

Comparing Judaism and Christianity

An Academic Autobiography

In April 2003 I was invited to participate at an international conference, titled “New Views of First-Century Jewish and Christian Self-Definition,” given in my honor at the University of Notre Dame. I wish here to thank the organizers for their invitation, my dear friends Mark Chancey, Susannah Heschel, Gregory Tatum, and Fabian Udoh.

The original idea of this address was to respond to some twenty-four papers. I soon realized that this would be impossible. At best I could have discussed only a few points. I decided instead to give an account of the circumstances in which I wrote some of my books. More precisely: what did I think that I was doing? I do not think that my intellectual biography is either impressive or important, and there are dangers in later reflections. Hindsight may serve as rose-colored glasses, and thinking about one’s youth may be merely self-indulgent. Thus I was by no means confident that I should write an academic autobiography. After I presented it at the conference, however, the remarks of others led me to think that it serves a useful purpose. I still think that my books addressed important topics, and it may be worth something if I say how I came to write three of them. I shall begin with a brief account of my youth.

Childhood and Education

I grew up in Grand Prairie, Texas, in the 1940s and 1950s. Although Grand Prairie is close to both Dallas and Fort Worth, families such as mine, which was at the lower end of the economic spectrum, lived almost entirely in our small town, seldom traveling to the nearby cities. Besides being separated from the influence of major cultural attractions, we were also very remote from the world of advanced learning. Thanks to my mother's college textbooks, I read extensively in English literature and world history, but despite this I had no conception of a life lived as a scholar and (of course) no idea of what such a life would require. The struggle to learn languages became a dominant factor in my life. I did not meet a foreigner, or even someone who spoke a foreign language, until I went to college. Before I started high school (at age sixteen), the only foreign language available was two years of Spanish (though Spanish speakers had not yet settled in the area where I lived). Thanks to the influence of my boyhood friend Dudley Chambers, who was the son of the superintendent of schools, two years of Latin became available when we began high school. Dudley and I, together with a few others, dutifully worked in Latin. I attended the only college I could afford, Texas Wesleyan College in Fort Worth, which generously provided a scholarship and arranged for a part-time job. There the only language available was French, which I studied for three years, gaining fair fluency in reading. We had no language labs, and I did not acquire the ability to comprehend spoken French.

I have been asked why I did not go elsewhere, for example, Europe, to learn modern languages. There are two answers: (1) I did not think of it, nor did anyone mention it to me; and (2) I could not have afforded it. Since travel is now very cheap relative to incomes, I shall offer an anecdote from a novel, published in 1946, that describes small-town America in the 1920s and 1930s. In it, a mind reader is explaining the trick of knowing what is in a person's mind. First, one must realize that there are only a few subjects: health, wealth, love, travel, and success. The most-asked question was, "Am I ever going to make a trip?"¹ Money was not quite as scarce, nor was travel quite as rare, in the 1950s as it had been in the 1920s and '30s, but the circumstances

1. William Lindsay Gresham, *Nightmare Alley* (New York: Rinehart, 1946), reprinted in Robert Polito, ed., *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s and 40s*, Library of America 94 (New York: Library of America, 1997), 517–795.

of my own family were not much different from the period of the Great Depression. A round-trip (return) ticket to Europe would have cost more than my father's annual income, and we were not entirely abnormal. One of my teachers, a member of one of the town's more prosperous families, once spent a week in New York, and her description of the trip filled us schoolchildren with wonder. It was the first time I had ever heard of anyone traveling so far (except, of course, to fight during World War II). I knew of only one small group of Grand Prairians who went abroad before I graduated from college.

The teachers and many other people in Grand Prairie knew that I had abilities. They talked to me about how well I could do in the professions. A local doctor, William Colip, offered to guarantee my expenses in medical school if I made A's in premed courses. Alas! I was only interested in the humanities, especially history and literature, and the only well-educated people I knew were in the three professions that flourish in small towns—law, medicine, and ministry. I learned many things from going to church, but not that reading the Bible required Hebrew and Greek, nor that understanding it required German and French. I had local boosters, but none who could point me in the right direction.

I knew from the time I was in college (1955–59) that I wanted to study ancient history and specialize in religion. But I did not know what I needed to know, nor did anybody tell me, until I went to the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas (1959–62). There, it readily became apparent that I needed to learn Greek, Hebrew, and German (as well as French). I took all the language courses I could while at SMU (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac), and I took summer courses in German (besides selling cookware, which, along with scholarships and work in local churches, supported me). My life basically changed when William R. Farmer, the senior New Testament scholar at Perkins, decided that I should have a year of study abroad. Bill and Samuel Crossley, a friend and former employer who was then director of Christian education at University Park Methodist Church, set out to raise money. A large contribution came from a member of First Methodist Church in Fort Worth (where Sam and I had formerly worked). Bill Farmer, for his part, contacted Rabbi Levi A. Olan of Temple Emanuel in Dallas, who received a very large anonymous donation from one of the members of the temple. I felt overwhelmed by their generosity, and I especially vowed that the gift from Temple Emanuel would not be in vain. Altogether, Bill and Sam

raised about \$10,000. Bill wrote some letters of introduction. I had met two major scholars when they lectured at SMU, and both were very helpful at this stage of my life (as well as later). David Daube encouraged me to come to Oxford and said he would help me if I were there. Morton Smith contributed letters of introduction and advised me on people who could be helpful in Israel. Most fruitfully, both Bill Farmer and Morton Smith wrote to Yigael Yadin. And I set off on my adventure (1962–63).

I studied German in Göttingen from June until October 1962 and then went to Oxford to see what David Daube could arrange. This resulted in my working on rabbinic Hebrew for two terms. Dissatisfied with my progress, I decided to study modern Hebrew to learn how to read unvocalized texts, and went to Jerusalem. There Yigael Yadin twisted the arm of Mordechai Kamrat, who accepted me as a private pupil, and I began to acquire a serious amount of Hebrew.

Almost all of the people mentioned in the previous paragraphs are now dead, and some did not live to see whether or not their selfless assistance to a poor, ignorant boy paid off. I hope that I have been half as helpful to a few as these great, busy men were to me.

Paul and Palestinian Judaism

In September 1963, when I started graduate school at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where the New Testament faculty members were John Knox, W. D. Davies, and Louis Martyn, I had three views about the field that I was entering and what I would like to do: (1) Religion is not just theology, and in fact is often not very theological at all. New Testament scholarship then (as now) paid too much attention to theology and not enough attention to religion. Bultmann, who came out of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule, bore a lot of the responsibility. His turn toward Lutheran theology was part of a larger movement, and I mention him only because he was so influential in New Testament studies. (2) To know one religion is to know none. The human brain comprehends by comparing and contrasting, and consequently comparison in the study of religion is essential, not optional. (3) New Testament scholars ought to study Judaism.

I cannot now say what had convinced me of numbers 1 and 2 (too much theology, comparison necessary). Bill Farmer had told me number 3 (study Judaism), and I simply believed him. That explains why, before beginning doctoral work, I had gone to Oxford, where

Daube got me into a class, taught by David Patterson, that was translating Mishnah Sanhedrin, and also why I went to Israel to study modern Hebrew. It was furthermore the intention to study Judaism that led me to Union. W. D. Davies was the leading New Testament scholar who wrote about the rabbis, and he had also argued in favor of the interpenetration of Judaism and Hellenism.² Moreover, Union was across the street from Jewish Theological Seminary, where I took some courses.

Although I do not know for sure why I thought that students of religion should not concentrate so exclusively on theology, I do know some of the things I had read. My two favorite books were E. R. Goodenough's *By Light, Light*³ and C. H. Dodd's *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*.⁴ I liked the mysticism that was so obviously important in the study of Philo and John, and at the time I identified it as part of "nontheological religion": it is more about experience than about thought. Dodd's detailed use of passages from Philo and the *Revelation* of the Thrice-Great Hermes to illuminate John was, I thought, marvelous. And I found Goodenough's portrayal of mystic Judaism enticing. While at Union, I also started working my way through Goodenough's *Jewish Symbols*,⁵ which impressed me almost as much as *By Light, Light*.

I spent some weeks reading about ancient astrology, which I then started seeing on lots of the pages of the New Testament. Astrology constituted more evidence of a fairly nontheological form of religion.

Even if I could, I would not now take you through the rest of my reading list. I found that meeting the requirements of a doctoral program distracted me from my true studies, and I also knew that I could not write a comparative doctoral dissertation. It was bound to take a long time, and I wanted out. So I hopped through the hoops with as much alacrity as I could and finished in two years and nine months.

My doctoral dissertation was called "The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition."⁶ It dealt with a question of form criticism: did the Gospel tradition change in consistent ways, becoming (for example), longer,

2. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London: SPCK, 1948; repr., Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1998). "Interpenetration" is the subject of chapter 1.
3. E. R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1935).
4. C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).
5. E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols., Bollingen Series 37 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953–68).
6. E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

more detailed, and less Semitic? The question went back to the interest in synoptic studies that Bill Farmer had planted in me,⁷ although I did not write on the “Synoptic problem” as such.⁸ The dissertation left me knowing less about the “authenticity” of the synoptic tradition than Bultmann (for example) had known, since it argued that there were no “laws” of the tradition that governed change. The material had altered in the course of transmission, but I concluded that we do not know in what ways it had changed. At the time, I did not see any way of beginning work on the historical Jesus, but I wanted to postpone that anyway, since I intended, after graduation, to begin a career as a comparativist. Having written a doctoral dissertation that was substantially influenced by the agenda of Bill Farmer, I proposed after my doctoral work to take up a project that would be more like the work of W. D. Davies.

My plan was then to return to Israel to begin reading rabbinic literature. I won a scholarship, but job offers began to arrive. The year was 1966; the United States had recently learned that the Constitution did not prohibit teaching about religion in tax-supported universities. The baby boomers were arriving in full force; universities were expanding; departments of religion were springing up and growing. Growth and expansion affected Canada as well. Eugene Combs of McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario) phoned and asked if I would come for an interview. I replied, as I had to others, that I was going to Israel. Eugene, however, proposed that I come for two years and then take leave to go to Israel; they wanted to get New Testament studies started in their new department. So that’s what I did. I remained at McMaster from 1966 to 1984, though I spent a few years away, either on leave or as a visiting professor elsewhere.

Why study the rabbis when what interested me was Hellenistic astrology and mysticism? I had thought of a Jewish topic that was *not* theological and that allowed for comparison and contrast—the three points that I regarded as essential. First, I would carry out an intra-Jewish comparison. Then I would figure out a way to compare something Jewish with something Christian. My conception of project

7. While I was a student at Perkins, William R. Farmer was writing *The Synoptic Problem: A Critical Review of the Problem of the Literary Relationships between Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

8. Much later, my interest in both the Synoptic problem and form criticism led to E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989). I contributed the sections on source criticism, form criticism, and life-of-Jesus research. Meg wrote the section on holistic readings.

number one, an intra-Jewish comparison, was largely determined by E. R. Goodenough. I had read in his *Jewish Symbols*—and of course I believed it—that George Foot Moore’s Judaism⁹ really existed, though it was a long way from being “normative.” Moore’s rabbinic Judaism, rather, was a small island in a vast ocean of Hellenistic Jewish mysticism. Goodenough was not expert in rabbinic literature, though, as Samuel Sandmel observed, by reading it in English he “absorbed a tremendous amount of its quantity and quite a bit of its quality.”¹⁰ Perhaps out of modesty, Goodenough had little to say about how Moore’s rabbinic Judaism and his own Hellenized Judaism related to each other, except that they were quite distinct and that Hellenized Judaism was by far the larger kind of Judaism.¹¹ I had read Wolfson¹² and Belkin¹³ on Philo, and so I knew that there were studies of Philo and the rabbis. But I thought that Goodenough’s Philo—not Wolfson’s—was the real Philo, and that therefore the real Philo had not yet been properly compared and contrasted with the rabbis.¹⁴ I also knew that there were lots of things that I could not do, such as study all the legal topics common to Philo and the rabbis. Nor, I thought, was it necessary, in view of previous work. Since mysticism was appealing, I first thought of comparing Philonic mysticism with rabbinic, but I decided against it on the grounds that mysticism was generally not

9. George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–30).

10. Samuel Sandmel, “An Appreciation,” in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of E. R. Goodenough*, ed. Jacob Neusner, *Studies in the History of Religion* XIV (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 8–9, 10.

11. I have been unable to find the source of the analogy “like a small island in a vast ocean.” On the two kinds of Judaism, however, and their relative scope, see Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 12:185–90, 197–98; 4:3–24. In *By Light, Light*, Goodenough had hesitated about the relative size of “normative” and nonnormative, mystical Judaism: the latter was the Judaism of “at least an important minority” (p. 5; similarly, 9). Even here, however, some of his claims were strong: “if Judaism in the circles that were using the Septuagint had come to mean what I have indicated . . .” (9). In any case, it seems to have been the work that went into producing *Symbols* that resulted in his confidence that mystic Judaism was far larger than rabbinic Judaism.

12. Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

13. Samuel Belkin, *Philo and the Oral Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940).

14. My only published effort at comparing Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism is E. P. Sanders, “The Covenant as a Soteriological Category and the Nature of Salvation in Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism,” in *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honor of William David Davies*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly and Robin Scroggs, *Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity* 21 (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 11–44, which is reprinted as chapter 6 of the present book. I wrote this when *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* was almost finished, and so the section on Palestinian Judaism repeated covenantal nomism (although I made use of *2 Baruch*, which I decided not to include in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*). I proposed that *Joseph and Aseneth* and the “real” Philo (Goodenough’s Philo) reflect forms of mystical Judaism, but that, nevertheless, in parts of Philo the importance of the covenant (called by him the *politeia*, “commonwealth”) shines through, as does the view that the law should be obeyed.

very important in rabbinic literature.¹⁵ Apart from mysticism and astrology, I knew of another nontheological aspect of religion: pious practices. I usually called these “practical piety,” but “pious practices” is a superior term.

I did not know anything about ancient pious practices. Well, I knew about prayer and—very vaguely—sacrifice, and I also knew from Goodenough that mysticism might include mystic rites. Guided by ignorance and a few clues, I thought that there must be bunches of pious practices, that I would be able to find them, and that by comparing rabbinic and Hellenistic Jewish practices I could make a contribution to understanding the relationship between Goodenough’s Judaism and Moore’s Judaism. Thus I could do a *Jewish, comparative* study on a *nontheological* aspect of religion and eventually follow it up by turning to pious practices in early Christianity. To say that at this stage I “saw through a glass darkly” would be to claim far too much.

In any case, the plan was hatched: compare the pious practices of the rabbis and Goodenough’s Jews (Philo and Jewish symbols). I realized that I would have to dig for the pious practices. Moore and Goodenough did not give sufficient information.

Cheered on by my colleagues and the administration at McMaster,¹⁶ I won a fellowship and headed to Israel to study the rabbis (1968–69).¹⁷

I should confess that it never occurred to me that I could not do what I proposed. Along with a great deal of ignorance, I carried out of Texas the simple assumption that anyone could do anything. Ignorance, in a way, was bliss. Had I known the difficulties, I probably would have tried something much more modest. But, as things were, I wrote a grant application, referees wrote letters, and a committee approved the application. The project appeared feasible, given a bit of work. It was, in fact, several years after I completed *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* that I realized that it was all beyond my abilities. I have felt like a fraud ever since, although I have worked hard to try to cover it up. (I have by

15. Emphasis is on the word *generally*. I had read Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941; repr., 1961); Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1960).

16. Along with numerous others, I am deeply indebted to the senior administration of McMaster University. Though the sciences predominated in the university and accounted for its reputation in Canada, the administrators wanted strength in the humanities and social sciences, and this included sponsoring and paying for a large and excellent Department of Religion. Our work—and I admit, especially mine—was materially assisted in numerous ways. I remember with deep gratitude Mel Preston, Bill Hellmuth, Alvin Lee, Art Bourns, Saul Frankel, and Peter George.

17. The fellowship was from the Canada Council, later called the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

now reached the point of viewing it as salutary that when one learns a lot, one also learns how much is yet to be done.)

Perhaps I could put the reflection thus: At a fairly early stage, I became aware of the fact that I sometimes applied the principle “nothing ventured, nothing gained,” and other times the principle “better safe than sorry,” but that I did not know in advance which one to follow. When young, of course, I mostly lived by the first maxim.

In the fall of 1968, my beloved friend and teacher, Mordechai Kamrat, took me in as a student again. Kamrat was one of the two most remarkable people I have ever known; the other was David Daube, with whom I had had numerous discussions in Oxford in 1962 to 1963. Kamrat knew all languages: I once heard him converse in Danish, and once he and I watched a TV program from Cyprus: he translated, though he had never been in a Greek-speaking country.¹⁸ And he could teach anyone anything. Like many Israelis, he was chronically short of money. I paid him a weekly sum that seemed reasonable at the time; it was about the same as I later paid for my daughter’s piano lessons.

Dr. Kamrat had started studying the Talmud at the age of four in Poland. Befriended by a Catholic priest, he was given access to a library and began to acquire languages other than Yiddish, Aramaic, Hebrew, Polish, and Russian, and knowledge other than Talmudic. He ended up with a PhD from the University of Krakow in pedagogical psychology, went to British-controlled Palestine (the only one in his family to escape the Holocaust), and figured out how to teach Hebrew to immigrants from anywhere.¹⁹ He taught me modern Hebrew and rabbinics in the same way: inductively, with drill. We started with the Mekhilta. I went to Moshe Schreiber Buchhandlung, dusted off my five-year old Hebrew, and asked advice about editions. I came back with most of the Tannaitic midrashim. Fortunately, I did not know that Lauterbach had translated the Mekhilta into English. When I later consulted the existing German translations of the midrashim, I am glad to say, I found the Hebrew clearer than the German. I don’t mean to say that I achieved fluency in rabbinic Hebrew. A long way from it. I read slowly and sometimes needed help. And now, thirty-five years later, my Hebrew is quite rusty, and I have to look up lots of words that I once knew. As I indicated above, I shared the common American

18. “All languages” is hyperbolic. As far as I discovered, he knew Latin and Greek, as well as all of the Slavic, Germanic, Romance, and Semitic languages that are spoken today. He once told me that he had dabbled in Chinese—which may have meant that he knew quite a lot.

19. Mordechai Kamrat, *Inculcation of the Hebrew Language* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Karni, 1962).

weakness of starting to learn foreign languages after I became an adult. Moreover, I'm not gifted. Being around Kamrat was sufficient to make me very modest about my ability to learn languages.

I was very fortunate that we started and ended with the Tannaitic midrashim, in which I had no translations available. I had Danby²⁰ with me, but luckily we did not read the Mishnah, and so I had to figure the rabbis out in their own language—with, of course, Dr. Kamrat's help.

I fell in love. The first things I noticed about the rabbis were their humanity, tolerance, and good humor. I also noted, of course, their academic love of precision. They wanted to find out what animal the Passover victim should be, how it should be cooked,²¹ and so forth, and they were keen to establish the meaning of *ben ha-'arbayim*.²² Besides the desire to understand the sacred text, which makes them very much like New Testament scholars, toleration of disagreement was their strongest and most consistent characteristic. The discussion of how long a man could be alone with a woman who was not his wife—which we eventually reached—struck me as a notable case of rather humorous whimsy. There was a kind of playful one-upmanship. Is “as long as it takes to swallow an egg” longer or shorter than “as long as it takes for a palm tree, bent by the wind, to snap upright”?²³

Besides making it through most of the major and minor Tannaitic midrashim,²⁴ the other book that I read that year was J. N. Epstein's *Mevo'ot le-Sifrut ha-Tannaim*.²⁵ It was eye-opening. I toyed with efforts to translate it, but it is full of quotations, for many of which the editor did not give the source. This is all very well for those who have memorized the Talmud, but it was too much for me. What I learned, though, is

20. Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

21. Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 16 do not entirely agree on the animal or how it was cooked, and so the rabbis had to sort these matters. See, e.g., *Sifre Deuteronomy* pisqa 129.

22. “Between the two evenings” perhaps originally (Exod 12:6; Num 9:3) meant “twilight.” That did not allow sufficient time, however, to slaughter tens of thousands of animals in the temple courts, clean up, and perform the regular evening sacrifices. Thus the “right” meaning of the term had to be discovered. According to *Mekilta Pisha* (*Bo*) 5, it meant “after the sixth hour of the day,” i.e., after noon; see Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 1:43.

23. *Sifre Zuta* to Num 15:3. See H. S. Horovitz, *Sifre d'Be Rab*, Fasciculus primus: *Siphre ad Numeros adjecto Siphre zutta* (Leipzig: Wahrmann Books, 1917; corrected ed.; repr., 1966), 233. See also *t. Sotah* 1.2. See Saul Lieberman, ed., *The Tosefta*, 3 vols. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955–73), *Sotah*, 151. My memory is that Dr. Kamrat and I read *hazārat deqel* as “restoration of a palm tree [bent by the wind].” In light of *lehaqqif* in *Sifre Numbers* pisqa 7 (Horovitz, *Siphre d'Be Rab*, 12), one might translate “as long as it takes to encompass [walk around] a palm tree.”

24. We read the Mekilta, *Sifre* on Numbers and Deuteronomy, most of *Sifra*, *Sifre Zuta* on Numbers, and parts of the Mekilta of R. Shime'on b. Yohai.

25. J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to Tannaitic Literature*, ed. E. Z. Melamed (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1959).

that it is possible to do critical historical work with the literature, and in particular to identify the *setam*, the anonymous voice in each tractate or even each chapter. I knew, of course, that I could never do it, but Epstein's demonstration has caused me ever since to look suspiciously at critical work that does not begin with identification of the anonymous voice.

At the end of the year, I reread George Foote Moore's *Judaism*. I planned to compare his Judaism to that of Goodenough, and now that I had read some of Moore's favorite sources, I thought it was time to reread his great work.

I have mentioned that I was struck by the humanity and tolerance of the rabbis. I had, therefore, begun to form the view that what some of my favorite New Testament scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann, had told me about Pharisaic or rabbinic Judaism²⁶ was not true. Now, as I read Moore, I saw a polemic against another view between the lines. And I concluded that on more or less every point that he discussed, he was correct. The rabbis really believed in the grace of God and the efficacy of repentance. So Moore wrote; so the mere reading of rabbinic literature proved. I did not like Moore's organization of the material, which basically followed the Christian creed: the idea of God, followed by man (which now would be called humanity), sin, atonement, and the hereafter (along with some other topics). I thought that it should be possible to organize the material in a way that was more natural to it.

By now, my topic had begun to change. I had, of course, found several pious practices, but I was distracted from them by the growing feeling that many influential New Testament scholars had misrepresented the rabbis. I did not have Bousset²⁷ or Jeremias²⁸ with me, and I did not yet know about Moore's own polemical article on Christian scholars who had written about Judaism,²⁹ but the need to

26. It also took a long time for the difference between Pharisees and rabbis to emerge into full consciousness in Jewish and Christian scholarship. I am inclined to attribute general clarity on the distinction to Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1971–72). On the other hand, during 1968–69 I knew that I was studying the rabbis and not the Pharisees, and I conceived my project in terms of bodies of literature, not named groups. Epstein, *Introduction to Tannaitic Literature*, was doubtless influential, but I am unable to give the history of my own early views about the relationship between the pre-70 Pharisees and rabbinic literature.

27. Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im Späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1926).

28. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962). The English translation, Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), appeared in 1969.

29. George Foot Moore, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *Harvard Theological Review* 14 (1921): 197–254.

do something about mendacity was growing. I had been told that the rabbis were deeply concerned with the effort to save themselves by doing more good deeds than bad, and that they were therefore either anxious (because they were uncertain of how the count stood) or arrogant (because they were confident that they had done enough good deeds to save themselves). I realized that possibly such rabbis were lurking somewhere in the Mishnah and Tosefta—which I had not yet read—but I doubted it. They were certainly not to be found in the Tannaitic midrashim. (It eventually turned out that they cannot be found anywhere.)

“You all know the rest, in the books you have read”: When I returned to McMaster, I was ready to write an argument about how to see rabbinic literature theologically, without recourse to the phony category “legalism.”³⁰ That is, since I thought that rabbinic literature as a whole had been misrepresented, it would not suffice to publish on only a few of its details, such as pious practices. I felt compelled, rather, to offer a more holistic presentation, especially of rabbinism’s undergirding theology.³¹ Nevertheless, this new requirement did not remove my main conviction: *I had to compare*, just as Gene Kelly had to dance. But besides leaving behind the intention to study pious practices, I had moved a long way from Philo, and I felt the need to look at Palestinian literature earlier than the rabbis. So I spent some time studying the Dead Sea sect and comparing the Scrolls with the rabbis.³² Then I studied some of the Pseudepigrapha of Palestinian provenance. At some point along the way, “covenantal nomism” came to me. It seemed to me to grow organically out of the material: the literature is not about what Protestants call “legalism” (now sometimes called

30. For some years, I have been lecturing on the false construction “legalism,” pointing out that, in addition to other flaws, it requires a degree of individualism that cannot be found in ancient Jewish literature. It assumes that Jews thought that each individual had to achieve self-salvation, with no group benefits and no collective privileges. Legalism is an invention of polemical attack on Roman Catholicism and Judaism. I hope eventually to publish this and other related lectures.

31. Reading the works of Max Kadushin made a holistic study even more attractive and helped me think that it could be done. See, for example, Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Blaisdell, 1965). I was also encouraged to search rabbinic literature for basic assumptions and underlying theological principles by reading Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah min ha-Shamayim ba-Aspaqlaryah shel ha-Dorot*, 2 vols. (London: Soncino, 1962–65). The work has now been translated into English: *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker with Leonard Levin (New York: Continuum, 2005).

32. In those ancient days, twelve principal scrolls comprised the collection. See Eduard Lohse, ed. and trans., *Die Texte aus Qumran*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971). I also found it possible to read through virtually the entirety of the secondary literature. Perhaps needless to say, this could not be done now, except by someone whose full-time occupation is Scrolls research.

“merit theology”), which is effort toward self-salvation, but it does deal with law. It is “nomistic” in its basic subject matter. But why did the rabbis and other Jews pursue these subjects at all? Was it not that God had given the law? And why should Jews obey it? To save themselves? Rabbinic literature lacks concern with individual salvation. So why did they pursue the details of law? Does not the effort presuppose the concept of election? And so on. I shall not repeat the argument of the book below.

When it turned out that the Dead Sea sect, while differing in some ways from the rabbis, held approximately the same views of election and law, I knew that I needed a contrast. And so I turned to Paul, who was largely a stranger to me, but who was the man who previously had been compared with the rabbis by my teacher, W. D. Davies.

Before reaching the point in the writing of what became *Paul in Palestinian Judaism*, my New Testament expertise was in the Synoptic Gospels, on which I had spent several years. I had taken (if I remember correctly) a total of two courses on the Greek text of parts of Paul’s letters, one taught by Victor Furnish at Perkins and one by Louis Martyn at Union. I had also read a list of books about Paul and had been examined on Paul as part of my doctoral work. When I began lecturing at McMaster University, I tried to present a Bultmannian Paul. I soon realized that this just did not work (the theory did not fit the text) and that I needed to do something else. By then I had learned *the most important lesson of my life*: you really know what you learn for yourself by studying original sources. I would never have come to my understanding of the rabbis by reading secondary literature. I could decide without firsthand study that Moore was better than Bousset, but that was by no means the same as internalizing the rabbis’ modes of argument and their spirit. Furthermore, I remembered that one of the most exciting afternoons of my life was when I had read the Pauline letters through at a single sitting. Putting these two things together, I simply started reading through Paul’s letters and making notes. Second Corinthians 12 made it perfectly clear that Paul was some sort of mystic. “Being crucified with Christ,” “dying with Christ,” and “being one person with Christ” were obviously very important concepts to him, though brushed aside by most Protestant research in favor of “justification by faith,” which was understood as judicial declaration of fictional (“imputed”) righteousness. After going through the letters a few times, I returned to Albert Schweitzer³³ and then read some of the pre-Schweitzer German scholars, who wrote prior

to the re-Lutherization of German scholarship. I was relieved to see that other people had found approximately the same Paul that I had “discovered.” These bodies of literature—rabbinic literature, Dead Sea Scrolls, selected Pseudepigrapha, and Paul’s letters—made up the sections of the book.

I originally wrote the parts on Jewish literature without polemic, trying to imitate the tone achieved by Moore in his major work, which omitted the vigorous attacks of his articles. But, near the end of my work, during what was about the sixth revision of the section on the rabbis, I decided that Moore had been wrong. Bultmann cited Moore as if he only gave additional details about the rabbis to flesh out the portrait in Bousset’s book.³⁴ I was not going to let that happen again, and so I decided to make it clear that some folks were wrong and that the rabbis had been misrepresented. Thus the polemics of the book when it finally appeared.

The only important part not yet covered is the question of “getting in and staying in.” This came from studying the issue of what to compare with what, and the principal negative example was the work of my revered supervisor, W. D. Davies. W. D. started with basic biblical and Jewish conceptions—the exodus and the giving of the law—and went in search of parallels in Paul. He found a few and concluded that Paul was a rabbinic Jew who simply replaced an unknown Messiah with a specific candidate, Jesus. There was a new exodus and a new law, the law of Christ. It seemed to me that this gave to these two points an importance that, in fact, they do not have in Paul’s letters. I could not see “dying with Christ” as a new exodus, nor did I find a great concern in Paul to establish a new “law of Christ.” So I dubbed the effort *Motivsgeschichte*, the study of individual motifs, and went looking somewhere else. I failed to note, I am embarrassed to say, that W. D.’s exodus and law are my covenantal nomism. In rejecting the way in which W. D. had set up the comparison, I did not grasp how close we were on the Jewish side. His error (as I still think it to be) in the analysis of Paul, which led him to miss what was both novel and essential in Paul’s letters, blinded me to his correct perception of the two ingredients of Judaism that determine its basic characteristics. (I

33. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1953).

34. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 43–47.

am sure that the largest category of my brain consists of things that are buried in it but that I do not call to consciousness at the right time.)

In any case, I decided to enlarge the categories and to discuss “getting in and staying in.” The weight of each topic is, of course, quite different in the various bodies of literature. Paul is obsessed with getting people into the new movement, and his discussions of correct behavior, once in, are rather thin and cursory.³⁵ The rabbis were concerned with correct behavior by the in-group and seldom had occasion to mention “getting in”—but, of course, concern over the behavior of the in-group implies that it existed. In the Scrolls one finds both emphases. Despite the unequal weight, I had a topic that is important all around—even when, or perhaps all the more when, it is assumed rather than argued. In-group literature assumes the importance of being in the in-group.³⁶

Paul’s break with Judaism, I thought, had to do with getting in; on behavior within the in-group he agreed closely with other Jews of his day. The difference is his requirement of faith in Christ. This, and only this, I proposed, led to a break between Pauline religion and his native Judaism.

I had some regret that the topic had become theology—but only some, since the mendacity of much of New Testament scholarship had become so important to me. This book did at least meet my other two goals: a comparison that included Judaism.

By the time I had finished the book, I realized that in many ways it was very close, both in method and substance, to the work of Samuel Sandmel.³⁷ Sam agreed to read the typescript, and I visited him at his home in Cincinnati. For the entirety of two afternoons, we sat on his porch while he patiently commented on aspects of the work. He persuaded Ben Zion Wacholder to check my translations of previously untranslated rabbinic passages. I add these names to the list of those who donated large amounts of precious time to my work.³⁸

35. Paul often displays great ingenuity in arguing for certain behavior, as in the chapters on idolatry in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. But the result is not in the least novel: do not directly engage in the worship of idols. Often, however, he simply gives general admonitions, such as “be blameless” (1 Thess 5:3). His creativity appears in his discussions of “getting in” and in some of his arguments about behavior, not in the context of behavior.

36. The argument about “assumption” or “presupposition” in Jewish literature has proved hard for many readers to see: they seek proof texts. I have discussed this and related issues in “Covenantal Nomism Revisited,” appearing as chapter 3 of the present book.

37. Especially Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1–13; Samuel Sandmel, “The Need of Comparative Study,” in *Theological Soundings: Notre Dame Seminary Jubilee Studies 1923–1973*, ed. I. Mihalik (New Orleans: Notre Dame Seminary), 30–35.

38. I also had fruitful discussions of the book with C. F. D. Moule and W. D. Davies. These trips, as well

I sent the book to the publisher in October 1975. Very negative readers' reports in both England and the United States led to a delay. Thanks to the fact that John Bowden, managing editor of SCM Press, finally read the typescript himself, the book as I had submitted it was published in 1977.

I shall now give a summary of the principal arguments, beginning with a negative point: (1) The book is not about the sources of Paul's thought. I grant that many or most topics in Paul could be paralleled in Jewish literature, but I was not pursuing an argument about where Paul got his ideas. Failure to note this point has misled several readers, some of whom have criticized me for using Jewish material later than Paul, while some have even imagined that in proposing that Paul had a different "pattern of religion" I meant that he had no connection with Judaism. (2) In most of Palestinian literature, the "pattern" of "getting in and staying in" is simple: one is in by virtue of the election (or covenant); one stays in by remaining loyal to the Jewish law. These two basic convictions gave rise to the term "covenantal nomism."³⁹ (3) In Paul, all are "out" of the people of God and may enter only by faith in Christ. (4) The two sets of terminology summarized by the phrases "being justified [righteously] by faith" and "becoming one person with Christ" essentially mean the same thing: these are the terms that indicate entry into the people of God: one "dies" with Christ or is righteously by faith and thus transfers into the in-group. (5) Once in, the member of the body of Christ should behave appropriately. In detail, this usually means the adoption of Jewish rules of ethics and other forms of behavior. (6) In both Judaism and Paul, people in the in-group are punished or rewarded depending on how well they

as my salary and secretarial assistance, were supported by a Killam Senior Research Scholarship. The scholarship was continued for the year 1975–76, while I worked on *Jesus and Judaism* and began (with Ben Meyer and Al Baumgarten) the McMaster project on normative self-definition; see n. 41.

39. Covenantal nomism appears even in Philo ("Covenant as Soteriological Category"). In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, I described it by using such words and phrases as "common," "basic," "assumption," "presupposition," "underlying agreement," "underlying pattern," and "basic common ground" (e.g., 70, 71, 75, 82, 85, 424). I thought of it as a "lowest common denominator" of many types of Judaism, though I chose not to write that phrase. In rereading Goodenough in the spring of 2004, I discovered that he had written that Jews were loyal to "some common Jewish denominator," which consisted of loyalty to the Jewish people and belief in the Bible. He also referred to this as "minimal Judaism." He wrote that Philo "still believed with all his heart that Jews had a special revelation of God in the Torah, and a peculiar relationship with him." See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 12:6–9. These pages, which I had read in 1964 or 1965, contained no pencil marks indicating that I had regarded the terms or the proposal as important. I nevertheless wonder whether they lodged in my subconscious mind, to surface ten years later. I wish that I had remembered these pages, since I would have been delighted to have Goodenough's support on both Philo and Judaism in general.

adhere to the standards. Punishment and reward, however, are not “salvation”; people are saved, rather, by being in the in-group, and punishment is construed as keeping them in (as in 1 Cor 11:27–32). (7) Paul does not accept the adequacy of the Jewish election for getting in; he begins the process of a theological rupture with Judaism by requiring faith in Christ. (8) Formally, Paul sometimes accepts “the whole law,” but it turns out that his gentile converts do not actually have to keep all parts of the Jewish law, and that sometimes even Jewish Christians should depart from Jewish practice (as in the case of Peter in Antioch). (9) Consequently, Paul’s “pattern” of religion is not the same as “covenantal nomism.” The efficacy of the election is rejected, and the law is accepted with qualifications. (10) Paul’s pattern is, however, like covenantal nomism in that admission depends on the grace of God, while behavior is the responsibility of the individual—who, of course, is supported in his or her efforts by God’s love and mercy. (11) Since one gets in by dying with Christ, and since Paul’s outlook is strongly eschatological, I dubbed his pattern “participationist eschatology,” though “eschatological participationism” might have been better.⁴⁰

Jesus and Judaism

When I told my wife that I don’t have much to say about *Jesus and Judaism*, she expressed her regret, since (she said) it is my best book. But, still, the explanation of what I was trying to accomplish is much briefer than the story of how I came to write *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. The period during which I wrote *Jesus and Judaism* (1975–84) included the period of the McMaster project on Jewish and Christian normative self-definition, the title of which contributes to the title of the conference at which I first presented this essay.⁴¹ For various reasons, these were difficult years for me, and I want to record my thanks for the kindness of friends and colleagues: Al Baumgarten,

40. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983, repr., 1985) was, as John Bowden complained to me, basically a long footnote to the Paul section of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. The earlier book had dealt with Paul in a less detailed way than New Testament scholars expect, and I wanted to give full exegetical detail of the most complicated topic: the law. I remain satisfied with the discussion of the various contexts in which Paul writes about the law. He answers diverse questions, and the answer to each question is consistent, but the various answers, when placed side by side, give a confusing picture. One cannot derive from them a systematic view of the law. To this discussion I appended a treatment of his view of the Jewish people, offering fairly detailed exegesis of Romans 9–11.

41. This project was supported by a very generous five-year “Programme Grant” from the SSHRC (1976–81). Our work was continued for another year with sponsorship from McMaster University.

Phyllis DeRosa Koetting, Alan Mendelson, Ben Meyer, John Robertson, and Gérard Vallée. The most important person in my life, however, was my daughter, Laura, who grew from five to fourteen years old during that time.

With regard to the book: I thought of calling it “how to write a book about Jesus without knowing much about what he actually said.” In the years since my doctoral dissertation, I had become even more distrustful of relying on a collection of “authentic” sayings to tell us what we want to know about Jesus, and the most important academic decision I made was to shift the discussion away from Jesus’ sayings. I had spent years on criteria of authenticity and had all sorts of lists, but I finally concluded that adding up a list of authentic sayings was never going to explain who he was or what happened. And so I went for what I regarded as better evidence: the skeleton outline of his career and especially his symbolic actions, namely, the calling of twelve disciples, the entry into Jerusalem, and the turning over of tables in the forecourt of the temple. There was also the highly significant fact that John the Baptist, who was an eschatological preacher, and early Christianity, which was a Jewish eschatological movement, frame Jesus’ career. During a brief but memorable conversation with Morton Smith at a meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas in Toronto, we agreed that one has to focus on the facts. I was enormously cheered. I was already inclined to give a good deal of weight to Jesus as a healer, since I wanted to emphasize “deeds” to help offset the tendency of academics to present Jesus as only a teacher, and, of course, talking with Morton about miracles strengthened that inclination.⁴²

I wanted to base *Jesus and Judaism* on the most reliable or “bedrock” tradition, but when I later wrote *The Historical Figure of Jesus* for the “general reader,” I realized that criteria for authenticity strike most readers as being merely a convenience by which an author gets rid of unwanted material. Moreover, the importance of finding the right context grew in my mind, with the result that I eventually concluded that if one has the right context for Jesus, which sayings are quoted do not matter very much. Consequently, in *Historical Figure* I quoted many more sayings as coming from Jesus than I had used in *Jesus and Judaism*. This does not imply full belief that they are all authentic.⁴³

My principal concern in *Jesus and Judaism* was to establish what led to the results: first to Jesus’ death and then to the formation of a

42. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

43. E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane Penguin, 1993).

group of his followers into a new sect. I doubted the authenticity of most of the passages depicting Jesus in conflict with the Pharisees, and in any case I found the disputes to be rather minor. So what drove history if not fatal Pharisaic animosity? I proposed that it was Jesus' self-conception as the one who announced the reassembly of Israel and the coming of the kingdom of God, his dramatic acts (especially the entry in to Jerusalem and the temple scene), and the system in Judea, which made the high priest responsible for maintaining locally the *pax Romana*. Unhappily, I did not use the word *system*, and in a book written at about the same time, Ellis Rivkin explained "what killed Jesus" more clearly than I did.⁴⁴ Still, I thought, I was helping to put to rest the view that dominated much scholarship: that Jesus was killed because he offended the Pharisees by favoring love, mercy, and grace. I submitted the manuscript to the publisher in the spring of 1984; the book appeared in early 1985.⁴⁵

To put the main arguments of the book briefly: Jesus was a prophet of the restoration of Israel who began as a follower of an eschatological prophet (John the Baptist) and whose ministry resulted in an eschatological Jewish movement (early Christianity, especially as seen in Paul's letters). He pointed to restoration in word and deed, proclaiming the kingdom as soon to arrive and indicating the restoration of Israel especially by calling the Twelve. He made dramatic symbolic gestures pointing to this hope. One of them, overthrowing tables in the temple court, led Caiaphas to the view that he might start a riot. The requirements of the Roman system resulted in his execution. His followers continued his movement, expecting him to return to reestablish Israel. This naturally led to their incorporation of the prophetic hope that in the last days gentiles would turn to worship the God of Israel.⁴⁶

44. Ellis Rivkin, *What Crucified Jesus? The Political Execution of a Charismatic* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984). Rivkin's book appeared after I submitted the manuscript to the publisher. Unfortunately, in the summer and fall of 1984 I was engaged in moving to Oxford, and I did not read Rivkin's book until after I had sent in the proofs. In retrospect, I see that I should have insisted on inserting a footnote even at that late date.
45. *Jesus and Judaism* was written with the aid of a Killam Senior Research Scholarship at the beginning of the project and a SSHRC Leave Fellowship near the end. Most of the book was written while I was Visiting Fellow Commoner at Trinity College, Cambridge (1982).
46. I assumed that Seán Freyne had accurately and adequately explained what Galilee was like in Jesus' day, and so I saw no need to say much about it. When later I moved to the United States (August 1990), I began slowly to learn that completely erroneous views were becoming popular here. Nevertheless, when I finished *Historical Figure* in 1992, I had not perceived the full influence of these views. I thought that they would gradually disappear. On Freyne's work and my own later efforts, see n. 74.

Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE

In September 1984 I moved to Oxford and again, as when I first read the rabbis, fell in love—this time with the environment created by scholars in other aspects of the ancient world: Geza Vermes, soon the young Martin Goodman, Robin Lane Fox, Fergus Millar, and Simon Price. I wanted to be like them. Well, I could never be that clever or learned, but I could go back to nontheological religion and, specifically, to religious practice, which I had dropped after 1968–69.

While writing *Jesus and Judaism* I had become fascinated with the riches of Josephus, whom I had neglected when writing *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.⁴⁷ When I had to explain the history of Jesus in light of the power structure of his day, of course, the only source outside the Gospels was the work of Josephus—not the Mishnah. In 1968–69, I had learned from Epstein that most Tannaitic literature comes from the period of R. Akiba and R. Ishmael and later—that is, the last three quarters of the second century. I never thought that rabbinic law governed Jewish Palestine in Jesus' day. The very first bit of rabbinic literature I read (please remember) was Mishnah Sanhedrin, which obviously is not a manual of how law courts worked.⁴⁸ I remember being told by friends at what is now the Albright School of Archaeological Research that they were scandalized because an Israeli scholar—whose name (alas!) I do not remember—had told them that Mishnah Sanhedrin does not represent the law in effect at Jesus' time. This was no surprise to me.

To understand the legal and governmental system, I turned to Josephus, and I found him to be most illuminating with regard to how things really worked politically and judicially. Furthermore, the Gospels and Acts support him. In the days of the prefects and the procurators, Judea was governed by the aristocratic priesthood.

47. Bill Farmer had urged me to read Josephus's *Jewish War* while I was at Perkins (1959–62), and I had complied. What he saw in it, however, was (1) that lots of Jews were zealous for the law, which led to the view (2) that the Pharisees controlled Judaism and made people zealous, which was bad because (3) zeal for the law is the same as legalism, which is horrible. I eventually learned that items 2 and 3 were not true, but this experience made me miss most of the actual treasures in Josephus. Farmer's views of Judaism were taken entirely from Joachim Jeremias. Approximately this same view of Josephus and Pharisaic control has now been argued by M. Hengel and R. Deines, "E. P. Sanders' 'Common Judaism,' Jesus, and the Pharisees: Review Article of *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah and Judaism: Practice and Belief* by E. P. Sanders," *Journal of Theological Studies* 46 (1995): 1–70. This view is no better now than it was then.

48. This statement applies to the tractate taken as a whole, including especially the structural statements and the view that "sages" constituted the membership of courts. I assume that some of the material is pre-70 and may even be of Hasmonean origin.