

The Theme of the Bible

King's College, Cambridge, holds a 'Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols' every Christmas Eve, broadcast throughout the English-speaking world and imitated in very many churches, especially Anglican/Episcopalian ones. As the title indicates, it includes nine readings from the Bible, interspersed with hymns and carols. The carols change a little from year to year, but the readings are more or less constant. At the beginning of the service there is a 'bidding' – a call to listen and to pray – which includes what amounts to an interpretation of the whole of the Bible in one sentence:

Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious Redemption brought us by this Holy Child.

The Bible – 'Holy Scripture' – is seen here as telling a story of disobedience and redemption, of sin and salvation, of paradise lost and paradise regained, concerning the whole human race ('our' disobedience). The main characters in the story are Adam and Jesus Christ, Adam who sinned in the garden of Eden (part of Genesis 3 is always the first reading in the service) and Jesus Christ, whom St Paul called the 'last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45), who obeyed God and through his obedience, even up to the point of death, conferred salvation on the whole of humanity. The Bible is thus understood as a story about a disaster followed by a rescue mission, and this fits with the nature of Christianity as a religion of salvation.

CHRISTIAN READING OF THE BIBLE

This idea of what the Bible is essentially about is so ingrained in western culture that it seems to most people with any kind of Christian background to be simply obvious. It results in a very particular way of

understanding the Old Testament – which, on this interpretation, begins in history but ends in prophecy. It starts with the disobedience of Adam and then the tale of how the people of Israel continued to slide away from the moral values God demanded, and ends with the predictions of the coming saviour, such as we find in Handel's *Messiah*. The King's College service always contains two of these, both from the book of Isaiah. One is the prediction of a royal son who will be the 'prince of peace' (Isaiah 9:6–7):

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.

(verses 6–7)

The other is the prophecy about the 'peaceable kingdom' in which the 'wolf shall live with the lamb' (Isaiah 11:1–6):

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him . . .

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

(verses 1–2, 6)

As we saw in Chapter 9, it fits with this way of thinking that the Christian Old Testament – always written as a codex, as we have seen – is arranged so that the prophetic books such as Isaiah come at the end, immediately before the Gospels in which the prophecies find their fulfilment.

This is how Christians have read the Bible since at least the second century CE, the age of Justin and Irenaeus. The King's College system

of readings¹ is really a modern descendant of the ancient tradition of making excerpts from the Old Testament of the passages that were thought to point to Jesus Christ – known technically as *testimonia*, 'testimonies' (see Chapters 10 and 11). Many early Christians will not have had access to the whole Old Testament, and will have known it mainly through *testimonia*-books, whose contents they may have learned by heart, and which may well have contained some texts that are not actually in the Old Testament at all, such as the one quoted in Matthew 2:23, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'²

This understanding of the Old Testament as a story of disaster calling out for rescue goes back to Paul, for whom the Scriptures (meaning of course the Old Testament) are teleological, running from Adam to Christ and then on to the Second Coming. The pattern is already implied in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians in the first couple of decades after the crucifixion, and is spelled out explicitly in Romans:

Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned . . . If the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many . . . For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

(Romans 5:12, 15, 19)

Christ undoes Adam's sin, and this is good news not only for Jews but for the whole human race, Adam's descendants. The Old Testament is to be read as a description of the sin into which Adam precipitated humankind and as a prophecy of the salvation from that plight that would be brought by Jesus Christ. The Old Testament thus runs seamlessly into the new dispensation described in the New.

Christian theologians of the first few centuries CE take this scheme for granted and elaborate it. Not content with seeing disobedient Adam as paralleled and reversed in obedient Christ, they develop a more complex typology, that is, a series of correspondences between Genesis (and the rest of the Old Testament) and the Gospels. Take, for example, John Chrysostom, the fourth-century Bishop of Constantinople (349–407 CE), in one of his homilies:

If you reflect upon the Scriptures and the story of our redemption, you will recall that a virgin, a tree and a death were the symbols of our defeat. The virgin's name was Eve: she knew not a man. The tree was the tree of

the knowledge of good and evil. The death was Adam's penalty. But now those very symbols of our defeat – a virgin, a tree and a death – have become symbols of Christ's victory. In place of Eve there is Mary; in place of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there is the tree of the cross; and in place of the death of Adam, there is the death of Christ.³

To most Christians from the second century CE onwards this has seemed an obvious and rather beautiful way of reading the Bible: the New Testament completes the story told in the Old by showing how God rescued the human race from the disaster into which it had fallen, and to which the Old Testament bears witness. Old Testament characters are often a foreshadowing of people and events in the New Testament and in Christian history. Of course, the Old Testament had other kinds of importance too, for example as providing a basic moral code; but as a narrative it was taken to be about the human lapse into sin, sin's continuation through the history of disobedience in the life of Israel, and the restoration of the human race through the death and resurrection of Christ, who will then come again for the final judgement of the world.

JEWISH READINGS OF THE BIBLE

It can therefore come as a shock to Christians when they first encounter a mainstream Jewish reading of the Hebrew Bible, which contains mainly the same books as what Christians call the Old Testament.⁴ In Judaism, to generalize a little, the Bible is not a story of disaster and rescue, but much more of providential guidance. The main character is not Adam: in Judaism, as it has developed down to modern times, there is no emphasis at all on the garden of Eden story as an account of the 'fall' of the human race, as Christians call it. Much more central is Abraham, the founder of the people of Israel, and the biblical story is that of how his descendants lived in the land that God gave them, were expelled from it when they sinned, but were afterwards allowed back and given an ongoing existence. There is no emphasis on 'salvation', at least not in the otherworldly and individual sense that Christians have often given that word, but rather on divine leadership and guidance of the people as a corporate entity through the winding paths of history. The prophets are there, but they are seen as guides for the path, and the predictions of the Messiah, though there are a few, are not in any way central or very important – they are a minority interest. The difference in the way the

Bible is read in Judaism can be seen in how the books are arranged: the last book in the Bible is not a prophetic book, as it is for Christians, but the book of Chronicles, which ends with the exiled Jews being given permission by the Persian ruler Cyrus to return to the Promised Land. The final word of the Bible on this arrangement is the Hebrew word *veya'al*, 'let him go up', that is, let anyone who wishes return to the Land. (This is the reason why immigration of Jews to Israel is now known as *'aliyah*, 'going up', from the same Hebrew verb *'alah*.)

For Jews therefore, at least throughout much of history, the Bible has been not at all about fall and redemption, but about how to live a faithful life in the ups and downs of the ongoing history of the people of Israel. The first eleven chapters of Genesis, from creation through Adam and down to Abraham, are a prologue to the history of Israel, rather than setting the main themes of the collection of books that follow. Christians have tended to treat all of the Old Testament as a kind of prophecy – even the Psalms have often been read as predicting the Messiah, and the books of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy, have been mined for predictions. Jews, by contrast, tend to treat it all as a form of instruction in living a good and observant life, in other words as *torah*, the Hebrew word for instruction or teaching (misleadingly translated 'law' – see Chapter 4). As Alexander Samely puts it:

Rabbinic texts contain details of a human project which could be described in modern terms as follows. Everyday life is an infinite series of opportunities for obedience to God, whose will is articulated and implied in Scripture, a book filled to the brim with instructions and information.⁵

It is sometimes said that Jews and Christians share the Old Testament, and differ simply in whether or not they regard the New Testament as part of the Bible. Although this is strictly speaking true, it misses out a great deal. Jews and Christians do indeed share these books, but traditionally construe them in such diverse ways that it is almost as though they were different works: and the difference in arrangement signals this diversity. For Jews the Torah or Pentateuch is overwhelmingly important; alongside it there are the Prophets and the Writings, but these are of far less significance. It would be an odd form of Judaism nowadays that foregrounded the Prophets in the way that Christians have done, and treated them as the interpretative key to reading the Bible. The Jewish Bible is definitely not one but three collections, one of them far more important than the other two. This was certainly true by the early third century CE at the latest, since the Mishnah presupposes

this arrangement. For Christians the Old Testament is a single work. As we saw in Chapter 10, for them the Pentateuch runs on into the other historical books to make what some of the Fathers actually call an Enneateuch (nine books; see Chapter 9). Then, after a kind of interlude constituted by the 'teaching' books such as Psalms and Proverbs, the work finds its climax in the words of the prophets, foretelling the coming Messiah. If we are to talk at all of 'the meaning' of a corpus of literature as long and varied as the Old Testament, we have to use some kind of overarching scheme of interpretation; and, given the difference between the Christian scheme of fall and prophesied redemption on the one hand, and the Jewish theme of providential guidance and instruction on the other, it is indeed almost as though they were two different collections.

Having set up this stark contrast, I must now qualify it slightly. What I have been saying is true for the way Judaism and Christianity have developed over the centuries. But if we go back to the time of Paul, that is, to the first century CE, we actually find that Jewish conceptions were more varied than they later became, and that Christian perceptions were not yet so fixed on the disaster-and-rescue model. Two books that were too recent to get into the official Jewish Bible, but can be found among the apocryphal/deutero-canonical books, reflect the same kind of interest in Adam's fall that Christians were to pick up. One is the so-called Wisdom of Solomon, a work from the first century BCE, well known to Christians, even those who do not regard it as Scripture, for the line, 'the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God' (Wisdom 3:1). The other is the slightly earlier book of Ecclesiasticus/Sirach, which gives us 'Let us now sing the praises of famous men' (Sirach 44:1). In both, sin and death result from the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and the Wisdom of Solomon at least thinks of God as able to reverse them, and so grant immortality – much closer to the Christian model:

God created us for incorruption,
and made us in the image of his own eternity,
but through the devil's envy death entered the world . . .

(Wisdom of Solomon 2:23–4)

– a clear reference to the garden of Eden story, with the snake as the devil, just as in later Christian imagination, though not (at least not explicitly) in Genesis 3. The author goes on to say that the 'hope [of the righteous] is full of immortality' (3:4), and to claim that their souls are indeed 'in the hand of God' (3:1). Ben Sira, the author of Ecclesiasticus, blames Eve for the loss of immortality:

From a woman sin had its beginning,
and because of her we all die.

(Sirach 25:24)

A third book, where the importance of the sin in the garden is clearest of all, is 2 Esdras, which comes from the end of the first century CE and so could depend on Christian ideas – though most commentators agree that its core is purely Jewish, despite its having been placed within a Christian framework.⁶ It is not, strictly speaking, canonical for any Christians, though it appears as a supplement in the Latin Bible, while being unknown to the Greek tradition. It was probably written in Aramaic or Hebrew, but is now extant mainly in Latin. In it Ezra, the putative author of the books, says:

'This is my first and last comment: it would have been better if the earth had not produced Adam, or else, when it had produced him, had restrained him from sinning. For what good is it to all that they live in sorrow now and expect punishment after death? O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants.'

(2 Esdras 7:46–8/116–18)

This is much closer to Paul's conception – and to that of subsequent Christian authors – than to what became normal in Judaism. Thus a Christian understanding of the fall and of redemption does have Jewish roots: they lie in the last couple of centuries BCE, when Judaism changed quite radically, rather than in the Hebrew Bible as it was read in earlier times and as it has been read by later Jews. Christians inherited a style of Jewish thinking about Adam and Eve and about the need for salvation that developed only towards the end of the Second Temple period, and they persisted in teaching it, after mainstream Judaism had largely abandoned it again.

Similar things can be said about messianic prophecy. The idea of the coming of a great king after the model of David certainly occurs in the Hebrew Bible, in books such as Zechariah, where he is called the *mashiah*, 'messiah', meaning anointed one. But it is a comparatively minor theme in the Old Testament. Many passages that Christians later interpreted as messianic prophecies probably referred originally to something much more mundane, the birth of a royal child in the normal course of events. This is likely to be the case in Isaiah 9:2–7, the passage about the prince of peace, which originally concerned the coming birth of the king's son. Towards the

end of the Second Temple period some groups did become greatly interested in messianic prophecy, as we see from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

His [that is, the Messiah's] kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all his ways truth. He will judge the earth with truth, and all will make peace. The sword will cease from the earth, and all cities pay him homage. The great God will be his strength.

(4Q246)

But rabbinic Judaism, the style of Judaism that is the precursor of what we now think of as Orthodox Judaism, tended to lose interest in messianic prophecy except in certain periods of tension or heightened expectation. It saw the Messiah as promised, certainly, but not as a subject of great interest for practical purposes.

Thus the whole model of a disaster and rescue mission, as I have called it, was not completely a Christian invention or discovery. It occurred within Judaism. But by making it the universal way of reading Old Testament Scripture, Christians ensured that Christianity would develop along quite different lines from Judaism. Christians soon came to see Judaism as having thoroughly misread its own Scriptures and even, according to some writers, as having falsified those Scriptures, removing allusions to the Messiah and to Jesus Christ as the saviour of lost humanity. We recall again how the second-century CE teacher Justin Martyr insisted that the Jews had changed the text of Psalm 96, which had originally read 'the Lord reigns *from the tree*', a reference to the cross. He also claimed that they had deleted from Jeremiah a reference to what is called the harrowing of hell, Christ's visit to Hades after his death but before his resurrection to preach to the pre-Christian righteous. According to Justin the text had read, 'The Lord God of Israel remembered his dead who slept in the earth of a grave, and he descended to them to preach to them his salvation.'⁷ There is no truth in either accusation, as there is no evidence that either of these passages was ever in the Hebrew Bible. But they confirmed the Christian feeling that Christians understood the Old Testament better than the Jews, and could even correct its text.

RECONCILING JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN READINGS?

So the New Testament is not just an addition to the Old: it radically rewrites it in many ways. Subsequent Christian thinkers, though they

inherited the Old Testament as part of their Scriptures, read it in quite a different way from their Jewish contemporaries. Christians believed that in and through Jesus Christ something new had happened, which could not be wholly understood in terms of the existing Scriptures; and this meant that when those same Scriptures were read, they were read differently. Even so, the Christians drew on contemporary Judaism for models to understand what they saw as this new revelation. Judaism itself very soon took a different course, and read the Bible primarily as sustenance for a journey of faith and obedience that was continuous from the time of Abraham through to the present, without any disruption of the kind represented for Christians by the disobedience in the garden of Eden. The Babylonian exile was a major hitch in the story, but it did not ultimately call into question God's faithfulness to his people; and there is no suggestion, as there has so often been in Christian thought, that any event, whether the disobedience in the garden or some other, renders human beings entirely unable to respond to God. There is no doctrine of original sin in Judaism, no sense that humankind is irretrievably lost without divine grace. That is a Pauline idea that subsequent Christian thinkers developed, but not one that most Jews ever envisaged.

The difference between Jewish and Christian readings of the Bible is the theme of an important short book by R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*.⁸ Much as I have been arguing myself, he suggests that for Jews and Christians respectively the main plot of the Bible has been quite differently articulated. Since the second or third Christian generation, Christians have read the Bible as concerned with four essential elements in a large-scale story: not the story of Israel, but the story of the world. The four elements are the creation; the fall; the redemption brought by Christ; and the final consummation of all things, as described in Revelation at the end of the two-Testament Christian Bible.⁹ The fall of humankind as a whole, which scarcely figures at all in a Jewish reading (and this is not surprising, since outside Genesis 3 the Hebrew Bible never mentions it), has been for Christians an absolutely central element in this structure, since it defines the question to which redemption in Christ provides the answer. This question is not how Jews should live, but how the whole human race can relate to a God whom it radically displeases.

Soulen shows how this fourfold schema can be found in Christian theologians from Justin and Irenaeus in the second century CE to Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Karl Rahner (1904-84) in the twentieth.

Nothing much is made of the history of Israel, other than as the stage on which the messianic promises, one day to be fulfilled in Jesus, were set. The Bible is seen as being primarily not about Israel and its history, but about the redemption of the world from sin. To this end the two Testaments relate different stages in the process of redemption. The subject of the Hebrew Bible, on this interpretation, is 'us', meaning either the whole human race or the people who are the forerunners of Christians, such as the patriarchs and prophets: not the great mass of the Jews, who are simply not in focus at all. Soulen argues that this amounts to supersessionism, the doctrine that Christianity has replaced Judaism. Such an idea is inherent not in specific features, such as whether the covenant with Abraham has been improved on in Christ – which, though important, are relatively small-scale matters – but in the whole way of construing the history told in the Hebrew Bible. There can only be mutual understanding between Jews and Christians, he believes, when they come to see how irreconcilably different have been their characteristic ways of reading it.

But there is another element in his work, and that is to argue that Christians ought to abandon their own traditional fourfold scheme and get back to reading the Bible in the Jewish manner. They would then see that God's dealing with the human world works on the basis that there are always to be Jews and Gentiles on earth, and that neither can ever be subsumed into the other. The New Testament offers the hope that some Gentiles and Jews alike can come to see that God has done a really new thing through Jesus, which changes world history; but in the process nothing requires them to cease to be, respectively, Gentiles and Jews. The central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures, Soulen argues,

is the God of Israel's work as Consummator and . . . God's work as Consummator engages the human family by opening up an 'economy of mutual blessing' between those who are and who remain different. God consummates the human family by electing it into an historical and open-ended economy of difference and reciprocal dependence, the identifying characteristic of which is the divinely drawn distinction between Israel and the nations. Jewish and gentile identity are not basically antithetical or even 'separate but equal' ways of relating to God. They are, rather, two mutually dependent ways of participating in a single divine *oikonomia* of blessing oriented toward the final consummation of the whole human family in God's eschatological *shalom*.¹⁰

For most Christians, this would be an entirely novel way of reading the Bible, one not found at all in the history of Christian biblical interpretation.

Central to such a reading is God's covenant relation with Israel: a relationship added to through Christ, in revealing more to Gentiles than they had previously known, but not in any way abrogated. The usual Jewish way of construing Scripture as the story of Israel is here affirmed, not set aside. To it is added that Scripture is also about the story of the other nations (the Gentiles or *goyim*) in relation to Israel, a point which Jewish readers would be unlikely to want to deny. But the Gentiles are not presented as those who will one day take over the promises to Israel through a new and better covenant. Rather, they are portrayed as people to whom the God of Israel also relates. This is, after all, inherent in the story of the blessing of Noah, the ancestor of the entire human race, as traditional Jewish readings have always affirmed. But the model of fall and redemption, which Christians have traditionally used to structure their own reading of the whole Bible, is seen as too easily bypassing the story of Israel and the nations, and introducing a falsely universalizing theme into a book which is closely bound up with a specific people, Israel, and its relations with the outside world.

Soulen's work challenges Christians to listen to the witness of the Hebrew Bible without imposing on it a prearranged theological schema based in the New Testament. It could lead, after much theological reflection, to a robust Christian use of the Hebrew Bible, in which supersessionism is overcome, yet the newness of Christ is truly celebrated as good news for the whole world, for Gentiles and Jews alike. Jews would be under no pressure whatever to abandon their Judaism. On the contrary, Christians would want them to celebrate and affirm it as being of eternal value. While the proposal is attractive, I do not think it corresponds to anything that has existed before in the Christian reading of the Hebrew Bible, which has always (since Paul) followed the disaster and rescue-mission model that universalizes the message of the Bible while relativizing its Jewish character. It does, however, open up the intriguing question how Jesus himself read the Jewish Scriptures. Did he see himself as the one who would deliver the world from its sins – the later Christian model – or essentially as a Jewish teacher who sought to improve Jewish adherence to Torah by radical moral teaching? The second understanding has characterized the modern 'Jesus the Jew' movement in scholarship,¹¹ which drives a wedge between Jesus and Paul and views Paul as having 'de-Judaized' the message of Jesus. If this is correct, then Soulen's argument could be seen as a return to Jesus' own understanding of the logic of the Hebrew Bible, across the intervening doctrinal development of the four-stage scheme that he rightly thinks has determined most Christian Bible-reading since the second

century CE. It does, however, tend to ignore the question of Jesus' own claims for his own status as inaugurating a new stage in God's dealings with Israel, or perhaps as bringing in the close of the age. It is not so easy to remove from the traditions in the Gospels Jesus' sense of his own divinely ordained destiny, and to leave us with him as simply a Jewish teacher, however great.

INTERPRETATION OF THE HEBREW BIBLE IN JUDAISM

In fact, the contrast between Jewish and Christian approaches to the Bible is in some ways even more stark than indicated above, in that mainstream Judaism has not typically read the Hebrew Bible as having an overarching grand narrative at all. In the synagogue liturgy¹² only the Pentateuch is read right through, and the Prophets (which include the histories) are read only in small excerpts to accompany the readings from the Pentateuch. The vast majority of passages from the Prophets are left unread, and thus are unfamiliar to many highly observant Jews. The Writings – the third part of the Hebrew Bible, including Psalms, Proverbs, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles – are not read at all except for the five scrolls, Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and Ruth, which are read at five major festivals, and particular psalms are used on a regular basis. There is no ideal of publicly reading through the whole Bible, as there has been in Christian traditions such as Anglicanism, or in Christian monastic practice. The sense that the Bible forms a narrative whole is, in contrast to the Christian view, altogether lacking.

In rabbinic commentary, pieces of the Bible are interpreted in an atomizing way, often with no regard for their context in Scripture; and though there are many stories in the midrashim (the plural form of midrash), the traditional Jewish commentaries on the biblical books, they are usually individual anecdotes, not part of any overall narrative framework. Overwhelmingly the stories in Scripture are mined for what they have to teach about obedience to Torah, not for their contribution to any teleological scheme of salvation or redemption, which is largely lacking. It is possible for Jewish scholars to write articles subtitled, 'Why Jews don't read Books',¹³ implying that Jewish biblical interpretation does not focus on whole books, still less on the scriptural collection as a whole, but on fragmentary bits. In traditional Jewish exegesis, all of Scripture is like an enormous anthology of sayings (rather like the book

of Proverbs), with no particular order or flow – according to one very important rabbinic maxim, 'there is no before or after in Scripture'¹⁴ – so that one may interpret an earlier passage in the light of a later one just as much as the reverse, as though all the books had been written at the same time – in God's eternity, in fact. The rabbinic approach to the Bible has been characterized as involving 'the segmentation of the Hebrew Bible into micro-Scripture. Each sign can be considered on its own, each word can have different meanings, each sentence different topics, and each story can have many links to other stories.'¹⁵ We shall return to this way of seeing the Bible in Chapter 14.

Thus it is not so much that Judaism uses the Scriptures to tell a different overall story from Christianity, but that the concern for an overall story is in itself a largely Christian preoccupation. Of course, it is obvious to anyone who reads the whole Old Testament that it does tell a continuous story from the creation to the end of the exile, and then after that provides at least sporadic information about life under the Persians and under the Hellenistic rulers of Egypt and Syria. But reading the whole Old Testament through is mostly a Christian interest. If one reads only the Torah – the Pentateuch, the first five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy – one reads about God's faithfulness to the patriarchs, the giving of the law through Moses, and the gift of the Promised Land, which will be fulfilled under Joshua. But the story of how that in fact happened, along with the subsequent history of divine guidance, Israel's rebellion and God's mercy, all lies outside the Torah and does not have the same centrality to Judaism. Many Jews knew the rest of the Scriptures extremely well – it is clear from rabbinic literature that most sages committed almost the whole of the Prophets and Writings to heart, just as they had the Torah – but that knowledge is not as essential a part of the religion for everyone as knowledge of the Torah.

In modern Judaism – we do not know how far back the custom goes, but certainly into Talmudic times – on the Sabbath known as *simchat torah*, 'rejoicing in the law', the final section of Deuteronomy is read, with Israel on the brink of the Promised Land, and then is immediately followed by the first section of Genesis, starting up the annual cycle of Torah-reading again. The story does not continue into Joshua as it does in the Christian Bible; Joshua is the first book in the Prophets, the second, and less important, division of the Jewish Bible. The Christian feeling that Deuteronomy is followed by Joshua just as much as Genesis is followed by Exodus is lacking in Judaism, which retains a sense that these are all separate scrolls.

Indeed, studying the Bible at all has tended to develop in modern times in Israel rather than in the diaspora, as part of giving the state not so much a religious as a cultural identity – new recruits to the army, for example, are presented with a pocket Hebrew Bible. Orthodox Jews had traditionally studied the Talmud, not the Bible, even though the Talmud constantly refers to biblical texts. The bland assertion that Jews and Christians ‘share the Old Testament’, even though they disagree about the New, fails to see how distinctively these books function in the two religions, and have done at least since the second century CE. Christianity developed a wholly different idea of divine salvation from Judaism, and one that was linked with exactly the scheme Soulen has identified: creation, fall, redemption, final consummation, all affecting the entire human race. In Judaism ideas of salvation were bound up instead with the fortunes of Israel, which it saw as lying in observance of the divine Torah.

One may press this point further by saying that Judaism, unlike Christianity, is not really a religion of salvation at all. An article in the English weekly newspaper the *Church Times* began as follows:

Religions are concerned, above all, with salvation – with what is awry in the human condition, and its remedy. Their beliefs centre, therefore, on what we need to be saved *from* and *for*, and how this can be achieved.¹⁶

The case of Judaism, Christianity’s closest relative, shows how far this is from being universally true. Not all religions are about rescue from the human plight: it is perfectly possible to have a religion that does not see the human race or the individual as sunk in misery from which salvation is needed, and Judaism is just such a one. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) put it, ‘the faith of the Old Testament is not a religion of redemption’.¹⁷ Judaism, like many religions, recognizes human sin and weakness. Unlike Christianity, however, it does not propose that these are at such a pitch that God needs to intervene dramatically to rescue humanity from them. Furthermore, it is not in general very concerned with humanity as a whole. Judaism does have theories about the well-being of, and the ethical obligations incumbent on, non-Jews, such as the theory of the so-called Noachite laws, supposedly made known to all humanity through Noah; and it has an awareness that there are prophecies about the gathering-in of the Gentiles at the last day. But such questions are marginal, not something that Jews spend a lot of time thinking about, any more than they do about the sin of Adam. Christians tend to assimilate Judaism to the model of Christianity,

asking what Jews have to say about the fall, about original sin and about salvation, and it is perfectly possible to find Jewish teachings on such matters if one looks hard. But the heart of Judaism does not lie there, and to establish a set of Christian questions to which one then seeks Jewish answers is to misunderstand the different genius of the two faiths. As we have seen, there were strands in Judaism in the time of the New Testament that did take more interest in such matters, but they did not continue into what became rabbinic Judaism. Thus Judaism and Christianity diverged over time in their way of reading the Hebrew Bible, just as they did in so many other ways.

OLD AND NEW

The idea of a substantial difference between the Testaments is not acceptable to all Christians, and is easily dismissed with the word ‘Marcionism’, referring to the famous second-century heretic who taught that the gods of the two Testaments were simply two different gods, an evil god who created the world (Old Testament) and a good God who redeemed it (New Testament).¹⁸ Marcionism was rejected in the second century by the dominant party in early Christianity. That the God of Jesus Christ is also the creator, who was already known in Israel, seemed crucial to Christian writers. Jesus himself obviously believed in this God. By the time the Church had assimilated both Jesus’ teaching and Paul’s, it had a religion that understood the Bible in something quite close to the four stages identified by Soulen. The second- and third-century Christians who developed this view were not inventing something new, but drawing the consequences of what Jesus and Paul had taught. It is a reading that extends beyond the natural sense of the Hebrew Bible, and makes fresh claims and proposals about the relation between God and the human race that do not contradict the Old Testament, but do move outside it.

Christians then proceeded to read the Old Testament as though it already taught these new ideas, and in the process they distorted its natural meaning, because they wanted the two Testaments to hang together as a seamless whole, despite the fact that they tell significantly different stories; and for Christians the New Testament story always trumped the Old Testament one. This was worked out in practice by a creative rereading of the Old Testament as though it spoke with the New Testament’s voice. As we saw, in early times that could sometimes

be accomplished by arguing that it was really a Christian book all along – that is the solution, for example, in the *Epistle of Barnabas*.¹⁹ But by the later second century more sophisticated methods of reading the Old Testament had been developed, in which it was seen as having a natural surface sense, yet also a deeper meaning that pointed forward to Jesus and to the New Testament. We shall examine this in Chapter 14.

Ultimately, there is no one correct way of reading the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible: it is a huge, heterogeneous collection of material that can only be given a unity by imposing some interpretative scheme on it. Jews and Christians have done this in different ways, but neither takes account of everything contained in the books, and it is not easy to see how any scheme could do so, given the variety within the collection. Both faiths have at times insisted on the Old Testament telling the story they wanted to tell anyway. Such insistence pretends that the Bible determines what we believe, when really the belief system in both faiths is to some degree independent of the Scriptures, which each reads according to its core tenets. Scripture is for both a resource, but it is not determinative of either as it has in fact developed.

READING THE NEW TESTAMENT

This chapter has mostly been about the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, since it is over that that Jewish and Christian interpreters have disagreed, identifying different themes as salient. But for Christianity there is also a question about the thematic unity of the New Testament. Here too we find at best a loose fit between what the Church taught as the essentials of Christian faith, and the Scriptures that were its main resource in locating them. At the latest from the time of Irenaeus in the late second century CE, appeal can be made to something called the ‘rule of faith’, which is a summary of the basics of Christian belief, analogous to the creeds and, indeed, lying at their root. The rule of faith is both a key for interpreting the Bible and also a summary of its contents: there is a kind of feedback loop between the two. When the New Testament is read, the rule of faith provides an interpretative framework that tells one where to place the emphasis, what are the main themes of the books, what is at the core of the faith and what is at the margins. At the same time, the Bible feeds into the rule of faith and fleshes it out in detail. ‘The rule of faith’, writes Eugen J. Pentiuc, ‘can be compared to a frame for a canvas