

REBECCA'S CHILDREN

*Judaism and Christianity
in the Roman World*

ALAN F. SEGAL

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
*Cambridge, Massachusetts
and London, England*

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Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Segal, Alan F., 1945-
Rebecca's children.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

1. Christianity and other religions—Judaism.
 2. Judaism—Relations—Christianity.
 3. Rome—Religion.
 4. Rome—Social conditions. I. Title.
- BM535.S329 1986 296.8'1 85-17656
ISBN 0-674-75075-6 (cloth) (alk. paper)
ISBN 0-674-75076-4 (paper)

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To my parents and my children



Acknowledgments

The controversial ideas in this book have been a long time coming. They have stimulated debate in my seminars and classrooms at Yale, Princeton, the University of Toronto, the Aspen Institute, and Barnard College at Columbia University. The controversy helped me refine the ideas.

It is impossible to thank every student whose hunches, questions, or suggestions added to the book, though I try to remember them all. Two in particular offered outstanding help in preparing the manuscript: Leonard Gordon and the late Frances M. Schwartz. Their and many other students' enthusiasm for seeing Judaism and Christianity from the perspective of social science, sympathetically, unifies this effort.

Other people consented out of collegiality to read the manuscript. Let me thank especially Bernard Barber, Thomas Boslooper, Leon Festinger, Jarl Fossum, Holland Hendrix, John Gager, Claude Gerstle, Wayne Meeks, Elaine Pagels, Gilles Quispel, Willard Oxtoby, James Schwartz, and Morton Smith, all of whom made important contributions to the book by sharing their insights with me.

I would like to thank Robert Juckiewicz, Mark Lerner, and Francine Ovios of Columbia University's Computer Center for their patient help in gaining access to Columbia's computers. I am indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities and to Barnard College for giving me time free from classes to finish the manuscript and for underwriting other costs in preparing it. For drawing up the indexes, I am grateful to Avent

viii *Acknowledgments*

Beck and Thomas Boslooper. Special thanks are due to Aida Donald and Elizabeth Suttell of Harvard University Press, who liked the manuscript even in its primitive state, and to Virginia LaPlante, who prodded it into literary form.

My thanks, as ever, to my wife, Meryl.



Rebecca's Children

*Two nations are in thy womb;
And two peoples shall be separated from thy bowels;
And one people shall be stronger than the other people
And the elder shall serve the younger.*

Genesis 25:23



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INTRODUCTION

Myth in Israelite Society

The time of Jesus marks the beginning of not one but two great religions of the West, Judaism and Christianity. According to conventional wisdom, the first century witnessed the beginning of only one religion, Christianity. Judaism is generally thought to have begun in the more distant past, at the time of Abraham, Moses, or even Ezra, who rebuilt the Temple destroyed by the Babylonians. Judaism underwent radical religious changes in response to important historical crises. But the greatest transformation, contemporary with Christianity, was rabbinic Judaism, which generally became the basis of the future Jewish religion.

So great is the contrast between previous Jewish religious systems and rabbinism that Judaism and Christianity can essentially claim a twin birth. It is a startling truth that the religions we know today as Judaism and Christianity were born at the same time and nurtured in the same environment. Like Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca, the two religions fought in the womb. Throughout their youth they followed very different paths, quarreling frequently about their father's blessing. As was the case with Rebecca's children, the conflict between Judaism and Christianity molded their characters and determined their destinies.

When Jesus was born, the Jewish religion was beginning a new transformation, the rabbinic movement, which would permit the Jewish people to survive the next two millennia. The complex of historical and social forces that molded rab-

binic Judaism also affected the teachings of Jesus, helping to form Christianity into a new and separate religion. Dislocation, war, and foreign rule forced every variety of Jewish community to rebuild its ancient national culture into something almost unprecedented, a religion of personal and communal piety. Many avenues were available to Jews for achieving this new sense of personal piety, one of which was Jesus' movement. Although the way ultimately taken by the majority of Jews differed from the way offered by Christianity, at the time of their inception rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were twin alternatives for achieving similar goals.

The period of the birth of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, from roughly 200 before the common era (B.C.E.) to 200 of the common era (C.E.), was like modern times in important ways.¹ It was characterized by a degree of cosmopolitanism, individualism, and technology that the West would not experience again until the Renaissance. Like the present, the Roman world knew war, imperial domination, and human tragedy on such a mammoth scale as to challenge the validity of inherited beliefs. Then, as now, the events of history and the increased ease of communications between cultures fostered a quest for new ways to understand the meaning of life.

The understanding of Judaism and Christianity as twin religions reared in the same environment comes from examination of the historical reports about Judaism and Christianity in the first centuries. Though incomplete, biased, and often puzzling, these accounts continue to be of importance to modern life. They are here scrutinized with the same methods that are used to deal with bias, incomplete data, and puzzlement in the contemporary disciplines of philology, literary criticism, history, political science, economics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology—in short, all relevant humanities and social sciences. As a result, these two great religions are analyzed within their social, economic, and political context. Just as the early theologies of Judaism and Christianity were embodied within their particular communities, so a comparison of these religions must attend to the real social matrix in which the religious thought existed. Insights gained from studies of religion in the

modern as well as the ancient period help to frame the history of early Judaism and Christianity, where the social setting might otherwise be obscured by the profound and timeless values in the texts.

A clear definition of religion is hard to achieve, because religion takes such different forms in different societies. The religion of any society embodies its ultimate assumptions, but not every society expresses its religious beliefs in the same sentiments, customs, or ceremonies. The problem of definition becomes manageable, however, when religion is broken down into smaller parts. When the ultimate assumptions of a society are articulated in allusive or analogical language, they are designated by a variety of nearly synonymous technical terms—root metaphor, conceptual archetype, or more simply, myth.² Though comparing single beliefs instead of a whole religion can be misleading, in this case the Israelite root metaphors were inherited equally by both Judaism and Christianity. The root metaphors shared by both communities serve to highlight divisions and contrasts between Judaism and Christianity.

Use of the term *myth* for a religious story does not suggest that the story is false. Rather, it means that the story is considered true by someone in a literal or metaphoric sense. The tenets of modern American democracy, especially as interpreted by the popular media, can be described as myths, since they are treated as self-evident truths. In this technical usage, a “foolish myth” is a contradiction in terms, at best referring to a myth that has ceased functioning in a mythological way. But because myth continues in ordinary parlance to have the unwanted implication of a false or foolish story, neologisms like “root metaphor” or “conceptual archetype” are used here when dealing with biblical religion and other religious writings to which we still give credence.

A root metaphor or myth usually takes the form of a story about the cosmos.³ Although the story may be amusing or enjoyable, it also has four serious functions: to order experience by explaining the beginning of time and of history; to inform people about themselves by revealing the continuity between

key events in the history of the society and the life of the individual; to illustrate a saving power in human life by demonstrating how to overcome a flaw in society or personal experience; and to provide a moral pattern for individual and community action by both negative and positive example. Around the world, root metaphors or myths are often connected with ritual actions, such as dancing, reciting, singing, eating, and bathing. The ritual, whether a complete dramatization of the story or just a casual reference to it, is an expression and embodiment of the root metaphor within the society.

The root metaphor underlying Hebrew society is expressed in the word *covenant* (Hebrew: *brith*). Covenant is a theological term that means much the same thing as *contract* does today. According to the ancient Israelites of the Hebrew Bible, the relationship between themselves and their God—a supernatural person called the LORD or, as His name is conventionally figured in Hebrew, Yahweh—was governed by the rules of a contract, which specified the divine nature of their societal laws.⁴ The root metaphor itself came from formal agreements in ordinary human relationships, such as treaties and commercial or marital contracts. One central concept uniting these areas of human endeavor was the use of an oath to guarantee the contract between the two parties. In the case of the Hebrew covenant, the two parties were Israel and its God. All those who were party to the covenant became known as the people of Israel, whether they lived in the southern kingdom of Judah or the northern kingdom, also called Israel.

The Hebrew claim of the divine origin of law was in no way unusual. All the great ancient Near Eastern cultures at the time of the Hebrews, as well as for centuries before them, thought of themselves as subject to laws given to them by their gods. For example, the Babylonian king Hammurabi was said to have received his law code from the god of wisdom, Shamash. Furthermore, gods were almost always called upon to witness and protect the integrity of oaths. Every treaty between nations in the ancient Near East contained a list of gods who had witnessed and were responsible for protecting the sanctity of the oaths sworn by the two parties.

But the Hebrew concept of covenant was unique in crucial respects. It conceived of the entire universe as under the sway of one deity. The law was not simply revealed; it was based upon an actual agreement and guaranteed by an actual oath sworn between the people and that God. Furthermore, the Hebrew God was not only single and unique but also reliable and just in His responses to His people. Hence, His ordinances of law were for the common human good. Nowhere else in the ancient Near East was there so systematic an appropriation of the concept of lawful, contractual obligation to express the relationship between a whole people and their god and consequently to define morality within society. These concepts, derived from the root metaphor of covenant and later expressed by terms like *monotheism* and *ethics*, evolved through many stages in Hebrew thought as the social institutions and historical situation of Israel changed.⁵

The Hebrew concept of the covenant was not merely a theological idea but also model of social practice. The Hebrews' legendary ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses—were pictured as having made archetypal covenants with God. These legendary accounts paralleled the historical covenant-making of such figures as David, Solomon, Josiah, and Ezra.

The interspersing of covenantal, legal material with historical narrative, epic, and saga in the Bible is a unique aspect of Hebrew covenant literature. Depending on the time and place in which the account was written and the purposes for which it was written, the covenant, like a contract, could be described differently. Biblical stories of the covenant express the perspectives and politics of the narrators. Even in the accounts of the patriarchal covenants, which were supposed to have taken place in the most distant past, the assumptions of the narrators are apparent, as in Genesis 15:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great. But Abram said, "O LORD, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir." And he

brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.

And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in two and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."⁶

Yahweh appears here to Abraham during a vision, which for the narrator expressed the transcendence of the encounter and the awesomeness of the divinity. Yet the model for this covenant is a human legal transaction, treaty-making. The flaming torch, connoting the presence of Yahweh, passes between the pieces of the animals to signify that Yahweh has sworn Himself with an oath. This strange ceremony has analogies with the treaty ceremonies of ancient Near Eastern emperors, but it may also reflect less stylized agreements used by tribal chieftains.

Apparently, the purpose of cutting up the animals is to invoke a curse upon any person who violates the oath. This story depicts a late Bronze Age practice of covenanting. The central feature of the ceremony was a solemn oath, to which the Bible makes Yahweh a partner. The metaphor of a covenantal treaty with Yahweh gives reality to the concept that God will continue to oversee the destiny of the people descended from Abraham. In this epic layer of the biblical tradition, the true and enduring aspect of God's providence is expressed as a treaty between two great though dissimilar chiefs—Abraham, the ancestor of all the people of Israel, and Yahweh, the God who promised to be faithful to his descendants, provided they behaved in a way befitting Yahweh's people.

Many other aspects of Hebrew society are reflected in the story. Offspring and homeland have paramount importance. These benefits will accrue to the descendants of Abraham as long as they keep faith with Yahweh's bond. Abraham himself, on account of his deep faith, is rewarded by being allowed to live to an old age and to be buried with his ancestors.

The story omits any doctrine of reward after death. This society understands ultimate rewards concretely: an easy death after a long and comfortable life, with many descendants to carry on afterward. There is no interest in the final disposition of souls after death. Rather, the story describes the benefits of the covenant to the living people, Israel. After the time of David and Solomon, when Israel had separated into two Kingdoms, the stories of Abraham and Jacob functioned to unify all those who claimed common descent from these patriarchs. The root metaphor of family relation to Jacob—the person whose alternate name, Israel, became the name of the entire people—originated with the ten Hebrew tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel, while the root metaphor of family relation to Abraham, who lived south of Jerusalem, solidified the remaining two Hebrew tribes in the southern kingdom of Judah. All the stories were adopted by the whole people when Israel was unified. The root metaphor of family descent set the Israelites apart from the Canaanites, earlier inhabitants of the land of Israel, whom the Israelites partially defeated but whose religion

they were tempted to emulate. Yahweh, the Israelite God, was not neutral toward the Israelites' accommodation to Canaanite ways after their settlement in the promised land. He found the Canaanite religion abhorrent because of its practices of ritual prostitution and child sacrifice. He wanted the Israelites to separate from the Canaanites, forbade them to sacrifice their children, gave them Canaan as punishment for the Canaanites' sins, and promised the Israelites progeny and long life if they obeyed His covenant. This moral is apparent in the epic, the law, and the prophecy contained in biblical writings. For instance, the story of the forestalled sacrifice of Isaac emphasizes the opposition of Yahweh to the religion of the Canaanites, while praising Abraham's obedience.

The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:2-17 are a concrete example of the covenant with Israel, specifying the terms for the people to follow as well as the promises of the divinity. Again the biblical narrative describes a covenant ceremony, this time complete with a communal oath-taking. The whole people, not just the eponymous ancestor, swear to obey all the ordinances laid down by Yahweh. According to the narrative, the stipulations of the covenant, which follow immediately after the oath-taking, begin with the Ten Commandments.

The story of the giving of the commandments shows evidence of many different kinds of narrator. Priestly aspects of the covenant ceremony are stressed in some places, details of treaty-making in others. These differences suggest that the scribal and priestly voices in the society all made contributions to the text. The Sinai event was told and retold by each generation in ancient times, and several originally differing concepts of covenanting were combined into a single biblical narrative. Yet the unity of the narrative is what chiefly impresses today's reader, because all the voices have been harmonized into a narrative whole. The biblical description stresses all the grandeur and wonder imaginable in that day. Yahweh's divinity is expressed by supernatural fire, while His presence is so exalted that it cannot be seen with the naked eye. With all the redaction and editing, the covenant metaphor nevertheless remains clear.⁷

Even more interesting, this story parallels the actual cove-