

Torah in the Flesh

A New Reading of the Prologue of the Gospel of John as a Contribution to a Christology without Anti-Judaism

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Christian theology, in particular the doctrine on Christ, has for many centuries been infested with anti-Judaism. After Auschwitz, Christians are challenged to develop a Christology without anti-Judaism: a doctrine on Christ that does not deny but affirms the integrity and worth of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith. At the heart of Christology lies the doctrine of the incarnation, and at the source of this doctrine lies the prologue of the Gospel of John, in particular the short sentence: "And the word became flesh," or in the Greek original: καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο (Jn. 1:14). A new look at this central statement of Christian faith is therefore necessary.

The first question to be asked is: What is meant by "Word," by "Logos"? The hypothesis advanced in this paper is that in the prologue of John Logos is to be equated with Torah. Reasons for this hypothesis will first be given, then some thoughts will be offered on its theological consequences, especially with regard to the relation of the Church to the Jewish people.

Logos Equals Torah

The equation of Torah with divine Wisdom is well documented. According to E.E. Urbach,¹ the remnants of the Wisdom myth referring to Wisdom's pre-existence and its presence at the creation of the world were transferred to the Torah. In Proverbs 8:22 ff., Wisdom says:

The Lord created me as the beginning of His way, the first of His acts of old.... When He established the heavens, I was there.... When He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him, like a master workman [another reading is: as a little child], and I was

1. E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 287.

daily His delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and delighting in the sons of men.

This divine Wisdom, through which God has created the world and sustains and rules it, is equated in Sirach 24:23 (cf. verse 9) with the “Book of the Covenant of God Most High, the Law that Moses has prescribed for us as the heritage for the community of Jacob.” In Baruch 3:9–4:4, Wisdom, by whose means God laid the foundation of the world, inhabited it with animals and guided the stars, is equated with the Torah. Speaking about God, the text says (3:35–4:1):

This is our God; there is none to compare with Him. The whole way of knowledge He found out and gave to Jacob His servant and to Israel, whom He loved. Thereupon Wisdom appeared on earth and lived among men. She is the book of the commandments of God, the Law that stands forever.

In the same sense the rabbis spoke of the Torah as an instrument with which the world was created (Sifrei Deuteronomy 48; Avot 3:18). Philo identifies Wisdom (σοφία) with Logos, which he describes as cosmological principle in *De Opificio Mundi* 16–19,24. There he compares God with an architect building a city, who “makes first an outline in his mind and, as if in wax, models a city of the mind” and after this model builds a city in reality.

In like manner we must think of God. When He designed to found the Great City [i.e., the world], He first conceived its types, and from them composed a world of the Mind [κόσμος νοητός] and then using it as a model completed the world of the senses.... The world of the mind is nothing else than the word [λόγος] of God in the act of creating a world.”²

But we also find in Philo the identification of the Logos with the Torah with its positive and negative commandments. According to his *De Emigratione Abrahami* 130, “The Law [νόμος] is nothing else but the divine Logos prescribing what one should do and prohibiting what one should not do.”

There is a remarkable parallel between the midrash attributed to Rabbi Hoshayah (c.225 C.E.) in Genesis Rabbah 1:1 and the passage just quoted from Philo’s *De Opificio Mundi* on the Logos as cosmological principle, but in the Midrash it is the Torah. The midrashic statement expounds Proverbs 8:22 ff., quoted above, as follows:

The Torah says: “I was the instrument of the Holy One, blessed be He.” As a rule, when a human king builds a palace, he does not build it by himself, but calls in an architect, and the architect does not plan the building in his head, but he makes use of rolls and tablets to know how to make the rooms and wickets. Even so the Holy One, blessed be He, looked in the Torah and created the world. And the Torah declares [Genesis 1:1] “with ראשית [ראשית] ‘in the beginning,’ is here understood as ‘with the beginning’] God created,” and ראשית means none other than

2. Cf. C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1954), p. 67.

Torah, as it is said: "The Lord created me אלהים [as the beginning] of His way [Proverbs 8:22]."³

That Philo's conception of Logos has a real and profound analogy with the rabbinical understanding of Torah is recognized by Martin Hengel, who agrees in this regard with Kurt Schubert. While Schubert allows for the possibility of a direct dependence of the midrashic statement on Philo, Hengel is of the opinion that Philo and the Midrash draw on an early common tradition.⁴ Daniel E. Gershenson summarizes the usage of the concept of Logos as follows:

The Word of God (*devar Adonai*) appears in the Bible as divine teaching, i.e., medium of revelation and guidance, ...the instrument of creation...and the instrument that controls nature. The Word of the Lord is identified directly with Torah in Psalm 119 (passim), and the attributes of the Word or Torah (Psalm 89; 119) are ascribed to Wisdom in the first nine chapters of Proverbs. Indeed, Torah and Wisdom are identified in the apocryphal books Ben Sira (24:1–21, 22 ff.) and Wisdom of Solomon (6:18 ff.) in all the same aspects.... Philo applies the term logos, or the holy logos, to Scripture itself, i.e. the Law (*IV Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesis* 140; *Som.* 229).... It is sometimes the same as wisdom (I *L.A.* 65, etc.), because it is the most inclusive expression of the thoughts and ideas of God, which in turn are identified with the Law, or the Torah, with the pattern of all creation and with the law that directs and maintains all things. Philo's identification of logos with Wisdom and Torah parallels the identification of Torah and Wisdom and the Word of God in rabbinic literature, and conforms to the roles assigned to each in Scripture and rabbinic sources.⁵

C.H. Dodd recognized that it would be legitimate to identify Logos with Torah.⁶ Gerhard Kittel, too, saw a close connection between Logos and Torah in the prologue of John; quoting Otto Proksch, he considered the two terms to be interchangeable.⁷ Raymond E. Brown has stressed what he calls the "Semitic background" of the prologue's use of "the Word" and mentioned in this connection, among other things, the "Personified Wisdom" and the "Jewish speculation on the Law (Torah)."⁸ Dodd, Kittel and Brown, however, came to different conclusions from those outlined below.

If it is generally recognized that Wisdom equals Torah and that Wisdom equals Logos, it seems, on the grounds stated above, quite possible to close the triangle and conclude that Logos equals Torah. If a Jew heard about "The Word," ὁ λόγος, in such an absolute use, he could hardly help but think of the Torah. In John 10:35 γραφή (Scripture, i.e., the Torah), is placed in parallel with νόμος and λόγος; in John 5:38–39 τὸν λόγον is paralleled with τὰς γραφάς, and in John 15:25 we find the same combination of λόγος, νόμος and Scripture (ὁ

3. Cf. the translation by Urbach, op. cit., p. 199.

4. M. Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus* (Tübingen, 1979), p. 311; K. Schubert, *Die Religion des nachbiblischen Judentums* (Freiburg and Vienna, 1955), p. 19.

5. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 11, coll. 461 f.

6. Dodd, op. cit., p. 273; see also pp. 85 ff.

7. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 4, pp. 138 f., also p. 100.

8. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (repr. London, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 520 ff.

λόγος ὁ ἐν τῷ νόμῳ αὐτῶν γεγραμμένος). These verses from the Gospel of John itself provide support for the equation of Logos and Torah. Further support is found in the combination of the verb τηρέω (“to observe”) with λόγος, as τηρέω is frequently used in connection with words for commandments or prescribed festivals. See John 8:51, 52, 55; 14:23 f.; 15:20; 17:7; 1 John 2:5.

A Translation of the Prologue

In the following a translation of the prologue of John is proposed, based on the understanding of Logos as Torah in the broad meaning indicated in the above quotation from Gershenson, namely, the Torah revealed to Moses on Sinai, which is at the same time the means or the instrument with which the world has been created and is maintained. An important key word is ἐγένετο (or derivatives from the same stem). It means “came into being,” “became,” “came to pass.” For the sake of using the same word throughout the translation, it is translated as “emerged.” In order to put the equation of Logos and Torah into relief, λόγος is translated as “Torah.”

- (1) In the beginning was the Torah,
and the Torah was toward God,
and Godlike⁹ was the Torah.
- (2) It was this which was in the beginning toward God.
- (3) All things emerged through it,
and apart from it not one thing emerged.
- (4) What has emerged in [or: through] it, was life,
and the life was the light of the human beings.
- (5) And the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not take it away.
- (6) There emerged a human being sent forth from God,
his name was John.
- (7) It was he who came to witness,
in order that he witnessed about the light, in order that
through him all would be faithful.
- (8) Not he was the light, but [he was there]
in order that he witnessed about the light.

9. The word order makes the traditional translation “and the Word was God” unlikely. In that case we would have expected καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν ὁ θεός. Brown (op. cit.) remarks in his commentary on this verse that the grammatical rule that predicate nouns generally lack the article cannot be invoked here to prove that an identity of λόγος and θεός is meant, since the “I am” formulae (Jn. 11:25, 14:6, etc.) that imply identity, and to which “the Word was...” in the prologue is akin, have the article. Philo makes a clear distinction between ὁ θεός (with article) and θεός (without article). The former is God Himself, the source of divinity, with which Philo never identifies the λόγος. The latter, however, is used by Philo to indicate the λόγος, understood as the divine energy working in the world. I have therefore chosen “Godlike” for the translation, although even this is not entirely satisfactory. The New English Bible paraphrases: “What God was, the Word was.”

- (9) [The Torah]¹⁰ was the true light that enlightens
each human being coming into the world.
- (10) In the world it was,
and the world emerged through it,
and the world did not recognize it.
- (11) To that which was its own, it came,
and those who were its own, did not take it up.
- (12) But whoever took it, to those it gave power
to emerge as children of God,
to those who were being faithful to His Name:
- (13) not from blood, nor from the desire of flesh, nor from the
desire of man, but from God they have been caused to emerge.
- (14) And the Torah emerged as flesh
and tabernacled among us —
and we beheld the glory of it,
glory as of an only one from Father —
[it — the Torah — was] full of grace-and-truth.
- (15) John witnesses about it and has shouted saying:
it was this of which I said:
“The one who is coming after me has emerged before me,
because my principal he was,”
- (16) because out of its fullness we all took
even grace upon grace,
- (17) because the Law was given through Moses.
The-grace-and-the-truth emerged through Jesus Christ.
- (18) God — nobody has ever seen Him.
As an only son,¹¹ ever at the Father’s bosom,
it was he who showed the way.

Jesus Christ: Torah in the Flesh

The prologue is a poem with a forward movement building up tension toward a climax at the end: “the-grace-and-truth emerged through Jesus Christ.” Let us see how it develops verse by verse.

It starts with “in the beginning,” ἐν ἀρχῇ, which in the Septuagint of Genesis 1:1 corresponds to בְּרֵאשִׁית; thus it recalls the already quoted midrashic statement on Proverbs 8:22 ff. (“The Lord created me as the beginning of His way....”) in Genesis Rabbah 1:1: “The Torah says ‘I was the instrument of the Holy One, blessed be He’ ...He looked in the Torah and created the world.”

10. This translation follows Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (16th ed., Göttingen, 1959), pp. 31 f., who considers verse 9 as the direct continuation of verse 5, such that the subject of the sentence is ὁ λόγος and τὸ φῶς is its predicate.

11. Here the reading μονογενῆς υἱός has been chosen. If one prefers the reading μονογενῆς θεός, the verse might be translated: “As a unique divine being, ever at the Father’s bosom, it was he who showed the way.” There are many authorities for both textual variants.

The poem continues (verses 2–5) in the style of the Wisdom literature to speak about the life-and-light-giving qualities of the Logos, Wisdom or the Torah. Suddenly, however, there is a break in the flow of the poem (verses 6–9) which in effect heightens the tension: there appears a person with the name of John, playing the role of a messenger, who witnesses to the divine light calling people to be faithful to the Torah.

The movement then continues and, in the style of the Wisdom literature, dwells on how God's Logos, Wisdom or Torah was received by the world. This part (verses 9–13) recalls Sirach 24:4 ff. where Wisdom is described as wandering through the world looking for a place where it can dwell, until it finds a foothold among the People of Israel, or Baruch 3:20 ff. which describes how even the rulers of the world and the great artists did not grasp the true wisdom, which was only revealed by God to the People of Israel and was then accepted by them. The tradition preserved in bAvodah Zarah 2b also comes to mind, which says that God "offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it until He came to Israel who received it."

Accordingly, when the poem speaks (verse 12) of those to whom the Torah "gave power to emerge as children of God" because they "took" the Torah and "were being faithful to God's name," it should be understood as referring to the Israelites who received God's Torah and became loyal to it. The poem is echoing numerous scriptural passages in which the Israelites are called "children of God," such as Deuteronomy 14:1 which is cited in Avot 3:18: "Beloved are Israel, for they were called children of the all-present.... Beloved are Israel, for to them was given the desirable instrument...through which the world was created, for 'I give you good doctrine, forsake you not my Torah' [Proverbs 4:2]." Here the cosmological significance of the Torah appears again. The Israelites are also called "children of God" in Deuteronomy 32:5 f., 20, Wisdom of Solomon 2:13, 16, 18 and elsewhere.

At the same time, however, the poem emphasizes that it is not restricting itself to those Israelites who are physical descendants of Jacob. Allegiance to the Torah is "not from blood" (verse 13); it transcends racial descent, as those who are obedient to the Torah are God's children — "from God they have been caused to emerge." Here the poem may reflect the spreading of the Torah of Israel among the peoples around the Mediterranean Sea, transcending racial and political boundaries. Josephus writes about the spread of the Torah in *Against Apion* 2:282: "As God permeates the universe, so the Law has found its way among all humankind."¹² (These converts, too, could begin the daily recital of the Eighteen Benedictions with: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God and the God of *our fathers*, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob....")

Traditionally, the contrast between those who "did not take it up" (verse 11) and those who "took it" (verse 12) has been understood as contrasting Jews with Christians. Instead, we see that it concerns the situation that had developed before the emergence of Jesus Christ. The latter event is announced, al-

12. Quoted by J. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York and Oxford, 1983), p. 61.

beit still in enigmatic terms, only in the next section of the poem: "And the Torah emerged as flesh and tabernacled among us...full of grace and truth" (verse 14). In this connection (*ibid.*), there is also reference to the "glory," the כבוד.

But before the veil of the secret is lifted, the flow is again interrupted by another reference to John (verse 15), who is portrayed as God's messenger witnessing about the Torah and its life and light. The Torah is then connected with someone whose name is not yet mentioned but in an enigmatic way only hinted at: someone who is coming after John, but has emerged before him and whom he recognized as his *πρῶτος* ("first"), his "principal." The poem leaves no doubt that the Torah was prior to John: since "the Law" (verse 16) was given through Moses on Sinai, not only John, but "we all" have received "grace upon grace out of the fullness" of the Torah. Then suddenly (verse 17), without any connecting conjunction, the veil is lifted, the secret is made known, and the person who until now was only hinted at, is openly called by his name: "The-grace-and-the-truth emerged through Jesus Christ."

We must pay attention to the fact that the verb following "the-grace-and-the-truth" is in the singular, not in the plural, which means that grace-and-truth is seen as a hendiadys, as one single concept denoted by a pair of terms. Indeed, the corresponding Hebrew phrase, חסד ואמת, occurs no less than fifteen times in the Hebrew Bible, generally as such a single concept and often in reference to God.

In this poem, the expression appears for the first time in connection with the word "glory" (verse 14), while its second appearance (verse 17) is followed by the statement that "nobody has ever seen God" (verse 18). These two connections suggest that although "grace-and-truth" occurs often in the Hebrew Bible, in the poem it must be understood in the context of the story of the revelation of God's glory to Moses after the restoration of the Tables of the Torah (Ex. 33 and 34). Moses asked God to show His glory, but God answered him: "You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live." Then God let His glory pass before Moses and Moses saw God's back, not His face. Moreover, among the words then spoken by God was the expression "full of grace-and-truth" (Ex. 34:6), which is echoed exactly in the poem (verse 14).¹³ Thus the invisibility of God, the appearance of God's glory after the restoration of the Tables of the Torah, and the words "full of grace-and-truth" all suggest a conscious reference in the poem to that theophany to Moses.

Against this background, verses 14–17 are to be understood as follows: The glory of the Torah was seen when the Torah emerged as flesh, as a human person in Jesus Christ. Through him emerged the grace-and-truth which is inherent in the Torah; as Psalm 25 says, all the paths of the Lord (on which He leads people through His Torah) are "grace and truth." What happened in Jesus Christ is of the same rank as the passing of the glory of God, "full of grace-and-truth," before Moses after the restoration of the Tables of the Torah. The

13. The Greek of Jn. 1:14 does not correspond exactly to the Septuagint of Exodus 34:6, but in any case the term חסד ואמת is translated variably in the Septuagint.

Torah emerging as flesh, as a human being in Jesus Christ, is analogous to what Moses experienced when God let His glory pass before Him.

Verse 17 has almost always been understood as presenting the contrast between Law and grace, as if it read: "The Law was given through Moses, but the grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." In the Greek text, however, there is no word that can justify a translation with "but." No contrast is implied. Rather this verse should be read in connection with the preceding verse: "out of its fullness we all took even grace upon grace" (χάριυν ἀντὶ χάριτος). God gives one grace after the other: First, out of the fullness of the Torah, we could receive the Mosaic legislation, and then we could receive out of the Torah's fullness its glory, its grace-and-truth as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The revelation of the glory of the Torah as grace-and-truth in Jesus Christ is of as great an order as the revelation of God's glory at Sinai. Following that revelation, the glory of God also filled the Tabernacle, in which stood the Ark of the Covenant containing the Torah. What happened then happens again now in the person of Jesus Christ. This understanding seems to be echoed in the earlier words of the poem, "and the Torah tabernacled among us" (verse 14).

Bultmann, who follows in his commentary the common view that verse 17 presents the contrast between Law and grace, admits that this contrast is otherwise foreign to the Gospel of John and that in no way do verses 14 and 16 lead us to expect such a contrast. Elsewhere in the Gospel (10:35), indeed, it is plainly stated that "the Scripture cannot be unbound" (οὐ δύναται λυθῆναι ἡ γραφή), it cannot be deprived of its binding character. (This reminds us of Matthew 5:17: "Think not that I have come to unbind the Law and Prophets; I have not come to unbind, but to implement.") Bultmann surmises, therefore, that verse 17 comes from the Pauline school.

Returning to verse 14, "the Torah emerged as flesh" (καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο) signifies that it emerged as a person of flesh and blood (בשר ודם, the Hebrew idiom for a human being). The Torah was embodied, personified in Jesus Christ. He was the Torah in the flesh, the Torah in person. That such a notion would not have seemed far-fetched to the first readers of the Gospel can be shown from a passage in Philo. At the end of his *Book on Abraham* (*De Abrahamo* 276), he sums up what he had written about the patriarch: "This life of the first and founder of the nation is, as some would say, agreeable...to the Law, but, as my discourse has shown, it is Law itself and an unwritten code." That is, the Law (the Torah) is embodied in Abraham.

The same notion is familiar in Hellenistic philosophy¹⁴ and also has parallels in rabbinic literature. For example, when Eliezer ben Hyrkanos was gravely

14. Aristotle declares that there is no law with respect to persons that excel in virtue, because "such a one may truly be termed a god among men" and "they themselves are a law" (*Politics* III 13, 1284a 3 ff.). A related idea occurs in Book IV of Plato's *Laus* as Malcolm Lowe has drawn to my attention: The State can come closest to the Age of Cronus, when humankind enjoyed sound law, internal concord and happiness under the rule of divine spirits, if it is governed by an autocrat of supremely good character. The right laws issue naturally from the mind of such a legislator. "When supreme power is combined in one person with wisdom and temperance, then, and on no other conditions conceivable, nature gives birth to the best of constitutions with the best of laws" (*Laus*, 711-712, A.E. Taylor tr.). Such a person, Plato adds,

ill, his disciples said that a scroll of the Torah lay in distress (bSanhedrin 101a). Eliezer was, so to speak, a living Torah scroll; he embodied the Torah.

Jesus, then, is the Torah in the flesh and as such he “showed the way” (ἐξηγήσατο, verse 18). The common translation, “The only son...has made Him [the Father] known,” is implausible because no object follows the verb. It is more likely that the verb must be taken in its simple original meaning: to show the way as does a leader (ἡγεμών; see Liddel and Scott, s.v.). Josephus uses the word in the sense of expounding the Law (*War* 1:694, 2:162; *Antiquities* 18:81),¹⁵ so that it may have a halakhic connotation of showing the right way according to the Torah.

The expression “glory as of an only one from Father” (δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, verse 14) is a further echo of notions that find expression in the Wisdom literature. An example is Wisdom of Solomon 7:22, where it is said that there is a spirit in Wisdom which is the “only one” of its kind (μονογενής); it is added (7:22) that Wisdom is “an emanation clear as sunlight from the glory of the Almighty” (ἀπόρροια τῆς τοῦ παντοκράτορος δόξης εὐλακρινής).

Accordingly, after the poem has revealed the name of Jesus Christ as the one through whom the grace and the truth inherent in the Torah have emerged (verse 17), it presents Jesus as the Teacher of Torah in the Book of Proverbs. That is, the words “as an only (μονογενής) son, ever at the Father’s bosom, it was he who showed the way” (verse 18) seem to reflect Proverbs 4:2–3: “Do not forsake my Torah; when I was a son with my father, the only one (ἕν) in the sight of my mother, he taught me.” (Although the Septuagint has ἀγαπώμενος for ἕν in this verse, the Greek versions of Aquila and Symmachus render it as μονογενής.) As the embodiment of the Torah, Jesus is, in the prologue of John — and in the whole Gospel — the authoritative Teacher of Torah and its ultimate interpreter.

In verse 14 it is Torah, or Wisdom, that seems to be referred to as “only” (μονογενής), whereas in verse 18 the Teacher of Torah seems to be thus termed. Since the Torah is embodied in Jesus Christ as its authoritative Teacher, the same epithet “only” can signify both the Torah and the Teacher by whom it is personified. The Johannine Jesus is indeed first and foremost the great Teacher. He is several times called “rabbi,” with the Hebrew word transcribed in Greek, in the Gospel. An example is John 3:2, where Nicodemus

should also be put in charge of religious observances, for “he that is temperate among us is loved by God, for he is like God” (ibid., 716).

Plutarch comes very close to the notion discussed here. Speaking about the true philosopher, he says that the λόγος is not written in outward books or on some wooden tablets, but is ἔμψυχος (“living,” literally “ensouled”) in such a man: ἔμψυχος ὢν ἐν αὐτῷ λόγος (*Ad Principem Ineruditum* 3:1, Wyttenbach ed., 780c). In a similar vein, C. Musonius Rufus (Hense ed., p. 37, 2 ff.) speaks of the king as a manifestation of the eternal cosmic law and calls him νόμος ἔμψυχος (“a living law”). Cf. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 4, pp. 1925 ff. In this context Romans 2:14 is an interesting parallel: “When gentiles, not having Law, do by nature the things of the Law, they, not having Law, are Law to themselves.”

15. *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 2 (s.v.).

addresses Jesus with the words: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God."

The Authoritative Interpretation of the Torah

What fruit does this analysis yield in terms of a Christology without anti-Judaism? At first sight very little, because it seems that this interpretation of the prologue of the Gospel of John also belongs to a replacement Christology, in which Jesus appears as the new and better Torah replacing the Torah given to Israel. Many terms traditionally designating the Torah are indeed applied to Jesus in the Gospel. The best known text is: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me" (Jn. 14:6). "Way," "Truth" and "Life" are common descriptions of the Torah. Here Jesus seems to claim to be Torah, indeed the Torah in person, Torah in the flesh. Eternal life, in Judaism mediated through the Torah, is in John mediated through Jesus.

Many more quotations can be given to support the assumption that Jesus came to replace the Torah. As these have been rehearsed for many centuries, there is no point in doing this again. According to John, moreover, Moses wrote about Jesus, and if the Jews would understand their own Scriptures, they would have to admit that the claims of the Johannine Jesus are true (Jn. 5:39–47).

At a closer look, however, some facts deserve attention. Nowhere does the Gospel of John say that the Mosaic Torah has been abolished. On the contrary, Scripture cannot be unbound (αυθηναί: Jn. 10:35, already quoted), it cannot lose its binding character.

A more specific affirmation of the Torah concerns observance of the Sabbath. Verses such as John 5:18, where Jesus' opponents want to have him put to death on the charge that he has unbound (ἔλυεν) the Sabbath, because he allowed a man whom he had healed on the Sabbath to carry his pallet, have been understood as if the Johannine Jesus abolishes Sabbath observance altogether. Elsewhere, however, it is made clear that Jesus and his critics simply differed on what is permitted and what is forbidden on the Sabbath. In John 7:22–23 Jesus is involved in a halakhic dispute that makes sense only on the basis of his acceptance of the binding character of the Sabbath commandment. Jesus argues that it is permissible to heal a person on the Sabbath with a logic according to the rabbinic rule of קל וחומר (literally "light and heavy," here the inference is a *minori ad maius*): If the Torah permits circumcision on the Sabbath, involving only a part of the body, then a *fortiori* it is permitted to heal the whole person on the Sabbath. This argument was indeed also put forward by rabbis who lived in the period when the Gospel was written, as Dodd points out by quoting similar statements by Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos and Eleazar ben Azariah, Tannaites of the Second Generation (c. 80–120 C.E.).¹⁶

16. See the quotations of sayings of R. Eliezer Ben Hyrkanus in tShabbat 15:16 (Zuckerman ed., p. 134) and of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah in bYoma 85a–b, given by Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 79. Also the section on *qal wa-homer* in the article by A.J. Hobbel in this volume.

Another example of the affirmation of the Mosaic Torah is found in the story of the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4). Here the controversy surfaces between the adherents of the Samaritan Torah and the Jewish Torah. Jesus, who in this story is identified by the Samaritan woman as a Jew (4:9), says to her: "You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know, we [Jews] worship what we know, because the salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). He apparently means that messianic salvation is based on the Jewish Torah, but will include a manner of worship "in spirit and truth" (4:23). These words seem to refer to the worship practiced in the Johannine community.¹⁷

Dealing with the question whether the Christian doctrine of the incarnation has anti-Jewish implications, one cannot ignore the horrible passages in John 8 directed against Ἰουδαῖοι, whether this means Jews in general or Judeans or some other more specific group.¹⁸ Nor can one ignore John 9, where a lengthy dispute with Ἰουδαῖοι is recorded. Both chapters seem to reflect a bitter conflict in which the majority of a Jewish community had excommunicated those who professed Jesus to be the Messiah, probably the Johannine community or its prominent leaders. "For the Ἰουδαῖοι had agreed that whoever confessed him to be the Messiah should be put out of the synagogue" (ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται, Jn. 9:22). Thus the venomous words about the Ἰουδαῖοι of John 8 must be understood as the strong reaction of members of the Johannine community against their expulsion from the synagogue. Here we have a sharp inner-Jewish dispute, not unlike the one between the Qumran community and the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem.

John 9 offers a clue about what was at stake in the conflict. The Ἰουδαῖοι say: "We are disciples of Moses...but we do not know where this one [Jesus] comes from" (9:28-29). The issue under debate apparently concerned the source of authority with regard to binding interpretations of the Torah. In rabbinic Judaism, to which the Ἰουδαῖοι owed allegiance, the authority to lay down halakhic rulings was put into the hands of those who had been authorized to do so by their teachers in a line of succession of teachers going back to Moses. This is expressed in the opening of the mishnaic tractate Pirquei Avot:

Moses received Torah from Sinai and delivered it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and prophets delivered it to the men of the great synagogue. These said three things: "Be deliberate in

17. That it is a worship "neither on this hill nor in Jerusalem" (4:21) may reflect a situation after the destruction of the Second Temple. Admittedly, the synagogue worship that already existed before the destruction could legitimately be termed a worship in spirit and truth. It is not very likely, however, that this is meant, given the polemical trend of the Gospel of John toward the Pharisees. There may be some connection with the pre-destruction criticism of the Temple found in the writings of the Qumran community. Note, too, that the Revelation of John (21:22) says in its vision of the New Jerusalem: "And I did not see a temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, is its temple, and the Lamb." Brown is of the opinion in his commentary (op. cit.) that Jn. 4 reflects a stage in the development of the Johannine community when a Samaritan group that was critical of the Temple joined the community.

18. For the argument that in the Gospel of John Ἰουδαῖοι mostly means Judeans, see Malcolm Lowe, "Who Were the Ἰουδαῖοι?" *Novum Testamentum* 18 (1976), 101-130.

judgment, and raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.” (Avot 1:1)

The expression “We are disciples of Moses” (Jn. 9:28, see above) reminds us of this opening verse of Avot. The Johannine community apparently did not submit to these “disciples” of Moses who claimed authority to lay down halakhic rulings or “judgment” (דִּינָה), the technical term for such a ruling. It maintained that Jesus had been authorized directly by God to lay down such rulings, as is stated in John 5:26–27: “The Father...has given him [Jesus] the authority to make judgment,” that is, to lay down halakhic rulings and to give binding interpretations of the Torah. Likewise, in John 7:24 Jesus ends his halakhic argument to justify healing on the Sabbath by telling his critics: “Do not judge by appearance, but judge with right judgment.” This resembles the injunction of Pirquei Avot, just quoted, to “be deliberate in judgment.” Jesus’ authority is also expressed in John 3:34–36:

For he whom God has sent, utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hands. Who is faithful to the Son has eternal life. Who is disobedient to the Son shall not see life, but God’s wrath remains on him.

“Giving all things into the hands of the Son” probably means putting in his hands the power to make authoritative decisions regarding the interpretation of the Torah. In rabbinic Judaism this power lay in the hands of the rabbis who formed a leadership authorized by tradition to rule on matters of Halakhah by majority decision. According to the Johannine community, however, this power had been directly bestowed by the Father on Jesus, bypassing “the disciples of Moses.” Expressed in general terms, the conflict between the Johannine community and the *ῥηδαιολογοί* was apparently a conflict between a charismatic leadership derived directly from God and a tradition-oriented leadership based on majority decisions of the authorized scholars of Torah.

This brings to mind a famous conflict between two rabbis who were approximate contemporaries of the Johannine community (bBava Metzia 59a–b). Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos sought to convince Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah on the question how Halakhah, i.e., binding law, was to be determined on a certain matter. In support of his claim to have authority to decide, Rabbi Eliezer performed miracles and even appealed to heaven for confirmation. Immediately, a heavenly voice (בַּת קוֹל) answered: “Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the Halakhah agrees with him?” Rabbi Joshua retorted that the Torah itself states that it is “not in heaven” (Deut. 30:12). The Talmud, quoting Rabbi Jeremiah, takes this to mean that neither a miracle nor even the testimony of a heavenly voice is admissible for the determination of Halakhah, but only the majority decision of the duly authorized sages.¹⁹ It goes on to relate that Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated over the incident.

19. Nonetheless, in another famous case it was precisely a heavenly voice that was decisive (bEruvin 13b). Three years of disputes between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, the two leading rabbinic schools, were ended only when a heavenly voice cried out: “These and these are the words of the living God, but the Halakhah is according to Beit Hillel.” Immediately afterwards, however, the Talmud brings a contrasting

It seems that the Johannine faction within the Jewish community based itself, too, on the claim that Jesus had received authorization directly from heaven. In John 12:28, a heavenly voice responds immediately to Jesus' appeal to the Father to "glorify my name." According to John 3:34: "He whom the Father has sent speaks the words of God," that is, his rulings come straight from God.²⁰ After Jesus' glorification, it was the Holy Spirit who took his place: "He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn. 14:26), and "he will guide you into all the truth" (Jn. 16:13). The Johannine community thus claimed to have inherited, through the action of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' authority to speak in the name of God. This attitude would have made the Johannine community unacceptable to the majority of the Jewish community in which it found itself and would have led to its excommunication, just as Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated.

According to this understanding of the Gospel of John, the Torah is embodied in Jesus and he is the Torah in the flesh and thus its authoritative interpreter, indeed the unique human being who gives halakhic rules proceeding directly from God. Therefore there is no reason to suppose that in the view of the Johannine community Jesus did away with the Torah. On the contrary, Jesus even appeals to Moses in his conflict with his opponents, saying that they are unfaithful to the Torah (Jn. 7:19). The Johannine community thus put Jesus' interpretation of the Torah and his halakhic rulings in opposition to the majority decisions of the rabbis. The Gospel of John reflects that conflict in those arguments between Jesus and ῥουδαῖοι which concern matters of Halakhah.²¹

Jesus' Oral Torah

What does this mean in respect of the attempt to develop a doctrine of the incarnation which is not a denial of, nor even a threat to, the integrity and validity of Jewish faith? Although the Gospel of John holds the Torah in high esteem, it seems of no great help to this attempt, because it clearly excludes the possibility of developing a Christology or a doctrine of the incarnation that recognizes the legitimacy of rabbinic Judaism. This is not because rabbinic Judaism is halakhic, but because rabbinic Judaism would never recognize Jesus, or indeed any single human individual, as the unique halakhic authority. There is a strong exclusivist tone in John: "No one comes to the Father but through me" (14:6); "Who is disobedient to the Son shall not see life, but God's wrath remains on him" (3:36).

report: The two schools were in dispute for two and a half years about whether or not it were better for a human being not to have been created, until they ended up by taking a vote on a compromise.

20. Compare "words of the living God" in the previous note.

21. It should be emphasized that although these arguments more than once threatened Jesus' life, the Gospel of John does not make them the cause of the crucifixion. Rather it was the fear that "everyone will believe in him [Jesus] and the Romans will come and sweep away us and this place and the nation" and the argument that "it is better for one man to die for the people than that the whole nation should be destroyed" (Jn. 11:48-50).

Or is this too quick a conclusion? One should look at the whole picture. In Pharisaic and rabbinic Judaism, the Written Torah is applied, interpreted and, in exceptional cases, even overruled by the Oral Torah, the living tradition of the authoritative reception of the Torah by the community. This Oral Torah has such a high rank that it is given equal honor to the Written Torah, and is presumed also to have been given to Moses on Sinai. In the Gospel of John, Jesus — and after his glorification the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete) — provides the Oral Torah. Jesus is therefore given the same rank as the Torah itself, and thus can be called the Torah in the flesh, the incarnate Word of God. The Johannine community sees the issue between itself and other Jews as: Which Oral Torah is the valid one and is to be adhered to? It rejects the Pharisaic Oral Torah in favor of the Oral Torah given by Jesus, saying: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (6:68).

But what is the content of Jesus’ Oral Torah, of the Torah embodied in Jesus? Jesus speaks many times in the Gospel of John about his commandments. This very fact is an important support for the hypothesis that the Logos in the prologue of John is to be understood as Torah. But with regard to the specific content of his commandments, only rather general statements on loving one another are given, virtually no concrete injunctions. It is as if one were to read from the Book of Deuteronomy only the first eleven chapters, containing the background and the conditions connected with the giving of the Torah, but to stop before chapter 12, which begins: “These are the statutes and ordinances which you shall be careful to do in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess.”

If Jesus so much emphasizes his commandments, what are they? If “the Scripture cannot be unbound” (Jn. 10:35), then these commandments can be none other than those contained in the Torah, but they receive, according to John, their true and authoritative interpretation through Jesus. Yet, when one looks for specifics of this interpretation, one remains in the dark. The only exception in John’s account is Jesus’ interpretation of the Sabbath commandment mentioned above. Yet even this supposed exception accords with the halakhic ruling of certain rabbis, based on just the same reasoning as is given by Jesus.²²

Jesus emphasizes the newness of one of his commandments: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn. 3:34). It is further elaborated in John 15:12: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I loved you. Greater love has nobody than this, that one lays down one’s life for one’s friends.”

But what is new about this commandment in comparison with Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself”? Although the novelty of Jesus’ teaching is often seen to lie in the saying “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44), here in the Gospel of John only love for one’s circle of friends is mentioned. Perhaps the new element is giving one’s life for one’s friends, or perhaps it is loving “even as I have loved you.”

22. See note 16 above.

Looking for more specifics of Jesus' Oral Torah, we may turn to the other Gospels, especially that of Matthew. Here too, however, the content of Jesus' Oral Torah does not seem to be so radically different as to justify the accompanying anti-Jewish polemic. The reasons for this hostile sentiment seem to lie elsewhere.

If Jesus is the embodiment of the Torah, the Torah in the flesh, can then the *imitatio Christi* bring people closer to the Oral Torah of Jesus? The notion of the imitation of Christ contains a mystical component, which may be present in John 6:53 ff.: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...." If Jesus is the Torah in the flesh, if in him the Torah emerges as flesh and blood (בשר ודם, i.e., as a human person), then "eating his flesh" and "drinking his blood" may indicate the communion with Christ through which a person is imbued with the Torah and is brought to living a life in accordance with the way the Torah was embodied in Jesus.

But it is important to keep in mind that there is in the Gospel of John — as in the other Gospels — no specific content of Jesus' Oral Torah that clearly contradicts the rabbinic Oral Torah. It may well be that the Gospels provide an incomplete picture of tensions and controversies between the early, mainly Jewish Christian communities and those factions in Judaism that accepted the Pharisaic Oral Torah and rabbinic authority. The Gospel of John seems to be a very Jewish Gospel, written by and addressed to Jews who took Jesus for the embodiment of the Torah.²³ It reflects a fierce and rather ugly debate between groups within a Jewish community over the true interpretation and application of the Torah. In the light of Jesus' repeated reference to his commandments, it is quite possible that the Johannine community, as a community of Jews committed to the Torah, had on the basis of Jesus' Oral Torah developed a Halakhah that was opposed by the Pharisaic community.

Torah as Paradigm for Today's Gentile Church

So far the discussion has been an attempt to elucidate the significance of the prologue to the Gospel of John for the early Christian community whose faith it expressed. Before attempting to draw consequences for our contemporary situation, we must first acknowledge how much, and not merely many centuries, separates us from that community.

Today the Church is overwhelmingly gentile in membership and has gradually eliminated all Christian forms of Judaism from its midst. It is very different from the Johannine community with its Jewish membership and its particular Halakhah, whose validity was not ascribed to Pharisaic or rabbinic tradition, but to him who was proclaimed to be the Torah in the flesh, the one through whom the grace and the truth inherent in the Torah had appeared

23. The Gospel gives only slight hints concerning the inclusion of gentiles in the Church, e.g., when Jesus says that he has "other sheep that are not of this fold" (10:16) and when there is mention of "some Greeks" (12:20). Moreover, both of these references could conceivably be not to gentiles at all but to Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews. This seems to be the meaning of Jn. 7:35: "Is he about to go to the Diaspora of the Greeks and to teach the Greeks?"

and to whom the authoritative interpretation of the Torah was given. This appearance was as significant as the appearance of the divine glory to Moses after the Tablets of the Torah, and thus the covenant, were restored. The Johannine community felt that it had been given the final and definitive interpretation of the Torah in the words of eternal life (Jn. 6:68) spoken by Jesus.

That community of Jews, however, existed for only a limited period.²⁴ Consequently, its dispute with what became rabbinic Judaism is no longer of concern for the present. The sharp controversy that is reflected in the Gospel of John need not burden any more our relations with the Jewish people.

Can anything, then, remain for us of that ancient and short-lived community's understanding of Torah? Paul decided that the Mosaic Torah was not meant for gentile Christians, but that they had been given access to the God of Israel apart from the framework of the Torah, since the biblical promise that Abraham would become the father of many nations had been fulfilled in Christ. He used the argument that God's promise to Abraham was unrelated to the Torah revealed to Moses and was even prior to the commandment of circumcision. Therefore, Paul taught that gentile Christians had not to be concerned about the question of how to relate to the Torah, even though his epistles abound with commandments for them to observe.

However, both the Epistles of Paul and the Gospel of John entered the Christian scriptural canon. Against the Marcionites, who pursued one line in Paul's thinking to an extreme, the Church Fathers made the conscious decision to keep the Torah in their canon and to declare that it, too, was meant for gentile Christians. Their general tendency, however, was to deal with the Torah, now incorporated in what was called the "Old Testament," as a text that in an allegorical or typological way could be seen to say what the Church confessed about Christ. Moreover, they used this text to legitimize the Church's status and to support its claim to be the true heir of God's Covenant with Israel, to the exclusion of the Jewish people.

Both the Roman Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council, and numerous Protestant churches have now explicitly given up that exclusivist claim. What Christological implications might the above interpretation of the prologue of John have in today's situation?

If Christ is the embodiment of the Torah, then also gentile Christians, as members of the Body of Christ, are intimately associated with the Torah. But they cannot construe that association in a framework of rabbinic Judaism. Certainly the Torah was given to Israel at Sinai in order to be implemented to its

24. R.E. Brown surmises that it was soon internally divided into various factions which fought one another tooth and nail, gradually disappearing from history as a separate identity. About the year 90 it began to admit gentiles. The faction whose views have been preserved in the Epistles of John subsequently merged with the Apostolic Church, which already had a very large gentile membership. Another faction moved to the heretical communities of the Docetists, Gnostics and Montanists. See R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York and Toronto, 1979), pp. 145 f. Even if those guesses are incorrect, however, the Johannine community clearly soon lost its original identity and became only one of the numerous ancestors of the fourth-century Catholic Church.

fullest extent in the Land of Israel. Gentile Christians, however, are not members of the People of Israel, nor are they linked to the Land of Israel. They belong to other nations and live in other lands.

Thus if gentile Christians are to take seriously the notion that the Lord Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the Torah and that his Spirit is also with them today to guide them into all truth, they must find a form of access to the Torah outside the frame of reference of rabbinic Judaism. They must develop an attitude and an approach to the Torah in accordance with their situation as non-Jews, who do not belong to the People of Israel and for whom the Land of Israel is not the Land of Promise.

A well-known midrash states that God offered the Torah from Sinai to all nations, but that only Israel accepted it.²⁵ In these terms, one may say that through the creation of the Church from the gentiles, the Torah was again offered to the nations of the world, but now accepted by those among them who confessed Jesus as the Christ, as the Torah in the flesh.

According to that midrash, when God offered the Torah to the world at Sinai, he at first did not go into detail but simply stated a few major commandments: You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal. This was already enough to make the nations refuse it. But when He turned to Israel, all Israel said: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear" (נעשה ונשמע, Ex. 24:7). That is, they accepted it all even before they had heard it all. Only then did God give them the Torah in all its details and establish His covenant with them. The Torah was then shaped according to the specific situation of the Jewish people and, in later ages, interpreted — and in exception cases even changed — according to their needs in different situations.

In Jesus Christ the Torah given to Israel through Moses is shining full of its grace-and-truth, because the Torah is embodied in him. With their incorporation in Christ through baptism, gentile Christians are given the Written Torah in that specific form in which it was given to Israel. The Christian "Old Testament" is the same text as the Jewish *Tanach* (or a translation of it). Yet since they are not Israel, but belong to other nations, and since they are not linked to the Land of Israel where God's covenant with Israel is to be lived, they cannot receive the Torah in the same way as Jews. Rather they begin, as the Jews did at Sinai, with "we will do and we will hear." That is, a willingness to hear more, based on a prior commitment to do what is heard. Then, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they must work out the details of their own national, social, economic, political, cultural and individual life in the light of and in analogy with the Torah given to Israel — more precisely, in analogy with the way the Torah was concretely worked out in its details and specifics when it was given to Israel and applied to its situation.

Christians thereby will develop their own Oral Torah and Halakhah for their own situation. It means that they must read the Written Torah not in a merely allegorical or typological sense, but in an "analogical sense," interpreting and applying its commandments in relation to the specific needs and

25. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *ba-hodesh* 5 (Lauterbach ed., vol. 2, p. 234).

challenges arising from the many different situations in which they live as non-Jews from many different backgrounds. The Torah given to Israel and interpreted by Israel, including Israel's Oral Torah and Halakhah, can serve as a paradigm for them; thus one may say that Israel's Torah can be studied by gentile Christians in a "paradigmatic sense." Through such a study, Christians may be helped by the rich experience that the People of Israel has gathered during more than two thousand years in working out the details and the specifics of their life in the Covenant under the Torah in different times and situations. They can learn also from Israel's numerous conflicts about the right interpretation of the Torah, including the conflict with the Johannine community.

The Church is more than ever in need of a Halakhah, meaning a discipline of life derived from the Torah that God has graciously first given to Israel, then offered to all nations in Jesus Christ as the living embodiment of the Torah. Here the first contours may emerge of a new Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Such a doctrine will have no place for theories of replacement or substitution of the Jewish people by the Church. Instead it will recognize that the Jews incorporated in the People of Israel, and the Christians incorporated in the Body of Christ, are called to be faithful to the one God who has given both of them His Torah "full of grace and truth."

Immanuel 24/25