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What Bible, Whose Bible: Studying the Scriptures of Others[1]

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Had someone told me 25 years ago that I would be giving this lecture, in this venue, I would have insisted that they were mistaken. Although I read the gospels in high school and college, and taught some NT texts alongside Genesis and Exodus, Sophocles, and the Iliad as part of a Humanities course thirty odd years ago at Brandeis University, my serious interest in the NT is of a more recent origin. I will explain by being autobiographical; my main current academic project concerns the Jewish reception of mainstream (Christian) historical-critical biblical studies, and I am more convinced than ever of the importance of biography if you want to understand scholarship.

I grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn NY, where I attended a Jewish elementary and high school that made it perfectly clear what the Bible is: The Tanakh—what many call the Hebrew Bible.[2] The NT was not part of that education. Unlike my collaborator in various projects, Amy-Jill Levine, who grew up in predominantly Catholic North Dartmouth, MA, I spent my early years in Jewish sections of Brooklyn, NY: I did not have Christian friends with whom I discussed the Bible or Christian holidays; in my little enclave, Christianity was hardly on the radar.

More than that—when I was in high school, the Jews for Jesus were beginning to proselytize very actively in NY, and my school supplied us with ready-made answers for why they, and the NT, were wrong, and we—traditional Jews interpreting the Tanakh the only right way—were unquestionably right. This "education" stayed with me for decades.

I remember reading Matthew in a Jewish history class in college, where the professor accurately told us that it was one of the most important sources for recreating the Jewish history of the late first century CE. I found Matthew fascinating because it was so Jew-ish—it looked so rabbinic in many ways, especially in how it cited Tanakh texts and explicated them in non-obvious ways, just like the classical rabbis—but my interest in it did not stick. Those days at Brandeis, where I was

[1] This is a lightly revised version of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations lecture given at the CTU Catholic-Jewish Shapiro Lecture, presented on November 3, 2024. I have retained the oral style of the lecture and have kept footnotes to the absolute minimum.

[2] For a brief discussion of the terminology for this corpus, see Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), 9-11.

a student, there was no course in the NT, and I was a Bible geek, meaning a Tanakh geek, taking just about every course in the Tanakh that Professors Nahum Sarna and Michael Fishbane offered. They were perfectly comfortable using the term "Bible" in the narrow sense of "our Bible," namely the Tanakh, a habit I am trying to unlearn. They both showed significant interest in post-biblical interpretation of the Tanakh—but in Jewish sources—the classical rabbis, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the medieval Jewish commentators. I had no sense from my education there that most of the world understands the Tanakh in a very different way, using a very different context—and that for them the afterlife of the Tanakh—or in this context, better to say the OT—is in the New.

I next encountered the NT and broader Christianity in graduate school at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. But this encounter did not take place in the Bible department, which is called the Miqra Department, reflecting one rabbinic term for the Tanakh—remarkably, modern Hebrew does not even have an accepted word for the Bible in the Christian sense, namely the OT + the NT! The influence of the great Jewish Hebrew University scholar of early Christianity, David Flusser, did not extend to the Bible Dept. I encountered Matthew instead in a course on the Syriac language alongside one of the works of the fourth-century Eastern Church father Ephrem. I remember sitting in class and thinking: How very strange it is that I am sitting in Jewish West Jerusalem, reading Matthew with the help of a Jewish teacher, surrounded by Jewish students.

And all my doctoral exams and my dissertation focused on *the* Bible, for me then the Tanakh only. This lack of focus in the New Testament continued even when I taught at Yale from 1984-1986, where the well-respected scholar of the Apostle Paul, Wayne Meeks, was a gracious colleague. I remember trying to read Meeks's *The First Urban Christians*—and I now realize that I had no clue of what he was talking about, and why this was such an important book.

I returned to Brandeis, this time to teach, in 1986—in the department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, which was really a department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies. I followed in the path of my teachers at Brandeis, where "Bible" meant the Tanakh.

Only in the very early 1990s did things begin to change there, when Jacob Hiatt, Myra Hiatt Kraft and Robert Kraft (the owner of the New England Patriots) endowed two chairs: one at Brandeis in Christianity, and one at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA, Jacob and Myra Kraft's hometown, in Judaism.[3] The first incumbent of the chair at Brandeis was the great Krister Stendahl, Lutheran Bishop of Sweden, scholar of Matthew and Paul, and Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, who had recently retired from Harvard.

I can still visualize a lecture about 30 years ago, given by Krister Stendahl, who treated me, a young kid, wonderfully. His topic was "Holy Envy"—a central theme of his teaching: his point was that we can be envious of elements that our

[3] See https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/16/style/campus-life-brandeis-holy-cross-a-joint-program-one-could-call-judeo-catholic.html .

own religion lacks, but that are found in other people's religions.[4] I was fascinated—it was hard not to be fascinated by this brilliant, influential, and charismatic gentleman—but to use a word that I grew up with in New York Yinglish, I thought he was *meshugah*—out of his mind. *He* could be envious of Judaism, the parent religion of his church, but how could I possibly be envious of any aspect of Christianity, the daughter religion, which depended on early Jewish beliefs and texts? But a very important seed was planted in my mind, a seed that would be nurtured by the next Kraft-Hiatt professor, E. P. Sanders, and then even more, by my long-term colleague and friend, Bernadette Brooten.

Then something else happened in the later 1990s. Don Kraus, Executive Bible Editor at Oxford University Press, one of the finest people I know, called me to say that Oxford was starting to put together a third edition of the *Oxford Annotated Bible*, to be called the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (*NOAB*).[5] As an Episcopalian with integrity, he was frustrated that the previous editions, especially in their OT sections, often drew a distinction between the OT as Law and the NT as Love and Grace, and he wanted me on the editorial team to be sure that the next edition would avoid that harmful dichotomy, based on Marcion, active in the second century, who was later declared a heretic, though his ideas sadly remained deeply entrenched in parts of the church. I agreed, and so I began to work with a team for whom the word "Bible" had its more typical, broad meaning, that is, "OT (including the deuterocanonical works) + NT."

The early rabbinic work Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers (4:2), observes: "one *mitzvah* (good deed) leads to another." For my purposes, I would paraphrase this as "editing one annotated Bible edition leads to editing another annotated Bible." After working on that edition of *NOAB*, Don Kraus again contacted me and said: We, Oxford, have a *Catholic Study Bible*, and think that we should have a Jewish one as well. How would you like to co-edit that? I said yes, and the first edition of *The Jewish Study Bible* (*JSB*) was published in 2004, co-edited with Adele Berlin of the University of Maryland; we published the second, revised, edition a decade later.

That publication is important for my journey for at least two reasons. One concerns a letter I received via snail mail—from a Christian lay reader who used the book; she thanked me for co-editing the volume, saying that she had never before realized that it is possible to read Isaiah 53—the central Suffering Servant chapter—without reference to Jesus. She acknowledged that it clearly had to have been read that way for the centuries after the prophecy and before Jesus, and she enjoyed pondering that non-Christocentric interpretive possibility. In some ways, that letter was one of the origins of the 2020 book I co-authored with Amy-Jill Levine, *The*

[4] See Krister Stendahl, "The New Testament and the Faith of the Church," in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 23-39.

[5] This appeared as Michael D. Coogan, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Bible With and Without Jesus: *How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently.*

The second reason that the *JSB* was important to me is because it was there, working closely with Adele Berlin, that I realized that I enjoyed editing Bibles. So at some point I said a throwaway line to Don Kraus: "I had so much fun editing the *JSB*, and learned so much from it, maybe I should do a sequel?"

A few years later Don emailed me and said that the Delegates of Oxford University Press had approved *The Jewish Annotated NT* (*JANT*), and since the NT was not my area of expertise, he suggested that I pair up with Levine. I jumped at the opportunity to figure out what such a book would look like and to co-edit it. The first edition of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* was printed in 2011, the second in 2017, and Levine and I are putting the final touches on the third edition.

The format for *JANT* followed other Oxford Bibles, though because the NT is much shorter than the entire Christian Bible, and even the Tanakh, we could be much more extensive in our annotations and have many more essays within a single volume. We had many decisions to make.

The most important concerned our goals and audiences. We decided early on that we were writing for two very different primary audiences: Jews who had little familiarity with the NT, and needed to have it explained to them in a clear, non-threatening, non-proselytizing way, and Christians who needed to understand better that Jesus was Jewish, much of his early audience was Jewish, and thus understanding first-century Judaism was crucial for properly appreciating his message and reception—as well as the message of Paul, the only Pharisee whose writings we have. We do not mean to downplay the Roman imperial context of the NT, but books that offer this information are readily available, while those that offer the Jewish context are not. Convincing Jews to read the NT, and convincing non-Jews that it is a Jewish book, are quite different goals: They do not contradict one another, but they do always mesh well. Both audiences remain before us always.

I often speak of the first goal as producing a "safe" NT for Jews—one that would not arouse a smidgeon of an assumption that it was trying to proselytize. I know too many Jews who for a variety of reasons have never opened the NT—what some call "that book"—because they sense that it is a thoroughly anti-Jewish work. More believe the New Testament has been responsible for the persecution of Jews for the last two millennia—and there is some truth to that belief.

Not everyone understood that Levine and I, and the dozens of other Jews who contributed to the volume, have no interest in converting people in any direction. One of the earliest Amazon reviewers, someone who had not yet read the book because it was not yet published, assumed by the title "*Jewish Annotated New Testament*," that Levine and I are messianic Jews interested in converting people to Christianity. The reviewer described our book using the colorful Yiddish "dreck" ("crap"). The review is short enough to quote in its entirety: "It is evil for Christians to try to convert Jews with this dreck. Why don't you people leave us in peace?" Of course we might have solved this problem by choosing a different title for the

book: I once said jokingly that, because the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" are off-putting for some Jews we might have called *JANT*: *An Annotated Version of the Parts of the Christian Bible that are not Part of the Jewish Bible*, but Oxford vetoed that title, saying that it would not fit on the book spine.

To address our Jewish audience, the book includes sidebars related to many Christian ideas with which Jews might not be familiar, such as "Beatitudes," "Born Again," and "Antichrist," alongside sidebars on issues of particular Jewish concern, e.g. "Pharisees and Tax Collectors," "Jews and the Death of Jesus" and "Circumcision and Works of Law." Levine and I have heard from many Jews and Christians that these are helpful because both biblical and theological basic literacy is not what it once was—in fact, it is gone. I cannot resist telling a story that I heard of a student reading Mark from beginning to end who was so sad when she finished the gospel because the main character was killed.

Other early reviews from some Christians criticized us from a different perspective, resisting the idea that the NT needs to be understood within a Jewish framework. One reviewer on a conservative Catholic website said: "Without having read it, and I can guarantee you I never will, I would guess it's a new bold attempt by the Rabbinic Talmudists to undermine the Faith. They are convinced that Trinitarianism, of which the Church is obviously the bulwark, is a blasphemy which must be destroyed and will stop at nothing."[6] I must note that this observation is especially wrong given that we included an essay by Daniel Boyarin that discussed Jewish precedents for ideas similar to the Trinity.[7] Another reviewer said that Jesus was indeed Jewish, but not related to current Jews, who are descendants of the medieval Khazars. This is an antisemitic theory that has been decisively debunked.[8] That review, on an antisemitic website, included pictures of both Levine and me with big noses and other lovely photoshopped details.[9] There is much to learn about antisemitism from reading reviews of the *JANT*.

We have also sometimes been criticized for being two Jews writing on the NT. This is unfair: Scholars do not need to be part of a religious or cultural tradition to understand it. Not only Buddhists study Buddhism. Does one need to be French (and dead) to study the French revolution? If only ancient Mesopotamians can teach us what the Epic of Gilgamesh meant, it's time to close all departments of Classics and Ancient History. There are advantages to having both insider and outsider perspectives on everything, including religious texts, and *JANT* can supplement in a constructive manner the *many* insider treatments of the NT, while creating a NT that is safe for Jews.

In addition to encouraging Jews to read the NT, and Christians to appreciate its Jewishness, I was, and am, intellectually curious about the extent of continuity and discontinuity between the Tanakh and the NT. Unless I am mistaken, no book

[6] http://catholicforum.fisheaters.com/index.php?topic=3444433.0 .
[7] Daniel Boyarin, "Logos, A Jewish Word: John's Prologue as Midrash," *JANT*[2], 688-691.
[8] See Shaul Stampfer, "Did the Khazars Convert to Judaism?" *Jewish Social Studies* 19, no. 3 (2013): 1-72 and Steven Weitzman, *The Origin of the Jews: The Quest for Roots in a Rootless Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 254-256.
[9] http://incogman.net/2012/02/jew-creeps-using-the-new-testament/ .

does this in a systematic fashion. Levine and I are very activist editors, and I often added notes to the annotations that highlighted the extent to which particular ideas in the NT connect to, develop, or do not relate at all, to those in the Tanakh.

For example, some NT texts suggest that suffering is a sign of divine love; this may be especially prominent in some of the depictions of the passion of Jesus. This idea of positive suffering is also present in the Tanakh, but only in a handful of over easily overlooked cases. It is most prominent in the Tanakh in Prov 3:11-12: "Do not reject the discipline of the Lord, my son; do not abhor His rebuke. For whom the Lord loves, He rebukes, as a father the son whom he favors."[10] In the NT, as in rabbinic literature, this idea became much more important. So I made sure that *JANT* would note this continuity with the Tanakh, but would also highlight that in the Tanakh, where this idea exists, it is much less prominent. Similarly, I also added material pointing out, e.g., that the so-called Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah in their original context do not refer to a royal or messianic figure, and that in the Tanakh this is a peripheral figure, appearing only in one book, but the early Christ-believing community represented in the NT turned this into a central text. This is *not* a value judgment, since the Bible is being constantly recontextualized and reinterpreted by both Jewish and Christian traditions. In some—perhaps even many—cases this reinterpretation goes against what the text originally meant, but that does not make the reinterpretation wrong.

But in discussing such continuity and discontinuity, it is always important to remember that such comparisons must involve similarities and differences—we must compare and contrast.[11] For example, the person writing a history of interpretation of Isaiah must surely note the very different place that Isa 53—the suffering servant—has in Jewish and Christian tradition. It is central to Christianity, but most Jews do not know that it is part of the Tanakh—for a more detailed exploration of this, see *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently*, which I recently co-authored with Levine.[12] To offer another example relating to the importance of highlighting both similarities and differences: I was once invited to an ecumenical discussion where the text under discussion was Jer 31:31: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Given the importance of this verse in the NT, especially in Hebrews 8 and 10, the Christian scholars went on and on, but I had almost nothing to say, since both classical rabbinic and medieval Jewish interpretative literature are nearly silent on this verse, which is of little importance to Judaism, except perhaps in polemical contexts.

I have developed a model that utilizes font sizes to explain the relative difference in importance between various Tanakh/OT texts in Jewish and Christin tradition: both religious communities may share (more or less) the same text, but

[10] Translations generally follow the NJPS, sometimes with slight modifications.

[11] This was a central point in the comparative work between the Bible and ancient Near Eastern texts by the Assyriologist William W. Hallo; see, for example, William W. Hallo, "New Moons and Sabbaths: A Case-study in the Contrastive Approach," *Bible and Spade* 9, no. 4 (1980): 99-105.

[12] For bull bibliographic information, see n. 2, above.

in some cases, one tradition, as it were, prints these texts in a large font, while for the other, it is in a normal or even a small font. Thus, within Christianity, Jeremiah 31:31 is a 36 point verse, but within Judaism, perhaps it is an 8 point verse. But the fact that it lacks significance within Judaism, and I had so little to say about the verse itself, showed a significant Christian bias in the organization of that event.

Returning to *JANT*: We had a free hand in determining what essays to solicit, and how to organize them. To my mind the most important of these is Levine's essay: "Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism." The most novel section of our essays is "(Jewish) Responses to the New Testament," which contains twelve essays about ancient through modern responses to the NT and different figures in it. This material is hard to find elsewhere, and some of the contributors whom we approached said: "Are you sure you want to include these essays? They often reflect crude, polemical, negative views of Christianity within Judaism over the ages." Our answer was an emphatic yes—in order to build a positive present and future together, both Jews and Christians need to confront the painful things that we have penned in the past.

The second edition has many more essays than the first, and the third edition will have even more, covering topics that either we or readers thought would help enhance the volume. I will discuss this a bit more later.

Once we outlined the essays, we needed to find authors for them and for the annotations. Because were trying to create a safe Bible, we wanted all of the contributors to be Jewish by one definition or another—but we excluded messianic Jews. Levine and I talked at length about whether we might include some non-Jewish scholars with expertise in Jewish literature of the period well, such as Krister Stendahl and E. P. Sanders. We ultimately decided not because we thought that, e.g., an essay by the former Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm might scare away some Jewish readers.

Some of the contributors were primarily NT scholars, while others were primarily scholars of rabbinics who could handle the NT in its original Greek. Over the last three decades or so, the NT has become an important part of graduate study in many programs of rabbinics, so fortunately we could find enough scholars to contribute. This would not have been the case two decades earlier when early Judaism and early Christianity were often treated as separate fields, each in its own silo, and when Jewish scholars, by and large, were excluded from studying NT and certainly from teaching it in Christian seminaries and even in some liberal arts settings; Jews are still excluded from teaching in some seminaries and liberal arts settings.

Like all academic fields, NT scholarship is contentious, and we had to decide how much diversity of opinion to allow. Because we did not want to create the NT according to Levine and Brettler, *JANT* reflects the variety of reasonable scholarly views on the NT. It celebrates diversity in interpretation and diversity in Jewish expression, as did the *JSB*. Just as *shiv'im panim latorah* (lit: "The Torah has seventy faces"), *shiv'im panim laberit haḥadashah* (lit: "The NT has seventy faces")—I am here referring to the famous dictum from the late midrash *Numbers Rabbah*

(13:15) that the Torah has 70 equally legitimate faces or facets of interpretation, and claiming that the same should be true for the NT.

I will now move away from *JANT* to focus on one extensive example of how understanding what is often called "the Jewish background of the NT" is enriching and problematic. I hope that this will show what it means for me, to use the subtitle of this talk, to "study the scripture of the other."

My example comes from Matthew, my favorite gospel, though I wish it lacked 27:25: "Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'"[13] The text I will discuss appears in Mark and Luke as well, but I prefer Matthew's version. Matt 22.34-40 reads:

> **34** When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35** and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. **36** "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" **37** He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [Deut 6:5] **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [Lev 19:18] **40** On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

For some, this passage, which reduces the commandments to only two, sounds very Christian—after all, it seems antinomian, and Jews are supposed to love laws. And the more laws the better. But this initial impression is incorrect, as the following rabbinic texts illustrate.

The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 31a) relates the following well-known story of the early rabbinic sage Hillel:[14]

> On another occasion it happened that a certain gentile came before Shammai (an early rabbinic sage who is paired with Hillel, almost always being more stringent on legal matters than Hillel), and said to him, "Make me a proselyte, on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Thereupon Shammai chased him away with the builder's cubit that was in his hand. When he came before Hillel (he also asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot, and) Hillel replied, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah while the rest is commentary; go and learn (it)."

The Jerusalem Talmud (Nedarim 9:4) and the Sifra (Kedohim 4:12), the early midrash on Leviticus, similarly note: "Rabbi Akiva (second century CE) taught: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18): This is an important basic principle in the Torah."[15]

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[13] NT quotations follow the NRSVue.

[14] The translations of rabbinic texts are my own, though often based on earlier translations.

[15] This is the most appropriate translation of the Hebrew *kelal gadol*.

This longer passage, which I will excerpt, from the Babylonian Talmud (Makkot 24a), reflects a similar desire to decrease the number of commandments in the Torah, and to relate them all to a small number of meta-commandments:

> R. Simlai (third century, mostly in the Land of Israel) when preaching said: Six hundred and thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses, three hundred and sixty-five negative precepts [e.g. "Do not murder"], corresponding to the number of solar days [in the year], and two hundred and forty-eight positive precepts [e.g. "Observe the Sabbath day"], corresponding to the number of the members of man's body. …
>
> David came and reduced them to [the Hebrew is *he'emid*, literally "made them stand on"] eleven [principles], as it is written (Ps 15), "A Psalm of David. Lord, who shall sojourn in your tabernacle? Who shall dwell in your holy mountain? (1) He who walks uprightly, and (2) works righteousness … (11) or accepted a bribe against the innocent. The person who does this shall never be shaken."
>
> Isaiah came and reduced them to six [principles], as it is written (in Isa 33:15), "(1) He who walks in righteousness … (6) Shuts his eyes against looking at evil." Micah came and reduced them to three [principles], as it is written (in Micah 6:8), "It has been told to you what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: [1] Only to do justly, and [2] to love mercy and [3] to walk humbly before your God." … Isaiah returned and reduced them to two [principles], as it is said (Isa 56:1), "Thus says the Lord, [1] Keep justice and [2] do righteousness" … (It is noteworthy that these three texts, and most of the others chosen in this passage, highlight interpersonal, ethical commandments, rather than ritual commandments.) Habakkuk came and based them all on one [principle], as it is said (Hab 2:4), "But the righteous shall live by his faith."

This tradition in the name of R. Simlai and the tradition concerning the greatest commandment in the NT are similar; Jesus "hangs" the many commandments on two commandments, while R. Simlai is interested in "making them stand" on various texts. But which tradition is earlier? Is the tradition quoted in the name of Hillel, who lived before Jesus preached authentic—even though it is cited in the Babylonian Talmud, from the sixth century or later?

And to complicate matters still further: The pairing of loving God and neighbor is in the Pseudepigraphic Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, likely composed in the second pre-Christian century.[16] It is found in The Testament of Issachar 5.2: "Love the Lord and the neighbor" and the Testament of Benjamin 3:3: "Fear the Lord and love your neighbor." Thus, the pairing the commandment to love God and to love your neighbor existed before Jesus; was he influenced by this?

[16] On this date, see Charlesworth, *OTP* 1.778-779; for the texts see ibid., 803, 825.

These questions bring me to the very apt subtitle of Peter Schäfer's 2012 book, *The Jewish Jesus:* "How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other."[17] Schäfer is a major scholar of Judaism who taught rabbinics in Belin and Princeton; he is not Jewish. As he points out, we often do not know the directions of influence, and on some occasions, arrows showing influence might look like the path of a boomerang. But Judaism and Christianity are quite intertwined in this early period.

This intertwining is not the same as identity or unity of opinion. We must engage in dialogue, not fake kumbaya unity. I cannot emphasize enough that differences are as important as similarities. I am tired of hearing people using the expression Judeo-Christian, which is especially common in America, especially in election season, implying that Judaism, particularly as reflected in the OT, and Christianity, are more or less the same. I assure you that when I shop in American stores after Thanksgiving, I do not hear Judeo-Christian music in the malls, nor will Rudolph be depicted wearing a kippah. It is unfortunate that Arthur Cohen's book of 55 years ago, the *Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*,[18] has not been more widely read and discussed. Judeo-Christian is still too often used to mean Christian, perhaps with a sprinkling of OT Judaism that comports with Christianity—no more and no less. And now it has become a pernicious code-word for excluding Muslims and others. As Jews and Christians we must be aware of both similarities and differences between our respective religions. Differences must be understood, and respected.

But there are, I believe, situations where it is appropriate, or perhaps even necessary, to criticize certain ideas of other religious groups, but this must be done with great care, *and only after engaging in self-criticism.* [19] Here are two examples of such critique of my own Scriptures. The first is the law of the *ḥerem*—the ban or proscription, mandating the killing of the residents of Canaan upon conquering the land. One form of it appears in Deut 7:2, which describes how the Israelites are to treat the people living in Canaan: "and [when] the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter." Deut 20:16-18 is even more problematic:

> **16** In the towns of the peoples, however, which the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. **17** No, you must proscribe [a fancy Bible-word reflecting the root *ḥ-r-m* for "kill and dedicate to God"]

[17] Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). On pp. 27-54, he notes the involvement of R. Simlai, the tradent in Makkot 24a (discussed above) in Jewish-Christian debate.

[18] For this and additional literature, see Levine and Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus*, 437 n60, and K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) and Malka Simkovich, "The Problem with the Term 'Judeo-Christian'," *The Times of Israel*, accessed December 24, 2024, https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-problem-with-the-term-judeo-christian/.

[19] The importance of religious self-criticism is highlighted in John T. Pawlikowski, "The Christian Bible and Interreligious Relations," in *Christian Perspectives on Transforming Interreligious Encounter: Essays in Honor of Leo D. Lefebure*, ed. Kristin Johnston Largen and James L. Fredericks (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 1-20.

> them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you, **18** lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before the Lord your God.

I find this law horrific. I am well-aware of various attempts to make it more acceptable, by e.g. saying that this is only a theoretical law, and that it was never applied[20]—but that doesn't help—the law itself is horrific. And exacerbating how problematic this law is: It is found in Deuteronomy, which some scholars claim is so humanitarian.[21]

I find problematic in a different way 2 Samuel 12, the chapter that immediately follows David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba. In the Tanakh, conception is either super easy and quick—almost instantaneous (think, e.g., Tamar—instantly impregnated by her father-in-law Judah in Genesis 38), or extremely difficult (think e.g., Sara, who conceived Isaac when she was 90 years old, and Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel described in 1 Sam 1-2; she was childless while her co-wife, Penina, had children).[22] 2 Sam 11 is an example of the former category. A child is born from this adulterous union of David and Bathsheba, and the prophet Nathan confronts David about his sin. David offers just about the shortest confession possible (v. 13), "I have sinned to the Lord," only two words in Hebrew. (Imagine what religious services would look like if all prayers were so short!) God forgives him for this capital crime. But—the crime needs to be punished, with the result that the crime and punishment are transferred—that is the meaning of the Hebrew word *he'evir* ("the Lord has *he'evir*ed your sin/punishment, you shall not die"), which too many translations clean up and render in the sense of forgive.[23] As the biblical text makes clear, the guiltless infant dies as punishment for David's adultery.

I find this text deeply disturbing. I am not assuaged by the rabbinic tradition that fills in the text by saying this was not really adultery since in this period every husband who went out to war conditionally divorced his wife[24]—so Bathsheba was not really married. 2 Samuel 12 describes vicarious intergenerational punishment, plain and simple—and this idea is found in other biblical texts,[25] although the Tanakh contain countervailing voices as well.[26]

Now that I have publicly acknowledged that I find problematic some texts in my own tradition, I can call out such texts as Matt. 27:25 "Then all the people answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" or John 8:44 "You are from your father the devil" or 1 Thes 2:15, about the Jews "who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets" or—much of the supersessionist, poorly named, Letter to

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[20] I discuss this issue at: https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/future-of-the-past/blog/destroying-amalek.
[21] See, for example, Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 27-28, 284-285.
[22] See Joel S. Baden and Candida R. Moss, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
[23] See, e.g., NJPS, "remit" and NRSVue "put away."
[24] See *b. Shabbat* 56a.
[25] The classic case is in the Decalogue; see Exod 20:5 and Deut 5:9 (and cf. Exod 34:7).
[26] See esp. Deut 7:10.

the Hebrews. Only after criticizing my own scripture, can I say that I find all of these texts deeply problematic. In *JANT* our authors contextualize these texts, and note, e.g., for Matthew, that the reference in its historical context may "only" refer to the Jews from the generation of the destruction of the Second Temple.[27] But this contextualization does not really make this and the other texts go away—any more than noting that the law of the *ḥerem* was perhaps only theoretical makes that law go away and become harmless.

We must condemn the texts in any scripture that promotes harm—beginning with our scripture, and then moving to critique the scripture of others. And we must condemn those who follow the path of these problematic scriptural precedents, whether it is our contemporaries who want to apply the law of the *ḥerem* to innocent Palestinians, even if this is in part a reaction to the horrific pogrom of October 7, 2023, or earlier scholars such as the second-century Christian Justin Martyr who said "For the true spiritual Israel ... are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ" or Martin Luther who claimed "The Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God."[28]

Levine and I believe that part of our role in books such as *JANT* and our more recent *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently*, is to flag such misunderstandings of Judaism, and especially of the Tanakh, within Christianity–misunderstandings that we have heard in churches and in the classroom, have read in books, and seen in social media. We have found ourselves constantly emphasizing, for example, that love is as much a part of the Tanakh as it is of the NT, and that the great love command of Jesus that I explored above combines parts of Lev 19:18 and Deut 6:5—two texts from the *Jewish* scriptures. We also find ourselves often clarifying that rabbinic Judaism is often not as it is depicted in so many contexts as Taliban-like; it never, e.g., interpreted, an eye for an eye, as referring to corporeal punishment.[29] Levine and I have added several essays in the forthcoming edition of *JANT* to make this even clearer, especially one titled "Stereotypes about God in the Old and New Testaments." We must not create our religious identities through "negative identity"—misrepresenting the religion of the other to bolster our own religion.

I conclude by noting another essay we have added to *JANT*[3]. In the Tanakh, the Land of Israel is very central—indeed, Chronicles, the final book of most editions of the Tanakh, ends with a reference of return to the Land. Yet, the Land of Israel plays a minimal role in the NT. Levine and I have highlighted this point by adding a new essay, "Land and Covenant," to the forthcoming third edition of *JANT*. Realizing the different place that the Land plays for Judaism in the *Tanakh*, and for Christians in the NT, can be an important starting point for discussing several contentious issues in the contemporary Middle East.

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[27] See *JANT*[2], 63-64.

[28] See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, translated by Thomas B. Falls (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 11; Martin Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, translated by Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 137.

[29] See Levine and Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus*, 206-217.

So please, let's be cognizant of the issues I have raised in this talk as we engage in dialogue—so that our dialogue is fruitful. Let's always be careful and self-conscious about how we use the deceptively simple word "Bible." "What Bible and Whose Bible" has so many implications—and let us always be aware of them. And finally, let us each look inwards at our own tradition and be willing to criticize it as the first step toward honest dialogue.