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Reorienting "Settled Identities": Rethinking a Course on Jewish-Christian Relations

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Over the course of the last decade, we have been co-teaching courses for students of our two seminaries, Union Theological Seminary (UTS) and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS), which lie across Broadway from one another on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Most recently, we taught "Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations" in spring 2020 amidst the initial irruption of COVID-19 that brought devastating illness and death, upended social interactions, and disrupted in-person learning. The planning sessions that we had found so personally enriching now took place via Zoom rather than over lunch or a glass of wine at day's end. And yet "remote" though we were by mid-March 2020, we have continued to ponder how best to approach the course's complex topics that are typically layered with emotional freight.

Now, from the vantage point of two years' distance, we reflect on our experience in the hopes that our analysis might offer greater clarity for those who might envision teaching such a course. In particular, we take note of how more sustained attentiveness to a conceptual scaffolding might have clarified the complex developments of the first centuries CE so decisive in establishing a pattern that has endured for nearly two millennia of relations between Jews and Christians and that is only in the contemporary period under reassessment.

Thus, in this essay, we are both describing salient aspects of our course and thinking "out loud" how we might revise it. Part I of our reflection situates the recent iteration of our course in context as we planned and taught it. After offering a brief overview of the course, we turn in Part II to a focus on the early class sessions in which we were particularly mindful of establishing critical foundational ideas. In Part III we step back to reassesses those first sessions in light of the literature on "threshold concepts" as well as the ever-developing scholarship on the interconnections in the evolving processes by which "Judaism" and "Christianity" emerged. A brief conclusion identifies other areas that would also benefit from more sustained attention to an explicit conceptual framework.

I. Overview: Confronting History in the Presence of the Other

We first taught "Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations" January-May 2018 in the wake of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11, 2017. By the time we began to redesign the course for spring 2020, the climate in our nation had grown even more toxic, with racial division and antisemitism intensifying amidst growing partisanship, cynicism, disinformation, and mistrust. The attack in October 2018 on the three congregations housed in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and six months later on the Chabad of Poway, California, heightened our sense of responsibility to educate future religious leaders to understand and to counter antisemitism and its related bigotry, racism. These events sharpened our conviction that the course constituted a case study in how cultural and religious differences can give rise to disparagement of the other, and how power imbalances and societal crises often fuel binary oppositional identity, often with tragic consequences. At the same time, we believe that learning about the gradual but real healing in Jewish-Christian relations over the past sixty years has considerable potential to inspire course participants to join in this transformative work as religious professionals.

We organized our course chronologically, probing the historical, socio-cultural, and theological forces that have shaped relations between our two traditions since the first century CE.[1] Typically, we discussed primary texts in each class session, virtually always through the lenses of selected secondary literature. In studying early antiquity, we focused on the Gospel of Matthew and then on primary texts from early church and proto-rabbinic writings. In the medieval period we used Christian art and the Crusader *Chronicles* as primary "texts."[2] In looking at important developments in the sixteenth century, we juxtaposed texts by Luther ("On the Jews and their Lies," 1543) with an analysis of the Roman Ghetto (1555-1870).[3] In surveying the Enlightenment, we focused on the emergence of racial antisemitism, a prelude to our study of the Shoah.[4] We arranged for a curated tour of an

[1] Our class met for three hours each week and was scheduled for twelve sessions overall. Because of the pandemic we ultimately had only ten sessions. We limited enrollment to fifteen students from each school so as to keep parity of traditions. All readings and other resources (e.g., websites and videos) were posted to our learning management platform, Moodle.

[2] See Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014). The illustrations of her book are available at https://static.macmillan.com/static/holt/dark-mirror/chapter3.html.

[3] See James Carroll, "The Roman Ghetto," in *Constantine's Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 363-384. In both iterations of the session on Luther, we have assigned excerpts from Heidi Neumark's poignant memoir, *Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory, and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015). She wrestles with her relatively recent discovery of previously unknown Jewish family in Germany, most of whom lost their lives in the concentration camps, and how these discoveries affected her vocation as a Lutheran pastor. Both times we have taught the course, Pastor Neumark has also spoken to our class.

[4] For analysis of the Enlightenment's linkage of racism and antisemitism, see J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 79-121. For another linkage, see Beverly Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

outstanding exhibit, "Auschwitz: Not Long Ago. Not Far Away" at the Museum of Jewish Heritage for a class session in late March.[5]

In the final sessions, we pondered whether Jews saw their experience in the United States as "exceptional," studied the emergence of Zionism and the founding of Israel in conversation with a critique of Christian liberation theology, examined the significance of Vatican II for ecumenical and interreligious relations, offered an overview of scholarship on Jewish-Christian relations, and ended with discussion of the document "A Time for Recommitment: The Twelve Points of Berlin" from the International Council of Christians and Jews (2009).[6]

In terms of course participants, our experience in co-teaching has enabled us to develop some assumptions about what to anticipate when students from our two seminaries learn together. Obviously, each course forms its own particular culture, but the following generalizations helped to shape the pedagogical strategies we used. In our experience, the JTS students are far more conversant with the history of relations with Christianity than their counterparts at Union, while having little familiarity with Christian beliefs and practices. Some are understandably wary about studying with Christians and mystified by the array of denominations. UTS students who have grown up in a church (albeit, a smaller proportion of the student body than a decade ago) generally assume they know something about Judaism because they have acquaintance with the Old Testament and know that Jesus was Jewish; typically, what they know is over-simplified, if not an outright distortion. International students often have never met a Jew. Most UTS students lack awareness of Christianity's anti-Jewish teachings, though with many students of color and the school's activist reputation, they are keenly aware of racism and engaged in anti-racist work; Christianity's sinful oppression of the "Other" is not a new revelation.

We experienced several memorable sessions at the midpoint of the 2018 course in which the different knowledge level regarding Christian anti-Jewish teachings made for some tense sessions. Having recently confronted some of the anti-Jewish writings of early Christian writers and a couple of weeks later the Crusader Chronicles, the discussion of Martin Luther's "On the Jews and their Lies" became quite tense. A few JTS students began to express barely controlled anger; for the most part, UTS students, cognizant that this anger had been building for weeks, were paralyzed with guilt. They simply had no idea of how deep and wide Christianity's anti-Jewish teaching were—and confronting it in the presence of Jews was all the more disturbing. We spent a fair amount of time talking with students outside of class. Yet as we were in the final third of the course, the tension largely dissipated—primarily because students had simultaneously begun working closely together on projects and presentations. Working collaboratively, they had begun to experience the depth of the other's humanity and to discover how much more complex both Judaism and Christianity were at the level of lived religion.

[5] The Museum of Jewish Heritage closed for the pandemic just days before our scheduled visit.
[6] https://www.iccj.org/fileadmin/ICCJ/pdf-Dateien/A_Time_for_Recommitment_engl.pdf.

Thus, when we began the 2020 iteration of the course, we decided to put the particular challenges of the course "up front." After the round of introductions to one another, we posed the question: "When you think of our world, what manifestations of intolerance and bigotry stand out to you? What keeps you up at night?" The reserve associated with an initial meeting of a course immediately gave way to animated discussion. Everyone had something to contribute to this discussion. We also drew upon this exercise to speak personally about why we find this a painful course to teach—and why we are nonetheless so committed to teaching it. In large part, we said, the difficulty arises because of the nature of the course material in which a tradition to which half the class belonged had been unable to differentiate without denigrating the tradition to which the other half of the class belonged. The course involved both confronting the tragic consequences of this denigration and revealing the reconciling endeavors of the past seventy years.

Moreover, the fragmentation and polarization of our time exacerbated the challenge to recognize our common humanity. As Beverly Mitchell writes in her analysis of shared characteristics of enslavement and the Holocaust:

> The notion of a common humanity runs counter to the prevailing trend in contemporary theology in which it is fashionable for various constituencies of the theological community to emphasize diversity and to particularize the theological concerns that arise out of a specific set of economic, social, and political realities. This focus on particularity has been a counter-response to long-standing tendencies in theological reflection to posit a form of universalism that obscured diversity and masked imperialistic pretensions toward the disinherited. The attempt to avoid co-optation from the dominant culture is an important act of resistance.[7]

However, Mitchell continues, in an era in which we witness efforts by conflicting parties to vilify one another, "It is imperative that we affirm out common humanity often, even as we celebrate our respective differences…. The urgency that accompanies this appeal to affirm a common humanity arises out of a recognition that the first step toward the kind of atrocities perpetrated against hapless groups, historically, is invariably made when we forget the commonalities that bind us together as members of one human family."[8]

Our experience in 2018 also confirmed our commitment to prioritizing highly interactive pedagogies. We believe that the extensive planning we do in shaping a syllabus, identifying the most appropriate resources, and designing pedagogies that engage participants in active learning largely obviates the need for lecturing at length. One or both of us may frame a topic, but typically we give priority to discussion. This means that we send out three or four questions that will be the focus of the initial part of the next class about four days prior to that class. We expect participants not only to read the assigned texts carefully, but also to be prepared to

[7] Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 2.
[8] Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps*, 2.

discuss them with their classmates. In a course such as ours that deals with troubling texts, polemical literature, and violence, we recognize and proactively name the challenge and, often, discomfort. We have, however, learned that even discomfiting discussion can contribute powerfully to learning. In their final reflection papers in 2020, two students wrote about their experience:

- Through this academic exercise, I think we all learned to grapple with our own texts in the presence of the other and to learn about the other's texts in their own context. I see the small group discussions and close readings of these texts to have been one of the most meaningful experiences in this class and most formative for my understanding of interreligious cooperation.
- I did find, however, that going through this process, despite the discomfort (or perhaps due to it), was critical for initiating repair of this historically fraught relationship. I noticed how many of the Christians in the class squirmed almost as much as I did when these painful texts were discussed. The Jewish pain was acknowledged in a very open way without defensiveness or blame-shifting. The first step toward repairing a bitter relationship is to get it all out there in an open and honest way, and I felt that the class format and the bravery of many of the students allowed this to happen.

Our requirements included a research paper on a primary text (due about a month into the term), and a final reflection paper to be shared prior to our last class session via posting on our Moodle site.[9] Two other requirements involved collaborative projects to be presented in class; groups had to include students from both schools. The first project was to select a contemporary manifestation of one of the themes addressed by our course (e.g., scapegoating, demonizing, white supremacy or white nationalism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, oppositional identity, and racism), connect it with similar historical manifestations, and explicate its current significance. The second, more extensive project was to plan and prepare a presentation of twenty minutes, choosing from five options for topics.

II. Laying Foundations in the Early Sessions

In 2020 our first three class sessions covered the first four centuries CE, with much greater emphasis on the first and third centuries because we wanted to correct what we see as anachronisms that have distorted history. The assumption that Jesus' disciples consolidated his teachings into "Christianity" in the immediate wake of his resurrection and thus established the Christian religion has long exerted a powerful hold on the Christian imagination. In this scenario, Jesus is the "founder"

[9] We specified that the final essay synthesize "how the experience of studying together in this course has impacted your understanding of your own tradition and your understanding and appreciation for the other. Please include discussion of course readings." We also included various prompts that they could use.

of Christianity; alternatively, it is Paul, the "convert" from Judaism, who establishes the Christian religion. Jews, too, typically hold similar perspectives on the origin of Christianity, seeing it as born out Judaism but rapidly developing into its opponent—and often, as an idolatrous religion. Thus, in conventional thinking, Christianity and Judaism are understood as religions in opposition from the beginning and conflict was—and remains—inevitable.

Biblical scholarship reveals a host of problems with these assumptions. First, they grossly oversimplify the complex and lengthy evolving process by which both Christianity and Judaism emerged in late antiquity in both conversation and contestation with one another. Second, these assumptions rest on a reductionistic or essentialist understanding of Judaism and Christianity that obscures their heterogeneity. Third, they disregard the meaning and significance of Jesus and the first generations of disciples as Jews. Fourth, they isolate religious arguments from their socio-historical contexts, and, finally, they fail to account for the impact of literate Gentile followers of Jesus schooled in the Graeco-Roman rhetorical mode who had little or no familiarity with Judaism in their arguments for a Christian identity divorced from Judaism.

Our challenge was to open up new ways of thinking revealing that neither tradition appeared fully formed as a "religion," an anachronism when applied to traditions of antiquity. To the contrary, each emerged from biblical Israel and evolved in relation to various groups of Torah-followers and Jesus-followers whose conversations, common and variant practices and rituals, uses of texts, and arguments took place over varying times and places with different levels of intensity. In short, in the first century CE neither Judaism nor Christianity existed fully formed. Nor did religion as a distinct category.[10]

In order to break open the conventional understanding of Christianity arising out of Judaism early in the first century CE, we introduced alternative terminology. Rather than impose a primarily religious meaning on the term *Yehudim (Judeans)* or its Greek counterpart *Ioudaioi*, we recommended that participants think of *Yehudim/Ioudaioi* an ethnic group comparable to other ethnic groups, with distinctive laws, traditions, customs, and gods. Only in predominantly "Christian" writings from early in the third century did the Greek term for "Judaism" (*Ioudaismos*) arise; contemporary scholars debate whether the related term, which makes a frequent appearance in the New Testament, *Ioudaioi*, should be translated as "Jews" or "Judeans."[11] Most argue for translating the term as "Jews," arguing that this translation denotes continuity with the nexus of culture, practice, and beliefs that have generally characterized Jews over time.

We raised the question of what terminology most accurately designates the early followers of Jesus? Most Christians simply think of the Twelve (e.g., Peter,

[10] See Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 73: "Religion as we understand it did not exist in the ancient world, and the religious dimensions of human experience had a very different status."

[11] Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (2007): 482–88.

James, and John) as Christians, as were Mary of Magdala, Paul and other early church leaders. The term *Christianismos* (Christianity), however, does not appear in the New Testament. *Christianos,* which appears three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:25; 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16), has typically been translated as "Christians," but this is anachronistic. There was as yet no bifurcation of Jews and Christians. We suggested as alternatives: "Christ Followers," or "Followers of the Way" or "Messianists" or the "Jesus Movement."

So, if in the first century CE *Christianoi* does not mean "Christians" in the sense we mean it today, when did the term take on a meaning of belonging to a distinct religious tradition? In short, when does Christianity—*Christianismos*—begin? Having raised that question, we directed them to Paula Fredriksen's important essay, "The Birth of Christianity and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism" in preparation for the second session in which we would also discuss the Gospel of Matthew in its Jewish context.[12]

We assigned this essay because it situates the Jesus Movement within the wider Jewish culture. With enviable economy of expression, Fredriksen explained that the "heated polemic against different types of Jews" in the Gospels and letters of Paul "contain … exactly the measure of their Jewishness. But this polemic came to be read, understood, and used as a blanket condemnation of Judaism itself."[13] She locates the beginnings of Christian anti-Judaism among second-century Gentile intellectuals who had neither connection to the synagogue nor to Jewish interpretive traditions and practices. Their writings constituted a departure from the *intra*-Jewish polemics of the New Testament, and their oppositional stance hardened in the post-Constantinian world. Perhaps threatened by the flourishing of synagogues in the Diaspora, fourth-century Christianity began to be "more strident, more comprehensive, more furious." Anti-Judaism thus permeated "all known genres of surviving Christian literature, including systematic theologies, biblical commentaries, martyr stories, church histories, antiheretical tracts, preaching handbooks, and sermons."[14] Nevertheless, in the realm of ordinary life, Jews and Christians intermingled well into the early Middle Ages.

With the Fredriksen essay establishing some important concepts for the first weeks of the course, we turned then to a prime exemplar of first-century literature

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[12] Paula Fredriksen, "The Birth of Christianity and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism," in *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust*, ed. Paula Fredriksen and Adele Reinhartz (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 8-30. Frederiksen concludes that Christianity is "twice-born, once in the mid-second century, and again after Constantine, in the fourth. And in that second birth especially, orthodox Christian anti-Judaism increased in range and in intensity" (30). See also Anders Runesson, "Inventing Christian Identity: Paul, Ignatius, and Theodosius I," in *Exploring Christian Identity*, ed. Bengt Holmberg (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 59-92. He writes, "On February 28, 380 C.E. Christianity, as it would develop in Medieval Europe, was born…. But Theodosius's edict of that year, issued independently of church authorities, that Nicene Christianity was to be the religion of the empire to the exclusion of all other forms of 'religion,' including other forms of Christianity, was indeed a crucial step in the development of Christian social and political identity" (86). This ruling, however, was not enforced until 391 when Theodosius prohibited all other temples, cults, and sacrifices.

[13] Fredriksen, 28.

[14] Fredriksen, "The Birth of Christianity," 29.

manifesting intra-Jewish polemic: the Gospel of Matthew (dated ca. 85)—a polemic more conventionally read as a Christian one. We acknowledged that for some in the course, particularly the JTS students, reading Matthew would be an initial encounter with literature later included in the Christian canon, and thus appreciated that they might have misgivings. UTS students varied in their depth of understanding of Matthew, depending in large measure on how much course work in Bible they had completed.

After eliciting initial responses to their reading of Matthew as a Jewish text, we took a more analytic turn, focusing on 23:1-36, Jesus' diatribe against the Pharisees in which he castigates them as hypocrites (seven times), blind men (three times), whitewashed tombs, snakes, and brood of vipers. We chose to focus on this passage for three reasons. First, Matthew's gospel has more references to Pharisees than other New Testament texts; to inquire into possible reasons for his pejorative portrait of the Pharisees provides a deeper dive into the issues shaping his gospel. Second, in spite of the copious references arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the Pharisees in recent years, the attribution of "hypocrite" to Pharisees is a stock item in the homiletic arsenal of Christian preachers—and thus needed to be countered. Third, homing in on the Pharisees would enable our students to gain familiarity with other significant contextual matters.

We drew upon an intriguing argument of Anders Runesson as a complement to Fredriksen's essay.[15] Runesson, who dates Matthew to the mid-80s CE in an urban area of the Galilee, first underlines the complexity of the term "synagogue," lest interpreters today conflate the contemporary synagogue with its predecessor in antiquity. In ancient texts, some seventeen Greek terms, five Hebrew terms, and three Latin terms refer to what is translated in English as "synagogue." Most common are three Greek nouns: *proseuche, synagoge*, and *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia*, however, is more often translated as "church."[16] The distinction he made between two types of synagogues is fundamental to his argument about the Mattheans in relation to the Pharisaic Movement. The public synagogue was a village assembly open to all for deliberating community issues, including the reading and discussion of Torah on *Shabbat*. In contrast, association synagogues were sites for voluntary groupings (e.g., Pharisees, the Qumran community, Sadducees) for their members to interpret Jewish life according to their own understandings; we might think of these voluntary associations as roughly analogous to denominations. Thus, there were, among others, Pharisaic association synagogues.

Runesson proposes that the Mattheans were "urban-based Pharisees who became convinced, most likely after the death and resurrection of Jesus had been

[15] Anders Runesson, "Behind the Gospel of Matthew: Radical Pharisees in Post-War Galilee," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37/6 (December 2019): 460-471. For a more detailed version, A. Runesson, "Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations: Matthean Community History as Pharisaic Intragroup Conflict," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127/1 (2008): 95-132.

[16] Runesson, "Behind the Gospel of Matthew," 464, contends that to translate *ekklesia* as church "misleads us to interpret the texts anachronistically as something removed from a Jewish context" and thus should be avoided when used in the context of the first century. We did not dwell on this important clarification, given all else we attempted to achieve in the second meeting of our class.

proclaimed to them by missionaries, that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's Messiah, confirming their Pharisaic belief in the resurrection of the dead as well as their hope for a restored Israel."[17] They had, he hypothesizes, originally formed a minority sub-group within a Pharisaic association in which there was attraction to Jesus's teaching among some members.[18] Yet the Mattheans became disillusioned in the 80s, separated themselves—perhaps because they saw the Pharisees as lacking faith in the messianic mission of Jesus—, and thus sought to delegitimize the Pharisees as neglecting the most vital aspects of Torah.[19]

Runesson convincingly shows that the Mattheans shared a basic worldview with other Jews: "It is obvious from the text that Jesus and the disciples share the same basic point of departure in Torah and its interpretation as other Jewish groups and that the critique against the Pharisees, the very force of the arguments used by the Matthean Jesus, depends on this shared foundation."[20] Similar to Fredriksen's argument, cited above, that the diatribe against different groups of Jews is "exactly the measure of their Jewishness," Runesson's essay provides a clear exegetical counterpoint to the frequency with which Christians generalize from the criticism of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 to criticism of Judaism as a whole.

In retrospect, we expected a lot of our students for that second session. The amount of reading was appropriate but the conceptual richness of the two articles, combined with the Gospel of Matthew, obscured the significance of what we were attempting to do: reorient interpretation of Matthew in such a way that his gospel is understood in its Jewish matrix. Nevertheless, we learned that this session made its mark in various ways, as these student comments reveal the mixed responses we received the next week:

- Paula Fredriksen launched us right into the context for the reading of the Gospel of Matthew, and I could not help feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable. Right away, I could see why anyone reading the first century text without the context of Second Temple Judaism would fall into the trap of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic interpretations.
- The Book of Matthew was one of our first assigned readings; I had never encountered this text before, but was encouraged to both read it critically and contextually. I had the opportunity to simultaneously encounter my own discomfort with the texts while also watching my Christian colleagues grapple with this text's historical and cultural significance, and while we were all expected to be respectful, at no point were we asked to coddle one another with what may come up; rather, our differing facility and experience with this book was seen and embraced as an asset for one another's religious growth.

[17] Runesson, "Rethinking Early Jewish-Christian Relations," 125.
[18] See Acts: 15:5, 23:6, and John 3:1 as examples of Pharisees attracted to Jesus.
[19] See also Anthony J. Saldarini, "Delegitimation of Leaders in Matthew 23," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54/4 (1992): 659-680.
[20] Runesson, "Behind the Gospel of Matthew," 467.

- It was even more challenging to cordially discuss some of the major themes of the writings with the group of people whose historical beliefs and actions were being reflected. *There were many accounts of brutal Christian persecution of Jews, but what was most disturbing was the insidious characterization of the Jews in Christian scripture. Indeed, the Gospels themselves contributed enormously to divisiveness, establishing a duality whereby Jews were the prototypical "other." These ideas inevitably developed and evolved into dark associations with Jews to all that is evil in the world* (emphasis added).
- Those first weeks actually gave me hope that Christianity could be redeemed. Christian anti-Judaism wasn't inevitable; it was the product of intense political and theological upheaval and then centuries of exegesis on that early conflict.

This last insight offers a link from Matthew's gospel to one of the texts we studied in the third session, the "Homily on the Passover" (ca. 160-170) of Melito, bishop of Sardis (d. 190). Melito's homily is both a literary gem and a dreadful denunciation. His accusation that in crucifying Jesus Jews have killed God illustrates how the Matthean intra-Jewish polemic was transformed into one between Gentile proto-Christians and Jews.[21] His sermon also demonstrates a key literary device in the Christian hermeneutical arsenal, typology, a poetic means of asserting superiority to the Jewish tradition.

In the same class session, we studied two Jewish texts from roughly the same period as Melito's homily, *Pirkei Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers") and the "Oven of *Achnai*." The former, one of the 63 tractates of the *Mishnah* ("Teaching," compiled ca. 200 CE), consists of sayings attributed to the sages; as a subject for study on Shabbat afternoons in the spring and summer, it is an important text for many Jews. A talmudic story known as the "Oven of *Achnai*," uses a debate among rabbis over whether or not a new kind of oven could become susceptible to ritual impurity to illustrate differing modes of Torah jurisprudence and to determine how to properly apply legal opinions from Torah to different realities in the community's lived experience. The outcome of the debate teaches that interpreting Torah does not rely on miracles (*pace* Rabbi Eliezer) but rather on the work of human reasoning because the "Torah is not in heaven" (*pace* Rabbi Joshua), based on Deuteronomy 30:12-14:

> It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe

[21] We situated this homily in its sociohistorical context, e.g., Mary C. Boys, *Redeeming our Sacred Story* (New York: Paulist, 2013), 76-91.

it."

III. A Retrospective: Developing a More Adequate Conceptual Framework

Looking back, we are clearer that our aim in the first session was to set the tone for the course and in the second session to establish an important challenge to the assumption that Jews and Christians formed separate and conflicting religions in the first century CE. We see now that we could have been clearer, a task that would have been facilitated by drawing upon what educational literature terms "threshold concepts," an idea developed by Ray Land and Jan H.F. Meyer about twenty years ago. Threshold concepts have since been incorporated into a range of disciplines, including literacy information, history, social science, engineering, medicine, and to a far more limited extent, the study of religion. A threshold concept, according to Land and Meyer, is "akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learning cannot progress."[22]

In the realm of biblical studies, John van Maaren identifies five threshold concepts.[23] The first and most fundamental, he asserts, functions as a threshold concept for the discipline of biblical studies itself: *the biblical world is a foreign country*. Entrance into the biblical realm involves developing modes of thought that encompass imaginative recreation of the past, link this reconstructed history to interpretation of texts, and develop empathy for historical characters. Other threshold concepts follow. *Our understanding of the Bible is constructed*, that is, readers weigh evidence, assumptions, patterns and agenda; they reconstruct history in conversation with textual interpretation. Moreover, *everything in biblical studies is an argument* because the texts are artifacts created by real people in real situations. The ideology, interests, and worldview of the authors, redactors, and transmitters shape features of the text (genre, language, structure, rhetoric, etc.). Further, *biblical study in academic settings is relevant*; it provides new ways of inquiry and pursuit of dispassionate evidence-based arguments as a tool in making meaning. Finally, *to regard biblical texts as authoritative* leads to inquiry about ways communities of practice transmitted, selected, and edited texts as a means of instructing their members on how to live in ways faithful to their tradition.

What makes threshold concepts distinctive is their constellation of characteristics. Threshold concepts are transformative insofar as they involve conceptual change; they also integrate concepts that may previously have appeared unrelated. Moreover, and most important for us, they are "troublesome" because they involve

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[22] Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land, "Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge," in *Improving Student Learning Theory and Practice Ten Years On,* ed. C. Rust (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 412-424 (citation, 412). See the extensive online bibliography on threshold concepts compiled by Mick Flanagan: https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html

[23] John van Maaren, "Transformative Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge: Toward a Threshold Concept for Biblical Studies," *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching* (2020 1/1): 61-78. Van Maaren notes the overlap of some of his threshold concepts with those of history and literature (65).

difficulty, often are typically counter-intuitive, seek to actualize inert and/or tacit knowledge, and may destabilize identity.[24] Caryl H. Sibbett and William T. Thompson term this "nettlesome" knowledge: "elements of knowledge that are deemed taboo in that they are defended against, repressed or ignored because if they were grasped they might 'sting' and thus evoke a feared intense emotional and *embodied* response."[25] Being "stung" into sensibility is at the heart of the identification of threshold concepts, because it stimulates the learner's experience of cognitive dissonance as a key path to learning.

In retrospect, we encountered three issues at stake in the early sessions that would have benefited from "nettlesome" concepts. First, we realize now that many Jews encountering Runesson's thesis regarding Matthew's depiction of the Pharisees would not find it sufficient to assuage their emotions regarding how New Testament texts had fostered "divisiveness [and] a duality" that portrayed Jews as "the prototypical 'other' [and] inevitably developed and evolved into dark associations with Jews to all that is evil in the world."[26] Grappling with the implications of commentaries that reorient seemingly *anti*-Jewish New Testament passages as *intra*-Jewish polemic requires time to absorb and assimilate. Second, we acknowledge that Runesson's argument did not necessarily challenge Christian students to rework their deeply embedded equation of Pharisees with hypocrites and the associated assumption that Judaism was legalistic. Situating Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees as examples of characteristically Jewish debate also requires time for absorption and assimilation. Third, we see that we moved too quickly to the text of Melito's *Homily on the Passover* without giving sufficient attention to implications of the changed demographics of the early second century when there were "Too many Gentiles, too few Jews, and no End in sight."[27] Here we should have lingered at greater length at the consequences of this demographic change, particularly the theological perspectives developing among non-Jewish Christ followers ("proto-Christians" in Runesson's terminology) who, unfamiliar with Jewish ways of life and conversant in Graeco-Roman rhetorical patterns of argumentation, illustrated the dictum that "Christianity was born in an argument over

[24] Threshold concepts bear a family resemblance to "Advance Organizers," as developed by educational psychologist David P. Ausebel in the 1960s. He argued for the value of presenting a hierarchy of knowledge that bridged the learner's existing knowledge with new knowledge at a more abstract level. Ausebel saw such an organization as key to meaningful learning. See D. P. Ausebel, "The Use of Advance Organizers in Learning and Retention," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 51 (1960): 267-272 as well as his *Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1963). See also his most recent, *The Acquisition and Retention of Knowledge: A Cognitive View* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012 [original 2000]). Threshold concepts, however, take into much fuller account the difficulty of presenting knowledge that challenges conventional understandings.

[25] Caryl Sibbett and William Thompson, "Nettlesome Knowledge, Liminality, and Taboos in Cancer and Art Therapy Experiences: Implications for Teaching and Learning," in *Threshold Concepts within the Disciplines* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008), 227-242 (citation 229).

[26] As expressed by one of the JTS students (see above).

[27] Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament's Images of Christ*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 169.

how to understand Jewish texts."[28] Likewise, we should have given attention to the significance of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE, the destruction of Jerusalem and the expulsion of Jews.

Mindful of these issues, we proffer the following as a primary threshold concept for the first section of our course: *Study of relations between Jews and Christians involves disturbing, exploring, and reorienting "reciprocally settled identities."*[29] That is, we needed to unsettle what Runesson terms "terminological edifices," the ways in which our ethnic/religious identities are set in a view of Judaism and Christianity as two diametrically different religions.[30] The pedagogical challenge is to break through the assumption that "Judaism" and "Christianity" are incompatible traditions. This assumption has had staying power "because that is the way that, in large part, things eventually worked out."[31]

Disturbing "reciprocally settled identities" is virtually always a nettlesome process, particularly if it involves deconstructing one's self understanding. We see this today, for example, in acknowledging that whiteness is an advantaged racial identity or that gender identity transcends binaries. Similarly, the scholarship that reveals the fluidity of ethnic and religious boundaries in the Mediterranean world of the first century CE and situates Jesus and the first generations of his followers squarely in their Jewish context disturbs conventional understandings.

In further exploring what is involved in unsettling the "terminological edifices," we see the necessity of teaching a series of interconnected claims, which themselves seem to have many of the characteristics of threshold concepts. Here, we identify and briefly develop several concepts that we believe would more adequately shape the first month of our course.

- *At least until the fourth century CE, there were Jews but no Judaism as such, and followers of Jesus but no Christianity as such.* Jewish life before the rabbinic period might best be understood as manifesting key common practices and beliefs within a diverse range of perspectives: "In the ancient world, *most* people whom we can identify as Jews were monotheists; *most* observed the Sabbath in one way or other; *most* would not consume pork, shellfish or blood; and most Jewish men were circumcised."[32] Moreover,

[28] Paula Fredriksen, "Roman Christianity and the pro-Roman West," in *Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire: The Poetics of Power in Late Antiquity*, ed. Natalie B. Dohrmann and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013): 249-266 (citation, 249).

[29] The term originates with Jack Miles, "Forward," in Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012).

[30] Anders Runesson, "The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions of Paul," in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark Nanos and A. Runesson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 53-79 (citation, 58).

[31] Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 186.

[32] E. P. Sanders, "The Dead Sea Sect and Other Jews: Commonalities, Overlaps, Differences," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Their Historical Context*, ed. T. H. Lim, et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 7-43.

the vast majority of Jews of antiquity worshiped the God of Israel, accepted Israel's scriptures as revelatory, observed most aspects of the Mosaic Law, and identified themselves with the Jewish people.[33] E. P. Sanders, from whose 1992 work, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, the term "Common Judaism" emerged, also makes the important claim that Common Judaism was neither uniform nor enforced—an important corrective to the assumption that in the first three or so centuries CE there was a Jewish institution that had the power to make normative rulings over the Jewish people. Only in the third or fourth centuries did rabbinic authority slowly become more widespread.[34]

- *Moreover, Jesus and the early Jesus movement existed entirely within the realm of Jewish life*. While it is commonplace today to find resources situating Jesus in his Jewish context or even to hear a reference to the Jewish Jesus in a homily, such assertions are "more declared than elaborated or explained.[35] A substantial attempt to fill out this lacuna may be found in the 2020 book by Barbara Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory*. Jesus was not a person who could have lived anywhere in any era. Rather, she argues that Jesus was a Jew with a "specific practice, narrative and tradition,"; he had distinctive daily practices and time structures, and "probably even a unique approach to God" connected to Jewish practice of the time (47). In contrast to the common misconception that Jesus saw himself in contrast to the Law, Meyer claims that Jesus' fundamentally observant Jewish praxis must be considered constitutive for discussion about his Jewishness. She regards him as a "practicing, Torah-observant and halakhically committed Jew," (52) whose disputations with the Pharisees, for examples, reveal Jesus engaging in characteristically Jewish debates about how Torah should be lived out. Considerable New Testament scholarship confirms Meyer's view of Jesus as Torah-observant. Yet, she pursues the significance further in her claim that living the Jewish law as understood in the Second Temple period was the way Jesus lived the covenant. While Christians today regard Torah as holy, both in their own sacred texts and as the law of the Jews, Christians have no need to

[33] Sanders, "The Dead Sea Sect." See also *Common Judaism: Explorations in Second-Temple Judaism*, ed. Wayne O. McCready and Adele Reinhartz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008). In their "Conclusion," editors McCready and Reinhartz add important nuance: "Second-Temple Judaism was in fact an untidy, complex and contradictory reality that fused widespread adherence to a set of beliefs and practices with fierce controversy and contradiction, the tussle for power and the impulse to exclude others on one basis or another" (220).

[34] If, as more recent scholarship reveals, the rabbinic movement came to dominate Jewish life over a period of centuries, then this "raises the possibility that a variety of Jewish groups and ideologies continued to exist after the destruction of the Second Temple. An increasing number of scholars now maintain that Judaism post-70 was as diverse as it had been before." *See Jesus, the New Testament, Christian Origins: Perspectives, Methods, Message,* ed. Dieter Mitternacht and Anders Runesson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2021 [Swedish original, 2007]), 450.

[35] Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 7.

appropriate *halakhah* for themselves. Christianity is not a halakhic religion. Acknowledging Jesus as observing Torah as interpreted in his time, however, reveals the positive significance of Jewish law that Christian theologians have for the most part neglected. Nevertheless, "Jesus the Jew is contemporary Christians' Other mainly in the sense of his Jewish life… a Torah-bound life."[36] Meyer's delineation of the Torah-observant Jesus as other to non-Jewish Christians of every era evokes James Crossley's critique of the temptation to image "Jesus the decaffeinated Jewish Other deprived of a degree of problematic Otherness."[37]

- Beginning in the early second century, *Gentile proto-Christians unacquainted with the Jewish ethnos proclaimed the teachings of Jesus through typological readings of Israel's scriptures (albeit in Greek, that is, the Septuagint), thus preserving those scriptures against opponents such as Marcion while at the same time maligning Jewish interpretational practices through their use of Graeco-Roman styles of argumentation.*[38] Their mode of interpretation played a dominant role in Christian thought for many centuries; it became the principal template by which Christianity was seen as superseding Judaism.[39]
- *Rabbinic and Christian interpretative practices gave rise to fundamentally different rubrics for interpreting Israel's scriptures, thereby shaping each tradition in distinctive ways often not understood by the other.* As Christian interpretation developed, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus became the lens through which the scriptures of Israel were understood, particularly through the medium of typology. The rabbis, however, interpreted these scriptures through multifocal lenses, originating with the Midrash (varying expositions of scriptural texts collected for each biblical book) and the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE, a compilation of Oral Torah). Together Mishnah and subsequent rabbinic commentaries constituted major portions of the Talmud, both of the Land of Israel (the "Yerushalmi" or Jerusalem, dating from ca. 400) and that of Babylonia (Modern Iraq), often referred to as "Bavli," compiled beginning in the sixth century.
- *Judaism and Christianity emerged in co-existence, conversation, competition, and contestation over the course of several centuries.* While contestation proved the most lasting—and detrimental—legacy, Jewish-

[36] Meyer, *Jesus the Jew*, 157.

[37] James G. Crossley, "A 'Very Jewish' Jesus: Perpetuating the Myth of Superiority," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11 (2013): 119

[38] Seen Anders Runesson, "Jewish and Christian Interaction from the First to the Fifth Centuries," in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip Esler (New York: Routledge, 2000), 245: "…[W]hat we see during the first five centuries is a gradual process, often ambiguous and never linear, in which the Jesus movement becomes ethno-culturally disembedded, losing central identity markers related to the Jewish ethnos, markers which emerging mainstream forms of Late-Antique Judaism maintained, nurtured and developed."

[39] Supersessionism, however, was a multifaceted perspective. See Terence L. Donaldson, "Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Identity," *Journal for the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting* 3 (2016): 1-32.

> Christian interaction was continuous and complex.[40] Significantly, Jews and Christians interacted in public civic settings at the local, national, and imperial levels as well as through various associations, in private and domestic settings. This period of identity formation was not straightforward, as many persons, Jewish and non-Jewish, "continued to express, in practice, an identity which blurred the boundary between what later became distinct categories for all: 'Jew' and 'Christian.'"[41]

A Concluding Note

Revisiting our course at a distance has provided us with deepened appreciation for both the complexity and significance of the early centuries of the emergence of Judaism and Christianity. We believe that explicit and repeated use of threshold concepts will enable us to more adequately establish a foundation from which we can explore later centuries, particularly post-Holocaust perspectives that have led to a reorientation of our respective origins.

As scholarship continues to emerge, new insights will require revision in every iteration of our course. Cultural developments will affect the context, requiring adaptation and adjustments. For example, in the current version of the course (Spring 2022), the heightened attention to issues of equity and inclusion gives new significance to racial matters, such as the obsession of so-called "Old" Christians with purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*) in late fifteenth century Spain, Kant's racial hierarchies in his "Of the Different Human Races" (1775-1779), and Hitler's use of America's Jim Crow policies in formulating the laws of citizenship and blood in the Nuremberg Laws of 1938.[42] Moreover, the trend in many state legislatures in recent months to pass laws prohibiting teachers in public schools from exposing their students to historical accounts that might prove unsettling or elicit discomfort, guilt or psychological distress stands in stark contrast to our commitment to confront the difficult history of the Jewish-Christian encounter. As the current syllabus reads: "There will be occasions in this course that will indeed prove unsettling… knowledge that unsettles also has the potential to reorient."[43]

Teaching this course is indeed unsettling, involving a continuing encounter with nettlesome knowledge. Yet we experience the process of reorienting settled

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[40] "Far from being forever frozen in ingrained hostility, the two sister religions engaged in a profound interaction during late antiquity…. [I]n certain cases the rabbis appropriated Christian ideas that the Christians had inherited from the Jews, hence that rabbinic Judaism *re*appropriated originally Jewish ideas that were usurped by Christianity" (Peter Schäfer, *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012], 1-2.)

[41] Runesson, "Jewish and Christian Interaction," 259.

[42] J. Kameron Carter's *Race: A Theological Account*, 79-121, provides an excellent resource on Kant and the Enlightenment. On the development of the Nuremberg Laws, see James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[43] This version of the course is taught by Mary Boys, as the appointment in July 2020 of Shuly Rubin Schwartz as Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary has necessitated setting aside her role in classroom teaching.

identities to be life-giving, offering new depth and breadth to our knowledge and, we hope, to an increase in wisdom.