truth or falsity in the description of a Judaism or of Judaism or of all Judaisms, we beg the very questions we propose to answer. This we do by invoking as an answer to the question what is in fact part of the question itself. Stated very simply: description of a religion cannot invoke theological norms, but can only encompass those norms within the labor of description itself.

In our view, we do best to start with documents that enjoy official status, that is, canonical writings. We investigate what those documents say, but then we ask also about the premises upon which their statements rest, the givens and the presuppositions exposed in explicit and articulated allegations. We turn, specifically, to the

systemic documents – the writings held to bring to authoritative expression whatever a given religious system wishes to say. A systemic document is canonical writing accorded authoritative standing by a religious community. It contains information deemed both true and important, facts held to be consequential, bearing self-evident implications for conduct and conviction alike. The religious community preserves such a document because the writing stands for the community and sets forth a component of the community's way of life and world-view.

But, in the nature of things, such a document may well convey facts or truths that others, outside of the community that values and preserves the document, accept as well. Not everything contained in canonical writings of a given group needs to be contrasted against opinions held in other circles or communities. Where a number of distinct groups have taken shape within a larger social world, all these groups, as well as the world in which they flourish, may well concur on a broad variety of topics. Consequently, a document that speaks for a specific and distinct group within that larger world may well go over ground quite familiar to others, outside the group itself. What that document says, then, constitutes the religious system's explicit message. What the same document presupposes leads us deep into that system's implicit conceptions, the deep, dense structure of its theory of how things are. In this book and its companions, we aim to identify principal parts of the Judaism – the Judaic religious system – that comes to explicit expression in the canonical writings of the Judaism of the dual Torah.

CHRISTIANITY A JUDAISM

The practice and belief of Judaism in the New Testament – a collection of writings produced for and by Israelites who revered the Torah as God's word or, in secular terms, for and by faithful Jews, educated in Judaism – have long been treated as alien components of Christianity's formative faith and its initial writing. That given of religion is contained in the title, *Judaism in the New Testament*, that is, a foreign body in a familiar one. But the earliest Christians insisted that they formed "Israel" and devoted rigorous thought to the demonstration that theirs was the Torah's sole valid meaning and their Founder its unique medium of fulfillment. In due course they produced the New Testament, but for at least the first hundred years of Christianity their only revealed Scripture was that same Torah

that (the rest of) Israel received as God's revealed teaching. So far as possible, these same people appealed to the Torah to validate their faith and studied the Torah to explain it.

So by their own word what they set forth in the New Testament must qualify as Judaism, and they insisted (as vigorously as any other Judaic system-builders) the only Judaism. Judaisms known to us over time follow suit: ours is the Torah, and we form Israel, the holy people. True, early on, the Gospel of John would fiercely condemn "the Jews" and blame them for the crucifixion. But even John valued Israel and certainly adhered to the Torah as he read it. While later on a shift in category-formation distinguished between Judaism and Christianity, even here Christianity insisted on its patrimony and inheritance out of ancient Israel. Not only so, but Christianity would represent itself for all time as the sole valid continuation of the faith and worship of ancient Israel. That is to say, Christianity portrayed itself as (other) Judaisms ordinarily portrayed themselves, and out of precisely the same shared Torah at that.

Consequently, to distinguish between the religious world of the New Testament and an alien Judaism denies the authors of the New Testament books their most fiercely held claim and renders incomprehensible much that they said. Whether Jesus, insisting on his Judaic conception of God's kingdom, or Paul, explaining how in his Judaic conception of Israel through Christ gentiles enter (are "grafted onto") Israel, whether the Evangelists, linking Jesus to the house of David and much that he said and did to Israelite prophecy, or the author of the Letter to the Hebrews recasting the entire history of Israel from an account of salvation to one of sanctification – the picture is uniform. But then how can we grasp the New Testament's Judaism if we do not treat its religion as (a) Judaism?

That simple observation explains why here we see the New Testament as the statement of Judaism (more suitably, a Judaism, among many), and further accounts for our insistence that Christianity's practices and beliefs for its writers and their audience constituted (a) Judaism and are to be interpreted as such. Responding as we do to the self-understanding of the writings before us, how do we effect the simple change that strikes us as self-evidently required? As we shall explain in a moment, we simply bring to its logical conclusion the widely understood fact that, in antiquity as today, many Judaisms competed. Most knowledgeable people now reject the conception of a single Judaism, everywhere paramount. A requirement of theology, the dogma of a single, valid Judaism

contradicts the facts of history at every point in the history of Judaism, which finds its dynamic in the on-going struggle among Judaisms to gain the position of the sole, authentic representation of the Torah. Further, along with the notion of a single official Judaism, we give up the notion of a unitary, internally harmonious Judaism, a lowest common denominator among a variety of diverse statements and systems. And logic further insists that we let go of the notion of an incremental, cumulative, “traditional” Judaism. At the same time, and for the same reason, we dismiss as vacuous and hopelessly general the notion of a single Judaism characteristic of a given age, e.g. the first century BC and AD, and we reject as groundless the conception that all documents of said age tell us about one and the same religious community, therefore, a single “Israel” and its Torah. It follows that the sources of a given period of time do not tell us about a single Judaism, characteristic of that time. They tell us about their writers’ premises, the Judaic thinking that underpins the Judaic system they have put forth – and that alone.

These closely linked conceptions – singular, harmonious, cumulative, and traditional – contradict the character of the evidence of all Judaisms of antiquity. If we open one set of coherent writings, we find one self-evidently valid answer to a cogent and pressing question, and if we open another set, we find a different answer to a different question. In the one, a given composite of proof-texts will predominate, in the other, a different composite, so it appears that one set of writings speaks of one topic to one group, another set of a different topic to another group. In all, viewed as a conglomerate, the various writings appear to form the statements of different people talking about different things to different people. And that view takes on even greater specificity when we realize that, so far as the diverse writings talk about the same issues at all, they present a mass of contradictions. Archaeological evidence for its part portrays synagogues rich in precisely the images that the written evidence tells us we should not find. So, in all, the conception of diverse, free-standing Judaisms best accommodates the evidence produced in ancient times (in secular categories) by Jews in the name of Judaism, or (in native categories) by Israel in the Torah.

Included in that statement is not only the iron datum that the New Testament writers saw themselves as Israelites teaching the meaning of the Torah, which none can contest, but also the givens of the authors of the documents at Qumran, the writers of the Elephantine papyri, the compositors of the Mishnah, the compilers of the Talmud, and the authorities behind the documentary

statements of every other Judaism of antiquity. All writers addressing a community of faithful wrote on the premise that the writers and those who would value, preserve, and conform to those writings formed “Israel” and practiced the Torah (the native category for which the secular one is “Judaism”).

Accordingly, we do not conceive that all writings point to a single Judaism, because the points of differentiation and even contradiction produced by a comparison of one set of writings with another render such a conception unlikely. Then what to do? We concentrate not on all writings of a given period but on some sets of kindred writings to ask about the Judaism that forms the foundation and the premise of that set of writings. That is, once we recognize the diverse character of various bodies of Judaic writings, we take up a single body of what appear on the surface to be closely congruent documents and read them. It follows, in its method, ours is a documentary approach to the study of (a) Judaism. For we insist that each piece of writing or set of cognate writings tells us about the Judaism to which it wishes to attest. We reject the notion that all writings inform us about one and the same Judaism, because we see too vast a diversity, too complex a range of disagreement, among the various writings to allow all to speak to a single religious tradition, even to find the lowest common denominator for their supposedly common address.

Then what? Once we abandon the idea that all (acceptable, canonical) writings speak of one and the same Judaism, one that is cumulative, traditional, and paramount, then a new possibility comes to the fore. It is that each writing that speaks for a single, coherent community of Jews will tell us about its religious system – its Judaism – and, further, take its place in the arena of comparison and contrast with other such Judaic religious systems. We no longer treat all Judaisms as exemplary of one Judaism nor assign priority to one over another, nor, yet, treat one Judaism as in any way related to, influenced by, or dependent upon another Judaism, whether of the prior or of the same age. We may compare and contrast Judaisms (the system of the New Testament with that of the Mishnah, for example), and temporal considerations – the one comes prior to and influences the other, for example – no longer govern the making of comparisons.

And that observation brings us back to the task of this book and the question we here propose to answer. Once we have defined our interest as not a single Judaism supposedly covering everybody but the Christians (there are no other candidates for exclusion!), then, it follows, we take to heart the Christians’ insistence that they formed

(an) Israel or a part of Israel, so their writings too have to be read alongside those of all other Judaic groups that saw themselves as (an) Israel or as part of Israel. But that changes the very framing of the question, what is the role of Judaism in the New Testament? It becomes, what does the New Testament look like when we understand it as the statement of a Judaism, that is, the religious world-view, way of life, and theory of “Israel” of a group of Jews whose writings we possess?

THE JUDAISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Hence the proper title of this book should be “*the* Judaism of the New Testament,” since we regard the New Testament as the documentary statement of a community of faithful practitioners of (a) Judaism, comparable to the documentary statements – in other terms to be sure – of other communities of faithful practitioners of other Judaisms. We take seriously the insistence of diverse social groups of Jews that they formed (an) “Israel,” the (sole remnant of the) people whom God loved for their acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. Each such group, distinguishing itself from others of Israel (the people), set forth the Torah as it understood the Torah, and all groups defined for themselves an urgent question and a self-evidently valid answer that, for the respective groups, formed their Judaism. How do these broadly recognized facts concerning Judaisms in ancient times change matters so far as earliest Christianity’s greatest literary evidence is concerned? In the setting of the diversity of social groups and their viewpoints in ancient Israel, we therefore cannot treat the New Testament as a foreign body, asking about how an alien religion played its part in the formation of that body. We rather see a variety of Judaic religious groups as equally representative Judaisms, all of them heirs to the same Scripture, every one of them insisting on the unique truth it alone possessed.

We propose here to spell out the implications for the reading of the New Testament of the now widespread recognition of the diversity of Judaisms in ancient times, before, during, and after the first century. While many discussions of Judaism and the New Testament recognize the profoundly Israelite character of the New Testament, so far as we know, none has recast matters in the way we do here. That is, if we really think that there were many Judaisms and no one orthodox Judaism, and if we truly maintain that the Jews comprised a diverse group with more points of diversity than

uniformity, then how should we think, also, about the New Testament in its original context: writings by Jews for Jews who formed a very special “Israel?” Hence the title we might have used, the Judaism of the New Testament, meaning, a systematic reading of the New Testament as a document meant to set forth a Judaism, a Judaic system (language we explain presently). That is, by comparison to the Judaisms of other writings valued by groups of Judaic faithful in the same time and place, how do these writings comprise a Judaism?

If that title would have puzzled more readers than it would have beckoned, our intent will hardly present a surprise to the many people who see earliest Christianity in the framework just now outlined. We propose to explain not so much why but how the New Testament should be read as documents of the Judaism they champion, among other Judaisms of antiquity, and in insisting upon the multiplicity of Judaisms at that time and upon the integral place of the communities of Christian believers among those Judaisms, we replicate the very perspectives of the documents and their authors themselves. For they held that they formed Israel, and, in our categories, theirs was a Judaism (that is, the Torah). Hence to speak of the Judaism in the New Testament frames matters in a way that violates the native category of that document, since it treats as distinct entities – Judaism, the New Testament community of faithful – what those who composed the books assumed belonged together. We do not suggest ours is the sole or the best possible reading of the New Testament’s Judaism, but we do offer an account of the New Testament in the context of Judaisms that takes account of how, in general, people today understand the character of Judaism in ancient times.

What happens when we carry out a shift in perspective, changing the refraction of our spectacles in favor of one that affords greater precision of vision? We hope that the familiar will become clearer and more distinct, that what can have produced confusion will now turn out to clarify and explain. The facts will persist, but they will serve a different purpose. Our argument here depends upon a single premise: a fresh way of asking about Judaism in the New Testament will prove illuminating, a shift of perspective both providing provocation for fresh thought on familiar subjects and also deeper understanding of enduring problems. Once we ask how the New Testament serves as documents of various Judaisms, writings valued by communities that saw themselves as uniquely (even exclusively) Israel, as much as the library found at Qumran is generally taken to

represent a free-standing Judaic structure and system, the remnant of Israel, our reading of the foundation-documents of Christianity is going to yield dimensions of meaning that we should otherwise have missed. And yet the fundamental proposition of this reading of Judaism in the New Testament's practice and belief accords entirely with the givens of every writer in the New Testament.

**FROM ONE UNIVERSAL JUDAISM UNIVERSALLY ATTESTED
FOR A GIVEN AGE TO A SINGULAR
JUDAISM ATTESTED BY A COHERENT CANON**

It follows that here we approach a classic problem – how to understand the New Testament in the setting of Judaism – by shifting the frame of reference from a period of time to a specific document. That is, it is commonplace to portray a single, universal, traditional Judaism described out of diverse evidence for a given era. But, recognizing no single, universal, cumulative Judaism everywhere paramount, we also differentiate among accounts of diverse groups, preserved in their canonical writings. And we ask ourselves, how do we understand the New Testament's Christianity if we recognize no single, universal traditional Judaism, from which Christianity supposedly took its leave, but rather diverse Judaisms, of which those set forth in the New Testament count as several among a greater number? So we undertake to understand the New Testament's religious system (indifferent to whether we call it Judaism or Christianity) as Judaisms among Judaisms. That is what happens when we recognize the facts of diversity and no longer assume a uniformity of faith to which all documents attest, hence the move from a period of time to a specific document and the religious system of the group that values that document.

Like all simple ideas, this one finds its provocation in an ambitious and systematic statement of a quite wrong conception. Specifically, we owe the idea for this book to Professor E. P. Sanders, Duke University, who, in his *Judaism. 63 BCE–66 CE Practice and Belief*,¹ has given us a single, unitary, cumulative, traditional “Judaism.” That, specifically, explains why our title mimics his. We agree that to describe a Judaism, focus rests upon belief and practice, the latter without the former standing for orthopraxy (of which more below, pp. 19–41), the former without the latter contradicting the practiced and social character of religions. In place of his dates, 63–66, we introduce *in the New Testament*. After *Judaism*, we could have

substituted for *in the New Testament* such alternative systems as *in the Mishnah* or *in the Dead Sea Library at Qumran* or *in the Talmud* or *in* any other body of Judaic writings closely associated with a particular social entity of Israel. For we concur that belief and practice form the organizing categories, though, as we make clear, we add a third, which is, theory of the social order or “Israel.” But for reasons now spelled out, Sanders clearly errs by claiming to tell us anything consequential about a single common-denominator Judaism, to which every document of any value attests. That is, Sanders speaks of a homogeneous Judaism in a particular period, covering all Jews everywhere and drawing upon all documents that are supposed to tell us about that period. That Judaism is cumulative, the product of centuries of agglutination; it is uniform; it is geographically and socially distributive and normative; all Jews adhered to this Judaism, whatever the special traits they further imputed to that same Judaism. Sanders thus matches a single, unitary Judaism against that single, unitary Christianity that took its leave of said Judaism and defined itself by contrast and opposition to it.

Let us dwell on a single example of the definition of a single Judaism out of all the sources, read all together, that of E. P. Sanders, to which reference has already been made. Sanders thinks that any and every source, whoever wrote it, without regard to its time or place or venue, tells us about one and the same Judaism. The only way to see everything all together and all at once is to rise high above the evidence, so high that we no longer see the lines of rivers, the height of mountains, the undulations of plains – any of the details of the earth’s true configuration. This conflation of all sources yields a fabricated Judaism. The result of this Judaic equivalent of a “harmony of the Gospels” is more often than not a dreary progress through pointless information.

This fabrication of a single Judaism is supposed to tell us something that pertains equally to all: the Judaism that forms the basis for all the sources, the common denominator among them all. If we know a book or an artifact is “Jewish,” then we are supposed automatically to know various other facts about said book or artifact. But the upshot is either too general to mean much (for example, monotheism) or too abstract to form an intelligible statement. Let me be specific. How Philo will have understood the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the authors of apocalyptic writings will have understood those of the Mishnah-passages Sanders admits to his account of Judaism from 63 BC to 66 AD, we are never told. Each of these distinctive documents gets to

speak whenever Sanders wants it to; none is ever brought into relationship – comparison and contrast – with any other. The homogenization of Philo, the Mishnah, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ben Sira, apocryphal and pseudepigraphic writings, the results of archaeology, and on and on and on turns out to yield generalizations about a religion that none of those responsible for the evidence at hand will have recognized: lifeless, dull, hopelessly abstract, lacking all social relevance. After a while, readers come to realize, it hardly matters, the results reaching so stratospheric a level of generalization that all precise vision of real people practicing a vivid religion is lost.

To understand what goes into Sanders' picture of Judaism, let us now provide a reasonable sample (pp. 103–4), representative of the whole, namely the opening paragraphs of his discussion, chapter seven, entitled "Sacrifices:"

The Bible does not offer a single, clearly presented list of sacrifices. The legal books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), we know now, incorporate various sources from different periods, and priestly practice evidently varied from time to time. There are three principal sources of information about sacrifices in the first century: Josephus, Philo and the Mishnah. On most points they agree among themselves and with Leviticus and Numbers; consequently the main outline of sacrifices is not in dispute. Josephus, in our judgment, is the best source. He knew what the common practice of the priesthood of his day was: he had learned it in school, as a boy he had watched and assisted, and as an adult he had worked in the temple. It is important for evaluating his evidence to note that his description of the sacrifices sometimes disagrees with Leviticus or goes beyond it. This is not an instance in which he is simply summarizing what is written in the Bible: he is almost certainly depending on what he had learned as a priest.

Though the Mishnah is often right with regard to pre-70 temple practice, many of the discussions are from the second century: the rabbis continued to debate rules of sacrifice long after living memory of how it had been done had vanished. Consequently, in reading the Mishnah one is sometimes reading second-century theory. Occasionally this can be seen clearly. For example, there is a debate about whether or not the priest who sacrificed an animal could keep its hide if for any reason the animal was made invalid (e.g. by touching something impure) after it was sacrificed but before it was flayed. The mishnah on this topic

opens with an anonymous opinion, according to which the priest did not get the hide. R. Hanina the Prefect of the Priests disagreed: “Never have we seen a hide taken out to the place of burning”; that is, the priests always kept the hides. R. Akiba (early second century) accepted this and was of the view that the priests could keep the hides of invalid sacrifices. “The Sages,” however, ruled the other way (*Zevahim* 12.4). R. Hanina the Prefect of the Priests apparently worked in the temple before 70, but survived its destruction and became part of the rabbinic movement. Akiba died *c.* 135; ‘the sages’ of this passage are probably his contemporaries or possibly the rabbis of the next generation. Here we see that second-century rabbis were quite willing to vote against actual practice in discussing the behavior of the priests and the rules they followed. The problem with using the Mishnah is that there is very seldom this sort of reference to pre-70 practice that allows us to make critical distinctions: not only are we often reading second-century discussions, we may be learning only second-century theory.

Philo had visited the temple, and some of his statements about it (e.g. the guards) seem to be based on personal knowledge. But his discussion of the sacrifices is “bookish”, and at some important points it reveals that he is passing on information derived from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), not from observation. The following description basically follows the Hebrew Bible and Josephus, but it sometimes incorporates details from other sources.

- One may make the following distinctions among sacrifices:
- With regard to what was offered: meal, wine, birds (doves or pigeons) and quadrupeds (sheep, goats and cattle).
- With regard to who provided the sacrifice: the community or an individual.
- With regard to the purpose of the sacrifice: worship of and communion with God, glorification of him, thanksgiving, purification, atonement for sin, and feasting.
- With regard to the disposition of the sacrifice: it was either burned or eaten. The priests got most of the food that sacrifices provided, though one of the categories of sacrifice provided food for the person who brought it and his family and friends. The Passover lambs were also eaten by the worshippers.

Sacrifices were conceived as meals, or, better, banquets. The full and ideal sacrificial offering consisted of meat, cereal, oil and wine. (Numbers 14:1–10, *Ant.* 3.233f.; the menu was sometimes reduced: see below).

Now let us ask ourselves, what, exactly, does Sanders wish to tell his readers about the sacrifices in this account of *Judaism. Practice and Belief*? He starts in the middle of things. He assumes we know what he means by “sacrifices,” why they are important, what they meant, so all we require is details. He will deal with Josephus, Philo, the Mishnah, and Leviticus and Numbers. Does he then tell us the distinctive viewpoint of each? Not at all. All he wants us to know is the facts common to them all. Hence his procedure is not one of description, analysis, and interpretation of documents, but a conflation of the information contained in each that he deems usable. Since that is his principal concern, he discusses “sacrifice” by telling us why the Mishnah’s information is useless, except when it is usable. But Sanders never suggests to his readers what the Mishnah’s discussion of sacrifice wishes to find out, nor how its ideas on the subject may prove religiously engaging. It is just a rule book, so it has no ideas on the subject – so Sanders; that is not our view. Philo is then set forth. Here too we are told why he tells us nothing, but not what he tells us. Then there follows the facts, the indented “with regard to” paragraphs.

Sanders did not have to tell us all about how Leviticus, Numbers, Philo, and Josephus and the Mishnah concur, then about how we may ignore or must cite the several documents respectively, if his sole intent was to tell us the facts of the “with regard to . . .” paragraphs. And how he knows how “sacrifices were conceived,” who conceived them in this way, and what sense the words made (“worship of and communion with God, glorification of him, thanksgiving, purification, atonement for sin, and feasting”), and to whom they made sense, and how other Judaisms, besides the Judaism portrayed by Philo, Josephus, the Mishnah, and so on and so forth, viewed sacrifices, or the Temple as it was – none of this is set forth. The conflation has its own purpose, which the following outline of the remainder of the chapter reveals: community sacrifices; individual sacrifices (“Neither Josephus, Philo, nor other first-century Jews thought that burnt offerings provided God with food”), a family at the temple, an example; the daily temple routine. In this mass of information on a subject, one question is lost: what it all meant. Sanders really does suppose that he is telling us how things were,

what people did, and, in his stress on common-denominator Judaism, he finds it entirely reasonable to bypass all questions of analysis and interpretation and so forgets to tell us what it all meant. His language, “worship of and communion with God, glorification of him, thanksgiving, purification, atonement for sin, and feasting” – that Protestant formulation begs every question and answers none.

But this common-denominator Judaism yields little that is more than simply banal, for “common theology,” e.g. “The history of Israel in general, and of our period in particular, shows that Jews believed that the one God of the universe had given them his law and that they were to obey it” (p. 240). No one, obviously, can disagree, but what applies to everyone equally, in a nation so riven with division and rich in diversity, also cannot make much of a difference. That is to say, knowing that they all were monotheists or valued the Hebrew Scriptures (but which passages he does not identify, how he read them he does not say) does not tell us more than previously we knew about the religion of those diverse people. Sanders knows what people thought, because anything any Jew wrote tells us what “Jews” or most Jews or people in general thought. He proceeds to cite as evidence of what “Jews” thought opinions of Philo and Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature, and so on and so forth. The generality of scholarship understands that the Dead Sea Scrolls represent their writers, Philo speaks for Philo, Josephus says what he thinks, and the Mishnah is whatever it is and is not whatever it is not. No one, to our knowledge, until Sanders has come to the judgment that anything any Jew thought has to have been in the mind of all the other Jews.

But it is only with that premise that we can understand the connections Sanders makes and the conclusions about large, general topics that he reaches. Let us skim through his treatment of graven images, which captures the flavor of the whole (pp. 244–7):

Comments by Philo and Josephus show how Jews could interpret other objects symbolically and thus make physical depictions acceptable, so that they were not seen as transgressions of one of the Ten Commandments, but as symbols of the glory of the God who gave them.

There follows a reference to *War* 5:214. Then Sanders proceeds: “Josephus, as did Philo, found astral and other symbolism in many other things. . . .” Some paragraphs later, in the same context, we have:

The sun was personified and worshipped. . . . The most

important instance was when Josiah . . . instituted a reform of worship . . . [now with reference to 2 Kings 23:4f.]. This is usually regarded as having been a decisive rejection of other deities, but elements derived from sun worship continued. Subsequently Ezekiel attacked those who turned “their backs to the Temple of the Lord . . .” (Ezekiel 8:16). According to the Mishnah, at one point during the feast of Booths priests “turned their faces to the west,” recalling that their predecessors had faced east and worshipped the sun and proclaimed that “our eyes are turned toward the Lord” (Sukkah 5:4). Despite this, the practice that Ezekiel condemned was continued by some. Josephus wrote that the Essenes “are particularly reverent towards the divinity. . . .”

This is continued with a citation of the Qumran *Temple Scroll* and then the Tosefta:

That the Essenes really offered prayer to the sun is made more probable by a passage in the Qumran Temple Scroll. . . .

Above we noted the floor of the synagogue at Hammath that had as its main decoration the signs of the zodiac in a circle. . . . This synagogue floor, with its blatant pagan decoration, was built at the time when rabbinic Judaism was strong in Galilee – after the redaction and publication of the Mishnah, during the years when the material in the Tosefta and the Palestinian Talmud was being produced and edited. According to the Tosefta, Rabbi Judah, who flourished in the middle of the second century, said that “If anyone says a blessing over the sun – this is a heterodox practice” (T. Berakhot 6[7].6). In the light of the floor, it seems he was opposing contemporary practice.

And so on and on he goes, introducing in the paragraph that follows references to Christian symbols (John 1:9, 15:1); the issue of whether “one God” meant there were no other supernatural beings (yielding a citation to Paul who was a Pharisee, with reference to Philipians 3:2–6).

Here matters emerge otherwise. If not cumulative, ubiquitous (“normative”), and characteristic of everyone in general but no one in particular, then what? For our part, in place of Sanders’ dates, we substitute the name of the document, promising also to describe Judaism, but this time the Judaism portrayed by a coherent set of documents, which speak for a well-defined, self-defined social group or Israel. From all Jews everywhere involved in one and the same

Judaism, to which a mass of conflicting documents are supposed to attest, then, we make an important move. It is to that particular group to which a single coherent body of official, public writings speaks: the Torah, or Judaism, of an Israel that values, in addition to the Torah of Sinai, further authoritative writings. Nothing is cumulative and historical, all things are discrete and systemic.

What makes this group distinctive in context, and what are the stakes involved in its Judaism? When we speak of the practice and belief of this Judaism, these questions, to be addressed to every Judaism, take over. And, when they do, instead of a lowest common-denominator Judaism to which anyone will have subscribed but no one will have attached much consequence (“Sure, so what?”), we come up with a Judaic system that is profoundly crafted to speak for a particular and unique perspective, like the Judaism of the Dead Sea library at Qumran, like the Judaism of the Mishnah and the Talmud, and like the other Judaisms portrayed in documents that speak for well-delineated groups of Jews, or, in the native categories, like the Torah as set forth by this Israel or that Israel. Since Sanders proposes to describe Judaism in New Testament times, we find it appropriate to respond to his description with our description, moving, as is clear, from a single Judaism to many Judaisms, a single period to which many documents attest to a single Judaic system portrayed in its own, but only in its own, canon.

If we turn to documents, does that mean we conceive a Judaism to correspond to a book, so that as we wish to speak of the New Testament’s Judaism, so we should proceed to the Judaism of Philo or of Josephus or of the composite Enoch-writings? The answer is negative, for we distinguish a book that speaks for an individual from one that makes a statement on behalf of a clearly delineated community. Religion is not individual, private, and philosophical (although some religious writings are) but public and social. That is why we do not confuse a book with a religion. When a book enjoys the sponsorship of a community and clearly speaks to and for that community, then the book affords evidence for the description of a religious system, in our setting, a Judaism.

In choosing the New Testament as our base document for the study of a Judaism, with the Mishnah occasionally offered for purpose of comparison and contrast, it is because both sets of writings clearly speak for a community and define matters as that community in particular wishes to see them. We propose as another candidate for this approach to the study of (a) Judaism any document that

clearly speaks to its distinctive social setting, hence the Elephantine papyri, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Talmud of Babylonia, but not the compositions of Philo or Josephus, which speak for individuals and set forth their distinctive perspective, a philosophy, perhaps, but not a Judaism – a religious system of the social order of (an) Israel.