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Torah and Christ On the Use of the Old Testament in the Early Synagogue and in the Early Church

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In this article the author discusses the inescapable link between understanding the OT from the perspective of the Christ-event and its normativity in its entirety as divine revelation and salvation history. The issue of the relationship between the living and the written word is brought out in discussing the significance of Christ in Christianity compared with the Torah in Judaism, namely, in the form of Christ as the fulfilment of the Torah. Though it is beyond the author's intention, this article has important implications for Christian dialogue with other faiths, and the role of scripture in revelation and salvation.
(Editors)

The encounter with Judaism differs significantly from the Church's encounter with other religions. In this encounter, the Old Testament is the common ground.¹ In this encounter, we are reminded that the Early Church first grew up within the Jewish People, and that the Old Testament from the beginning was its basic document of faith which it shared with the rest of the people. But as the Early Church and the Synagogue parted ways, we also understand that the Old Testament became a dividing issue.²

The American Jewish scholar, Jakob J. Petuchowski, in the article on the theology of the Jewish prayer book, has described the difference and yet the structural parallelism between Christianity and Judaism by using [John 3:16](#):

For God so loved the world

For God so loved Israel,

that He gave His one and only Son,

that He gave us His *Torah*,

that whoever believes in Him,

that all who keep it,

shall not perish,

shall not perish,

but have eternal life.

but have eternal life.

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Petuchowski comments on this comparison, saying that the significance of Christ in Christianity is comparable to the significance of the Torah—the Law—in Judaism.

¹ Exemplifying this directly is e.g. *M. Dayan*, *Living with the Bible*, Jerusalem 1978, and in an analytical way, *C. Schoneveld*, *The Bible in Israeli Education*, Assen/Amsterdam 1976.

² Cf. e.g. *Bristol document of Faith and Order* from 1967, reprinted in *R. Dobbert*, *Das Zeugnis der Kirche für die Juden*, *Missionierende Gemeinde*—Heft 16, pp.96ff.

This emphasis on respectively Christ and the Torah is also valid as will be seen when we have a closer look at the use and the interpretation of the Old Testament in the Early Synagogue and the Early Church. The aim of the present article is not to break new ground in the ongoing debate on OT hermeneutics, but to bring us back to the starting point in the Church's use and understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. We shall go back to the early centuries AD and to New Testament times and describe the use of the Old Testament in the Early Synagogue, then see how the Early Church is dependent upon Early Judaism in its use and interpretation of the Old Testament, but also how the Church and Pharisaic Judaism took different ways. This will lead us to a discussion on the relationship between Christ and the Torah, the Law, in the New Testament and the Early Church, before we summarize the argument in some concluding points regarding use of the OT in the Church today.

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE EARLY SYNAGOGUE

We start off with the use of the Old Testament in the Synagogue in the first centuries of the common era and make some remarks on the *reading*, the *preaching* and the *study* of the OT. However, first we must recognize the obvious fact, that the Jews then—as today—did not speak of an Old Testament. The collection of Old Testament Scriptures was known according to its three main sections: the Law or the five books of Moses (*ha-Tora*), the Prophets—including all the historical books as well as the major and minor Prophets (*ha-Nevi'im*) and finally the writings that comprise the Psalms, the Book of Job and the rest of the Old Testament Books (*ha-Ketuvim*). Today, therefore, the Jewish designation of the Old Testament Scriptures is simply TANAK—an abbreviation for its three sections (*Tora*, *Nevi'im*, *Ketuvim*).

From early post-exilic times it became a custom to read a portion of the *Torah*, in the Synagogue on the Sabbath, on Monday and on Thursday.³ The whole Pentateuch was divided into weekly portions (*Sedarim*). However, two systems of reading seemed to develop: in Palestine, they read the five books of Moses in the course of a three-year cycle, thus dividing the Pentateuch into 155 weekly portions p. 185 (also 153 and 167).⁴ In the East, in Babel, however, they followed a one-year cycle and divided the Pentateuch into 54 portions. In the course of time, this became the universal Jewish practice, and in the Synagogue today the Torah is read according to this annual cycle, divided into 54 portions.⁵

At the time of the New Testament it had also become a practice to read a short lesson from the *Prophetic* Books in addition to the Torah portion—the so-called *Haftara*.

³ Cf. *Talmud Jer. Meg.* IV, 1; *Babli Baba Kamma* 82^a Mekilta de Rabbi Jismael, Vajassa 1, 77–80 (Lauterbach-edition, 1933).

⁴ The existence of a fixed Palestinian triennial cycle has been argued by A. Buechler, *The Reading of the Law and Prophets in a Triennial Cycle*, and *ibid*, *Reading of the Prophets in a Triennial Cycle*, in *Contributions to the Scientific Study of Jewish Liturgy*, ed. J. Petuchowski, New York 1970, pp.181–302; both articles reprinted from JQR 5, 1893 and 6, 1894. This hypothesis has been called into question by J. Heinemann, *The Triennial Lectionary Cycle*, JJS 19, 1968, 41–48, and *ibid*, *Ha-Machzor Ha-Telath-Shenati we-duach Ha-Shanah*, Tarbiz 33, 1964, 362–368. Cf. also W. D. Davies, *Christian Origins and Judaism*, Philadelphia 1962, 67–95. It has, however, to some degree been confirmed by B. Z. Wacholder, *A History of the Sabbatical Readings of Scripture for the 'Triennial Cycle'*, Prolegomenon in J. Mann—I. Sonne, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, Vol. I, 1940, Repr. New York 1971.

⁵ Cf. e.g. I. Elbogen, *Der juedische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, Frankfurt 1931—Hildesheim 1967, pp.155–205.

Whereas the Torah was read in continuous lessons, the prophetic pericopes were selected to illustrate the specific Torah lesson of the day.⁶ But it is uncertain when a fixed order of *Haftarot* developed.⁷ We therefore understand that the Torah lesson always was of primary importance, whereas the prophetic pericope was of auxiliary character. Texts from the writings (*ha-Ketuvim*) (the *hagiographia*) were excluded from the lectionary of the Synagogue, except at the main festivals when one of the five scrolls (the *Megillot*: Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations) was read.⁸ The chanting of Psalms from the beginning played an important part in the Jewish Liturgy.

The particular relationship between the Torah lesson and the prophetic pericope can be illustrated by the readings of the Sabbath called *Para* (Heifer). The Torah reading of this day is from [Numbers 19](#), about the red heifer as the sacrifice of purification and about water of purification, for the removal of sins. The prophetic lesson connected with this text (*seder*) is [Ezekiel 36:18–32](#), where God says that He will sprinkle water upon the people and cleanse them from all their uncleanness. In this manner, the ritual acts of purification prescribed [p. 186](#) for the people is related to God's eschatological act of purification.⁹ In addition to the weekly portion of the Torah to be read together with a prophetic text, there were separate readings for festivals and holidays: relevant Torah portions were read as well as selected prophetic texts that could illustrate the Torah text or the content of the festival. For the *Day of Atonement* (*Yom Ha-Kippurim*) they read [Leviticus 16](#) from the Torah and one of the prophetic texts was the Book of Jonah, exemplifying the right attitude of repentance, the right way of afflicting oneself ([Lev. 16:20](#)).¹⁰

To provide a proper understanding of the Old Testament texts read, a *sermon* (a homily) was often given that particularly explained the relationship between the Torah lesson and the prophetic pericope.¹¹ Many of these sermons/homilies are kept in later rabbinic homiletical commentaries to biblical books, the so-called homiletical *Midrashim*. An early anthology of homilies is the *Pesiqta Rabbati*. Here we find a Homily for Pentecost, dealing with the giving of the Law which is commemorated on the Jewish Pentecost. This homily takes its departure from a quotation from the Song of Solomon, which is read at the festival, and ends up with quotations from [Exodus 20](#), which is the Torah lesson for the festival. According to the rabbinic interpretation, the Song of Solomon describes in poetic language the covenantal love-relationship between God and His people Israel. And Pentecost was in this period already a festival commemorating the Sinai-Covenant and particularly the giving of the Torah. It is then interesting to note how the Song of Solomon is here interpreted. Chapter [5](#), verse [13](#) that is quoted, reads 'The cheeks of my beloved are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh'. However, the Jewish homily quotes a paraphrasing translation into Aramaic of the so-

⁶ *Babli Meg. 29 b.*

⁷ For this problem cf. the references given in footnote 4.

⁸ Cf. *I. Elbogen*, op. cit.

⁹ Cf. *Pesiqta Rabbati*, Piska 14–15-end, W. Braude, Yale Judaica Series, New Haven 1968, Vol.I. p.295. Cf. also *E. Werner*, *The Sacred Bridge—Liturgical Parallels in Synagogue and Early Church*, New York 1970 (1959), p.78.

¹⁰ Cf. *Babli Meg. 31a*; *M.D. Herr*, Day of Atonement, art Enc. Jud., Jerusalem 1971, Vol.5, 1379; cf. *E. Werner*, op. cit., p.79ff.

¹¹ For the intricate problems here involved, see e.g. *B. Z. Wacholder*, op. cit. Cf. also *J. Bowker*, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature, An Introduction to Jewish Interpretation of Scripture*, Cambridge 1969.

called *Targum Jonathan*, and this rendering clearly displays the early Jewish understanding of the text that is expressed in the homily itself. 'His tablets (of ten lines resembling rows) in a terrace garden of spices; they have as many subtle points and matters as a garden has fragrances; the lips of the Sages who occupy themselves with Torah, disseminate subtle interpretations on every aspect thereof, and the p. 187 words of their mouths are as choice myrrh'. Here we see how the Song of Solomon is interpreted within the mentioned framework of the covenantal love-relationship between God and His people and related in an allegoric way to [Exod. 20](#); the love of the people (she) to God (He) now is expressed in the people's love of the Torah, whereby the 'cheeks of my beloved' becomes the two tablets of the Torah, and in the midst of the people even the Torah-Sages are regarded as 'His Lips'. Hence, the Song of Solomon, [5](#) speaks of the beauty of the Law, given at Sinai as it is told in [Exod. 20](#).¹²

This emphasis on the Torah in the reading of the OT in the Synagogue was paralleled by its dominant role in the somewhat later *education* of children and youth. At the age of five the child was introduced to the *study* of the Torah. The child then started by reading the Book of Leviticus, which expresses where the emphasis was put in the use and the understanding of the Old Testament and of the Torah. The Midrash explains that the children start with the Book of Leviticus because 'as the sacrifices are clean and the children are clean, so they shall come clean and occupy themselves with clean matters'.¹³ After Leviticus followed the other parts of the Torah and later the Prophets and the Hagiographia. The ideal, but probably seldom implemented educational progress for the children and the youth is expressed in an old saying of Judah ben Tema at the end of the second Century: 'At five years old one is fit for Scripture, at ten years for the *Mishnah*, at thirteen for the fulfilment of the commandments, at fifteen for the study of the *Talmud*'.¹⁴ After the study of the Torah, at the age of ten, came the study of the *Mishnah*, which was a collection of legal discussions and decisions (*halakhot*) by rabbinic authorities and at fifteen the study of the Law Code called the *Talmud*. The *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* referred to in this saying must be earlier collections of the same kind as those we usually refer to by these names: collections that found their final form in the *Mishnah* around 200 AD and the *Talmud* in the 5th–6th Centuries.

Most synagogues in the first centuries AD would operate an elementary school (*Beit Sefer*) and a more advanced school (*Beit Talmud* or *Beit Midrash*).¹⁵ In the *Beit Sefer* the students would study the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, what later was called the *Written Torah*. In the *Beit Talmud*, the students would continue by p. 188 learning the *halakhot* and the scriptural interpretations and expositions of the rabbis which was to be called the *Oral Torah* and later to be collected in the *Mishna* and the *Talmuds*, in *Toseft* and the *Midrashim*. As the sages in these times regarded the Torah as 'the very substance of their lives', the study of the Torah 'for its own sake' was of primary importance, and the Torah study was oriented towards the observance of the commandments and the keeping of the ritual purity according to the Law.¹⁶

¹² *Pesiqta Rabbati*, ed. op. cit., ad loc.

¹³ *Leviticus Rabba*, 7, 3; *Pesiqte de Ray Kahana*, Mandelbaum- 1962, p.118.

¹⁴ *P. Avot* 5, 21 Cf. *Eccles. Rabba* 7, 28.

¹⁵ TJ Meg. 3, 1.7 3d; TB. Ket. 105 a. Jfr. Enc. Jud. IV, p.401 and G. I. Moore, *Judaism*, New York 1971, Vol. 1, pp.308–22.

¹⁶ Enc. Jud. IV, p.399.

As we have used the word *Torah* several times already and vaguely translated it 'Law', we must at this point try to give a more accurate rendering of this word. Several scholars have in recent years argued that 'Torah' should rather be translated through words like 'teaching, instruction'. For Old Testament usage of the word, this may be correct. E. E. Urbach, however, has for the Rabbinic literature probably more correctly argued for the rendering 'the constitution and the living regime of the people' and claimed that Torah actually is the 'institution, embodying the covenant between the people and its God, and reflecting a complex of precepts and statutes, customs and traditions linked to the history of the people and the acts of its rulers, Kings and Prophets'.¹⁷ The advantage of this comprehensive definition is that the Torah expresses a covenantal reality for the people with its origin in the revelation on Sinai; at the same time Torah may thus comprise both the Written and the Oracle Code, but with an emphasis on the statutory and the legal parts of the Pentateuch—in particular the Decalogue and the Holiness Code—and with subsequent emphasis on the commandments (*mitzvot*) and the rabbinic decisions concerning conduct and behaviour in secular and ritual spheres (*halakhot*). With the mentioned emphasis on the five books of the Torah in the reading, the preaching and the study of the *Tanak* (the Old Testament) in the Early Synagogue, this concept of the Torah also became a central key to the understanding and interpretation of the *Tanak*. We shall return later to this point.

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The New Testament is one of the witnesses who testify to the above mentioned reading of the Torah and the Prophets in the Synagogues at that time. In [Luke 4:16](#) we are told that Jesus came to Nazareth, the town of his Childhood, and on the Sabbath he went to the Synagogue [P. 189](#) as was his custom. In the Synagogue service of that Sabbath morning, he read the prophetic pericope of the day, from [Isaiah 61:11](#),¹⁸ about the one that is anointed to preach good news to the poor, render the sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed and bring the Jubilee year to the people. After the reading, it is stated the eyes of all were fixed on Jesus, who continued by declaring: 'Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing ...' ([Luke 4:21](#)).

This event in the life of Jesus is important from two points of view. First, Jesus went to the Synagogue as did his fellow Jews and listened to the readings from the Old Testament together with them. Secondly, it is equally important that he relates the Scripture lesson to himself, in front of his own people—he places himself in the midst of the Scriptures, and presents himself as the fulfilment of the hope of the people.

A similar event is told in the Book of Acts, chapter [13](#). The Apostle Paul and his companion came to the city of Antioch in Asia Minor and according to their custom went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. After the reading of the Torah lesson and the prophetic pericope, it is told, Paul was asked to speak to the people and he delivers a remarkable sermon ([13:16–41](#)). He gives first a brief summary of the history of Israel and of God's redemptive and salvific acts for his people, then states that this God of Israel raised up a saviour for the people from the family of David, Jesus from Nazareth. The last half of the sermon concerns this saviour: that God fulfilled the promise to the Patriarchs for the sake of the people when He raised Jesus from death ([13:32](#)).

¹⁷ E. E. Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem 1975, Vol.I–II; Vol.I, p.286ff.

¹⁸ cf. A. Buechler, *The Reading of the Law and Prophets etc.*, op. cit.

We note that both in this summary of the history of Israel and this proclamation of the resurrected Jesus Christ there are many direct and indirect references to the OT texts, particularly to the historical books, the Psalms, the Prophet Isaiah and the Prophet Habakkuk. In this sermon Paul uses the OT in two ways that are interrelated: the OT is a record of salvation history that finds its climax in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it contains promises that are now fulfilled in the resurrected Jesus from Nazareth.

These two events from the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts also demonstrate the change that now takes place in the use of the OT by Jesus Himself and His apostles, as well as by the Early Church. In its use of the OT, the early Church is dependent upon the synagogue and Early Judaism, and it continues to use the OT as its basic document of faith and as a record of salvation history. However, the OT is now used with a different emphasis and with a new reference determining its [p. 190](#) exposition. This can be seen both in the *preaching* as well as in the *reading* of the Scripture in the Early Church.

Throughout the Book of Acts we see that *the message of the Apostles* to their fellow Jews and to Gentiles comprises three elements:¹⁹ 1) that the Messiah is a suffering Messiah, 2) that the Messiah is to rise from the dead, 3) and that this Messiah is Jesus in whose name forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to Israel and all nations. Wherever we meet this preaching, however, the apostles—Paul as well as Peter—argue on every point that this happened *according to the Scriptures* ([Acts 3:12–20](#); [13:16–42](#); [24:46–47](#); [26:22–23](#)). In the scriptural argument of the Apostles, there are certain texts that occur more frequently than others, texts that we also meet in other NT books as proof texts for God's work through His Son Jesus Christ. These textual selections are particularly from the Book of Isaiah, Jeremiah and certain minor Prophets as well as the Psalms, the most known being the Messianic or Royal [Psalms 2](#) and [110](#) and the Songs of the Suffering Servant, mainly [Isaiah 53](#), such texts quoted throughout the New Testament.¹⁹

In connection with the preaching of the Gospel *Kerygma*, the Early Church selected and developed a whole body of Old Testament material: Testimony collections or strings of testimony passages applying to the Gospel facts. This body of material can be found throughout the NT writings and it is striking how the quotations and the allusions to the Psalms, Isaiah and the other Prophets dominate, whereas there are relatively few references to the legal material of the Pentateuch. In this use of the collections or strings of testimony passages from OT, however, the first Apostles and the Early Church followed a *rabbinic method*: the Sages and the rabbis of New Testament times used to combine proof texts to elucidate a legal or a theological matter, and such strings of testimony passages were handed over in the rabbinic traditions. Ample evidence for this can be found particularly in the rabbinic Bible commentaries, the so-called *Midrashim*.²⁰

The dependence upon the synagogue, however can be seen more [p. 191](#) clearly in the *reading* of the Scripture in the Early Church. In different geographical regions different traditions developed throughout the early centuries in the reading of the Bible (Gallican, Moz-arabic, Roman, Greek, Armenian, Nestorian lectionaries etc.). However in all of them a certain influence can be discerned of the continuous and cyclical reading of the OT in

¹⁹ For this and the following, cf. *C. H. Dodd, According to the Scriptures*, London 1953.

We do not here subscribe to the more rigid hypothesis of *Rendel Harris*, *Testimonies*, Vol.I–II, Cambridge 1916–1920, about an existing testimony book in the Early Church, but are convinced of the existence of testimony collections or strings of testimonies in the oral tradition of the Church.

²⁰ This point has not as yet *per se* been much analysed in the scholarly research of the rabbinic literature, but represents an underlying factor in many research contributions. Cf. e.g. the important contribution given by *W. S. Towner*, *The Rabbinic 'Enumeration of Scriptural Example'. A Study in a rabbinic Pattern of discourse with special reference to Mekhilta d'rabbi Ishmael*, Stud. Post-Bibl. 22, Leiden 1973.

the synagogue.²¹ Although Sunday, the Day of the Lord, early became the main day of worship, the Early Church retained the main outline of the Jewish calendar year, and it seems that the OT lessons to some degree remained intact in the Christian services. The old *Apostolic Constitutions* (2nd Cent., Syria) give instructions for five pericopes to be read as the weekly portion: from the Law, the Prophets, the Epistles, the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel.²² However, the introduction of the reading of the Apostolic writings gave a new dimension to the reading of the OT, and the synagogal lectionary was not simply automatically adopted, but important changes took place.

We shall here restrict ourselves to giving one example of this: the OT readings on the Holy Saturday, at the Easter Vigil.²³ Both in the old Roman as well as some Asian lectionaries there are two sets of OT text read on this evening. The first set of texts represents lessons read in the synagogue during Passover: [Exod. 12:14](#) and [15](#), the eschatological text of [Ezek. 37](#) and [Psalms 35](#). But then there are also three texts from a different setting, namely from the Jewish Day of Atonement that was celebrated in the autumn: the prophetic Book of Jonah, [Psalms 27](#) and [Genesis 1:1](#). This example clearly demonstrates that a conscious and deep theological reflection lay behind the taking over and the transformation of the reading of OT texts. The Book of Jonah was chosen for the Day of Atonement to exemplify the right attitude of repentance and affliction of oneself. When the reading of this book was transferred to Easter, this was caused by a shift in the understanding of the book itself. Jesus had referred to Jonah as a symbol of His own destiny ([Matt. 12:10–12](#)); read at Easter, the book now rather exemplified the Grace of God as it was perfectly demonstrated through the atoning death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Day of Atonement of the Old Testament had been fulfilled and completed through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, that was commemorated at Easter, and hence OT readings of the Day of Atonement had been transferred to Holy Saturday [p. 192](#) and the Easter Vigil. The OT was now read and used as a book that points towards and speaks about God's redemptive act through Jesus Christ.

These two examples concerning the use of the OT in the Early Church—the testimony collections for the preaching of the Gospel and the reading of OT lessons in the liturgy—illustrate how the *Tanak*—the Torah, the Prophets and the writings—remained the Bible of the Early Church, and how traditions and customs from the synagogue were taken over, but transformed and related to a new centre of salvation history and a new covenantal reality: Jesus Christ.

FROM TORAH-CENTRED TO CHRISTO-CENTRIC INTERPRETATION

In this brief survey of the use of OT in the synagogue and the Early Church, the differing understanding and interpretation of the OT has been indicated. The emphasis on the Torah in the reading of the OT in the synagogue is paralleled by the use of the concept of the Torah as hermeneutical key to the scripture. Likewise, God's redemptive act through Christ became the hermeneutical key in the Early Church. In concentrating on some OT texts and their interpretation in respectively synagogue and Church (rabbinic literature vs. NT), we shall have a closer look at the implications of this new hermeneutical key, and

²¹ Cf. mainly *E. Werner*, op. cit.

²² *Apostolic Constitution*, Book 8. Edition by e.g. F. X. Funk, *Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum*, 2 Vols, 1905.

²³ Cf. *E. Werner*, op. cit., pp.78–92.

this will then take us into a brief discussion concerning the relationship between the OT, the Torah and Christ.

The great prophet of the exile, whose message we have in ‘the book of Consolation’—[Isaiah 40–55](#), is comforting the people and proclaims in the name of the Lord that salvation is at hand. This he often does in metaphorical and allegorical language. In [44:3](#) the Lord promises ‘that I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground’, and in [55:1](#) the Prophet invites the people: ‘Ho, everyone who is thirsty, come to the waters’. In [58:11](#), we also meet the promise that the people shall be ‘like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters fail not’. In the *rabbinic tradition* this promise of living water is related to the Torah. A rabbinic commentary to the Book of Deuteronomy, called *Sifrei Deuteronomium*, explains it: ‘The words of the Torah is compared to water: as water means life for the world, so are also the words of the Torah life for the world ... And as water is given to the world, free of charge, so can also the words of the Torah be obtained free of charge, as said in [Isaiah 55:1](#)’.²⁴ However, when the [p. 193](#) rabbis in this manner spoke about the Torah, they did not only mean the written Law of the Pentateuch but also included the ‘Oral Torah’, the rabbinic legal decisions concerning ritual purity and a life according to the commandments (*halakhot*) that later were gathered in the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* already mentioned. This oral Torah, these *halakhot*, were understood to have been transmitted from Moses on Sinai in an oral manner down to New Testament times and further. Accordingly, Rabbi Meir, a famous rabbi of the second Century AD and other rabbis, could say that a man who occupies himself with the Torah and learns new *halakhot* every day, becomes ‘like a spring of water, whose waters fail not’.²⁵

The rabbinic interpretation of the mentioned passages in the Book of Isaiah is, however, not arbitrary allegorization. It is based on a theological tradition and reflection that goes back to the OT itself. The call of the prophet to the thirsty to ‘come to the waters’, and to the hungry to come and eat, is related to and dependent upon the invitation of Wisdom in [Proverbs 9](#) to those ‘thirsty and hungry’ to come to her to eat and drink ([Prov. 9:1–6](#); [Is. 55:1–3](#)). In the late OT period, wisdom was identified with Torah. This is particularly reflected in the apocryphal Book of Jesus Sirach (ch.1:26; 19:20; 21:11; 23:27; 24:23), but is already found in some of the Psalms ([19:8ff](#); [119:103ff](#)). Even in [Psalm 1](#), we find the same terminology as in the Isaiah passages, in the description of the man whose delight is in the Torah and who resembles ‘a tree planted by streams of waters’ ([Ps. 1:2f](#)). This same Torah-Wisdom-tradition pictured the Torah as pre-existent to the creation of the world, with the Torah as the creator-‘instrument’ (cf. [Ps. 104](#); [Prov. 8](#)). And this tradition forms an important background to the *logos*-concept in John’s Gospel, chapter [1](#), where Jesus is described as ‘the word’ that ‘was with God in the beginning’ through whom ‘all things were made’ and in whom ‘was life’ ([John 1:2f](#)). R. E. Brown comments on this part of the Johannine prologue: ‘Jesus is divine Wisdom, pre-existent, but now come among men to teach them life. Not the Torah, but Jesus Christ is the creator and the source of light and life’.

This development of an OT tradition is important to have in mind when we now return to a reference to the same Isaiah-passages in the preaching of Jesus as rendered in the same Gospel of John. Jesus also spoke about ‘living waters’ mentioned in the Isaiah texts. However, he relates the invitation to drink living water to his own person. In his talk [p. 194](#) with the Samaritan woman, Jesus said to her: ‘Whoever drinks of the water I will give

²⁴ Sif. Deut. 11, 22 48/84. Edition by H. S. Horowitz and L. Finkelstein, New York 1969 (1935–1939).

²⁵ P. Avot 6 1. Midr. Tehelim 1, 18/9a. Edition by S. Buber, Wilna 1899 translation by W. G. Braude, Yale Judaica Series, New Haven 1959.

him, will never thirst. The water I shall give him, will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' ([John 4:14](#)).

With similar reference to the Isaiah passages, Jesus also spoke to the people at the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, and proclaimed according to [John 7:37–39](#), 'If any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water"'. Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him should receive, for as yet the Spirit has not been given, because Jesus had not been glorified'. In this saying, Jesus presents himself as the source of living water, and the Gospel writer adds that the living water in the life of those who believe in Jesus, actually is the spirit of the resurrected and glorified Jesus Christ. It is not the Torah that is the living water and not the ones who fulfil the commandments and *halakhot* who become like a spring of water whose waters fail not. Jesus himself is the source of living water, and his spirit becomes in those who believe in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

In the different interpretations of these Isaiah passages, we see how Jesus takes the place that was given to the Torah in the Synagogue and in rabbinic Judaism. That Jesus Christ in this way places himself in the midst of the OT and in the midst of the life of the people can also be seen in the synoptic Gospels. In the old rabbinic writing, *Pirke Avot*, we read: 'When they sit together and are occupied with the Torah, the *Shekinah* (i.e. the presence of God) is among them'.²⁶ In a similar statement Jesus says to his disciples according to [Matthew 18:20](#): 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them'. These parallel sayings as well as our previous examples present us with the problem of the understanding of the Law in the Early Church in the broader context of their understanding and use of the OT.

CHRIST AND TORAH

After this survey it would be easy to conclude that there is an antithetical relationship between Jesus and the Torah. Indeed, both NT scholars and other Christian theologians have jumped to this conclusion, stressing that Jesus and the Early Church were marked by a negative attitude to the Torah, wilfully abrogating it. This view has also led to a rather eclectic use of the Old Testament. However, taking the **P. 195** breadth of New Testament material and its Jewish setting into consideration, we are convinced that a different view is more consistent with our sources: when Jesus in his own preaching and in the teaching of the Early Church takes the place of the Torah—he does so in the terms of *fulfilment in a new revelatory event*. In the following we shall expound this view and have a look at some of its implications.²⁷

It is in [Matthew 5:17–20](#) that Jesus himself states that he has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but that he has *come* to *fulfil* them. The two words 'come' (*elton*) and 'fulfil' (*pleerosai*) are used elsewhere in the Gospels to express consciousness of Jesus about his own mission and ministry, in particular his messianic fulfilment of OT promise.²⁸ When Jesus comes to *fulfil* the Torah, it is thus more than a confirmation by way of acting according to the Torah. Through his life, his ministry and his teaching, he brings the Torah, the revealed will of God, into a new stage of salvation history; he brings

²⁶ P. Avot 3, 7.

²⁷ In a forthcoming publication in another context, the author will give a more detailed treatment of the exegetical problems here involved, in a paper entitled 'The Messiah and the Torah in the New Testament'.

²⁸ [Mt. 10:34f](#); [20:28f](#); [26:54ff](#); [Mk. 14:49](#); [Luke 4:21](#); [24:44](#) e.a.

it with him into the age of messianic fulfilment, which also means the eschatological realization of the good Will of God.

In stating his fulfilment of the Torah, Jesus also speaks of the smallest letters and the dots of the Torah. He then follows contemporary rabbinic tradition, emphasizing in this way the continuing validity of the Torah for the sake of its implementation ([Mt. 5:18–20](#)). In dispute with Pharisees and in conversation with the rich young man, Jesus focuses upon the commandments of the Decalogue ([Mt. 15:4ff](#); [19:17ff](#)). Or in answer to questions from Pharisees, Jesus spells out the greatest commandments of the Law, stressing the love to God as expressed in the *Shema* and the love of the neighbour ([Mt. 22:34ff](#); cf. [Deut. 6:4f](#) and [Lev. 19:18](#)).²⁹

However, precisely as Jesus confirms the validity and authority of the Torah, he also enters into dispute with the Torah-teachers of his own age. Much material has been brought forward in recent years that shows considerable proximity between Jesus and the Pharisees in their attitudes to the Torah. But there is also a fundamental difference: Jesus objects to the rabbinic development of a normative oral Tradition, to an Oral Torah. This is illustrated by the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning Sabbath observance ([Mt. 12:1–15](#); Luke p. 196 [6:1–11](#)). The Sages had decided that chronic diseases do not ‘override’ the Sabbath. However, Jesus heals a man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath and thereby comes in conflict with the tradition of the elders. Jesus broke down their ‘Torah-hedge’ which prevented an act of loving kindness. In addition to this, Jesus claims for himself authority to decide what is good. Similarly, Jesus defends his disciples who have picked grain in the field on the Sabbath and acted against the Oral Tradition and indirectly even against a precept within the Torah-Written Torah.³⁰ Jesus does not abrogate the Sabbath observance in this instance, but refers to exceptional cases of Sabbath conduct in the life of David and in the regular Temple service of the priest, and then he claims for himself authority to decide what is according to the will of God: ‘For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath’. Over against the Oral Tradition Jesus restores the authority of the basic precepts of the Written Torah ([Mt. 23:23](#)) and claims authority for himself in the exposition of the Torah.

In order to get further perspective on the words of Jesus that he has come to fulfil the Torah, it is worth noting that this statement comes in the context of his proclamation that ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is near’ ([Mt. 4:17](#); [5:3](#), [10](#); [6:33](#)). When Jesus demands from His disciples a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, this righteousness is one linked to the Kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus thus claims to fulfil the Torah, this is an eschatological fulfilment which takes place as Jesus brings the Kingdom of Heaven near. Thus these three things belong together: Jesus, the Kingdom and the Torah.

The presence and the coming of the Kingdom through Jesus means the realization of the promises to the Patriarchs and the Prophets as well as of the will of God in the Torah. This Kingdom, which is brought near by Jesus, is the reality and realm of salvation: it is marked by God’s active redemption of men and by his presence and rule, and through Jesus, this Kingdom breaks its way through the world.³¹ Jesus therefore, now also transfers ‘a new righteousness to his disciples’ ([Mt. 5:20](#)). In the so-called ‘antithesis’ of [Mt. 5:21–48](#), we thus find a comprehensive collection of the material that further

²⁹ D. Flusser, *Jesus—in selbstzeugnissen und Bild-dokumenten*, Hamburg 1968; *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (Hebrew), Tel-Aviv 1979, in particular pp.226–234 ‘The Torah in the Sermon on the Mount’.

³⁰ Cf. M. Shabb VII, 2; [Exod. 34:21](#).

³¹ Cf. S. Aalen, ‘Reign’ and ‘House’ in the Kingdom of God in the Gospels, *New Test. studies* 8, 1962, p.215ff.

illustrates Jesus' attitude to the Torah and his own ethical teaching for those who 'enter the Kingdom'. As Jesus deals with the 5th and 6th commandments he restores their absolute validity and emphasizes their unlimited area of application (5:21-30). However, in connection with the OT precepts of p. 197 divorce, oath and retaliation (5:31-42), Jesus goes beyond the regulations of the Mosaic Torah. He emphasizes the unbreakable unity of husband and wife, stresses perfect truth in all speech and demands forgiving and unlimited love over against retaliating Justice (5:43-48). Jesus may therefore summarize his teaching on the new righteousness by saying: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect' (5:48).³²

At this point we must again bring into focus the Palestinian-Jewish background of Jesus and the NT. The definition of the Torah that we quoted above, emphasized that Torah must be understood in the context of the covenant. The rabbis used to stress that the redemption from Egypt preceded the giving of the Torah at Sinai: that they first accepted the Kingdom of God when they were redeemed from Egypt, and that they, thereafter, accepted his decrees at Sinai.³³ There seems to be a certain similarity in pattern between this rabbinic tradition and the Gospel material we have just presented, which also points to the development in salvation history: Jesus came and proclaimed that the Kingdom is at hand, that God's redeeming Grace and activity is eschatologically present in his own person and ministry in a new covenant. Just as there is continuity with respect to the redemptive act of God (the Gospel), between the Old and the New Covenant, so there is also continuity with regard to the Torah and the will of God (Law) for his people in the New Covenant. As Christ is the focal point in the coming of the Kingdom, he also becomes the focal point in fulfilling the Torah: the Torah must now be read, interpreted and applied in a 'New righteousness' personified, determined and taught by Christ.

PAUL'S USE OF THE TORAH

It is our conviction that *Paul* in his letters follows the same basic pattern in his understanding of the Torah. However, the context and the perspective of Paul's ministry is different. The Pharisee from Tarsus becomes the apostle to the Gentiles in his encounter with the risen Lord. This encounter and Paul's discovery of the new covenant in Christ transform his reading of the Old Testament and the Torah. It has often been stated that Jesus replaces the Torah at the centre of Paul's life when he meets the resurrected Christ on the Damascus Road.³⁴ But P. 198 also in Paul's case, this replacement and the new approach to the Torah should not be understood in terms of a negative abrogation, but rather in the context of *fulfilment* in the reality of the *New Covenant*. This we shall see as we first turn to some of Paul's difficult, negative statements of the Torah, and let them help us to gain a proper understanding of the fulfilment.

As a rabbinic trainee Paul knew that the Torah embodied the covenant between God and Israel and was the *proprium* of Israel over against the nations. In view of the Christ-event and the new covenantal unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, Paul now has to conclude that the Torah has been superceded and replaced by Christ as the embodiment of the covenant. In [Ephesians 2](#), Paul speaks of Christ as our peace, who has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles and abolished 'the Law with its commandments' ([Ephes. 2:14f](#)). Now salvation has come in Christ for both Jews and

³² Cf. also Jerem. [31:33](#).

³³ Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Bachodesh 6.

³⁴ Cf. e.g. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, London 1970-1973, p.149ff.

Gentiles. However, this does not imply that the Torah has been abrogated in terms of genuine revelation of the holy will of God. In the same chapter of [Ephes. 2](#), Paul in various ways expresses the continuity between the old and the new covenant: in Christ, the Gentiles who were excluded from citizenship in Israel, have now become fellow-citizens with the people of God, built on the foundations of the apostles and the prophets—a holy temple, a dwelling in which God lives by His spirit. Paul later also asks the Ephesians not to live as the Gentiles, as they have been created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness ([4:17, 24](#)). Christ is now the embodiment of the covenant and the Torah has been removed as a dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, but remains a genuine revelation of the holy will of God.

However, as Paul discovers that salvation is only in Christ, he has also to draw new conclusions concerning the relationship between the Torah and his own people Israel. Paul was probably acquainted with the view that R. Tanchuma later expressed: ‘The word of the Lord went forth in two aspects, slaying the heathens who would not accept it, but giving life to Israel who accepted the Torah’ (Exod. Rabba 5:9).³⁵ But now Paul has seen that it is only in Christ that God gives salvation and life, and consequently he concludes that it is futile also for the Jews to try to achieve righteousness and salvation through the Torah and apart from Christ ([Rom. 9:30ff; 10:1–4](#)). Thus his understanding of life and death through the Torah is also transformed: the discovery that salvation is only through Christ, leads Paul to discover anew the [p. 199](#) absolute demand of God and his absolute wrath ([Rom. 1:32; 2:5f; 2:16; Gal. 3:10](#)) and he must conclude that the Holy will of God in the Torah becomes an instrument of death—even for the Jews—when they are apart from Christ. It is on this background that Paul develops his new understanding of the Torah in the history of Israel as ‘a custodian unto Christ’ ([Gal. 3:23f](#)), and of the rather negative function of the Torah as revealing and condemning sin ([Rom. 7:7–25](#)).

But Paul has more to say about the Torah. When he speaks of its negative function in revealing and condemning sin, he repeatedly stresses that it is good, holy and spiritual ([7:12, 14](#); cf. [7:25](#)). It is then worth noting that when Paul reaches the climax in [Rom. 8:1](#), proclaiming that ‘there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’, he continues immediately by mentioning the Law of the Spirit of life and emphasizes that the requirements (the righteous requirements) of the Law are now fulfilled in those who live according to the Spirit ([8:2, 4](#)). The Torah has not been abrogated, on the contrary, when man in Christ is set free from the condemnation of the Torah, he is also set free to a new life according to the Spirit whereby the righteous requirements of the Torah may be fulfilled.

In [Rom. 8](#), as in many other places, Paul mentions together the Torah and the Spirit. This is part of the terminology describing the reality of the new covenant.³⁶ On this point, Paul is dependent upon the prophetic tradition that goes back to Ezekiel and Jeremiah ([Jer. 31:31–34; Ez. 36:26–28](#)). These prophets describe a new covenant which will differ from the Sinai covenant, and they tell that God will give the people a new heart and pour out his spirit so that they will follow His decrees and Laws. It is on this line that Paul speaks about fulfilling the requirements of the Torah. He also writes to the Romans in the same context that ‘we serve not under the old written code, but in the new life in the Spirit’ ([Rom. 7:6](#) cf. [2 Cor. 3:3f](#)). When Paul in this way emphasizes the newness of the life in Christ according to the Spirit over against the Torah from Sinai, we also understand that he gives considerable place to the life and the example of Christ in his ethical teaching.

³⁵ Cf. [Sir. 45:5](#); Ps. Sal. [14:1ff](#).

³⁶ Cf. [Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 1:22; 3:3ff; Ephes. 1:13; 4:30](#).

However, this should again not be regarded as an abrogation of the Torah as the good will of God, but rather be seen in the context of its fulfilment in the new stage of salvation history.

It may be that Paul's statements concerning the Torah and the Spirit reflect the fact that the Spirit fell upon the disciples on Pentecost Day, when the Sinai covenant and the giving of the Torah was celebrated in [p. 200](#) the temple and the synagogues.³⁷ In the Early Church this fact did not cause any disregard for the Torah, but was regarded in fulfilment categories. Consequently, the early lectionaries prescribe the reading of [Exodus 19–20](#) for Pentecost—the festival of the Spirit and the Church.³⁸ In this perspective, several of Paul's positive statements concerning the Torah and his practical references to it take on additional dynamic meaning ([Rom. 3:31](#); [7:2, 14](#); [13:8](#); [Gal. 5:14](#); [6:1ff, 6–16](#)).

As Paul thus deals with the question of Christ and the Torah, he also reveals his dynamic and comprehensive use of the Old Testament. For him the Old Testament is more than a collection or a list of messianic testimonies, or a typological book picturing Christ and a new morality. For Paul, the OT is a book of salvation history that leads towards Christ and continues to unfold him. And it is a book containing the holy Law of God which drives men towards Christ so that God in him may redeem them from the curse of the Law and restore them to new life in the Spirit with the fulfilment of his good will.

CONCLUSION

After this survey of some material from the Early Synagogue and the Early Church and this case-study concerning Christ and the Torah in the New Testament, we shall now summarize by way of drawing some conclusions for the understanding and the use of the OT in the Church today.

The NT and Early Church material that we have here presented, seem in our contemporary situation to call for a proper balance between two principles for our use of the OT: the normativity of Scripture in its entirety and the Christo-centric interpretation of scripture.

Our examples from the apostolic preaching and the reading of the OT in the Early Church underlines how the salvation history and the Word of God in the OT now only can be read and fully understood in light of the Christ-event. Even more clearly the relationship between Christ and the Torah shows how the OT as a revelatory word may be misused if it is read apart from the Christ-event. Christ put himself in the midst of the Hebrew Scriptures and thereby underlined their Christo-centric use and interpretation.

However, for the sake of the Church today, we must also *reverse* the [p. 201](#) Christo-centric approach to the OT and emphasize that Jesus Christ and the NT cannot be properly understood apart from the OT, and then the OT in its entirety. Too often a Christo-centric approach leads to a rather eclectic use of the OT which in the end may lead to faith in a Jesus from Nazareth which is not the Messiah of the Bible. The OT was the Holy Scripture for Jesus, for whom it contained the Word of God and recorded the work of God, and it was on the line of this work and this word that Jesus understood his ministry. Today our need is particularly to be able to see Jesus and read the New Testament in the light of the total witness of the OT. It is for this reason we emphasize a proper balance between the

³⁷ Cf. M. Weinfeld, Pentecost as Festival of the Giving of the Law, Immanuel 7, 1978, 7–18.

³⁸ Cf. g. Kraetschmar, Himmelfahrt und Pfingsten, ZKG 66, 1954, 209–253. J. Goudoever, Biblical Calendars, Leiden 1959.

two principles: the normativity of Scripture in its entirety and the Christo-centric approach to the Old Testament.

In a similar way there is today a need for a proper balance in the approach to the Old Testament as both salvation history and the spoken Word of God. Too often the OT is just regarded as history—even as salvation history—but then not very relevant since it belongs to the past. But this history becomes relevant as one listens to the Word of God spoken to Israel and mankind in and through history, and when one is made part of this history through the word. For this reason we also chose to deal at some length with the question of Christ and Torah—both ‘words from God’ par excellence, but words which belong to the history of the people of God’s Kingdom as it breaks its way through the world.

We started off with a note concerning the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Certainly, the importance of the OT for the life of the Church also points to the importance of the encounter with the synagogue in this respect. We have had opportunity to see how the Early Church was dependent upon the synagogue and upon rabbinic traditions as they developed their new understanding of the OT and how they transformed the lectionary of the Synagogue in their own reading of the OT. In today’s encounter with the synagogue we are once more made aware of these roots, and this encounter may help us to let the OT in its breadth and its dynamic content throw light on Christ and the New Testament and bring richness to the life of the Church. But then the Church may also talk meaningfully with the synagogue and the Jewish People about Christ and the Torah, giving witness to the Word that came into the world with life and light.

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Imaginary Faith

Thomas Müntzer

*Translation and Introduction by James M. Stayer (abridged) Reprinted
with permission from The Mennonite Quarterly Review Vol. 55 1981
pp.99–130.*

Imaginary Faith (*von dem getichten glauben*) was written in 1524.

Today when theologies of revolution are demanding greater attention from Christians, the following translation by James Stayer of Thomas Müntzer’s protest will be found to be surprisingly relevant to our times, especially after the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s birth with the renewal emphasis on the great Reformer’s stand on sola fide. Müntzer ought not to be read uncritically yet Stayer’s introduction and translation reveal that the issues at the time of the Reformation are still ours and so can be studied with profit. Müntzer was both a theologian and a revolutionary. An explanation is needed about the system of footnotes in this article. There are two kinds of footnotes, one given by Stayer in numbers (1, 2, 3 etc.) and another by Müntzer himself in alphabets (aa, bb, cc, etc.). The alphabets are shown in the text, as in the German original, both at the beginning and at the end of the