

WHY I AM NOT A JEW ... OR AM I?

One of the great joys in my legal life was my relationship with Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. He was brilliant, witty, opinionated, friendly, and fun, all rolled into one. He had a great love for his family, his friends, the law, and his country. He also loved to sing, hunt, talk, analyze, and eat! It was in the midst of these activities that I found myself with him in a humorous interchange.

We were on a hunting trip in South Texas for the weekend. During Sunday lunch, there were six of us feasting on some incredible food when out of the blue, Justice Scalia, who humbly insisted on being called simply “Nino” by his friends, issued forth the question:

“*Lonesome Dove*, what was better, the book or the movie?”

We went around the table answering the question, and since I was seated at his left, I was the last to answer.

“I think I liked the book best. I had already seen the movie, had fallen in love with the characters of Woodrow Call and Augustus McCrae. I found them perfectly captured by the actors Tommie Lee Jones and Robert Duvall. After the movie, I wanted more of them, and I got that in the book. The book gave me the movie sequences and even more. I liked it enough to read the prequel, and then I read the seq...”

I couldn’t finish the word “sequel” when Scalia interrupted me.

“What word did you just use?” he demanded to know.

I replied, “I said I read the prequel, and was about to say sequel.”

He challenged me, proclaiming indignantly, “prequel is NOT a word!”

I told him, yes, it was a word. He asked its precise meaning, and I explained that in a series, the prequel is the preceding item while the sequel is the next item. He then raised his hand dismissively and said,

“Prequel is not a word! It is a combining of the Latin prefix ‘*pre-*’ with the end of the Latin word ‘*sequitor.*’ You can’t do that with language.” (In fairness, Scalia’s father had been a Latin teacher.)

I replied, “Well, words come about through all sorts of ways, and ‘prequel’ is a word NOW in the English language! I never said it was a Latin word!”

He huffed, so I added, “And anyway, the word is in the dictionary.”

This, what I thought was my winning argument, he rejected with a bit of sarcasm in his voice, “Well, maybe it’s in *Webster’s Third Dictionary*, but nobody counts that as a real dictionary!”

I was then on the defensive and wondering how far he would push this, so I threw out a bluff. I firmly asserted, “It’s in the *Oxford English Dictionary*! Surely that counts as a dictionary!”

He gave me his “Are you bluffing?” stare as he asked me directly, “Do you really know that it’s in there?”

I replied, “Of course it is!”

He said, “How do you know that?”

I gave a satisfied nod as I answered, “Because it’s a word in English, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes English words!”

He asked me if I knew how to “do that Google thing,” and when I affirmed I did, he urged me to look it up. We found a computer, got on the internet, and looked. Sure enough, the *Oxford English Dictionary* had the word “prequel.” I thought I had finally won the argument, only to have the Supreme Court Justice give me the final un-appealable answer,

“Wow, what has the world come to? The *Oxford English Dictionary* has gone the way of *Webster’s Third*!”

As a footnote to this story, both the Justice and I wrote the Oxford English Dictionary Editor, and urged him to remove the word from the upcoming fourth edition, in an effort to scrub and improve the English language. I got a nice reply from the editor explaining that his job is to put into the dictionary all of the English words. He is not a gatekeeper for the Queen’s English.

This interchange with Scalia came natural to us both. Defining words is one of the most important parts of a lawyer’s job. A contract isn’t clear, if the words aren’t defined. Testimony isn’t precise, if the words are ambiguous. One person can have one idea and a second person an entirely different idea, if the words used have multiple meanings. Definitions are necessary in the world of legal precision. For this reason, although the meaning of being “Jewish” might seem obvious, it is important to consider it first, because the definition is not as precise as one might think!

WHAT IS A JEW?

I have a number of Jewish friends, and I encounter many Jews through daily living. Some of my favorite musicians are Jewish (Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen, Mark Knopfler, etc.) Of course, there are many famous Jewish actors (Harrison Ford, Natalie Portman, Billy Crystal, etc) as well as writers (Saul Bellow, Franz Kafka, Ayn Rand, etc.) and scientists (Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk, Robert Oppenheimer, etc.). With all of these well-known and famous Jews, we might wonder why anyone would need to ask, “What is a Jew?”

The answer is not so clear-cut because “Jewishness” can refer to a number of things. Consider as an example, J.D. Salinger, who wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*. He was “Jewish,” yet he was also a Hindu. Referring to one as a Jew might refer to her or his nationality, culture, ethnicity (genealogy), or religion. Each of these has a different nuance infusing “Jew” or “Jewish” with a special meaning. Not surprisingly then, my reasons for the statement “Why I am not a Jew...” depends on what one means by Jewishness.

If one refers to living in or being a citizen of the nation of Israel, then I must quickly acknowledge, “I am not a Jew; I am a Texan!” If one refers to culture, then again, I would say, “No, I do not keep *kosher*, and I wasn’t *bar mitzpha*’d, so I am not Jewish.”

Many people set aside those meanings of Jewishness, and instead mean a genealogical one. For many, being a Jew is a reference to people born as ultimate offspring of Abraham and Sarah, the Old Testament people we read about in the Biblical book of Genesis. The story of this beginning of Jewish people is very ancient.

Roughly 2,000 years BC (“before Christ”), or BCE (“before the common era”) at a time when Abraham had no children, God made a promise to Abraham.

And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5).

Abraham felt that his wife Sarah was far too old for such a promise, so with his wife’s consent, Abraham impregnated his wife’s servant Hagar. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, whom the Muslims count as the father of the Arab peoples. It was after Ishmael’s birth that the aged Sarah became pregnant. By God’s miraculous touch, Sarah gave birth to her and Abraham’s child, naming him Isaac.

Isaac fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered twelve sons who were the progenitors for the twelve tribes of Israel. According to tradition and the Biblical account, these form the genealogical tree from which Jews exist today.

The term “Jew” does not stem from all these tribes, however, but from the tribe of Jacob’s son Judah. The Old Testament account has the families from Jacob’s twelve sons living in Egypt for several centuries while enslaved by Pharaohs. This lasted until Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the wilderness and to the Promised Land. This deliverance happened somewhere around 1400 to 1200BC, depending on which theory of the Exodus one accepts. The Israelites settled in the land of Canaan, and the land was apportioned among the tribes, with the tribe of Judah, Benjamin, and Simeon getting the southernmost part of the land.

For centuries, Israel then existed as a loose confederation of the various tribes ruled by judges who arose in various places at various times. Eventually, the people demanded a change in the governing structure. The people wanted a king. With the anointing of Saul, around 1030BC, the nation of Israel became the Kingdom of Israel. This lasted for only three kings, Saul, David, and Solomon. After Solomon’s death, the kingdom was severed into two, a Northern Kingdom and a Southern Kingdom, around 931BC. The Northern Kingdom was ruled by one line of kings while the Southern Kingdom was ruled by the progeny from Kings David and Solomon.

After several centuries, the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Kings Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II, around 720BC. Many of the northern tribes were transported away from Israel and assimilated into other people groups in the Middle East, while others fled to the Southern Kingdom and integrated into that population.

The Southern Kingdom was also known as the Kingdom of Judah, since Judah was the predominant tribe. It lasted longer than the Northern Kingdom, but was eventually conquered by Babylon in campaigns waged between 597 and 582BC. Most of the people were deported to Babylon, fled to Egypt, or disappeared in the surrounding lands. Around 539BC, a number of the people were allowed to return from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild the city as well as the temple. These people of Judah are what many today term “Jews.”

Our English word “Jew” derives from the name for the tribe descended from Judah. The German word for this group is “Jude,” pronounced “yu-de.” (In an adjective form this becomes pronounced “yu-desch,” or more commonly “yiddish,” which is a form of Middle German with loan words from Hebrew and other European Languages, written in the Hebrew alphabet.)

This might make one easily answer the question of whether one is Jewish by simply tracing lineage back to Jacob; however, even that is not so simple. There is a huge political overlay on anything like this, and politics influences the term. Part of the Biblical promise to Abraham was not just that his offspring would be so numerous, but also that God promised them the land that currently comprises Israel (and a bit more than that). Accordingly, in the Middle East, many Jews (and Christians) assert a divine right to its land tied ultimately

to their status as the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but other nations challenge that right.

Not surprisingly, a number of people have challenged the historicity of Abraham, his offspring, and even whether or not there was a Moses. What might be more surprising is that this group of skeptics include several Israeli scholars. These select scholars attempt to propagate their opinion in the public arena as if it is fact. It is not hard to find a number of places where Abraham is labeled a myth, and Jews today and the ancient Israelites are supposed to be simply Canaanites who banded together and composed some great mythology of origins.

For example, if one were to look up the Wikipedia site for “Jew,”¹ one would find:

Modern **archaeology** has largely discarded the historicity of the Patriarchs and of the Exodus story,^[53] with it being reframed as constituting the **Israelites'** inspiring **national myth** narrative. The Israelites and their culture, according to the modern archaeological account, did not overtake the region by force, but instead branched out of the **Canaanite peoples** and culture through the development of a distinct **monolatristic**—and later **monotheistic**—religion centered on **Yahweh**,^{[54][55][56]} one of the **Ancient Canaanite deities**. The growth of Yahweh-centric belief, along with a number of cultic practices, gradually gave rise to a distinct Israelite **ethnic group**, setting them apart from other Canaanites. The

Although written as fact, this is nothing but conjecture and a political opinion cloaked as “archaeology.” The authors cited do not represent the larger scholastic community, and their opinions fail to take into account significant evidence.²

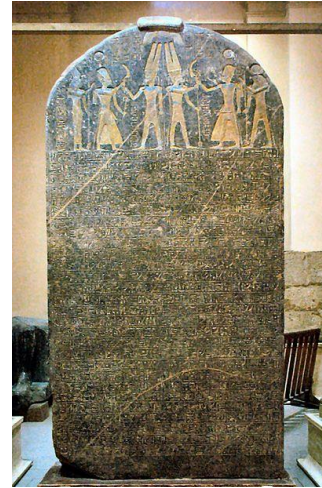
It would seem logical to look to genetics to help address this question, but that is a constantly evolving science. Genetic studies have indicated that Jews and Arabs have a common ancestor, but not from some Canaanite infiltration in the 1,000BC era. At least one study of the Y-chromosomes has indicated that Jews and Arabs have a common ancestor that lived roughly 4,000 years ago, about the time of the Biblical Abraham. The same study indicates that the high priestly line of Jews had a common ancestor around 1300BC, roughly the time of the first high priest Aaron.³

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews>.

² A well-documented and thorough response to these arguments is found in Kitchen, Ken, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 2006).

³ Klyosov, Anatole, “Origin of the Jews and the Arabs: Date of their Most Recent Common Ancestor is Written in their Y-Chromosomes – However, There Were Two of Them.” Available from Nature Proceedings <http://precedings.nature.com/documents/4206/version/1>.

The oldest archaeological reference to the “Israelites” by that name comes from a stone called the “Merneptah stele.” Currently in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, this ancient granite carving was originally made around 1208BC. It was discovered by famed archaeologist and Egyptologist Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) in 1896.



The stele commemorates the victories of the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah over a host of others. The stele describes a number of states conquered by the Pharaoh, including Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yano'am. There is also a reference to Israel. “Israel is laid waste and his seed is not.” Israel is referenced differently in the stone. The way this is written in hieroglyphics, it speaks of Israel as a collective group of people, but not a kingdom. In other words, unlike the people in Ashkelon or Gezer, the people of Israel had no king, and were more of a loosely affiliated confederacy of people, fully consistent with the Biblical picture.

While the whole area of historicity is worthy of a book itself, especially with the political overlay, it is sufficient for this endeavor, that if one were to type my DNA, I suspect it would show that I am not one of those descended from the common ancestor of Abraham's era! Hence, in that sense, I am not a Jew either.

This leaves a last definition of a Jew, and that is the religious one. We might here speak more properly of Judaism. This group contains not only those who are practicing adherents that are born genetically Jews, but it also includes those who convert to Judaism. Even here, however, there is a great deal of diversity.

RELIGIOUS JUDAISM

Religious Judaism comes in many shapes and sizes. Scholars generally speak of three approaches to religious Judaism that cover the majority of practicing or religious Jews. At one end of the spectrum are Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jews are the most strictly adherent to the Hebrew Law or “*Torah*.” (This is the designation for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, i.e., of the “Old Testament.”) At the other end of the spectrum are Reform Jews.” Reform Jews see the *Torah* as a set of guidelines, but do not think they must be strictly adhered to as unalterable, divine and eternal commandments.

A good contrast between these came about when I was eating lunch with one of my Hebrew professors who had grown up in an Orthodox home. My professor ordered a ham and cheese sandwich. I looked at him somewhat stunned. He told me that he grew up Orthodox, but was now Reform. He then poked his finger in my face and added, “Moses

never would have forbade ham, if he'd tasted it the way my wife makes it!" Now I am not saying that all Reform Jews see things as Dr. Klein. I'm not sure I even see things as Dr. Klein! (I don't eat pork, for example.) But this story shows a contrast that can exist between two different sets of religious Jews.

In between the two ends of the spectrum, Orthodox and Reform, lies a middle ground – Conservative Judaism. Conservatives are more likely to adhere to a good bit of *Torah*, even though they do not adhere to it all.

If we go back in time 2,000 years, the Jewish religious sects were not classified as Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. There were sects, but they bore different names. The sect we know most about was called the "Pharisees." Most scholars believe the Pharisees came out of the Hasidæan movement that arose in the second century before Christ.⁴ The Hasidæans (aka "Hasidim") were Jews fully devoted to the Law of God as governing life and religion, at a time when that way of life was under attack.

After Alexander the Great (356-353BC) had conquered much of the known world, the Greek way of life (with a good bit of Greek religion) became fashionable throughout the Ancient Near East, including the territories of Judah and Israel.

In the Apocrypha, we read of this Greek influence:

In those days there appeared in Israel men who were breakers of the law, and they seduced many people, saying: 'Let us go and make an alliance with the Gentiles all around us.... Some from among the people promptly went to the king, and he authorized them to introduce the way of living of the Gentiles. Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom. They covered over the mark of their circumcision and abandoned the holy covenant (1 Maccabees 1:11-15).

Things reached a point where the Seleucid ruler Antiochus Epiphanes issued a decree forbidding the practice of the Jewish faith. This decree brought about a Jewish revolt spearheaded by the Maccabee brothers. The Hasidim, who gladly sacrificed themselves to keep the religion of Moses from extermination, fought valiantly in aid of the revolt.⁵

⁴ "Pharisees," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Keter Publishing House 1972), Vol. 13, at 363; F. F. Bruce, Paul, *Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 47ff. See also *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday 1992) III at 66.

⁵ This is the same revolt from which came Jewish Hanukkah celebrations, commemorating the lasting of oil for the lamps during the rededication of the temple.

These Hasidim were the fathers to the Pharisees. In its purist form, Pharisees sought to protect the true Jewish faith and practice.

Another sect we know of were called the Sadducees. They were generally considered a more secular group who were the upper economic and political group of Jews. They generally oversaw affairs of state, regulated relationships with the Romans, and maintained the Temple in Jerusalem. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus (37-c.100) explained that the Sadducees did not believe in the afterlife, something the New Testament writings also note. They also followed mainly the *Torah*, but limited their Scriptures to those five scrolls.⁶

The third sect of which we know even less were the Essenes. The Essenes lived separated out from normal Jewish life, sacrificing on their own rather than in the Temple. They held all things in common, and Josephus notes there were only about 4,000 of them.

By the middle of the first century, another Jewish sect was recognized. It is worth noting here that the Greek word for sect is “haireisis” (αἵρεσις). It is the word used in the Bible to reference the Sadducees (Acts 5:17) as well as the Pharisees (Acts 15:5). This same word was used in the 40–50AD era for the Jewish sect variously called “the Way” or “the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5, 14). This is the group we now call Messianic, or Jewish Christians (see also Acts 28:22).

It was not until sometime after the destruction of the second temple at the end of the first century, that Christianity was excised from normative Judaism. Before that, it was considered a growing Jewish sect.

Because of this great diversity, today and historically, it is difficult to give strict definitions to religious “Judaism;” however, we can still find some useful generalizations by examining core teachings of key people.

One of Judaism’s most famous teachers lived in the Middle Ages, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, commonly known as Maimonides. Living from about 1138 to 1204, Maimonides was a rabbi, philosopher, and doctor, all rolled into one. Jewish history still reckons him as one of, if not the, preeminent Jewish scholar on the *Torah*. An introduction to a leading book on Moses Maimonides describes his significance,

Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) is one of the greatest religious thinkers of all time. In Jewish tradition, he is often called the Great Eagle, the philosopher who rose to great heights and whose vision covered an extensive range. A popular saying among Jews is that “From Moses [of the Torah] to

⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, Ch. 1:3.

Moses [Maimonides], none has arisen like Moses [Maimonides].” Indeed, it can fairly be asserted that from the days of Moses Maimonides until our own time, no Jewish thinker has had a more significant impact on Jewish religious thought than Maimonides.⁷

Maimonides published thirteen principles of faith, and I will use those principles as core definitions of what it means to be Jewish in a religious sense. These thirteen principles are what I examine to determine, whether I am a Jew or not.

Principle 1

The first principle is belief in a Creator, a being who is himself complete in existence, and who caused all that exists.

I find myself in agreement with this first principle. This principle also exists in the Christian faith. It is the idea that God has always been complete in every manner of existence by himself. Christianity teaches that God has fellowship within the Trinity, and hence has no need of company, no need of others to express or receive love, no need of anything whatsoever. God is full unto himself. Yet this same God created all there is. The Jewish rabbi and Christian apostle Paul wrote of God, “who created all things” (Eph. 3:9).

Again, in writing to the church at Colossae, Paul spoke of Jesus as God,

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:16-17).

This sounds much like Maimonides who wrote,

the Creator, may He be blessed... is the Cause of all that exists. He maintains their existence, and their existence is dependent on Him.⁸

So, on this first principle of Judaism, even as a Christian, I find myself in agreement.

Principle 2

The second principle centers on the unity of God, that God is One.

⁷ Rabbi Marc D. Angel. *Maimonides—Essential Teachings on Jewish Faith & Ethics*, (Jewish Lights Publishing 2012), Introduction.

⁸ *Ibid*, at 196.

Again, as a Christian, this same principle exists. The New Testament apostle James, who was also the brother of Jesus, wrote of the importance of believing that God is one, noting that even the demons had this figured out!

You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (James 2:19).

The rabbi and apostle Paul wrote similarly,

For there is one God (1 Tim. 2:5).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul waxed poetically about this truth,

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6).

Now some may raise the question, “but don’t Christians believe that Jesus is also God?” Yes, Christianity certainly does teach that Jesus is God, yet that truth exists alongside the truth of God being one. God is one as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a truth considered even in the Old Testament. God spoke within himself in the Creation account, “Let *us* make man in our image, after *our* likeness” (Gen. 1:26). We read in the same creation account of the Spirit of God moving over the face of the deep (Gen. 1:2).

The Hebrew Scriptures also, fully affirming that God is one, spoke of a coming Messiah who would be God as well.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

The difficulty, according to the Christian faith, is that humanity has no way of truly understanding the nature of God, beyond the ways that God has revealed himself. It is a bit like trying to read Russian if you cannot read or speak it. Someone might teach you that “God” in Russian is “бор,” and that would enable you to identify it when you see it. Then if someone were to reference “публика галерки,” you might be vehement that the word has nothing to do with God (or god). From the frame of reference of one who understands only бор, that would be right. Still, the picture gets bigger the more one learns.

So is the Christian understanding of God, commonly known as the Trinity. We cannot expect to know God as a full being. The one who created all and holds all together is a being far beyond our comprehension. Heaven forbid that we should think God simply a

supersized human. He is definitely not! So for Christians, there are three things we best understand about God. First, he is One. Not two. Not three, but One. Second, the Father, Son, and Spirit are all God. Finally, the Father, Son, and Spirit are not the same. With that mystery, Christians readily accept the truth taught by Maimonides,

The Unity of God; namely, that we must believe that He who is the cause of all is One. [This “One”] is not like one of a pair, or one of a kind, or one person composed of many parts, and not one like one physical thing that can be divided and separated infinitely. Rather, The Most High is One and a Unity unlike any other unity. This second principle is taught in the phrase “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”⁹

The key is found in another statement of Maimonides, that “The *Torah* speaks in the language of man.” God is described as One, and that unity cannot be diminished. Nevertheless, God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct yet not three gods.

Principle 3

God is Spirit, not flesh. God is not subject to the things that affect bodies, such as movement or fatigue. When the Bible speaks of God in physical terms (walking, standing, etc.) it is a metaphor. It is using the language of people.

This was the teaching of Jesus as well, and it is readily embraced by Christian orthodoxy. When Jesus was speaking with the Samaritan woman at a well where she was getting water, the conversation turned to worshipping God. The woman tried to get Jesus into a debate or dialogue over whether God should be worshipped at one physical location or another. Jesus responded that the true worship of God proceeded from the heart. God is not a physical God and we should not get wrapped up in an idea he is physically located in one place or another. Jesus explained,

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:24).

Over and over in the Hebrew Old Testament, we read of God’s Spirit coming upon people, giving them words of prophesy (1 Sam. 1:10), helping them walk in the ways of God (Ezek. 36:27), and empowering them (Mic. 3:8). These same things are spoken of in the same language in the Christian writings of the New Testament (Acts 2; Gal. 5:16; Rom. 8:12-17).

Some might think that because Christians believe that Jesus is God, and because Jesus was a human, that this invalidates the idea that God is spirit. Such is not the case, however.

⁹ *Ibid*, at 197.

When the Jewish rabbi and Christian apostle Paul wrote about Jesus both before and after the incarnation, he used some majestic language that illustrates the point.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, *though he was in the form of God*, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*. And being *found in human form*, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11).

Clearly, Jesus was not a human prior to the incarnation. Human form was something much less than he was when “in the form of God.” Humanity was a form Jesus took to work his redemption, it was no more his actual form than the human messenger (aka “angel”) that was identified as God in the Old Testament was God’s true form. Consider this passage from the Jewish book of Judges:

Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.” And Gideon said to him, “Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.” And the LORD turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?” (Judg. 6:11-14).

The Lord God took a human form to deliver a message to Gideon. God is Spirit, not flesh, but can and has taken on human form. On this, there is alignment between the Christian teaching on the nature of God and the Jewish teaching.

Principle 4

God is Primordial, meaning that he is absolute and no one or nothing existed before him.

This is a Christian truth, applied to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one God was before all others. There is no time when God was not. Of Jesus, the apostle John wrote,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made (Jn. 1:1-2).

Jesus is the “Word” in John’s writing, as he made clear in the fourteenth verse explaining, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Again, as per the third principle of Maimonides, Jesus had to become flesh; he was not a human God. Yet John does teach the preexistence of God that we call “the Father” as well as Jesus, or God we call “the Son.” Paul taught the same thing of Jesus. In the Colossians 1:17 passage set out earlier, Paul wrote about Jesus, “he is before all things.”

Again, there is no difference in the Jewish and Christian views of God in Principle 4.

Principle 5

That God, blessed be He, is alone worthy of worship, adulation, exaltation, and obedience to His commandments. One must not worship any lesser beings—for example, angels, stars, heavenly spheres, the elements and anything made from them.

This principle is set out at the very beginning of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2-5). It is a very Jewish understanding, and sits at the core of Judaism. Failing to follow this commandment was a recurrent sin, which brought about suffering for the Israelites over and over again (1 Ki. 14:9).

The Christian faith agrees one hundred percent with this fifth principle of Judaism. Early in his ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness where Satan tempted him to sin and disobedience. One of the temptations was for Jesus to worship Satan. If Jesus would do so, Satan promised to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus refused, affirming,

It is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve (Lk 4:8).

Christianity does teach that people should worship Jesus, but as referenced earlier, this is based on the principle and belief that Jesus is God. Not another God or a different God, but the one God. So, we see the disciples of Jesus worshiping him after he stops a storm dead in its tracks (Mt. 14:22-33). Jesus does not stop them, because they did so, seeing him as God.

And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Mt. 14:33).

As God, Jesus is worthy of praise and adoration. The Christian Scriptures contain a book called Revelation, where John has visions of Jesus and things to come. In the revelation, a

scene in heaven is revealed to John. In that scene, the angels themselves are worshipping Jesus proclaiming,

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. (Rev. 4:9-10).

Again, this worship is not contrary to the commandments of God, nor contrary to the Jewish principle espoused by Maimonides. This is the worship of God, one being in three in ways that humans do not have a frame of reference for understanding. Ultimately, Christianity expresses that the spiritual being God is not one that fits into human molds or comprehension. Christianity believes it a bit unreal to suppose that the God of creation, the God of the universe, the God who is spiritual, could be defined or understood by flesh and blood humans. We must use human language for a non-human being. As Maimonides explained, we use “hands” and “face” for God because this is what we know, not what he is.

In principle 5, I find myself aligned with Judaism.

Principle 6

“That there is prophecy.”

This is a principle that is borne out repeatedly in the Old Testament. The Old Testament Scriptures are considered Scriptures, not because they are musings of smart people, but because God revealed them to people we call “prophets.”

The Hebrew word for “prophet” is *navi*’ (נביא). It refers to a speaker on God’s behalf. A true prophet was one who was relating the words of God. The Spirit of God would work through a prophet to produce God’s word for the people. Many of these prophetic words became the Jewish Scriptures commonly called the Old Testament.

Christianity agrees fully with this principle. The earliest church believed that the Old Testament contained expressions of God’s words, delivered through the prophets. Jewish rabbi and Christian apostle Paul called the Old Testament the “oracles of God,” and pointed out that being entrusted with those was a great blessing of the Jewish people (Rom. 3:1-2). Toward the end of his life, Paul told one of his closest companions, Timothy, a younger man who had full responsibilities for carrying on where Paul left off, that Timothy could rely on the Old Testament as God’s prophetic word given through God’s Spirit in what we would term “inspiration.”

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Christianity also believes that this presence of prophecy did not end with the prophets of the Old Testament. One of the last prophets of the Old Testament, a man named Joel, spoke of a later time when prophecy would again pour forth. Joel prophesied that,

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy (Joel 2:28).

This was something Jesus also anticipated coming shortly after his death. Jesus told his closest followers to stay in Jerusalem after his death. He explained that God would send his Spirit to them, and the Spirit would remind them of what had happened, would teach them its significance, and would give them prophetic words to teach (Jn. 14:25-26; 15:26-27). As Jesus said it, the Spirit would bear witness to Jesus aiding the apostles in their efforts to bear witness to him.

This is the premise of the New Testament Scriptures. The early church gathered up those writings deemed to have apostolic authorship or approval, and studied them along with the Old Testament as prophetic words or revelation from God to humanity.

In principle 6, I find myself aligned with Judaism.

Principle 7

“The prophecy of Moses our teacher; namely, that we must believe he is the father of all prophets who preceded or succeeded him. All prophets are of lesser status.”

This principle is one that is consistent with Christianity, although there is something further where the Christian faith understands a fuller level of realization of this truth. Moses was clearly God’s major prophet in the Old Testament, yet even Moses recognized that someone else would come that was just as worthy of being heard. In the Jewish book of Deuteronomy, Moses prophesied that God had told him just that.

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— ... And the LORD said to me, ... I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him (Dt. 18:15-19).

There is no such prophet in the Old Testament. Christianity agrees with Moses that another would come. That other prophet is Jesus. Now if Jesus were just a human prophet, then there would be an issue with Jesus being on Moses' level. Maimonides believed that any succeeding prophet would be a lesser prophet. Yet Jesus was not just another human prophet. Jesus was also God.

The early disciples of Jesus wrote of this comparison in ways that showed Jesus fulfilling Moses' prophesy of one "like me from among you" to whom all should listen and obey. Yet Jesus was also one from God, who uniquely modeled and taught the ways of God, even as he spoke of them, for indeed, Jesus was God made man. The apostle John explained,

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:17).

For Maimonides, the reason Moses was of such great unmatched stature was that God spoke to Moses directly, while with other Old Testament prophets, God used an angel or some intermediary. This again affirms well the life and prophetic nature of Jesus as one "like Moses." As God, Jesus explained that when one saw Jesus, one saw God the Father (Jn. 14:9). Jesus then adds that his entire life was one of revealing God the Father.

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works (Jn. 14:10).

It is because Christians believe Moses had a clear prophetic word from God, that Christians believe there would be one as per Moses' prophecy, that would be like Moses. This is one that all should listen to and obey. This is Jesus.

With that understanding, in principle 7, I find myself aligned with Judaism.

Principle 8

"Torah is from Heaven; namely, we must believe that the Torah we currently have and that we received through Moses our teacher is entirely from God."

As mentioned earlier, "*Torah*" is the Hebrew word that refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, also called "the Books of Moses," or "the Pentateuch." The English names for the books of the *Torah* are "Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Christians also believe these books were from God through Moses. (The death of Moses, and certain post-Mosaic material most Christian scholars acknowledge as added to the Mosaic books, but done under prophetic work). Jesus would often quote from the *Torah* or reference the *Torah*, and do so as a work of Moses.

When Jesus healed a leper. He instructed the leper to follow the law laid down by Moses in Leviticus 14:8-10 saying,

See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift *that Moses commanded*, for a proof to them (Mt. 8:4).

Another example is when Jesus chided the people for violating one of the Ten Commandments found in the *Torah*, he did so as a quotation of Moses.

And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do” (Mk. 7:9-13).

In principle 8, I find myself aligned with Judaism.

Principle 9

“The authenticity of the Torah; namely, that the Torah of Moses was transcribed from the Creator, may He be blessed, and not from anyone else.”

Here Maimonides was again emphasizing the source of the *Torah* as God. Reading Maimonides on this shows a bit fuller meaning behind his terminology than we might understand as I have quoted him.

The *Torah* as we have discussed are the first five books of the Old Testament. In the thought of Maimonides, this would be considered the “written *Torah*.” In addition, Maimonides believed in an “oral *Torah*,” meaning rabbinic sayings that were believed to have been handed down orally from Moses, finally being written after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD.

For the Christians, the written *Torah* was seen as Moses recording God’s words. As referenced earlier, the Jewish rabbi and Christian teacher Paul would call them the “oracles of God” (Rom. 3:1-2). The Christians do not, however, readily understand the oral *Torah* as authentic to God and Moses. As such, the principles of Maimonides are consistent with Christian teaching and understanding, as long as one isolates the written *Torah*.

Principle 10

“That God most High knows the deeds of human beings and does not turn His attention from them.”

This concept is deeply rooted in Old Testament thought. The Psalmist explained it this way,

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether (Ps. 139:1-4).

This is not a situation where God was watching and aware of only the Psalmist as one who would naturally be seeking God. God also watches and knows the thoughts and deeds of evil and wicked people. Proverbs 15:3 explained,

The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.

This is another point that is fully consistent with Christian teaching. Jesus explained that God knows the number of hairs on our heads (Mt. 10:30). Over and over in Scripture we read that Jesus, as God, knew the thoughts of those around him. In Matthew 12, Jesus heals a demon possessed man who was blind. Some of the Jews that were antagonistic to Jesus were mumbling that Jesus must have done so by the power of Satan, rather than God. Jesus addressed these murmurings, but not because he heard them. He “knew their thoughts.”

Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Mt. 12:25-28).

This happened over and over again (see, e.g., Lk 5:22).

The Jewish rabbi and Christian teacher Paul explained this was part of the Spirit’s role in the lives of believers.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of

the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8:26-27).

This is an important Christian understanding of how God hears and answers prayers. God knows our thoughts, and seeks us out, working in us to better express our prayers and concerns. In this way, God enervates us in our work calling on him and his power to help us walk in this life to his glory and the good of his kingdom.

In principle 10, I find myself aligned with Judaism.

Principle 11

“That God most High gives reward to one who fulfills the commandments of the Torah and punishes those who transgress its prohibitions.”

This principle is at the core of the Old Testament law. It strikes at the very character of God to understand that God is holy and just. As holy, it means that his commandments are sacrosanct. They are to be followed; no ifs, ands, or buts. As just, it means that God does not, and cannot let “sin” or disobedience to his laws and character go unpunished.

We read of this early in the *Torah* in the fall of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve violate God’s command not to eat of a certain tree in the Garden of Eden. Because they disobeyed, they were punished. The punishment was not simply banishment from the Garden, but it was a spiritual and physical death. God pronounced the curse on sin that entailed dramatic consequences on humanity.

God is not only a just and holy God, but he is also loving and merciful. So, hand-in-hand with the curse pronounced on the sin of Adam and Eve, God promised that he would eventually make blessing and reconciliation possible through the offspring of woman (Gen. 3, especially verses 14-19).

This truth of God’s character existed not only on the personal level, but also on a national level, as one considered the life of Israel as a group. In Deuteronomy 28:1-2, Moses explained,

if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.

This concept is carried on through Christian thought as well. Rabbi Paul explained,

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap (Gal. 6:7).

Yet, the Christian understanding goes deeper, much along the lines of the teachings of the *Torah* pertaining to the sin and fall of Adam and Eve. Paul again explained that God's principles of judgment are precisely what Maimonides set out:

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury (Rom. 2:6-8).

The problem that Paul knew only too well, was that no human being *really* does good or measures up. Paul knew this because as a rabbi, he had studied under the top teacher of his day, Gamaliel. Paul knew the Jewish Scriptures cover to cover (or scroll to scroll!). He knew that Isaiah had prophetically pronounced that,

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment (Isa. 64:6).

Similarly, the Psalms declared,

The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one (Ps. 14:2-3).

Paul even quotes this before his bold proclamation of how the just God could find a righteousness in an unrighteous people so that blessings could flow rather than destruction (Rom. 3:10ff).

Paul's further explanation is the core of the good news of the Christian faith. Christianity has the answer to the problem in the Jewish Scriptures. The problem: How can a just God forgive people who have sinned and should be receiving destruction? The answer: By bearing the sins to a place of destruction in the life of one who has done nothing wrong. In other words, when the perfect Jesus choose to be assigned the consequences for the sins of humanity, his acceptance of those consequences satisfies the requirements of God's justice on our behalf. We can know the blessings of righteousness that Maimonides referenced. Not because we earned them, but because Jesus earned them, and then gave them to us. Paul said it this way,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of

God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness (Rom. 3:21-25).

More than just agreeing with principle 11, it is the core of the Christian message. Without it, Christianity has no meaning. As rabbi Paul explained,

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:21).

Principle 12

“Messianic days; namely, to believe and trust that [the Messiah] will come soon. “And if he tarries—wait for him” (Habakkuk 2:3)... One must believe that he will have superior rank and honor to any other king that ever ruled. One should exalt and love and pray for him, according to what all the prophets from Moses to Malachi had prophesied. This principle entails belief that every king of Israel [including the Messiah] must be from the house of David and from the line of Solomon.”

The teaching of Maimonides on this point is consistent with that of the Old Testament. The Jewish Scriptures constantly spoke of the coming Messiah. Many of these verses have already been referenced earlier in this chapter, but of course there are more.

The Christians see this concern of Maimonides and the Old Testament prophets fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. It is the belief in a Messiah that gives meaning to the life of Jesus. So to understand the alignment of Christianity with this principle of Judaism, I offer an abbreviated chart of Messianic prophecies from Jewish Scriptures, combined with the fulfillment of those prophecies in the life of Jesus, who is considered accordingly as the Messiah (which is in Greek, “Christ.”)

Jewish Messianic Prophecy

The Messiah would be akin to the Passover lamb, male, unblemished, and sacrificed with his blood covering the doorposts so that the people would find release from bondage into the Promised Land (Ex. 12).

Relevant Life of Christ

“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29)

“Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

Jewish Messianic Prophecy

The Messiah would be a descendant of David, as referenced by Maimonides and also in the Old Testament (For example, 2 Sam. 7:12-16).

The Messiah would be resurrected (Ps 16:8-10, "I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.").

The Messiah would be born of a virgin. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Isa. 7:14).

The Messiah would be called Wonderful Counselor and Almighty God (Isa. 9:6-7 – "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.")

The Messiah would perform signs of healing (Isa 35:5-6, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert").

The Messiah ushers in a new covenant." (Jer. 31:31 – "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah").

The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2 – "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.")

Relevant Life of Christ

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt. 1:1).

"Therefore he says also in another psalm, 'You will not let your Holy One see corruption.' For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he whom God raised up did not see corruption." (Acts 13:35-37).

Jesus was born of a virgin. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us)." (Mt. 1:22-23)

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Lk. 1:32-33).

"And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended" (Mt. 11:4-6).

"Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant." (Heb. 9:15)

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled...and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet..." (Mt. 2:1-5).

Christians not only agree with principle 12, but see it as properly espousing the teaching of Judaism that was fulfilled completely in Jesus. One would be hard-pressed to find a Messianic promise not fulfilled in Jesus.

Principle 13

“Resurrection of the dead.”

Maimonides believed in the resurrection of the dead, but with a bit of a twist. Maimonides believed that only the righteous would be resurrected, not the wicked.

There is a split in Christian thought on this subject, though all mainline Christians believe in the resurrection of the dead. The split comes in whether or not those who are not redeemed, will eventually be extinguished.

Jesus taught that there was a resurrection, and that he was the source for it. He explained,

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live (Jn. 11:25).

The issue for some is in passages like Matthew 10:28 where we find Jesus warning people,

do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell

Does Jesus mean that some people are eventually destroyed as Maimonides taught? Or should that passage be interpreted differently? Conversely, when Jesus spoke of hell as an “unquenchable fire” (e.g., Mt. 3:12; Mk. 9:43), did he mean eternal conscious torment or simply that there is a burning fire that can and will always be able to destroy the wicked?

Either way, Christianity is built on the premise that those found in Christ will be delivered from this world and death into a resurrection with eternity spent in the presence of God. This is the point of Jesus dying. He died to take away our sins so we could join him in a resurrection.

Maimonides Concluded

Why is Christian teaching so closely aligned with classic Jewish teaching? Because at its roots, Christianity is a Jewish faith. Christianity believes that it is Judaism for the world. It is the fruition of Jewish prophecy, and takes the Jewish experience and understanding of God, to the non-Jewish nations. In a real sense, Christians believe that in Jesus, historical

Judaism finds its fulfillment. Jewish believers in Jesus as Messiah become what some term “completed Jews,” as opposed to those who still await the Messiah. Why is this so? This is explained in the next installment...

To be continued...

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury” (Rom. 2:6-8).*

I don’t measure up. I really don’t. Not even on the good days. Viewed in isolation, this is very, very bad news.

2. *“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom. 3:21).*

I don’t have to measure up! I have a righteousness that is real, that is just, and that is given to me! This is really GOOD NEWS!

3. *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn.11:25).*

Thank you, Lord! I am going to let this truth transform me, and I am going to share it with others!