



ARTICLE

## What Does It Mean to Read New Testament Texts ‘within Judaism’?

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In memory of E. P. Sanders (1937–2022), one of the most important New Testament/Early Judaism scholars of his time.

### Abstract

For centuries, Christians have understood some of the texts included in the New Testament as ‘Jewish,’ in the sense of them being written by (converted) Jews for other Jews. From a historical perspective, a new development in the academy suggests that such approaches do not do justice to the nature of these texts. Indeed, even more recent attempts at understanding the New Testament against the *background* of Judaism are also found wanting. Instead, placing these texts within the broader context of the diverse ways of embodying Jewish ancestral customs in the pre-rabbinic Second Temple period, this interpretive trajectory, involving scholars from a wide array of backgrounds, insists that Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Revelation etc., should be understood as *expressions of Judaism*. This article highlights key issues involved in such re-readings of New Testament texts, including ways in which they may or may not relate to normative-theological positions among Christians and Jews today. First, the study looks at how the question is asked in our contemporary setting. Then, moving down historical layers, issues related to history and categorisation are addressed before we, finally, return to the present to consider possible implications of our findings.

**Keywords:** New Testament; Second Temple Judaism; Rabbinic Judaism; Christianity; ancestral customs; synagogue; church; parting of the ways; canon; hermeneutics; theology; ethnicity; ethics; history; rationality; confirmation bias; truth

### I Introduction: Reading Beyond (Canonical) Reception

It is a given for most readers of the Christian Bible today that its inclusion of the Old Testament does not transform Leviticus, Isaiah, or Amos into ‘Christian texts.’ To be sure, their canonisation in the church has resulted in Christian readings of them, but, historically, everyone agrees that these texts belong among the literary treasures of Israel; they were not originally produced by or for Christians. A growing number of scholars from a variety of backgrounds are now arguing that the same is true for the texts included in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> While the canonisation of these texts within the Christian church

<sup>1</sup> For a historical overview and discussion of these developments, see A. Runesson and D. M. Gurtner, ‘Introduction: The Location of the Matthew-within-Judaism Perspective in Past and Present Research’, *Matthew Within Judaism: Israel and the Nations in the First Gospel* (ed. A. Runesson and D. M. Gurtner; Early Christian

certainly was and is a Christian project, resulting in Christian readings of Matthew, Acts, and Paul, these scholars suggest that, historically, they, too, belong among the literary treasures of the Jewish people.

Writers from Papias onward have identified some of the New Testament texts, like Matthew, as written for Jews by a Jewish convert, but such views do not constitute a prequel to what these researchers are suggesting. Rather, they dispense with both the term ‘conversion’ and the idea of a first-century ‘Christianity’, arguing that these are inappropriate categories for understanding the nature of these texts in their original milieu. Matthew and the others should no longer be read, they claim, against the *background* of Judaism and Jewish life, but as *expressions of Judaism*; ‘as part of one (diverse) trajectory among several others within a pluriform ethno-religious tradition that displayed, as did other trajectories, various levels of openness to non-Jews’.<sup>2</sup> There was not yet a new entity, ‘Christianity’, in any sense similar to the socio-religious and discursive location inhabited by the Church Fathers of Late Antiquity to which these sympathisers could have converted, leaving ‘Judaism’ or ‘the synagogue’ behind. Applied first to Paul and later to Matthew, Mark, John, and other New Testament texts, such readings, while being quite diverse in terms of approach and some results, have become identified as the ‘within Judaism’ perspective.<sup>3</sup> But what does it mean to read the texts included in the New Testament as Jewish texts, as being located ‘within Judaism’?<sup>4</sup>

In the following, I shall explore this question, including discussion also of the hermeneutics and potential effects involved as first-century Christ-oriented Jewish voices are resurrected in the twenty-first century. We shall begin by looking at the contemporary scene, where our questions are necessarily formed. Then, we shall shift to look at some of the key historical issues, before we return to the present and consider the possible implications of our findings.

## 2 Present Tense: Points of Departure

The most critical aspect of the question we are asking in this article – ‘What does it mean to read New Testament texts “within Judaism”?’ – is, I believe, that it is often articulated in the present tense. Emphasis is consequently, perhaps inadvertently, put on the fact that we are the ones asking the question, and that we do so in the here and now. Unavoidably, our query is embedded in – and therefore also explained by – our own cultural, religious-political, and discursive context(s). The present therefore necessarily constitutes part of our point of departure, but what does it mean, and why is it important?

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Literature Series 27; Atlanta: SBL, 2020) 1–25; see esp. 2, n. 2 for a selection of recent studies dealing with books across the New Testament collection. This research trajectory did not appear *ex nihilo* but is related to renewed work on Second Temple Judaism more broadly from the beginning of the 1900s onwards. From the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developments have been further solidified, including work by scholars such as W. D. Davies, K. Stendahl, J. Gager, A. F. Segal, M. D. Nanos, D. C. Sim and many others. While much of this scholarship has been published in English and some in German (see esp. K.-W. Niebuhr, *Paulus im Judentum seiner Zeit: Gesammelte Studien* (WUNT 489; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022)), important work in French has been done esp. by S. Claude Mimouni, *Les Chrétiens d’origine juive dans l’Antiquité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004). For a recent, but in my view in several respects problematic critique of such readings focussing on Paul, see U. Schnelle, ‘Über Judentum und Hellenismus hinaus: Die paulinische Theologie als neues Wissenssystem’, *ZNW* 111:1 (2020): 124–55. See further discussion below.

<sup>2</sup> Runesson and Gurtner, ‘Location’, 3.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (M. D. Nanos and M. Zetterholm, eds.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); *Matthew Within Judaism: Israel and the Nations in the First Gospel* (A. Runesson and D. M. Gurtner, eds.; Early Christian Literature Series 27; Atlanta: SBL, 2020); W. V. Cirafesi, *John Within Judaism: Religion, Ethnicity, and the Shaping of Jesus-Oriented Jewishness in the Fourth Gospel* (AJEC 112; Leiden: Brill, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> On Paul, cf. the important recent contribution by P. Fredriksen, ‘What Does It Mean to See Paul “within Judaism”?’ *JBL* 141.2 (2022) 359–80.

Strictly speaking, reading Paul, Mark, Matthew, John, Luke, James, or Revelation ‘within Judaism’ today means reading these texts as in some way hermeneutically operative within a reading collective identifying as Jewish. To be sure, such reading collectives do exist today – I am thinking here of Messianic Jews<sup>5</sup> – but the vast majority of people identifying as Jewish engage in (canonical) reading practices defined by Rabbinic Judaism, a form of Judaism that did not exist when many of the New Testament texts were authored, and which evolved beyond their normative reach.<sup>6</sup> For most present-tense Jews, then, reading the New Testament within Judaism would be an anomaly, an unreasonable exercise in hermeneutical asymmetry. The irony is, of course, that rather soon after these texts were produced their canonical, normative reach came to include non-Jews who identified theo-ethnically partly in opposition to Jews and Judaism, and who therefore constitute the primary socio-religious lineage for present-day Christians. Reading Paul, Matthew and the others within Judaism today would, also for modern-day Christians, be an anomaly, an unreasonable exercise in hermeneutical asymmetry.

For both Jews and Christians (and most others, regardless of religious or non-religious belonging), the term ‘Judaism’ means ‘not Christianity’, and vice versa, when employed in everyday conversation.<sup>7</sup> Further, there is a solid tradition historically within Christianity to use New Testament texts as tools to denounce that which is *not* Christianity, especially ‘Judaism’.<sup>8</sup> In addition, in the normative narratives nurtured within these traditions, ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ have almost always been understood as homogeneous entities, whose basic characteristics have remained more or less unchanged through the centuries. (The ‘heretics’, those who are wrong, are usually the ones accused of altering traditions.) This idea of theo-ritual consistency over time creates a religiously consequential sense of discursive contact between the ancients and us. ‘We’ are the heirs of those who formulated and transmitted the sacred scriptures currently embraced liturgically, canonically, theologically, and ethically.

As academic interpreters of these texts, we are (socially and/or religiously) predisposed to operate with these two entities, ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’, as constructed by these religious communities, when we read the New Testament texts. Such a view of the world expresses the ‘normal’ which constitutes our instinctive point of departure for any questions we ask. We are also inclined to align texts included in the New Testament with Christianity rather than Judaism since Christianity owns the canonisation process into which the individual texts, while older and unrelated to it, were drawn, and (rabbinic) Judaism operates beyond it. Through the very terminology we apply and the socio-religious matrix we inhabit, we, therefore, tend to reproduce and reproject the boundary dynamics that construct our own contemporary religio-institutional world *before* we activate our interpretive procedures since such terminology affirms ourselves and our place in the world, even as we breathe life into the ancient Other and, in that process, produce relevance (confirmation bias).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the interpretive dynamics created among some messianic Jews by the academic ‘within Judaism’ perspective, as focused on Paul, see the recent dissertation by J. Nyström, ‘Reading Romans, Constructing Paul(s): A Conversation Between Messianic Jews in Jerusalem and Paul Within Judaism Scholars’ (Ph.D. Thesis, Lund University, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> All mainstream forms of Judaism today, even as they strongly disagree in many ways – including on the issue of ‘who is a Jew?’ – originate from the rather diverse rabbinic movement that emerged around the beginning of the second century and came to more or less define ‘Judaism’ in the late ancient/early medieval period.

<sup>7</sup> This is true also for many Messianic Jews who reject Christianity as inauthentic and illegitimate. On this, see Nyström, ‘Reading Romans, Constructing Paul(s)’.

<sup>8</sup> Including rejection of Messianic forms of Judaism; from the writings of Ignatius of Antioch onwards.

<sup>9</sup> On confirmation bias, cf. R. S. Nickerson, ‘Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises’, *Review of General Psychology* 2.2 (1998) 175–220: ‘Confirmation bias, as the term is typically used in the

For most readers today, to speak of New Testament texts as ‘within Judaism’ may therefore be perceived as idiosyncratic or even eccentric, creating hermeneutical confusion. But would such a reaction have materialised for those who lived before the Christian canonisation processes began to take form and exercise influence on people’s minds and socio-ritual behaviour? Would those who authored the texts *without* accessing the binary terminology we are used to, ‘Judaism’ and/versus ‘Christianity’, have understood the ‘within-question’ at all? What *did* it mean to read these texts beyond the so-called ‘parting of the ways’ paradigm? ‘As feminist theorists often say, what you see depends upon where you stand’, Laura Nasrallah once noted when engaging Paul.<sup>10</sup> This is certainly true. Aiming to move the perspective from which they perceive history, exegetes who read these ancient texts within Judaism almost necessarily become counter-cultural iconoclasts. For the aim of history is, many would claim, regardless of any methodological caveats, to affix meaning(s) to specific time periods through a process aiming at contextual plausibility, i.e., *to remove the texts and those who wrote them from whatever relevance they may have today* and seek their identity as the Other; the ones no longer among us but whose thoughts and practices are interesting to us.

### 3 Past Tense: Leaving Home

When we shift the question to the past tense ‘What *did* “within Judaism” mean?’, we engage a very different set of issues beyond the anxiety many Jews and Christians may feel today when they are exposed to the ‘within Judaism’ problematic, worrying about contemporary religious boundaries becoming blurred, boundaries which for them are constructive carriers of key aspects of their religious identities; indeed, guardians of the uniqueness that has become critical to their respective self-definitions.<sup>11</sup> But even a question asked in the past tense is, of course, echoed in the present. It seems to me, therefore, that there is no other way to engage the past than through an ‘archaeological’ procedure. There is no other place to start ‘digging’ than the top layer, passing layer after layer on our way down through the centuries, before we return to the present to incorporate our findings into the larger contemporary narratives from which we derive meaning and construe anew our sense of place. More often than not, as we pass through these layers the presuppositions behind our question, the assumptions that gave rise to and formed the question in the first place, are challenged as the contexts within which our query is embedded change.

psychological literature, connotes the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand’ (175).

<sup>10</sup> L. S. Nasrallah, *Archaeology and the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 10.

<sup>11</sup> Numerous scholars are currently involved in such historical exercises. Some recent examples, which could easily be multiplied: on Paul, Nanos and Zetterholm, *Restoring the First-Century Context*; M. Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); P. Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); on Mark, J. VanMaaren, ‘Gentile Alterity and Ethnic Solidarity: The Role of Group Categorization in Understanding Mark as Jewish Literature’, *Negotiating Identities: Conflict, Conversion, and Consolidation in Early Judaism and Christianity (200 BCE–600 CE)* (ed. K. Hedner Zetterholm, A. Runesson, C. Wassén, and M. Zetterholm; ConB. Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2022) 139–58; on Matthew, *Matthew Within Judaism* (ed. Runesson and Gurtner); on John, Cirafesi, *John within Judaism*; on Luke/Acts, I. W. Oliver, *Luke’s Jewish Eschatology: The National Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); on James, D. C. Allison, *James: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); for James in relation to the Didache and Matthew, see *Matthew, James, and Didache: Three Related Documents in Their Jewish and Christian Settings* (ed. H. Van de Sandt and J. Zangenberg; Atlanta: SBL, 2008); for Revelation, J. Marshall, ‘John’s Jewish (Christian?) Apocalypse’, *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (ed. M. J. McCabe; Fortress 2007) 233–56. On analysing Jewishness and its various ancient manifestations, see now J. VanMaaren, *The Boundaries of Jewishness in the Southern Levant 200 BCE–132 CE: Power, Strategies, and Ethnic Configurations*. *Studia Judaica* 118 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

When we ask our ‘within Judaism’ question, one of the most critical ‘layers’ that challenges our presuppositions prior to engaging in the inquiry is constituted by evidence from Late Antiquity;<sup>12</sup> the final ‘layer’ we must pass through on our way towards the first and early second century CE.<sup>13</sup> It is in this place that we find the birth of what we speak of today as (mainstream) Judaism, i.e. rabbinic forms of Judaism. Seen from the perspective of Late-Antique Rabbinic Judaism, earlier and often fundamentally different ways of embodying the Jewish, of living Jewishly (Ἰουδαϊκῶς), become more distinct. In a similar way, but somewhat earlier, we see the birth of the term (and, I would argue, the idea of) Χριστιανισμός; of that which we would recognise as related to later forms of Christianity. Indeed, the first time this term is used, in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, the meaning of the word is defined through differentiation from precisely Ἰουδαϊσμός.<sup>14</sup> In this ‘layer,’ what stands out, in my view, is how this interpretive tradition is argued into existence on the basis of hermeneutics and terminology quite different from those that seem to govern and shape our first-century texts.<sup>15</sup>

Though the journey from the first century to Late Antiquity was a multifaceted process, the difference in which I am interested here is that which relates to issues of distinct identities assuming either a shared socio-ethnic, and therefore also ‘religious,’ frame of reference, or ethnically separate interpretive ‘platforms’ upon which socio-ritual and theological judgments are made. That is, I am intrigued by the rhetorically designed difference that does not only depend on distinct institutional belonging but also on how this institutional distinctiveness is discursively construed relative to ethnic discourse (and thus ‘religiosity’). The reason why this institutional and ethno-discursive distinction matters is connected to how the ‘within Judaism’ question relates to traditional ways of understanding the so-called ‘separation between Judaism and Christianity’, or, as it is often phrased, ‘between synagogue and church’.

While in Late Antiquity we find institutional separation into entities designated ‘synagogue’ (συναγωγή) and ‘church’ (ἐκκλησία) and owned by groups identified as ‘Jews’ (Ἰουδαῖοι) and ‘Christians’ (χριστιανοί) respectively,<sup>16</sup> no such correlation between named institutions and group designations exists in the first century.<sup>17</sup> Terminologically, what is today often understood as an appropriate translation into the English ‘church’ is in our texts, primarily Paul but also others, including Matthew, termed ἐκκλησία, a word used by other Jews, too, for Jewish institutions that did not orbit the conviction that, with Jesus, the messiah had arrived.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I shall return below to a second key historical period which has determined much of what we think and believe about the past today.

<sup>13</sup> Dating New Testament texts is, as is well known, notoriously difficult, at least if we aim at some precision. The most recent monograph-length study, suggesting an early date for most documents, is J. Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition* (Baker Academic, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Ignatius, *Magn.* 10.1–3; cf. *Rom.* 3.3; *Phld.* 6.1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf., e.g., Matthew’s Gospel on the Jewish νόμος, or Paul on the relationship between Israel and the nations (Romans 11), with Ignatius’ letters or Chrysostom on the same themes.

<sup>16</sup> On this development, see J. Lieu, ‘The Synagogue and the Separation of the Christians’, *The Ancient Synagogue From its Origins until 200 CE: Papers Presented at an International Conference at Lund University, October 14–17, 2001* (ed. B. Olsson and M. Zetterholm; CBNT 39; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003) 189–207.

<sup>17</sup> Readers of the NRSV, however, would think otherwise, as this translation creates such correlation through its politics of translation. See discussion in A. Runesson, ‘The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions on Paul’, *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (ed. M. D. Nanos and M. Zetterholm; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) 53–77.

<sup>18</sup> See the comprehensive study by R. J. Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklēsia in the Early Jesus Movement* (AJEC 98; Leiden: Brill, 2017); on Josephus, see A. R. Krause, *Synagogues in the Works of Flavius Josephus: Rhetoric, Spatiality, and First-Century Institutions* (AJEC 97; Leiden: Brill, 2017) esp. 98–114, 193–5. Schnelle, ‘Über Judentum und Hellenismus hinaus’, 124–5, summarises his conclusions arguing for a Paul that cannot be

Indeed, ἐκκλησία was only one among at least twenty-five Greek, Latin, and Hebrew designations for what we translate with one word into 'synagogue' today.<sup>19</sup> What is more, many of these terms were used interchangeably in and around the first century CE to refer to two types of institutions: public, civic institutions on the one hand, and semi-public, unofficial associations on the other.<sup>20</sup> As in Mediterranean societies more generally, in Jewish society, too, associations mimicked civic terms and offices, and it is within this larger socio-institutional matrix we find the institutions frequented by the people who produced the texts included in the New Testament: the Christ-groups.<sup>21</sup>

The problem is, though, that our generalising translation habits tend to conceal both the diversity of these institutions and the difference between Jewish associations and Jewish civic institutions, the former extant throughout the Mediterranean world, the latter existing only in Judaea and Galilee where Jews were in charge of city and town administration.<sup>22</sup> Problematically, the implications of a lack of attention to these institutional differences may lead to a misconstrual of the social dynamics involved as Christ-followers, whether Jewish or not, interacted with other Jews. Indeed, the entire idea of a 'parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity' tends to disintegrate once the players involved are located in more specific institutional settings, which also has interpretive consequences for our 'within Judaism' query.

Both Jesus and his earliest followers (all of whom were Jews according to the Gospels) interacted with other Jews in the civic institutional space provided by the public synagogues of Judaea and Galilee, and such interaction continued for a few centuries. Once the rabbinic movement began to nurture an active interest in these civic institutions in the

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contextualised within 'the framework of Judaism' by listing a 'new name' as one of the criteria for separate religious belonging. As far as I can tell, however, there is no support in the sources for assertions regarding Jesus' followers taking a new name, if 'new' implies a name different from names used by other Jews. Indeed, Schnelle claims that Paul within Judaism scholars ignore, 'die theologische und organisatorische Selbstkonstituierung des entstehenden Christentums. Wer sich eigene Versammlungsorte gibt, einen neuen Namen hat, neue Riten und neues Recht entwickelt, eigene Gemeinschaftsmahle hält, einen neuen heiligen Tag schafft und eigene Gottesdienste mit einem exklusiven Selbstverständnis feiert, war nicht Teil einer anderen religiösen Gruppe.' None of these criteria, however, are self-evidently decisive for the quest to mark Christ-followers as Other in relation to the many other diverse forms of Judaism existing at this time; even less, in my view, could they be used to speak of these messianics (χριστιανοί) as a new 'religious group'. This has to do with the overarching methodological problem of categorisation (and communication), an issue to which we shall return below.

<sup>19</sup> For the evidence, consult the terminological index in A. Runesson, D. D. Binder, and B. Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E. A Source Book*. (AJEC 72; Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> For this distinction between institutional type, see A. Runesson; *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001). For application in historical reconstructions involving Jesus and his followers, see, e.g., J. Bernier, *Aposynagōgos and the Historical Jesus in John: Rethinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Passages* (BIS 122; Leiden: Brill, 2013); J. J. Ryan, *The Role of the Synagogue in the Aims of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017); C. Keith, *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; London: T&T Clark, 2020); and, most recently, Cirafesi, *John Within Judaism*. For more literature and discussion, see J. J. Ryan, 'The Socio-Political Context of Public Synagogue Debates in the Second Temple Period', *The Synagogue in Ancient Palestine: Current Issues and Emerging Trends* (ed. R. Bonnie, R. Hakola and U. Tervahauta; Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur im Alten und Neuen Testament 279, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020) 133–52, esp. 133–7, and n. 9. On the use of 'associations' as an etic designation for the ancient period, see J. S. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) 18–19.

<sup>21</sup> On associations and types of associations, including Christ groups, see most recently the important studies by Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, and R. Last and P. A. Harland, *Group Survival in the Ancient Mediterranean: Rethinking Material Conditions in the Landscape of Jews and Christians* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> On the public nature of these institutions, see also L. I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

third century and later,<sup>23</sup> they encountered such Christ-followers and eventually won the battle over how ‘Judaism’ should best be defined and lived.<sup>24</sup> This battle, in this institutional space, in and of itself identifies those who took part in it as ‘within Judaism’. By then, though, followers of Jesus who maintained key characteristics associated with their (religio-ethnically defined) Jewishness had been marginalised not only by emerging rabbinic influence but also by non-Jewish forms of Christianity.<sup>25</sup> Disappearing into the shadows of history, these Christ-oriented Jews had little or nothing to do with the rise of Christianity as we know it in the Late-Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods. And this latter type of (non-Jewish) Christianity had little or nothing to do with the rise of Rabbinic Judaism; these groups – Rabbinic Judaism and non-Jewish forms of Christianity – never shared, as far as we know, institutional space.<sup>26</sup> All this means, then, that we cannot speak of the later transmutations of Judaism and Christianity as ever having parted ways in some ‘origins period’; what never belonged together cannot part.<sup>27</sup>

Once Christian and later Muslim colonisation of Palestine had made Jewish administrative control impossible, Jewish civic institutions (‘public synagogues’) naturally ceased to exist. The form in which they existed before this time had no historical continuity in later periods. Rabbinic forms of Judaism thus succeeded in defining Judaism over an extended period of time which also involved a social transformation and what might be termed an ‘associativisation’ of Jewish communal life in Palestine. That is to say, forms of Jewish community life which had previously taken place within civic institutions (‘public synagogues’) now had to migrate into associative spaces as civic administration shifted away from Jewish control. If we are to believe Justin Martyr, however, a ‘parting of ways’ dynamic was in full swing already in the mid-second century, but between Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus, not between ‘Judaism and Christianity’. The institutional context here is not civic (‘public synagogues’), though, but rather the unofficial associations, whether they were of the occupational, immigrant, neighbourhood, domestic, or cultic variety (‘association synagogues’).<sup>28</sup> Understanding interaction in associative space – including between Jews and non-Jews – require us to look closer at the type of assemblies we are dealing with when we consider what might be categorised as ‘within Judaism’.

<sup>23</sup> For late rabbinic interest in public synagogues, see Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*; Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Ezra Burns, *The Christian Schism in Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> This process begun quite early. We find traces of it in Romans 11, and Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 47, while confirming the existence and acceptable status of Jewish believers in Jesus, is clear about his own and his contemporaries’ priorities.

<sup>26</sup> This does not mean, of course, that there would be no interaction between members of these distinct movements in Late Antiquity; there certainly was, and this had a secondary impact on some aspects of the development of rabbinic Jewish interpretations of Judaism. As Burns, *Christian Schism*, notes, however, the form of Jesus oriented worship primarily known to the rabbis was the Jewish messianic, and these messianic groups had a more direct impact on the process in which rabbinic Judaism rose to prominence. Cf. K. Hedner Zetterholm, ‘Alternate Visions of Judaism and Their Impact on the Formation of Rabbinic Judaism’, *JJMJS* 1 (2014) 127–53; eadem, ‘Jewishly-Behaving Gentiles and the Emergence of a Jewish Rabbinic Identity’, *JSQ* 25.4 (2018) 321–44; P. Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> For further discussion, see A. Runesson, ‘What Never Belonged Together Cannot Part: Rethinking the So-Called Parting of the Ways Between Judaism and Christianity’, *Jews and Christians: Parting Ways in the First Two Centuries C.E.? Reflections on the Gains and Losses of a Model* (ed. J. Schröter, B. A. Edsall, and J. Verheyden; BZNW; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021) 33–56.

<sup>28</sup> On varieties of associations, see Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations*, 23–40.

Associations whose patron deity was the God of Israel could be a neighbourhood group or an occupational guild, for example, and ethnic, gender or social (slave/free) diversity of the membership would not be out of the ordinary, as seen from the perspective of the larger context of some Graeco-Roman associations.<sup>29</sup> In other words, finding non-Jews in associations which venerated the God of Israel would make ancient social sense, regardless of whether such non-Jews paid homage to this patron deity through a Christ-oriented lens or without it. It is quite likely that it was through such small face-to-face groups that the Christ-cult spread and that it did so both within Jewish networks<sup>30</sup> and separate from them.<sup>31</sup> Since it is in such associative settings that we find the institutional origins of what is today called synagogue and church, our question of what ‘within Judaism’ meant in the Second Temple period and early centuries of the Common Era should be interpretively focused here. For example, we may ask whether non-Jewish tentmakers (σκηνοποιοί) who joined a guild (i.e., an occupational association) run by Jewish tentmakers, whose patron deity was the God of Israel, should be considered ‘within Judaism’ if they, as members of such an association, venerated that same god through various cultic activities? Should the same label be retained if some of the (Jewish) members of such an association became convinced that their patron deity had sent a messiah, as promised in the texts they all understood as sacred, and then moved their assemblies to another location because of conflicts with other members who disagreed? The twofold point I want to make here, alluding to Acts 18.2–8 (15), is simple: first, that the language of ‘within Judaism’ feels somewhat awkward in this context, and, second, that a split within a group along the lines of specific convictions (messianism and its rejection), resulting in separate assembly spaces, does not imply that those who left established a new cult, or ‘religion’.<sup>32</sup> For such recategorisation to fit an ancient context, we need additional evidence.

As we redefine what ‘Judaism’ was in this social and discursive space where Χριστιανισμός is not yet a word, we need to rethink what ‘within’ means.<sup>33</sup> If these early Christ-groups worshipping the God of Israel through a messianic lens, a) were not an expression of living Ἰουδαϊκῶς, i.e., were not what we would call ‘within Judaism’, and b) Χριστιανισμός did not yet exist as an identifiable entity either discursively or socially, and c) the interpretive paradigm of a parting of the ways between what we today understand as Judaism and Christianity does not apply – what would these groups and individuals have been ‘within’ or ‘outside’?

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Paul’s theologising of the associative diversity of such groups in Gal 3.28, as discussed in A. Runesson, ‘Placing Paul: Institutional Structures and Theological Strategy in the World of the Early Christ-believers’, *SEÅ* 80 (2015) 43–67. On Paul’s ἐκκλησία in Corinth as very likely a neighbourhood association, see most recently R. Last, ‘Christ Worship in the Neighbourhood: Corinth’s Ekklesia and its Vicinity (1 Cor 14.22–5)’, *NTS* 68 (2022) 310–25.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperCollins; 1997).

<sup>31</sup> Christ cult as unrelated to basic Jewish ancestral customs, such as food laws, is implied in Pliny the Younger’s letter to Trajan on the good news that Christ-followers are now repenting, and, as a consequence, the meat market and the temples are again thriving; none of this would have happened had these repentant followers of Jesus been Jewish previous to their adopting a Christ-oriented cultic stance.

<sup>32</sup> Pace Schnelle, ‘Über Judentum und Hellenismus hinaus’, who seems to me to take a Late Antique/Medieval or modern approach as he chooses the (institutional) interpretive frame within which he reads and understands the evidence. Cf. the Therapeutae of Egypt, who, according to Philo (*Contempl.* 30–33; *ASSB*, no. 160), had their own separate assembly space and mode of worship, as did other Jewish groups too.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. K. O. Sandnes, *Var Paulus Kristen? Har kirken forstått hans tro og teologi?* (Oslo: Efrem, 2021) 210: ‘The question of the relationship between Paul and Christianity must be asked based on the fact that there was no Christianity in Paul’s time.’ (In Norwegian; my translation).

#### 4 Within a Culture Not Our Own

Aiming to answer questions such as these, many scholars have suggested the procedure of first identifying a certain set of ideas and/or practices that they believe essential to understand something as within or outside Judaism, a *sine qua non* for the socio-religious location of Christ-groups vis-à-vis Judaism later to be proposed. Most famously, perhaps, James D.G. Dunn suggested what he called ‘the four pillars of Judaism’: monotheism, election and land, Torah, and Temple.<sup>34</sup> In my view, the problem is, however, that while such comparative approaches may seem valid at first, they do not respond to the nature of the source material, which is pluriform, fluid, and adjustable within the context of Jewish ancestral customs oriented around the God of Israel, and lacks for the time period in question – the Second Temple period – a clearly articulated normative centre that we as observers could identify as accepted by all.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, how could we decide what a first-century Jew, self-identifying as a Jew, could or could not think or do, without normatively privileging one ancient group over another? If first-century ‘Judaism’, which is a category that organises the world and facilitates communication, i.e., an abstraction, was a diverse phenomenon,<sup>36</sup> and if we consider the fact that what has often been understood as the most iconic or ‘authentic’ form of Judaism (usually and anachronistically a form of Rabbinic Judaism) in reality was just one variant among many, in fact, even a minority position,<sup>37</sup> against what should we measure Paul, the Gospels, or Revelation in order to understand their relationship to the category ‘Judaism’?

Why is it that we often seem to need an archetypal, or ‘most authentic’ something, against which to compare what then necessarily becomes a deviation? What are the methodological considerations behind such interpretive decisions? What, for example, would the outcome be if we instead asked: which ancestral customs, traditions, and texts do Paul and the Gospels refer to as self-evidently authoritative when they construe the

<sup>34</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed; London: SCM Press, 2006). See also W. D. Davies’ interesting discussion of such approaches in *Christian Engagements with Judaism* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999) 15–40, asking, ‘[w]hat is it within Judaism as its “center” or “essence” without which it ceases to be itself?’ (15), only to reject such terminology as misguided, instead choosing to speak of ‘the heart’ of Judaism (39). Cf., from a different angle, M. Hengel, *The ‘Hellenization’ of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1989) 54–5. While, for Hengel, ‘pagan cult,’ ‘failure to observe essential parts of the Torah’ (in whichever way Torah observance was defined), and ‘specific desecration of the temple’ would have been dealbreakers (54), ‘the whole development of christological doctrine could have taken place completely within Palestinian Judaism’ (55). For more extensive discussion of this and the following, see A. Runesson, *Judaism for Gentiles: Reading Paul Beyond the Parting of the Ways Paradigm* (WUNT 494; in collaboration with R. Runesson; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022) Chapter 1.

<sup>35</sup> For example, if the centrality of the Jerusalem temple is a *sine qua non* for the identification of an individual or group as Jewish, how do we categorise the worshippers at the Jewish temple in Leontopolis? (On Jewish temples outside Jerusalem, see Runesson, Binder, and Olsson, *Ancient Synagogue*, nos. T1–12. Further, if ‘monotheism’ is the focus, how should we understand the two-powers in heaven traditions? (Cf. Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven*; see also most recently on the problematic term ‘monotheism’ as such, P. Fredriksen, ‘Philo, Herod, Paul, and the Many Gods of Ancient Jewish “Monotheism”,’ *HTR* 115:1 (2022) 23–45, here esp. p. 27, n. 11). The examples can be multiplied.

<sup>36</sup> L. Stuckenbruck, ‘What is Second Temple Judaism?’, *T&T Clark Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism* (2 vols); (vol. 1; ed. D. M. Gurtner and L. Stuckenbruck; London: T&T Clark, 2020) 1–19, here 19: Judaism ‘was marked by a staggering diversity that challenges attempts to define what Judaism or being Judaic in antiquity was’.

<sup>37</sup> The previously common assumption that rabbinic Judaism took over and defined Judaism immediately after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE has been thoroughly disproven. Synagogue scholars such as L. I. Levine (see, e.g., *The Ancient Synagogue*) and other historians of the first few centuries of the Common Era rather point to the fourth century or later periods for the rise of rabbinic Judaism. See discussion in G. Stemberger, ‘Die Umformung des palästinischen Judentums nach 70: Der Aufstieg der Rabbinen’, *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit. Wege der Forschung: Vom alten zum neuen Schürer* (ed. A. Oppenheimer, with assistance of E. Müller-Luckner; Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999) 85–99.

arguments that they expect their respective audiences to be convinced by? Who else among Paul's, Matthew's, Mark's, Luke's, and John's contemporaries in the Mediterranean world referred to the same customs and texts as authoritative when they aimed at convincing their addressees? Looking at our earliest Christ-oriented texts, which ancestral customs are considered to work against God's plans for Paul's addressees, the ἔθνη, and, crucially, which traditions are used to make that case? Which ancestral traditions and customs in the Mediterranean world nurtured ideas about an anointed king to rule Israel and the nations (treated as two entities, one specific and the other general)? If Paul and the others had to identify the god of whom they spoke, what would they have called that god?<sup>38</sup> And what does Paul's self-identification as an apostle to the nations<sup>39</sup> imply about his understanding of the ethnic composition of the world and his own location within that composition?<sup>40</sup>

Such questions seem to me to open up for consideration the nature of the wider discursive context within which the authors of the texts included in the New Testament formulated and communicated their messages, simultaneously (indirectly) indicating which other Graeco-Roman ancestral customs, traditions, and texts were available to them, but of which they – and, from their perspective, their audiences – had no use. My point is this: answers to questions such as these allow us to construct the general outlines of, and name, a category within which these authors define themselves, and which they understand to contain the rhetorical force needed to convince their audience. This may be done, then, without having to posit a set of criteria isolating an entity which itself is pluriform, fluid, and adjustable, or drawing up a methodologically ambiguous and arbitrarily selected ideal image of an authentic and fixed category against which to compare the content of the New Testament.

Or, to put it differently, the multiple variations of the ancestral customs we designate as 'first-century Judaism' are expressions of a recognisable theme, but there is no 'original', 'authentic', 'ideal', 'fixed', 'pure' or universally accepted authoritative melody on which variations elaborate. There is no 'starting point'; we have only variations. Or we can explore the same concept through the lens of text criticism, where many scholars are leaving behind the idea of an Urtext, from which variants grow and against which variations can be measured, and instead speak of textual fluidity and manuscript culture. It seems to me, rather, that it is the self-professed loyalty to the God of Israel that best keeps all of the variant expressions following from such allegiance together as a category, beyond ancient or modern normative attempts at defining one variant or another as the exclusive owner of the theo-ritual discourse, and allows us to speak of a variety of ancient phenomena as Israelite ancestral customs or Yahwistic traditions.<sup>41</sup> Such a general criterion of what 'within' would have meant would include Samaritans too, however. Indeed, one could even suggest that it could include Late-Ancient Christianity, since this variant may also be understood as an example of 'Yahwism'.<sup>42</sup> Reading ancient texts

<sup>38</sup> Matthew did call this god, explicitly, 'the God of Israel' (Matt 15.31).

<sup>39</sup> Rom 1.5; 11.13; 15.16; Gal 1.15–16; 2.2, 8–9; 1 Thess 2.16.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Gal 2.15.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. J. VanMaaren, 'The Gospel of Mark Within Judaism: Reading the Second Gospel in its Ethnic Landscape' (PhD Diss., McMaster University, 2019), noting that self-identification is key to the interpretive enterprise of categorisation. It is perhaps the normative impulse that causes the historian the most trouble as it is intertwined with power and sometimes hard to detect. This is especially true with regard to the right to define the insider and outsider. Indeed, according to the modern orthodox definition of who is a Jew, a solid number of converts to other variants of Judaism – including their children – while understanding themselves as observant Jews, fall outside that definition, with halakhic consequences.

<sup>42</sup> These Christians redefined 'Israel', though, to apply to themselves (new Israel/true Israel), which signals a discursive movement as to what the 'God of Israel' means, to them, as divorced from the Ἰουδαῖοι. This is a far

‘within *Judaism*’ thus requires further signals in discursive practices that cannot easily be oriented around Samaritans and Christians. They are all Yahwisms, but not all are Judaisms.<sup>43</sup> To be categorised as ‘within Judaism’, then, the first-century texts we study need to voice veneration of the God of Israel in ways that orbit (pre-rabbinic) constructions of Jewish ethnicity.<sup>44</sup> This is precisely why Paul, contrary to, e.g., Matthew, presents us with a special problem, as his addressees are mainly non-Jews and he wants them to remain so even as they accept his message about the Christ.<sup>45</sup>

What we see in these, our oldest Christ-oriented texts is, I would suggest, what we might call a ‘de-ethnosizing process’, in which the language, categories, and authority of Jewish ancestral traditions are retained for the people of Israel’s God but extended in specific ways to normatively include also non-Jewish people groups. Such processes were not unique to the Jewish people, though, but rather represent a variation of a common theme in the Mediterranean world at this time, in which the relevance of gods and goddesses of specific ethnicities was extended to apply also beyond ethnically defined groups. We see such developments at play in, e.g., the cults of Isis and Serapis.<sup>46</sup> An important point to emphasise here is that de-ethnosizing processes do not diminish the value or effect of the ‘original’ ethnic orientation of the cult; on the contrary, it was precisely the ‘foreignness’ of these (‘exotic’) Eastern cults that made them attractive to others. It is within such a more general theo-ritual culture we should understand, in my view, what Paula Fredriksen has called Paul’s Judaizing of the nations.<sup>47</sup> Such proclamation of a ‘Judaism for gentiles’ does not undermine Judaism or Jewish ethnicity; on the contrary, it confirms the importance of these ethno-religious traditions also beyond the Jewish people.

In other words, just as it is quite clear from Romans 11 that Paul is inviting non-Jews to share in the nourishment that comes from the olive tree whose roots extend back to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it seems equally obvious (based on the same olive-tree metaphor) that Paul did not intend to re-enact an exodus for Jews, rescuing them from their ancestral traditions and leading them all into a gentile promised land. Rather, the Jewish ancestral traditions are precisely what carry within them the salvific force now shared also with non-Jews, through the work of the Spirit. What Paul, the apostle to the nations, offers his addressees is best described, then, as (a particular form of) Judaism for gentiles,<sup>48</sup> for those who are not Jews like himself. For Paul, these gentiles are thought of as ‘within the orbit of Judaism’ in the sense of being dependent on and giving

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cry, it would seem, from Paul’s understanding of the God of Israel as the God of Jews and non-Jews (e.g., Rom 3.29).

<sup>43</sup> As for Paul, the discursive space that his letters conjures up is so interwoven with traditions cherished and embodied by Jews (not Samaritans, Zoroastrians, or worshippers of Mithras, Isis, Serapis, or Zeus) that it seems to me hard to escape the conclusion that it is into this space – a Jewish space – that he invites non-Jews on terms generated (by himself and other Jews) specifically for them.

<sup>44</sup> On Jewish ethnic discourse and boundary-making, see most recently VanMaaren, *Boundaries*.

<sup>45</sup> Note, however, the recent argument by P. J. Bakken, *Paul’s Negotiation of Abraham in Galatians 3 in the Jewish Context: The Galatian Converts - Lineal Descendants of Abraham and Heirs of the Promise* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), who, based on a comparative study of Philo, understands Paul to be going further than this and suggests his aim was to turn non-Jews into proselytes.

<sup>46</sup> See discussion in A. Runesson, ‘Judging Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew: Between “Othering” and Inclusion’, *Jesus, Matthew’s Gospel and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Professor Graham N. Stanton* (ed. D. M. Gurtner, J. Willitts, and R. A. Burridge; LNTS 435 London: T&T Clark 2011) 133–51, here 136–8.

<sup>47</sup> P. Fredriksen, ‘Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel’ *NTS* 56.2 (2010) 232–52.

<sup>48</sup> It is not ‘Samaritanism for gentiles’, nor ‘Christianity for gentiles’; Paul’s argument privileges Judaism as the hermeneutical frame within which everything else is fitted. On this, see further discussion in Runesson, *Judaism for Gentiles*.

expression to Jewish ancestral customs adapted for non-Jews. As Peter Richardson wrote already in 1969, commenting on Paul's writings,

The Church has no existence apart from Israel and has no separate identity. It exists as an interim measure until the fullness of Israel [...] is brought in and grafted on (v. 23). Only then will the olive tree be full and ripe. The thought is distinctly Israel-centric.<sup>49</sup>

Fredriksen's rhetorical question is quite relevant in this context:

'[W]ould the participants in this moment of the movement, whether they were Jews or Gentiles, think of Christianity as anything other than the true form of Judaism, or as the right way of reading the Jewish scriptures, or as the latest and best revelation from Israel's god in keeping with his ancient promises to his people?'<sup>50</sup>

The answer is, arguably, no, they would not. This, in turn, suggests that the emergence of 'Christianity', and thus also of reading practices from a position 'outside Judaism' (according to our modern conversational habits) need to be understood from a vantage point other than that provided by the Pauline writings, namely Pauline reception, and, by extension, reception of the New Testament as a collection of writings interpreting one another from a horizon modelled by later followers of this messiah, but unknown to the authors themselves.<sup>51</sup>

## 5 Conclusion: Back to the Future

At the heart of the problem of understanding Paul, or Matthew, or Mark, or John, or any other Christ-oriented text as within or outside Judaism lies, I believe, issues relating to patterns of human perception and communication, as well as basic notions of local phenomena as embodiments of universal categories, the relationship between the general and the unique, of the essential and of variation, of the original and of adaptations – all of which, while being active components of any theory explaining historical relationships between Judaism and Christianity, are fraught with conceptual difficulties.<sup>52</sup> The bottom line is that the way we phrase things as we try to understand these phenomena creates something; it changes the place from which we observe the past and thus by implication the present. It is meaningful to ask again, then, by way of conclusion, what *does* it mean to read New Testament texts as 'within Judaism'? Based on the previous discussion, the following four conclusions suggest themselves.

First, the importance of emphasising pre-rabbinic, Second Temple period Jewish and Graeco-Roman comparanda when constructing the discursive matrix within which the New Testament texts are read stands out, especially when contextualising our question in the history-of-research trajectory it builds on. In this (comparative) space, second, the interpretively reasonable emerge differently from later and other interpretive

<sup>49</sup> P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (SNTSMS 10; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>50</sup> P. Fredriksen, 'Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins Whose Time has Come to Go', *SR* 35.2 (2006) 231–46, here 235. She adds: 'This list of identifiers is of course a paraphrase of Romans 15.'

<sup>51</sup> So also Sandnes, *Var Paulus Kristen?*, 210. For Sandnes, Paul himself never meant to form a 'church' separated from Judaism. The development that led to such a situation must be explained based on factors beyond Paul, the reception of Paul, as the Pauline correspondence in itself, despite the sometimes radical claims contained within it, cannot carry the full explanatory weight of this turn of events. To understand the 'parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity', then, we need to study not only Paul but also *reactions* to Paul (Sandnes, *Var Paulus Kristen?*, 220; cf. idem, *Paul Perceived: An Interactionist Perspective on Paul and the Law* (WUNT 412; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> I have developed this argument in greater detail in Runesson, *Judaism for Gentiles*, Ch. 1, and Epilogue.

matrices construed based on other forms of rationality. To be sure, Paul, Matthew, John and the others were read from a vantage point outside, and in opposition to, 'Judaism' in Late-Antique Christianity, and it made perfect sense for the actors involved to do so. Such readings were, within their theo-ritual and social reality, perfectly reasonable and religiously rational. This was so not only from a Christian perspective but also from an emerging rabbinic position, which distanced itself, too, from various expressions of Second Temple Judaism, as well as from contemporary forms of (non-Jewish) Christianity.

Third, while the authoritative texts, with some variations, remain, human understanding of the reasonable changes over time and across cultures. This is true also of interpretive trajectories within European intellectual culture, that is, the trajectories within which modern historical study of the New Testament emerged as a result of the Enlightenment. The key aspect of this development in reading texts as ancient and historical rather than religious and normative, that is, in removing their discursive relevance from normative reading collectives and searching for their historical otherness, constitutes the very real parting of the ways between academia and church that was initiated (but not finalised) in this period. The rationality nurtured by Enlightenment culture construes the reasonable in new ways beyond religious narratives and their ways of arguing theo-historical truths. Reading Paul, Matthew, John and the others within Judaism thus presupposes an epistemological 'parting of the ways' process, not in antiquity but in the modern period, between academia and the religiously normative; in theory of knowledge, especially issues concerning method and validity.

It is, fourth and finally, this epistemological parting of the ways that creates a discursive matrix in which a 'within Judaism' reading is not only possible but also made reasonable through engagement with specific sets of pre-rabbinic Second Temple Jewish comparanda understood from certain (reconstructed) perspectives that evolve, too, from this modern/historical reading culture. And it is this modern epistemological parting of the ways between academic and theological normativity that, in the end, undermines the very idea of a parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity in antiquity, a process in which the death of the one is inscribed as supersessionally necessary for the life of the other as polarised entities are carefully forged.<sup>53</sup>

Granting such an epistemological parting of the ways, which moves us beyond meanings perceived to be reasonable in the culturally embedded here and now, one must ask, though, whether our reconstructions can ever be anything other than monsters conjured up by a range of Mary Shelleys. What are their use? What do they do? What does it mean to read first-century texts 'within Judaism' in the twenty-first century? For me, as for many others, there is an ethical dimension to the whole enterprise, in that we aim to understand, through radical listening, voices not our own. I do think, too, that the historical Other has a place in contemporary theological discussions, both Christian and Jewish, in Jewish/Christian dialogue, and in philosophical and political deliberations; but, and this is essential, not as an unchallenged voice, and not beyond the contemporary hermeneutics of those conversations. In the end, reading the New Testament 'within Judaism' is, I believe, at once making its content foreign *and* finding its authors' voices. The responsibility of understanding what this means in settings where these texts represent the point of departure for normative discussions of what reality really is and how people should behave in it – in other words, what truth is – resides not with the ancients, however,

<sup>53</sup> On supersessionism and the discursive location of historical study relative to it, cf. R. Shepard Kraemer, *The Mediterranean Diaspora in Late Antiquity: What Christianity Cost the Jews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) xii: '[c]areful historical work may not be sufficient to protect us from repeating our painful past, but its absence makes that even more likely'.

but with us. In such discussions, we need more than historians to take part. As Robert Wilken writes:

The dialectic of past and present, tradition and innovation, permanence and change, runs through the whole history of Christianity. [...] Christians have, in their construction of the past, prized antiquity, stability, and permanence, but the historical record shows us quite another picture. [...] No matter how deeply we probe, how early we extend our search, we will never find an original faith. We can't go home again, not only because the home we once knew has changed beyond recognition. No, there never was a home. From the beginning, Christians have been wanderers and pilgrims whose dream lies not in the past, but before them and all men – in the future.<sup>54</sup>

What we speak into being is undeniably closer to us than any origin story is able to conjure up. For, as Rudolf Bultmann famously argued, '[h]istorical phenomena are not what they are in pure isolation, but only in relation to the future for which they have importance'.<sup>55</sup> The real question is, then, when we ponder what it means to read New Testament texts within Judaism: for which future are first- and second-century apocalyptically oriented Jewish texts – canonised by Late-Antique non-Jewish Christians who claimed as theirs the messiah that these texts variously shaped – important?

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<sup>54</sup> R. L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) 185.

<sup>55</sup> R. Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper, 1957) 120.

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