

Introduction

Et Major Serviet Minori
(And the Elder Will Serve the Younger)

THE THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

This book is intended to be a study of the reciprocal attitudes of Jews and Christians toward one another, not a history of the relations between them. I do not intend to present a systematic and comprehensive description of the dialogue and conflicts between Jews and Christians, with their various historical metamorphoses. My sole purpose is to reveal fragmented images of repressed and internalized ideas that lie beneath the surface of the official, overt religious ideology, which are not always explicitly expressed. My objective is to engage in a rational and open discussion of the roles played by irrationality, disinformation, and misinformation in shaping both the self-definition and the definition of the “other” among Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages.

The book revolves around three pairs: Jacob and Esau, Passover and Easter, Jewish martyrdom and blood libel. The first pair is typological, that is, it uses an existing narrative system based on the Scriptures and charges it with the later conflict between Israel and Edom, Judaea and Rome, Judaism and Christianity, a conflict between chosen and rejected, persecuted and persecutor. This involvement with the question of who is chosen and who is rejected, who is “Jacob” and who is “Esau,” reflects a process of self-definition as well as, ipso facto, a definition of the other, the persecutor and rival. The tension evoked by this typology is one between subjugation, suffering, and

exile, on the one hand, and dominion, primogeniture, and victory, on the other. For Christianity, it is viewed as the tension between the Old Testament and the New Testament; for Judaism, it is that between Exile and Redemption. The first two chapters and the final chapter of this book concern this issue.

The second pair deals with the two most important holidays in Judaism and Christianity, Passover and Easter. Both holidays share the conceptual premise of being based on ancient tales about a deliverance in the past and the promise of deliverance in the future. Although this confrontation has a long history, it will not be told here. Our discussion will be limited to exposing points of friction between these two festivals on three levels. The first level is a description of the denial of the rival ceremony by means of overt or covert polemics; the second is a description of the appropriation of specific ritual elements taken from the rival religion, along with a change in their ideological content; the third, a description of misunderstandings in which the ceremonies of one religion are misinterpreted by members of the other religion so as to confirm the latter interpretation to the world of the observer and interpreter. These motifs will be discussed in chapters 2 and 5.

The third pair—martyrdom and blood libel—leads us deep into the world of reciprocal images. Here we shall attempt to confront concrete Jewish suffering with the world of messianic imagination. Imagination and hallucination were designed to offer compensation and reward for the flaws and deficiencies of reality, but they also played an important role in the revised shaping of reality—not only of Jews but of Christians too. The acts of the Jewish martyrs in Germany during the Crusades express not just their despair but also their hopes, and the Christian spectators not only witnessed the deeds themselves, but they also noted the ideology of those who performed them. Thus, a vicious circle with tragic consequences was set into motion. This complex circle is described in chapters 3 and 4.

Both religions interpreted themselves through pairs of typological biblical characters. The one is youthful, beautiful, spiritual, righteous, and, most important, triumphant and powerful; the other is old, ugly, wild, wicked and, most important, defeated and humbled. The polemic is two-sided and direct and recognizes only one alternative. Such was the world of Jews and Christians during late antiquity until Islam appeared as a third religious option, and such was the situation in Europe throughout most of the Middle Ages. Unlike in the Muslim countries, where Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together, interreligious conflict in Europe tended to be bipolar: hence the propagandistic power of pairs such as Cain and Abel, Isaac and

Ishmael, Rachel and Leah, Ephraim and Manasseh—and of course, of Jacob and Esau.

I have therefore chosen to focus on the typological conflict between Esau and Jacob, which relates to interpreting the past, to understanding the present, and especially to grasping the nature of the blessing for the future: “and the elder will serve the younger.” In the Middle Ages Jews and Christians argued about their common biblical past as well as about the present—their beliefs and religious praxis—but essentially the argument turned on the future, on messianic faith and on what was expected at the End of Days. Both Jews and Christians were deeply devoted to their faith, and it was unlikely that opposing interpretations of the rival religion would undermine it or instill doubt in their hearts about either the mythic past or the concrete here and now. Nevertheless, there was considerable mutual uneasiness about the unknown future. For medieval people, the future was the age of the Messiah, and the messianic realization of the blessing given to Jacob by Isaac was understood not only as a promise for a glorious future but also as a stirring up of terror about days to come. What was awaiting them in the new world order? Who would be raised up, and who would be brought down? Which one was the “elder” who would serve the “younger”?

The typological meaning of Jacob and Esau’s story intersects the relationship between Christianity and Judaism from its inception down to our own day. Thus, before approaching this historical tale itself, we must first undertake a brief literary analysis of its biblical source. I do not intend to engage in a rigorous philological description of the meaning of the scriptures in question or of the various interpretations of the story by Christians, Jews, and modern scholars; rather, I shall attempt to read it simply as literature, free, as much as possible, of interpretive tendencies, whether traditional or modern. The aim of this introductory discussion is to understand what it is about this primordial story of Esau and Jacob that has made generation after generation squeeze themselves into it, seeking in it a hint of themselves and of their future.

THE EARLY TYPOLOGY: *ESAU ID EST EDOM*

From the outset, the story of the twin brothers does not augur well. Even before they are born, God informs their mother, Rebecca: “Two nations are in your womb.” The twins’ struggle in the mother’s womb causes her suffering, and the difficult pregnancy heralds a difficult history: “Two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the

other, the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen 25:23). Unlike the covert rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael, the hostility for Esau expressed in the Bible is overt and steeped in harsh memories of love, hate, and fear. The biblical narrator certainly wished to cope with the political reality of his day, in which the brother-nation Edom was the rival of the kingdoms of Judaea and Israel, and therefore he imposed the resentments of the present on the embryonic, dim, mythic past.¹

Like Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob were full brothers, unlike Ishmael and Isaac, who shared the same father but not the same mother.² The greater the consanguinity, the more intense the quarrel. Isaac was the first of Abraham’s descendants to be born in the Land of Israel. An immigrant, Abraham feared that his son would take a wife from among the local women. Hence, he called his servant and instructed: “You will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell” (Gen 24:3). Abraham sent his servant to what seemed a most unlikely place: to the home of his forebears in Aram, which he had forsaken many years earlier, following God’s commandment: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house” (Gen 12:1). Now he wishes to connect his son with the same circles he had left.³

1. See Ze’ev Weissman, “National Consciousness in the Promises to the Patriarchs” [in Hebrew], *Mil’et* 1 (1983): 9–24; Weissman, *Mi-Ya’aqov le-Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1986), 86–89. For the polemical intention of the present story to cover up the sins of Jacob and to cope with the ancient traditions that criticized Jacob’s actions, see Yair Zakovitch, “Jacob’s Heel” [in Hebrew], *Sefer Dr. Barukh Ben Yehuda* (Tel Aviv, 1981), 121–44. This interpretation is opposed by Moshe Garsiel, “Literary Structure and Message in the Jacob and Esau Stories” [in Hebrew], *Hagut be-Miqra* 4 (1983): 63–81. For a position that rejects the existence of any covert polemics in the Jacob and Esau story, seeing it as a literary fiction devoid of any historiographical pretension, see Thomas L. Thompson, “Conflict Themes in the Jacob Narratives,” *Semeia* 15 (1979): 5–26.

2. Weissman, “Diverse Historical and Social Reflections in the Shaping of Patriarchal History” [in Hebrew], *Zion* 50 (1985): 7, notes the difference in family structure between the story of Jacob and that of Abraham and Isaac—a monogamous family structure in the former as opposed to a polygamous one in the latter. This difference was one of the factors that led Weissman to see the traditions of the Jacob narrative as having a different and more ancient origin than those of the Abraham and Isaac narrative. For an assessment of Weissman’s position, see Alexander Rofé, “History of Tradition and the Creation of the Jacob Cycle” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 56 (1987): 593–97.

3. Rofé thinks this episode reflects the atmosphere in the period of Ezra and Nehemiah and the opposition to mixed marriages with the indigenous inhabitants of the land: “An Enquiry into the Betrothal of Rebekah,” in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1990), 27–39.

The success of the servant's mission leads to another separation in the family and produces another departure from the ancestral homeland in Aram to the land of Canaan. This time the one who goes is Rebecca, who also prefers an unknown land and even a foreign bridegroom to her homeland and to living in her mother's house. When asked if she desires to join Abraham's servant and to part from her family, she answers with one Hebrew word: *Elekh*: "I will go" (Gen 24:58). Abraham went to the land of Canaan by God's decree; Rebecca goes there at the bidding of her heart.

Unlike Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca are thus partners from two different lands. Perhaps the great split that will tear their sons apart has its origin in their parents' story. The initial encounter between Rebecca, a young maiden from Aram, and Isaac, a middle-aged man, takes place in a field. Rebecca arrives at the fields of the Negev after a fatiguing journey riding on a camel, anxiously awaiting the first meeting with her future husband. She knows very well where she is coming from, where she is going, and whom she is to meet, whereas Isaac, the intended bridegroom, does not know anything about what is to occur: "And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening" (Gen 24:63), as was his habit. While people are returning to their homes, he goes out to the field, not knowing who is approaching him. Rebecca knows what awaits her, but Isaac knows nothing.

It is then that the first encounter takes place: "And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebecca lifted up her eyes, and she saw Isaac" (Gen 24:63–64). They both raise their eyes, they both see something, but Isaac does not see Rebecca, he only sees camels, while Rebecca sees Isaac right away. Isaac sees, but does not comprehend. Does Rebecca? When she sees Isaac, she "falls off the camel"—that is, alights from it, waits for the man coming toward her, and asks the servant: "Who is the man yonder, walking in the field to meet us?" And the servant answers, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself (Gen 24:65). Isaac walks idly, aimlessly in the field, while Rebecca takes pains to find out who is standing before her. When she hears that he is indeed her intended husband, she covers her head, in a sense disappearing into her demure identity.

Now we come to a second dialogue, between the servant and Isaac, and the presence of Rebecca covered by her veil seems to fade away. "And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother, and took Rebecca, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Gen 24:66–67). Two characters, who have thus far played a peripheral role

in the story, here take center stage. One is Isaac, who though he is forty years old, is led to his marriage by his father, with the help of the servant. The second is Sarah: even though she has now been dead for three years, her spirit still dominates her son. In contrast, the two main characters in the story of Isaac's marriage, Abraham and Rebecca, who had been proactive, now disappear. The servant reports on the success of his mission, not to Abraham, but to Isaac, evidently because Abraham was no longer alive. As for Rebecca, who had received the servant generously and actively when he came to Aram and had boldly decided to go to a new land and a distant family, now becomes merely a bland substitute for the dead mother. Her identity seems to have been swallowed up, and from now on her place is in the tent of her mother-in-law.

This tension between Isaac, the man of the field, and Rebecca, hidden in the tent, is a metaphor for the dualism between two characters and two symbols. The field is the arena of one who lives in nature, in the open, while the tent is a symbol of enclosure and innocence. But despite her enclosure, the one who sees clearly is Rebecca, while Isaac's eyes grow dim. Rebecca, who acts surreptitiously between the folds of the closed tent, sees more clearly than her husband, the man of the open field.

This difference between the field and the tent involves another dimension as well. Isaac was the first farmer among the Patriarchs. While for the classical Rabbinic Sages his image is that of a spiritual man, one who became blind because of the tears that the ministering angels shed on him during the Binding,⁴ one who went out to “meditate” in the field to pray and to reflect,⁵ his character in the Bible is completely different. Isaac sows and brings forth a blessing from his toil “and reaped in the same year a hundredfold” (Gen 26:12). He quarrels with the local Philistine farmers about water. He wanders little, and God even forbids him to leave the land in time of famine. He is completely connected to the land and to his labor on it. Unlike his wife, his mother, and his father—all of whom were immigrants and nomads, either herders or traders—he was born there. The tent is the symbol of transience and alienation, the dwelling of the exile and the nomad, while the field indicates fixity and attachment to place.

The difference between the parents sets the scene for the difference between the children, the twins who struggle with one another. From Isaac,

4. *Gen. Rab.* 65.10, ed. Theodore-Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), 719.

5. *Gen. Rab.* 60.14, 654–55.

the man of the field, Esau is born: “Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field,” while from the mother, who sits in the tent, “Jacob . . . a mild [or: simple] man, dwelling in tents” is born (Gen 25:27). Thus Isaac loves Esau, while Rebecca loves Jacob. Esau is referred to as the “older son” of Isaac (Gen 27:1), while Jacob is simply “the son” of Rebecca (Gen 27:6). The parents’ characteristics are magnified in their children: from Isaac the farmer, who quarrels with the local residents over water rights, is born Esau, who lives by the sword (Gen 27:40) and who mobilizes a band of soldiers to greet Jacob (Gen 32:6).⁶ In contrast, Jacob, at the scent of danger, prefers to flee for his life and go into exile in a distant land. Esau is the hunter who subsists on wild animals, while Jacob is sustained by the homely meals that his mother prepares for him in the tent.

The selling of the birthright takes place after Esau returns home “from the field . . . famished” (Gen 25:29). The field disappoints him, and Esau is left hungry. He sells his birthright for homely food—“bread and pottage of lentils” (Gen 25:34)—and the birthright passes from the man of the field to the man of the tent.⁷ But Isaac is unaware of all this. He is blind and lives in the past. Before he dies he asks Esau to “go out to the field, and hunt [him] some game” (Gen 27:3) so that he may bless him. Rebecca overhears. She, who sees the open field clearly, also hears clearly between the folds of the tent. When Esau goes out to the field to hunt venison, she proves her superiority and quickly prepares food for Isaac from her flock. Thus Jacob gains the birthright reserved for the firstborn, after his father sniffs him and finds that his odor “is as the smell of the field” (Gen 27:27). Both Esau and his father, Isaac, are portrayed as gluttons, willing to sell a birthright or a blessing for a favorite food.⁸

The theft of the blessing and the transformation of the young Jacob to the favored son bring down Esau’s wrath on Jacob. Jacob flees, retracing his

6. The expression “four hundred men with him” alludes to an army battalion. See A. Shapira, “Jacob and Esau: A Polyvalent Reading” [in Hebrew], *Iyyunei Miqra u-parshanut* 4 (1997): 270–72. According to Yoel Bin-Nun, “The Yitzhak Stories” [in Hebrew], *Megadim* 25 (1996): 68–70, Esau’s army was intended to defend his homestead.

7. According to V. Maag, “Jakob-Esau-Edom,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 13 (1957): 418–29, the earliest layer in the narrative of Jacob and Esau reflects a tension between hunters (Esau) and shepherds (Jacob) who dwelled alongside one another in the northern part of the Land of Israel, in Gilead and Bashan. At the time of David, and as a result of the conquest of Edom, another, southern, layer was added, which identified Esau with Edom, and the typology of the Jacob-Edom story became a national one.

8. Zakovitch (n. 1, p. 000), 130–31.

mother's footsteps back to her home and her family, but he thereby cuts himself off from his own family and goes into exile. There, in a foreign land, he marries his wives and sires his children (except for Benjamin, his youngest). Jacob arrives in Aram as a chosen son and returns as the head of a chosen family, father of the twelve tribes. This transition, from chosen son to chosen family, takes place specifically in the Aramaean exile, far from the Promised Land, just as the transition from chosen family to chosen people occurs in the Exile of Egypt. Jacob is "a wandering Aramaean" (Deut 26:5), that is, an exile in Aram, who inherits the Land of Israel and evicts Esau from it. After twenty years of exile, God commands him to "return to the land of [his] fathers and to [his] kindred" (Gen 31:3). Not "go from your country" (Gen. 12:1) as told to Abraham or "I will go" (Gen. 24:58) as proclaimed by Rebecca, but "return"—the return of an exile to the land of his forefathers. Abraham was a stranger in the land of Canaan, Isaac was a native son who never left the land, while Jacob returns to "his homeland" from exile.

Perhaps the Bible's intention here is to say that the Land is given in perpetuity not to the stranger who settles in it or to the local "man of the field," but only to the exiled son who returns to it. Indeed, Isaac's blessing of Jacob is only realized at the end of the story of Jacob and Esau. After Jacob returns, he buys "the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent" (Gen 33:19) in Shechem. Now Jacob too has bought a field in the land of Canaan. This action is followed by a description of Esau's departure from the land, and the Bible does not mince words in describing the heaviness in Esau's abandonment of it: "Then Esau took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle, all his beasts, and all his property which he had acquired in the land of Canaan; and he went into a land away from his brother Jacob. . . . So Esau dwelt in the hill country of Seir: Esau is Edom" (Gen 36:6, 8). By contrast, later on it says of Jacob: "Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan" (Gen 37:1). Thus the promise was fulfilled: the separation between the brothers is accomplished, and the land becomes Jacob's.

The entire story may be read as a covert polemic with a counternarrative containing opposite territorial claims, designed to create a mythic history in order to justify a contemporary political reality. The narrator's ideology bases a claim to ownership of the Land of Israel on a divine promise, while denying opposing claims of local residents or their neighbors over the Land. The essential motif in the biblical claim to the Land is the superiority of the one

who returns from exile over the native, since the foreign settler comes by dint of divine promise, not of original holding or rights. Thus we have a denial of autochthony as the basis for any claim to the Land.⁹ Jacob and his descendants are described as destined to be lords of the land, while Esau and Ishmael are to serve as their subjects—a reality fulfilled at the time of the First Temple after the subjugation of Edom by David.¹⁰ At the end of the First Temple period, during the Babylonian rule over the kingdom of Judaea, Edom took advantage of this opportunity and ruled over the border regions of Judaea in the northern Negev and thereafter was considered a treacherous brother deserving of the harshest revenge and punishment.¹¹

The biblical polemic with Edom is also reflected in the story of Hadad the Edomite, King Solomon's great enemy (1 Kgs 11:14–25). The story of Hadad's life contains motifs clearly reminiscent of the history of Israel in Egypt and of the life of Moses. Like Moses, who was born and saved after Pharaoh had ordered that every male son born be thrown into the Nile, Hadad was also saved from the slaughter of all the males in Edom during the period of David's conquest (1 Kgs 15). Hadad fled to Egypt via Midian, much like Moses, who returned to Egypt from Midian. Pharaoh greeted Hadad with blessings and even gave him land on which to live, like the land of Goshen given to the Israelites. Hadad was raised in the home of Pharaoh, where he married Pharaoh's sister-in-law, who bore him a son, Genubath (in Hebrew: "the stolen one")—a name reminiscent of the words of Joseph: "for I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews" (Gen 40:15). Hadad, who was "of the royal house in Edom," thereby enjoyed an additional degree of status in the Egyptian royal house, like Moses, who was adopted as a son by Pharaoh's daughter. After Hadad learned of David's death, he turned to Pharaoh and asked him: "Let me depart, that I may go to my own country" (Gen 21)—an echo of Moses's repeated request "Let my people go" (Exod 5:1 and passim). Hadad's request was also not initially granted: "But Pharaoh said to him: 'What have you lacked with me that you are now seeking to go to your own country?'" And like Moses, Hadad was also insistent: "And he said to him, 'Only let me go'" (Exod 22).

Yair Zakovitch explains that this resemblance reflects the wish to present

9. Compare Y. Levi, "A Territorial Dispute in the Land of Israel in Ancient Times" [in Hebrew], in *'Olamot nifgashim* (Jerusalem, 1969), 60–78.

10. 2 Sam 8:14.

11. Isa 34:5–7; 63:1–6; Ezek 25:12–14; Obadiah.

the story of Hadad as an inverted parallel to the story of Jeroboam ben Nabath (1 Kgs 11:26ff.), who was also seen as a kind of “second Moses.”¹² In his opinion, the story of Hadad is the work of scribes from Judaea, who wished to deny Jeroboam any resemblance to Moses. To that end, the story of Jeroboam was superimposed on a secondary personality—Hadad. I suggest reading the story of Hadad as echoing a rival Edomite tradition, according to which Hadad was considered the national savior from subjugation to David, who was compared to Pharaoh. The biblical author had no difficulty in accepting this tradition, since it furthered his goal: to present Hadad as appointed by God to be the “adversary against Solomon” (1 Kgs 14)—that is, as a way to punish Solomon for his forbidden love of Pharaoh’s daughter, as a kind of measure for measure. The very existence of a rival Edomite story to the story of Moses may be seen as an expression of the widespread enmity between the sons of Jacob and those of Esau—rival sons competing for the same territory and the same ancestral heritage.

THE LATE TYPOLOGY: *EDOM ID EST ROMA*

Our proposed reading of this biblical story suggests that the later typology, identifying Edom with Rome, did not come out of thin air but was based on the biblical typology identifying Esau with Edom. The emergence of this later typology is presumably the result of the disappearance of the Edomites—the concrete element for whom the biblical typology was originally invented. But the decisive event leading to the creation of the new typology was the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., in whose wake a far-reaching change occurred in the meaning of the terms Esau and Edom. For the Jews, the quarrel between Jacob and Esau ceased to be a story of a territorial quarrel between neighboring tribes and was instead converted into a conflict of messianic dimensions between Judaea and Rome. As soon as Edom became synonymous with Rome, all prophecies of future revenge were shifted in one fell swoop from Edom to Rome, along with the expectation of its fall and ruin at the End of Days.

During the first centuries of the Common Era, Edom was synonymous with pagan Rome, and the biblical drama between Esau and Jacob, with its charged symbols, was interpreted as an allegory and a prophecy of the

12. Yair Zakovitch, “*And You Shall Tell Your Son . . .*”: *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Jerusalem, 1991), 87–97.

ongoing conflict between Judaea and pagan Rome. According to this conception, there can be no peace between the two nations: “If this one is full, that one is destroyed.”¹³ Rabbi Akiba seems to have been the first to understand Edom as a metonym for Rome. He interpreted the verse “a star [*kokhav*] shall come forth out of Jacob” (Num 24:17) as a prophecy alluding to Bar Kokhba, because the subsequent verses continue: “Edom shall be a dispossessed. . . . By Jacob shall dominion be exercised, and the survivors of a city be destroyed” (Num 24 18–19), in which the “city” is interpreted as Rome.¹⁴

Yet since there were other opinions on this point, it behooves us to return to the verse “two nations are in your womb.” The Masoretic version reads here *ge'im* (ג'ימ) rather than *goyim* (גוים; “nations”), and the Sages interpreted this unusual spelling as an allusion to pride (גאון; i.e., “proud ones”)—that is, both brothers, and their respective nations, Judaea and Rome, are proud. Although proud brothers are indeed likely to clash, according to this Midrash, calm prevails between them: “Two proud nations are in your womb: this one takes pride in his world, and that one takes pride in his world—Hadrian among the nations, and Solomon in Israel.”¹⁵ Each nation prides itself on the myth of a model leader in the distant past. Another Midrash of a more contemporary bent depicts the emperor of Rome, Antoninus, and the Patriarch Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi as models of brotherhood: “‘Two nations (*goyim*) are in your womb.’ [This verse has been interpreted as follows]: Do not read *goyim* [nations], but rather read *ge'im* [proud ones]. Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: This refers to Antoninus and Rabbi [i.e., Judah ha-Nasi] from whose table neither radish nor horseradish nor cucumber was ever lacking, in either summer or winter.”¹⁶ Abundance is a sign of greatness, and the leader of the Jews in the Land of Israel is portrayed here as an equal partner to his friend, the emperor of Rome.

This harmonious perspective was common during the third century C.E., when tension between conquering Rome and subjugated Judaea had slackened, and before Rome became Christian. At that time the status of the Patriarch reached its peak, with the claim that he was a descendant of the

13. *b. Meg.* 6a.

14. *j. Ta'an.* 4.8 (68d).

15. *Gen. Rab.* 63.7: 685, H. Freedman and M. Simon, eds.; *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English, (1939; repr. London, 1961), 561.

16. *b. Ber.* 57a; *b. Avod. Zar.* 11a.

Davidic royal house. For a moment it seemed as if this self-delusion would be strong enough to soften the permanent opposition of the Jewish nation to its subjugation to Rome and to its lack of political sovereignty.

Another exegete interpreted the verse “two nations are in your womb” rather differently. He read the Hebrew *shnei* (two) as *senu’ei* (hated): “Those hated of the nations are in your womb: all the nations hate Esau, and all the nations hate Israel.”¹⁷ At that time a strange solidarity existed between Rome and Judaea: both were hated. The preacher may have sensed a similarity between the triumphalist imperialism of Rome and the universal messianic aspirations of Judaism. It is doubtful whether there was any other time in history when Jews were willing to share their sense of persecution with another nation, let alone with Esau.

But the early fourth century and the Christianization of Rome marked the end of this openness and the hope of cooperation. The hostility between the two “brothers” prevailed over their fraternity and was carried over into the raging channel of tense relations between Christianity and Judaism, a turgid stream that persisted in its course throughout the Middle Ages. Henceforth, the Jewish identification of Edom with Rome carried a double meaning, both religious and political. There were some who called the Christian Church by the name of Edom, while there were others who saw that name as a metonym for the empire itself and for the Roman-Byzantine state. Edom thus became the last mythological foe of Israel until the End of Days—changing its identity, name, time, and place but always known by the ancient and threatening name: Edom.

Yet for Christians the names Jacob and Esau carried the opposite meaning: Jacob was the prototype of the Christians, the true Children of Israel, while Esau was the archetype of the Jew, the elder brother who loses his birthright to his younger brother, the Church.¹⁸ The source of this notion appears in Paul’s epistle to the Romans, where he speaks of the election of Israel in the flesh, as opposed to in the spirit:

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the

17. *Gen. Rab.* (n. 15, p. 000).

18. For a comprehensive survey of Christian exegesis, see Klaus Thraede, “Jakob und Esau,” *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 16, (1950–2004): 1118–217.

promise are reckoned as descendants. For this is what the promise said, “About this time I will return and Sarah shall have a son.” And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she was told, “The elder will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”¹⁹

Just as Paul wished to extend the status of Israel to uncircumcised Christians, he also required the election of Isaac and Jacob, on the one hand, and the rejection of Ishmael and Esau, on the other, as proof that even within the same family there can be a rejected older brother alongside a chosen one. His proof is made up of two stages, the second one stronger than the first. The first is the rejection of Ishmael and the election of Isaac. Both were sons of the same father, but only one of them was chosen; hence, not all fleshly sons are necessarily sons in God. But this is a weak proof, since Ishmael’s rejection may be explained by the argument that he was not the son of the legitimate wife. Therefore, there was need for a second proof, that of Jacob and Esau—both of whom are twin sons of the same parents. Moreover, the rejection of the one did not occur after his birth or because of his evil deeds, but before his birth. Hence it is the divine promise, and not the ethnobiological pedigree, that determines the status of the chosen one.

This view appears in the writings of Christian authors from the second century on: the author of *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin Martyr, and Melito of Sardis.²⁰ In the writings of all three authors, the typological identification

19. Rom 9:6–13. And cf.: Gal 4:21–31; Heb 12:16–17. Whether it was Paul himself who believed that the Jews had been rejected as a chosen people or whether it was a later interpretation of his doctrine remains an open question. See John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford, 2000).

20. *The Epistle of Barnabas* 13: “And the Lord said to her [i.e., Rebecca]: two nations are in thy womb, and two people in thy belly, and one people shall overcome a people, and the greater shall serve the less. She ought to understand who is Isaac and who is Rebecca, and of whom he has shown that this people is greater than that people.” The homily alludes to the typological significance of the prophecy to Rebecca, “two nations are in your womb,” and immediately thereafter turns to a discussion of the symbolic meaning of Jacob’s blessing to Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob crosses his hands, placing his right hand on the head of the younger, Ephraim, and his left hand on that of the elder, Manasseh—a sign of preference of the younger over the elder (Gen 48:13–19). The equation, Rachel = Church, Leah = synagogue, appears in the writings of Justin Martyr, once again in order to show that the younger is more beloved. But he adds a new insight to the equation Jacob = Christianity: “Ja-

implied in the story of Jacob and Esau is still implicit, with the emphasis on the Pauline idea of election, that children by the flesh are not necessarily children of divine promise. Irenaeus was the first to make the typological identification of Esau with the Jews and Jacob. He maintains that the verse “two nations are in your womb” alludes to two nations that are to arise from the same father: the Jews and the Christians:

[Jacob] received the rights of the firstborn, when his brothers looked on them with contempt; even as also the younger nation received Him, Christ, the first-begotten, when the elder nation rejected Him . . . [Jacob] suffered the plots and persecutions of a brother, just as the Church suffers this selfsame thing from the Jews. In a foreign country were the twelve tribes born, the race of Israel, inasmuch as Christ was also, in a strange country, to generate the twelve-pillared foundation of the Church.²¹

Irenaeus goes on to compare the events of Jacob’s life to those of Jesus’s, but the strongest analogy between Jacob and Jesus seems to be the persecution and suffering experienced by both. In light of Irenaeus’s words, the famous homily in the Passover Haggadah on Deuteronomy 26:5, “a wandering Aramaean was my father” (which we will discuss in detail in the next chapter), has an especially interesting ring. The Haggadah suggests an alternative reading of the Hebrew verse, which would translate as “an Aramaean would have destroyed my father,” that is, Laban, the Aramaean, wanted to make Jacob perish. Irenaeus’s typological move is clearly continued by the Church Fathers of the third century—Cyprian, Origen, and Tertullian.²² The Christians countered the Jewish equation of Jacob = Jews, Esau = Rome, with the opposite equation: Jacob = Christians, Esau = Jews. It is noteworthy that these parallel systems of identification emerged at the same time.

cob was hated for all time by his brother; and we now, and our Lord himself, are hated by you and by all men” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, sec. 134). Compare this exegesis with the one cited above (n. 17): “All the nations hate Esau, and all the nations hate Israel.” Melito of Sardis explains the identification of the Jews with Edom by the fact that they were reddened with the blood of Jesus (Gerson D. Cohen, “Esau as Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann [Cambridge, MA, 1967], n. 43). A similar idea is found in a Jewish Midrash on Esau: “‘ruddy’ . . . for he was filled with blood, yet he hated the blood of circumcision” (*Midrash ha-Gadol, Bereshit*, 439).

21. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.21.

22. Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, chap. 1; Cyprian, *Testimonia*, 1.19, 20; Origen, *Hom. In Gen.* 12.3, cited by J. Danielou, *Origen*, trans. W. Mitchell (New York, 1955), 164.

Even before the Christianization of the Roman Empire, Christians saw the Destruction of the Temple and the subjugation of the Jews to Rome as proof of the fulfillment of the blessing “the elder shall serve the younger.”

In contrast to the Jewish interpretation of the figure of Esau, Paul’s use of the figure of the younger, chosen brother as opposed to the older, rejected brother is natural and obvious, since it is intended to grant the status of chosenness to the new, non-Jewish believers. Turning Esau into the prefiguring of pagan Rome provokes a number of difficult questions. First, Esau, like Jacob, is a Semite; how then could the Sages see him as patronymic of Rome, he who is among the sons of Japheth? Second, Rome had already received a different typological identification in the writings of the Judean Desert sect: namely, the Kittim. Why was this identification abandoned, and how did it fit with the new identification? Third, what led Jews in the second century C.E. to consider Rome a “brother?” What did such a kinship have to do with the dreary reality of the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple? Fourth, there are those who think that, since the Edomites were accused of participating in the Destruction of the First Temple,²³ they were identified with Rome, who destroyed the Second.²⁴ Yet, in fact, the Idumaeans (identified with the biblical Edomites) fought vigorously alongside the Jewish Zealots in the Great Roman War.²⁵ How was it possible within one or two generations to forget the Idumaeans’ alliance with the rebels against Rome, instead turning them into a metonym for the empire against which they fought?

In a paper surveying the image of Esau in Jewish and Christian exegesis, Gerson Cohen described the Christian and Jewish moves as parallel developments, traveling on two independent tracks: “The new Christian usage of Esau did not originate as a retort to the Jews, but rather as a taunt inspired by the apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans [9:6–13], quite without regard to—or probably, even the vaguest knowledge of—what the rabbis were saying about their pagan Roman overlords [31].” Yet in the previous section Cohen discusses the increasing difficulty of the Jews in coping with the political reality of Christian rule after the fourth century. How could the success of Christianity and its earthly dominion be explained while identifying it with Esau, the rejected brother, who was meant to be subjugated

23. Ps 137:7.

24. Moshe D. Herr, “Edom,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), 6:379.

25. Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 5.249ff.

to his younger brother, Jacob? In fact, Christian propaganda, according to Cohen, could strike back: “Christian typology had appropriated the very symbols that provided the substance of Jewish eschatological theory and had turned them against the Jews [30].”²⁶

In other words, Cohen distinguishes between the ancient exegesis, of Paul and the early Church Fathers, which developed as an internal position, and the later Christian exegesis of the early Middle Ages, which carried on a lively dialogue with Jewish symbolism. Cohen rejects out of hand the possibility that Paul had already adopted Jewish eschatological symbols regarding Jacob and Esau. Why? Simply because the Jewish identification of Esau with Rome did not emerge until the early second century, just before the Bar Kokhba Revolt, as quoted above from Rabbi Akiba, who lived about three generations after Paul. Thus, Cohen states that the Jewish eschatological identification that emerged just before the Bar Kokhba Revolt had nothing to do with the Pauline move that preceded it and was formed entirely against the backdrop of the hostile relations between Jews and Romans after the failure of the Great Revolt. Hence, Cohen sees the development of the parallel Christian exegesis as an internal tradition, originating in the writings of Paul.

But the opposite parallelism, between Christian and Jewish exegesis, cries out for clarification. Does it exist merely by chance? Is there not a mutual affinity between the Christian claim that the Jews are Esau and the Jewish claim that Esau is Rome? Is it really plausible to assume that in this great debate concerning each side’s identification with Jacob, the issue of the counteridentification of the “other” as Esau did not arise? The possibility should be considered that the Jewish identification with Jacob emerged from internalizing the Christian position and confronting it. Cohen treats the identification of Esau in its messianic context, and here his position that the Jewish exegesis came earlier is plausible.²⁷ Yet, the identification of Esau has another, more basic context that arises in early Christian writings: the question of election. On this topic, Pauline thought seems to have preceded

26. Cohen (n. 20, p. 000), 19–48.

27. Many scholars think that the first expression of this can be found in 4 Ezra 2:6, 8, about one generation before Rabbi Akiba: “From Abraham to Isaac. For from him sprang Jacob and Esau, but Jacob’s hand held the heel of Esau from the beginning. The heel of the first age is Esau; the hand of the second is Jacob.” Yakov Licht understood Esau as a symbol of this world and Jacob as a symbol of the World to Come; see *Sefer Hazon ‘Ezra* (Jerusalem, 1968), 35. But Michael E. Stone, following many scholars, thinks that Esau is Rome, the final

that of the Sages and even to have caused the latter to defend itself. Posing the problem of election in the center of early Christian doctrine and the attempt to deny Judaism its position as the natural heir of Jacob and Israel (*Verus Israel*) necessitated a Jewish response that stressed its identification with the biblical Jacob. Such a Midrash, dealing directly with Paul's arguments, appears in *Sifrei Deuteronomy*:

“For the portion of the Lord is his people” [Deut 32:9]. A parable. A king had a field, which he leased to tenants. When the tenants began to steal from it, he took it away from them and leased it to their children. When the children began to act worse than their fathers, he took it away from them and gave it to the original tenant's grandchildren. When these too became worse than their predecessors, a son was born to him. He then said to the grandchildren: “Leave my property. You may not remain therein. Give me back my portion, so that I may repossess it.” Thus also, when our father Abraham came into the world, unworthy [descendants] issued from him, Ishmael and all of Keturah's children. When Isaac came into the world, unworthy [descendants] issued from him, Esau and all the princes of Edom, and they became worse than their predecessors. When Jacob came into the world, he did not produce unworthy [descendants], rather all his children were worthy.²⁸

The implicit claim in this Midrash is rather surprising. The author sees fit to deprive Abraham and Isaac of their position as chosen sons and to see them as tenants simply because of the defective offspring that came from them. His position may be understood in the context of Paul's claim that Abraham—father of many nations—is the typological father of the new converts to Christianity, for he was chosen even before he was circumcised. Considerable similarity exists between this parable and that of the vineyard owner and the tenants in Matthew 21:33–44 (Luke 19:9–19). The son of

kingdom, in whose wake shall come the Kingdom of Jacob; see *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Minneapolis, 1990). This view is also found in *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Gen 25:26, ed. M. Margolies (Jerusalem, 1947), 441. Cohen (n. 20, p. 000), 21, thinks that Jacob and Esau represent historical cycles as well as specific kingdoms, being paradigms of the love and hatred of God.

28. *Sifrei Deut.*, sec. 312, ed. Horowitz-Finkelstein, 353; English: *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, trans. R. Hammer (New Haven and London, 1986), 318. And see the analysis of this Midrash in E. Mihaly, “A Rabbinic Defense of the Election of Israel,” *HUCA* 35 (1964): 103–35; M. Derret, *Studies in the New Testament* (Leiden, 1978), 2:92–98.

the vineyard owner (Jesus) is killed by the tenants (the Pharisee and Sadducee establishment), who wish to control the vineyard (Israel). The owner of the vineyard (God) punishes the tenants and destroys them and gives the vineyard to other tenants (the nations). The view expressed in *Sifrei* is the opposite of that in Paul and the Gospels.²⁹ It claims that Jacob is the elected one, the last and final one, since none of his sons is rejected. The Jewish preacher goes on to talk of Israel being *segula* (a treasure), that is, an everlasting election—unlike Paul’s claim that the election of Jacob and the rejection of Esau from the womb prove that the firstborn is not necessarily the elected one.

Hence, the issue of Esau’s identity is clearly tangential to the debate over the identification of Jacob, in which the Jewish position is reactive and defensive. The propaganda of post-Pauline Christianity, which depicted Christians as the heirs of Jacob, was also a successful and painful claim regarding the identification of the persecuted brother: it is the Jews who are the older brother, and as such they persecuted the early Christians. Even after Christianity became the majority religion, the original trauma documented in the New Testament did not disappear. The Jewish response, which persisted in identifying the Jews with Jacob, probably found it difficult to determine the identification of Esau, the pursuing and dangerous older brother.

Yet if we assume that the Jews internalized the troubling Christian typological exegesis, we may understand how the conquering and subjugating Rome wound up as the mythic heir of Esau and Edom. Jacob represents a double fate: suffering and persecution at the hands of his brother in the present, alongside the promise for the future that the persecuting brother would lose his position and become a slave to Jacob. This picture corresponded to the position of the Christians before and after the Destruction of the Temple and to that of the Jews only afterward. The rivalry between Jews and Christians was over the identification of the persecuted one, and consequently over the identification of his persecutor.

Thus, after the Destruction of the Temple, Jewish apologetics faced a se-

29. On the similarity between the two parables, see David Flusser, *Yahadut u-meqorot ha-Nazrut* (Tel Aviv, 1979), 181–83; cf. David Flusser, “Two Anti-Jewish Montages in Matthew,” *Immanuel* 5 (1975): 36–37. According to D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash* (London, 1991), 190–97, the “son” in the Gospels is not Jesus but John the Baptist. Yet this is certainly not how the parable was understood in early Christian literature, and the Jewish Midrash counters that interpretation.

rious challenge: How could it claim that the Jews were still the beloved children of God even after his Temple had been destroyed? To meet this challenge, they needed to relate to the adversary's menacing slogan and turn it around. The Jewish response was that the promise, "the elder shall serve the younger," had not yet been fulfilled. Present reality was temporary, and Isaac's blessing on Jacob would be realized in the future, in the time of the Messiah, when Rome, which now subjugates Jacob, shall perish. The choice of Edom as the metonym for Rome is thus a forced response on the part of the Jews to the Christian exegesis about the nullification of the Jewish nation's election following the Destruction. This should not be seen so much as a direct polemic with Christianity, but rather as an apologetic explanation of Judaea's subjugation, using religious language that at that time was conventional and widespread among both Jews and Christians.

This dialogue between Christian critics and Jewish apologetics is expressed in a sermon of Ambrose of Milan, who also thought that the dissimilarities of the sons originated in the different natures of the parents. The maternal Rebecca is bound to the gentle younger son, while the stern Isaac is associated with the strong and rugged son and recognizes the older son's natural right of primogeniture. The father grants honor, the mother gives love:

Accordingly, Jacob received his brother's clothing, because he excelled the elder in wisdom. . . . Rebecca presented this clothing as a symbol of the Church; she gave to the younger son the clothing of the Old Testament, the prophetic and priestly clothing, the royal Davidic clothing, the clothing of the kings Solomon and Ezechias and Josias, and she gave it too to the Christian people, who would know how to use the garment they had received, since the Jewish people kept it without using it and did not know its proper adornments. This clothing was lying in shadow, cast off and forgotten. . . . The Christian people put it on, and it shone brightly.³⁰

An opposite interpretation of Esau's garment is found in a Jewish Midrash: "Rabbi Aha said in the name of Rabbi Huna: Esau, the evil one, is destined to put on his cloak and dwell with the righteous in the Garden

30. Ambrosius, *De Jacob et via beata*, 2.9.2, in *Fathers of the Church* (Washington, 1972), 65:150–51.

of Eden in the Time to Come. But the Holy One blessed be He will drag him out and throw him out of there.”³¹

Both the Jewish and the Christian exegeses dispute the symbolic meaning of Esau’s garments. Ambrose views the garments in the same way that he views Esau himself: a symbol of the old covenant that was superseded. The Jew sees in these same garments an allusion to Esau’s deceitfulness and his attempt to adopt a borrowed identity and to impersonate a righteous Jew; and only God can recognize his deceit.

THE CONCILIATORY APPROACH OF MODERN RESEARCH

Following the line of typological thought of earlier generations, which understood the deeds of the fathers as an omen for their sons, we may perhaps learn something from the conciliatory end of the quarrel between the two brothers. Unlike other pairs of brothers in Genesis, whose rivalry ended in murder (Cain and Abel) or exile (Ishmael and Isaac), Esau and Jacob knew how to forgive one another and to make up after decades of jealousy, separation, and exile. When Jacob returned from exile to the land of his fathers, Edom goes back to being the brother of Israel.

The Christian-Jewish debate that started nineteen hundred years ago, in our day came to a conciliatory close. Throughout the centuries, the Christian side based its argument on two fundamental assumptions. The first was that the physical existence of the Jews within Christian society had to be guaranteed; the second, that the Exile of the Jewish nation and the destruction of its religious and political center in the Land of Israel were punishment for the Crucifixion. These two basic assumptions collapsed within a single decade. In 1945 the Christian world learned of the horrors and scope of the Final Solution, and in 1948, the State of Israel was established. The murderous outburst of Nazi anti-Semitism stood in clear contrast to the Church doctrine of tolerance formulated by Augustine, within whose boundaries the traditional debate with the Jews was possible. In one fell swoop, the anti-Jewish position of Christianity became reprehensible and illegitimate, among other reasons because the Church was accused of being indirectly responsible for that lethal outburst

31. *j. Ned.* 3.8 (38a); Eng. trans. by Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, 23, *Nedarim* (Chicago, 1985), 66. For this homily and its relation to the Jewish-Christian polemic over the identity of Jacob and Esau, see M. Simon, *Verus Israel* (London, 1986), 187–89.

of hatred against the Jews. The establishment of the State of Israel and the renewed political sovereignty of the Jewish nation made the Christian exegesis of exile and destruction irrelevant. And indeed, within twenty years, Pope Paul VI visited the Holy Land and, on October 28, 1965, Vatican Council II adopted a declaration (*Nostra Aetate*) on the relation of the Church to non-Christian faiths, which included a “Jewish paragraph” removing guilt for the Crucifixion from the Jews and recognizing their status as a “chosen people.”

Ours is thus the first generation of scholars that can and may discuss the Christian-Jewish debate from a certain remove. This book is hence the product of a postpolemical age, a fact that makes it easier to publicly declare things that were once discussed in whispers in private chambers or known only to a chosen few. This book could not have been written by my mentors at the Hebrew University, who were trained in Europe between the two world wars. Just as the scholarship of previous generations is bound by the framework of their perspectives, this book too presents, at best, what my generation can do. It ought not be surprising, therefore, that we, who stand on the shoulders of the previous generation, can and do see the other side—the dialogue and the tacit agreements—better than they could.

Of course, the old historical scholars also paid a great deal of attention to the presence of parallel phenomena in Judaism and Christianity. But they tended to concentrate more on shared social or theological aspects and to balk at touching on shared systems of religious symbols and ceremonies. These systems were considered the very heart and soul of religious uniqueness, and as such they were generally deemed off-limits in comparative discussion, since they posed a threat to the notion of religious and cultural uniqueness. The old Jewish historical scholars tended to adhere to the dogma of the authenticity of Judaism and were deeply fearful of parallel moves that were likely to present Judaism as adopting rival symbols into its world. In this book, I have tended to seek dialogism rather than “authenticity.” The dialogical affinity of one culture with its environment does not necessarily impair its uniqueness or authenticity. Specifically, in Ashkenazic Jewry, previously considered a bastion of closure and loyalty to its internal religious tradition, there developed a profound affinity, albeit one mixed with hatred, with its sister religion, Christianity.

From here there follows another basic assumption of this book: that whenever we find a similarity between Judaism and Christianity, and we do not have grounds to suggest a shared heritage, we may assume that it is indicative of the influence of the Christian milieu on the Jews, and not vice versa, un-

less it may be proved that the Jewish sources are more ancient. The reason for this assumption is quite simple: minority cultures tend to adopt the agenda of the majority culture. True, from a theological perspective relations between the two religions were even and balanced, but the historian cannot ignore the relative and completely different dimensions distinguishing the two sister religions. Judaism certainly played an important role in shaping Christian self-awareness in medieval Europe, since the Jew helped define the boundaries of the “other”; however, Judaism’s influence on determining the religious and intellectual agenda of the period is not to be overestimated. The Jews always tended to occupy an important place in Western consciousness, far beyond their real weight. However, cultural, economic, social, and political agenda was dictated by the majority to the minority, and not the other way around.

This willingness to accept the one-way influence of Christianity on Judaism as a plausible working hypothesis also reflects a different cultural starting point from that which was used in older research, which tended to emphasize Jewish “authenticity.”³² The dialogic position sees Jewish life in Christian Europe as involving the absorption and internalization of many values of the environment, along with its body language, ceremonies, and holy time. The uniqueness of Ashkenazic Jewry, which constitutes the main focus of this book, is also inherent in that interaction. Whereas the Jews of Spain were only one element in a varied and heterogeneous milieu, the Jews of Ashkenaz were the only alien element in an otherwise rather homogeneous environment. Belonging to the only minority requires the creation of barriers—and indeed, on the level of open discourse, Ashkenazic Jews created a world that was extremely estranged from Christians. Yet it was precisely this intensive sojourn in the shadow of a dominant religion that provided the strongest exposure to the majority culture, which even the highest barriers could not block out.

32. This approach is evident, for example, in Yitzhak Baer’s work; see my paper, “Yitzhak Baer and the Search for Authentic Judaism,” in *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians*, ed. D. N. Myers and D. Ruderman (New Haven, 1998), 77–87. It is not my intention to belittle the enormous achievements of Baer, who succeeded, perhaps more than any other historian, in identifying parallel phenomena in Judaism and Christianity, although precisely for that reason he tended to ascribe the similarity with Christianity to Jewish influences on Christianity, and not vice versa. An extreme example of the “authentic-seeking” approach is Ezra Fleischer; see, for example, his “Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in Its Cultural Setting (Comparative Experiments)” [in Hebrew], in *Moises Starosta Memorial Lectures*, ed. Y. Geiger (Jerusalem, 1994), 63–97.

But one may also raise the following question: If Christian influence on Judaism was indeed considerable, why are there relatively few differences between the practices of Ashkenazic Jewry and that of Jews from such Muslim centers as North Africa or Babylonia? In the final analysis, the basic religious ceremonies and texts of these two Jewries are quite similar. My answer to this question is quite simply that the Christian influence on Jewry did not first emerge in the Middle Ages. Like the Jews of Christian Europe, the Jews in Muslim lands inherited a religion whose historical formation had already taken shape through the rejection of the alternative offered by Christianity to the crisis of the Destruction of the Second Temple. The confrontation with Christianity lies at the very heart of Midrashic and Talmudic Judaism,³³ which deal intensively with a renewed self-definition of who is a Jew and what is Judaism, as part of determining the reverse definition—namely, who is not a Jew. It was essential to define this in relation to those who wished to see themselves as Jews and were rejected by the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud because of their belief in the messiahhood of Jesus. Self-definition is an extensive and open process, one based not solely on automatic denial, but also on absorbing new religious ideas, ceremonies, and symbols from the outside. The processes of appropriation and the struggle over that which is appropriated characterize the world of anti-Christian polemic during the Rabbinic period. In the Middle Ages, however, the tendency of mutual denial came to dominate.

Three examples exemplify this process, each pertaining to one of the foundations of religious life: holy place, holy time, and holy text. “Mount Zion,” known today to every Jew and Christian as the name used for the upper city of old Jerusalem, was originally a Christian (or Jewish-Christian) term that originated as a way to expropriate the holiness of the Temple Mount following the Destruction of the Temple and to transfer that holiness to an alternative mountain, the traditional site of the tomb of King David, the

33. On the basis of this assumption, we should rely on the classical work of Hermann Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 4 vols. (München, 1922–28), but in a form diametrically opposed to theirs. The many parallels between the Talmud and the New Testament are not necessarily a result of the influence of the cultural world represented by the Talmud on the New Testament, but rather the opposite. The relation between the New Testament and Talmudic literature is discussed by Geza Vermes, “Jewish Literature and New Testament Exegesis: Reflections on Methodology,” *JJS* 31 (1982): 361–76. Vermes is a New Testament scholar who seeks to justify the benefit of comparison with Talmudic literature but in the process of doing so rejects the likelihood that the world of the Sages was directly influenced by the New Testament.

prototype of Jesus.³⁴ Yet Jews also used and still use the name “Mount Zion,” apparently without sensing the absurdity of it, even though it was originally the name of the Temple Mount. They accepted the Christian identification, because their polemic with Christianity was built not only on denial but also on the absorption and acculturation of traditions, names, ceremonies, and symbols.

The same holds true for the development of the holidays. There is room to suppose—and far more research is required on this important question—that Jewish liturgical time was profoundly influenced by Christian liturgical time. Passover is the focus of this book and will be discussed in detail later; for the moment, this principle can be easily demonstrated by examining the status of the Jewish festival of Shavu’ot in relation to Pentecost. The new significance given to Shavu’ot by the Talmudic Sages, as the holiday celebrating the Giving of the Torah, emerged after the description of the descent of the Holy Spirit to the apostles on the fiftieth day after the Crucifixion, as related in Acts 2. If this is not a one-sided influence, only a parallel development can explain this similarity of conceptions, in which Mount Sinai and Mount Zion (where the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles)—that is, the Old Testament and the New Testament—contest one another.³⁵ Particularly famous is the Midrash about how God courted the nations and offered them the Torah, and about how all of them refused, except for Israel.³⁶ This legend expresses an acute competition with the Christian claim that the new Torah was taken from Israel in the flesh and given to Israel in the spirit.

The Sages’ ban on writing down the Oral Law may be also explained in

34. Ora Limor, “Christian Sanctity—Jewish Authority” [in Hebrew], *Cathedra* 80 (1997): 31–62; Y. Zafrir, “Zion—The South-Western Hill and Its Role in the Development of the City of Jerusalem During the Byzantine Period” [in Hebrew] (PhD diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975), 6–7.

35. Compare Gal 4:24–26. On the parallel development of the holidays, see Moshe Weinfeld, “The Uniqueness of the Decalogue and Its Place in Jewish Tradition,” in *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition*, ed. B. Z. Segal, trans. G. Levi (Jerusalem, 1985), 40–44.

36. *Sifsei Deut.* sec. 343, ed. L. Finkelstein, 395–97: “When the Holy One blessed be He appeared to give Torah to Israel, it was not only to Israel that He appeared, but to all the nations. First He went to the children of Esau. He said to them: Do you accept the Torah? They said to Him, What is written in it? He said to them: ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ They said, the whole nature of those people and their father is a murderer, as the Bible says, ‘the hands are the hands of Esau’ (Gen. 27:22), and ‘by thy sword shalt thou live’ (Gen. 27:40). He went to the children of Ammon and Moab . . . He went to the children of Ishmael . . . when the Holy One blessed be He saw that it was thus, he gave it to Israel.”

a similar manner.³⁷ This ban seems to be a conscious, thoroughly ideological response to the fear that the Oral Law would be universalized and expropriated from its internal Jewish context, as happened to the Written Law when the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Septuagint and canonized by Christianity. This suggestion, explicitly raised in a late Midrash that will be discussed in chapter 2,³⁸ implies that the Sages were well aware of the threat posed by the competing sister religion. It is hard to imagine a more convincing explanation for this unprecedented phenomenon, in which a culture with such a deep commitment to learning insists on preserving a specifically oral framework, unless we assume that it was motivated by a struggle for the very existence of that culture.

It is no wonder, then, that the distinctions between Ashkenazim and Sephardim in the Middle Ages cannot be reduced simply to the difference between the Christian environment and the Muslim one, because Judaism in Muslim lands in the Middle Ages was also a continuation of a long-standing anti-Christian tradition that defined its religious identity through the denial of the alternative option. To be a “Jew” meant, in the most profound sense, to adopt a religious identity that competed with Christianity, and vice versa. Or, to adopt the formulation of the late Jacob Katz, the veracity of one religion depended on the negation of the other.³⁹

Thus, one cannot accept the claim that the Jews of Muslim lands were exempt from a confrontation with Christianity. On the contrary, the most ancient anti-Christian Jewish polemic was written in the Muslim countries,⁴⁰ because the urgent need to struggle with the Christian alternative also arose in those areas, even during the pre-Islamic period. Likewise, in the Persian-Sassanid Empire and in its Zoroastrian religious milieu, Christianity presented an unparalleled challenge to the Jew.⁴¹ As we shall discuss

37. *b. Gittin* 60b: “Teachings that were given to you orally you are not permitted to transmit in writing.” And: “The Holy One blessed be He established a covenant with Israel only on the basis of the oral teachings.” *Tanhuma, Ki-Tissa* 34:27: “The Holy One blessed be He says to the nations of the world: You claim that you are My children, but I know that only those who know My secrets are My children. Where are His secrets? In the Mishnah, which was given orally,” and similarly elsewhere.

38. *Tanhuma, Ki Tissa* sec. 34.

39. Jacob Katz, *Et lahqor ve-et lehitbonen* (Jerusalem, 1999), 54.

40. D. J. Lasker and S. Stroumsa, eds., *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1996).

41. See N. Koltun-Fromm, “A Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia,” *JJS* 47 (1996): 45–63.

later, the sequence of legends about the Destruction of the Temple specifically in the Babylonian Talmud is characterized by a covert anti-Christian polemic, unlike the versions in the Jerusalem Talmud, in which the anti-Christian motifs are weaker and far more muted. The Byzantine government obviously exerted considerable pressure on the Jews of the Land of Israel, but this does not contradict the intensity of the polemics conducted by the Nestorian Christians and the Jews in Babylonia. It is therefore probably no coincidence that the only non-Jewish work cited in the entire vast literature of the Talmud and Midrash—and of all places in the Babylonian Talmud—is the New Testament.⁴²

THE MOTHER, THE DAUGHTER, AND THE SISTER

The polemic in question is not necessarily direct and explicit. In the introduction to the earliest known anti-Christian work, the polemic of Nestor the Priest, the editors, Sarah Stroumsa and Daniel Lasker, note: “Despite evidence of a Jewish interest in Christianity, a review of the Jewish polemical arguments during the first eight centuries of the Christian era demonstrates that the daughter religion was not a central concern of the Jews.”⁴³ This view faithfully represents the central trend of scholarship in this field, as demonstrated by a statement of Anna Sapir Abulafia: “Any consideration about relations between Judaism and Christianity must begin with an obvious point. Christianity is a daughter religion of Judaism and as such it draws much of its validity from the very sources that Jews have always claimed as their own.”⁴⁴ And David Berger wrote:

The corpus of early Christian works directed against Judaism is, as we have already noted, rather extensive. Anti-Christian works by Jews, on the other hand, are virtually nonexistent before the twelfth century. One reason for this disparity is that Jews had no internal motivation for writing polemics against Christians; in times or places where Christianity was not a threat, we cannot expect Jews to be concerned with a refutation of its claims.⁴⁵

42. *b. Shabb.* 116a-b.

43. Lasker and Stroumsa (n. 40, p. 000), 14. And cf. A. Limor, “Judaism Looks at Christianity: The Polemic of Nestor the Priest and *Sefer Toldot Yeshu*” [in Hebrew], *Pe’amim* 75 (1998): 109–25.

44. Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (London, 1995), 63.

45. David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1979), 7.

In contrast, in an article on Christian influences on the Zohar, Yehuda Liebes wrote: “The nature of Christianity as a daughter-religion (or, rather, a sister-religion) of Judaism, an alternative interpretation of a common scriptural tradition, made it all the easier for the two religions to influence one another.”⁴⁶ Indeed, there seems to be good and sufficient reason to revise the view that grants Judaism the status of mother religion. First, the term *daughter religion* is problematic insofar as it relates to the status of Christianity in relation to Talmudic Judaism, seeing that both are daughter religions of biblical Judaism, which was centered on the Temple before its destruction in 70 C.E.⁴⁷ The dispute over which of them is more authentic in its claim to succession is a subject for theological debate, and it is doubtful whether the historian (especially one who is a Christian or Jew!) should take a position in such a dispute. Second, precisely because the challenge posed by Christianity to post-Temple Judaism was so demanding, a search for direct and explicit polemics cannot suffice. There are, in fact, no extant polemical compositions prior to the ninth century, but the field of polemics is far broader than the specific literary genre bearing that name. If we tune our ears to listening to more hidden tones, rustlings of subtle hints intended to counter the claims of “heretics” will reach our ears.

Classical scholarship frequently tended to examine the relations between Christianity and Judaism through the literature of direct and explicit polemics. But polemical literature deals with professed theology, and its purpose is to sharpen the points of friction between the two religions. Even the harshest and most scathing polemics require a common language and shared presuppositions regarding the point of departure of the debate. Hence, beneath the ideological and emotional tensions, we can identify hidden and more complex layers of mutual recognition, cooperation, and great cultural similarity. Moreover, not everything we identify today as “Christian” was necessarily understood as such by medieval people. The “Christian” language of ritual and ceremony of the majority culture may have been considered by the minority culture as a neutral and universal language that might be “Judaized” and subsequently incorporated into Jewish ritual.

The assumption that, despite the official and explicit ideological barriers,

46. Yehudah Liebes, “Christian Influences in the Zohar,” *Immanuel* 17 (1983–84): 43.

47. This has already been noted by A. F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge, MA, 1986). Among recent studies that identify the depth of the common liturgical and polemical language of Jews and Christians is L. A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood; Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago, 1996).

the Jewry of Christian Europe internalized the language and the textual world of their environment is increasingly confirmed by recently published studies. Some of them shed a different light on the character of Ashkenazic Jewry. Ivan Marcus, for example, recently showed how Jewish rites initiating a child into his school studies were clearly influenced by Christian ceremonies.⁴⁸ Jeremy Cohen has demonstrated how figures from the New Testament, Christian liturgical motifs, and even Crusader values, penetrated tales of Jewish martyrdom in 1096.⁴⁹ And Elliot Horowitz has indicated the strong attraction the Jews felt for the Cross and the important subconscious role it played in the system of Jewish symbols, far beyond that which studies of the previous generation would lead us to imagine.⁵⁰ This tendency to rebut the opponent while internalizing his symbolic world also follows from Ora Limor and Elchanan Reiner's studies on holy places in Judaism and Christianity.⁵¹ These studies convincingly demonstrate a clear, one-sided influence of Christianity on Judaism. The "rediscovery" of the Holy Land by the Jews of Christian Europe in the twelfth century, the formulation of the settling of the Holy Land, and the pilgrimage to the Land as important religious obligations—all these are clear expressions of the spirit of the age, the age of Christian Crusaders who were stirred to set off to a distant and almost forgotten land.

We seem to be confronting a genuine revision in our historical understanding of the mental world of the Jews who lived in Christian countries in general, and in Ashkenaz in particular: no longer a closed and suspicious Jewish society, but one that succeeded in maintaining, alongside the hos-

48. Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood* (New Haven, 1996). In other publications as well Marcus describes the process as "inward acculturation" of the world of Christian symbols within Judaism.

49. Jeremy Cohen, "The Persecutions of 1096, from Martyrdom to Martyrology: The Socio-cultural Context of the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles" [in Hebrew], *Zion* 59 (1994): 169–209.

50. Elliot Horowitz, "Medieval Jews Facing the Cross" [in Hebrew], in *Yebudim mul ha-Zelav: gezerot TTN"Whistoriyah uvehistoriographiyah*, ed. Y. T. Assis et al. (Jerusalem, 2000).

51. Limor (nn. 34, 43, p. 000 and 000); Elchanan Reiner, "From Joshua to Jesus: The Transformation of a Biblical Story to Local Myth: A Chapter in the Religious Life of the Galilean Jew," in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land*, ed. A. Kofsky and G. G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem, 1998), 223–71; Limor, "A Jewish Response to the Crusades: The Dispute over Sacred Places in the Holy Land," in *Juden und Christen zur Zeit der Kreuzzüge*, ed. A. Haverkamp, *Vorträge und Forschungen* herausgegeben vom Konstanzer Arbeitskreis für mittelalterliche Geschichte 47 (Sigmaringen, 1999), 209–31.

tility, a lively and open dialogue with the Christian milieu.⁵² In this context, the extremist religious pietism of the Ashkenazic Hasidism may also be seen as a kind of internalization of the world of Christian values, which may also account for their mighty effort to defend themselves against its influence. As Jeremy Cohen has noted, “What is common to Jewish and Christian culture in the Middle Ages is just as impressive as the appeals of members of those cultures to alien values outside their culture. That is, those cultures were more complex than is usually supposed, and the channels between the two were always open in both directions, even in times of crisis and conflict between them.”⁵³

The widespread image, in research and among the general public, of Ashkenazic Jewry as being cut off from the Christian milieu, reflects two very modern points of view. One expresses the influence of the modern urban metropolis, whose dimensions and density are radically different from the tiny dimensions of the medieval city. Modern people have no difficulty imagining minority groups living in closed ghettos, maintaining their own internal subculture and subsociety, zealously preserving their uniqueness. In the bastion of ultratraditional Orthodoxy in Jerusalem’s Meah Shearim quarter—which is certainly as intolerant as a typical medieval city—stands the Church of Saint Peter of the Finnish messianic congregation, and those ultra-Orthodox Jews going to their *stiblach* (little prayer houses) do not have a clue about what is going on within the church right under their noses, and vice versa. But this kind of mutual alienation found in modern cities could not have existed in the intimacy of the medieval city. The assumption that human beings living in such compact and dense neighborhoods, practically on top of one another, in a city whose tumult consisted of human voices and not automobiles would not recognize or know or hear what was happening beyond the walls of their houses is implausible. The burden of proof rests on anyone who argues that. In this respect as well we

52. This has long been recognized by art historians such as J. Gutmann, “When the Kingdom Comes: Messianic Themes in Medieval Jewish Art,” *Art Journal* 27 (1967–68): 173–75; Gutman, “The Messiah at the Seder: A Fifteenth-Century Motif in Jewish Art,” *Raphael Mahler Jubilee Volume* (Tel Aviv, 1974), 29–38. But this view has not been adequately accepted among historians, perhaps because the place of art in the everyday life of Ashkenazic Jewry has not been fully clarified. Or perhaps art is still considered a non-normative manifestation of Jewish religious life in the Middle Ages.

53. Cohen (n. 49, p. 000), 205.

need to change our point of departure and assume—as long as it has not been proven to the contrary—that religious ceremonies and texts used by one side were known to the other.

Another consideration that led past scholarship to consider Ashkenazic religious culture as closed and immune to outside influences was the modernization and Westernization of Jewish identity. For both modernizers and traditionalists, the Westernization of the nineteenth century is understood as involving an abandonment of the old religious tradition. The religiosity of the Middle Ages is perceived by them as a reflection of contemporary Orthodoxy. As a result, religion has become identified with the rejection of Westernization. Paradoxically, it was in the more open and secular and less Christian world of the nineteenth century that religion was assigned the function of preserving the old world, sealing itself off from the temptations of its surroundings. But medieval religion was entirely different. Its function was not only to preserve the old world but also to offer a dynamic cultural framework that would absorb and express changing ideas and ideals. Religion in the Middle Ages did not turn its back on its environment, language, or symbols but, rather, it wished to incorporate them all. From this there followed its willingness to assimilate the spirit of the age, through its ability to plant a new seed in the guise of an ancient husk, as in the Talmudic saying that “whatever innovation a veteran scholar may introduce was already told to Moses at Sinai.”

All this should not blur the distinctions between then and now. Insofar as cooperation did exist between Jews and Christians, it proceeded mainly in the subconscious realms of the culture. During the Middle Ages there was no ideology of cooperation and mutual respect, no declared and conscious tolerance for the “other” and his culture. The “other” certainly had an influence, and but his presence was threatening. Even if the houses of Jews and Christians were very similar, they were separated by an invisible wall of hostility. By contrast, in recent generations we have seen an increased awareness of the common perspectives of different cultures and of the way in which human beings perceive the “other” living among them. It is this awareness that gives hope for greater tolerance and understanding in relations among individuals, communities, and nations.