

The Jewish Approach towards Christianity.

But the thoughts of the Creator of the World are not for a human to grasp, because our ways are not His, and our thoughts are not His. And all these things of Jesus, and [Mohammed] that came after him, are not but to carve the way for the King Messiah and to direct the entire world to worship God together, as it is said, "For then will I change the nations [to speak] a pure and clear language, that they may all call out upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent" (Zephaniah 3:9).

-Maimonides¹

The following observations on the Jewish approach to Christianity were developed in conjunction with a vision presented of a rebuilt Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in peaceful proximity to the existing Islamic shrines on the Temple Mount as well as to the numerous Christian sites and churches located nearby. Per the words of the eminent Jewish thinker Maimonides quoted above, both Christianity and Islam, each an offshoot of Judaism, have a role in God's plan for the redemption of the world. Given the Temple's purpose to manifest the presence of the One God to the entire world, not just to Jews, it is indeed natural that Jews, Muslims and Christians together would share in the world transformation that a rebuilt Temple would promote.

However, given a history of anti-Jewish persecutions linked to Christianity and its theology, it may nevertheless be difficult for some Jews to understand the possibility of any positive dynamic resulting from the proximity of a rebuilt Temple to existing churches in Jerusalem. In this paper, we will examine the Jewish Halachic position with respect to Christianity, and also the views of certain rabbis throughout the ages who offered commentaries concerning the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We will consider and analyze some major differences between the original teachings of Jesus and aspects of a later theology forged under the influence of the Roman Empire, culminating with theological changes made during the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and in the years following. We hope that we can provide some historical background to help distinguish between some who committed destructive and immoral acts in the name of Jesus throughout history as opposed to the ethical teachings of Jesus and the good will of followers of his throughout the centuries.

Given the immense body of scholarship written by both Christians and Jews on the origins of Christianity, it would be presumptuous for us to offer anything that could be viewed as answers to the many key questions encompassed by this subject. But we hope to at least be able to raise the question here as to whether the Roman approach of divide and conquer may have occurred to some extent theologically as well in creating historical divisions between Jews and Christians, divisions concerning which it is now constructive for both of us to unravel through study and

¹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 11:4 (Rabbi Kappah's edition). In Medieval Time, the censorship omitted this paragraph but it was still well known amongst the Jewry in Western Europe. See Ben-Shalom, R. *Facing Christian Culture*. Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem 2006, pg. 165 fn 60 (hereinafter Ben-Shalom, *Facing*).

dialogue. As noted above, given Rambam's quoted words and the universal and transformative role of the Temple, it is clear that Jews, Muslims and Christians will share in the redemptive events of the prophetic vision on God's Holy Mountain.

Please note that the subject of this paper is the Jewish approach to Christianity, and that it is addressed toward a Jewish readership. Christians and other non-Jews are of course welcome to read it as well, with the understanding that nothing here is intended to judge Christianity, its theology, or any of its denominations. There has indeed been an active quest in modern time by Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, for the roots of Christianity, a subject of intense interest also during the founding period of the United States, central to which have been questions similar to those we will raise. Although, of course, the answers Jews and Christians find will reflect our differing theological foundations, it can nevertheless be valuable to continue the dialogue of centuries past on these questions of interest to us both and to learn from our differing perspectives.

A. The Halachic Approach Towards Christianity.

There is a common assumption, formulated primarily in the medieval times, that according to the *halachah*², Christianity is considered an idolatrous religion. Therefore, all the restrictions and severe behavioral guidelines that were set down by sages throughout history for Jews, to eradicate any potentially idolatrous practices, such as forbidding any possible benefit from idolatry or the prohibition to enter a place of idolatry,³ apply immediately to Christianity. Accordingly, due to the prohibition to study or inquire about idolatrous beliefs,⁴ consideration of Christianity has been severely limited in halachic Jewish writings. However, the historical aspect of Christianity received a considerable amount of attention. For instance, a great preponderance of Rabbis had a positive view of Jesus as a lawful, observant Jew, as discussed in detail later in this paper, in contrast to their generally negative view of the theology forged around Jesus under the influence of the Roman Empire.

Historically, idolatry was rejected and heathens were castigated in Judaism not for theological reasons alone, but also because idolatry was connected with moral misconduct.⁵ The rabbinic definition of idolatry itself is devised from two basic factors: the rituals of idolatry and immoral behavior. That is why, once pagans follow the basic moral precepts, which are reflected in the Seven Noahide Laws,⁶ many rabbis do not consider them as idolaters. The Me'iri introduced this notion concerning Christianity and resolutely determined that the Christians are not to be defined as idol worshippers as, de facto, they follow the Seven Noahide Laws: "and it was already

² The term *halachah* can refer to a specific, received Jewish religious law, or, as used here, it can refer to the great corpus of rabbinical literature addressing normative behavior beginning from the Mishnah to the later writings of Rabbis to the present day.

³ See the various ruling in the Mishnah, Avodah Zarah chapters 1-2, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat-Kochavim*.

⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat-Kochavim.2:2*.

⁵ Such reflections on this can be found in Jewish sources, see Mishnah Avodah Zarah 2:1, and also in historical-epigraphic writings. See also Mishnah Avodah Zarah 2:1.

⁶ Talmud Sanhedrin 56a. These laws represent the moral and religious basis of any civilization according to the Torah. See Talmudic Encyclopedia, entry "Ben Noah."

explained that [offensive rulings against heathens] originate from the times when those nations were idol worshippers and were filthy by their own deeds and disgusting as a result of their bad manners . . . but other nations, that restrict themselves according to their laws and that are clean from these disgusting manners, and moreover, punish violations of those rules, there is no doubt that these things [rulings] do not apply to them"⁷ As opposed to "earlier heathens . . . that did not follow any law [religious or civil] and did not care for any duty of a human society,"⁸ others, from "the nations that restrict themselves with religious laws, and worship God in a way, *although their belief is far from ours . . . they are viewed as Jews concerning any law without a difference at all . . .*"⁹ Therefore, according to the Me'iri, who represents the branch of Rabbis who were more lenient towards Christianity,¹⁰ Christians, who "restrict themselves according to their laws," are not considered heathens.¹¹

Other rabbis do not consider Christianity as idolatry because Christianity's creed is a certain kind of belief that is permitted to gentiles. To them, gentiles are not regarded as pagans if they believe in God but also in a secondary divine entity (less powerful, yet deriving strength from God) who also must be worshiped.¹² This is called *shituf* (associationalism)—"the association of a divine being with God."¹³ This belief is forbidden for Jews, as the belief in the One God includes the prohibition against recognizing,¹⁴ let alone worshipping, other "gods," but was not forbidden for gentiles.¹⁵

Many of the *rishonim*¹⁶ accepted this view and ruled that the prohibition on idolatry for gentiles does not include a restriction against associationalism. For instance, the Talmud forbids a Jew to make a business partnership with a heathen "lest the latter be obliged to take an oath [in connection with a business dispute], and he swear by

⁷ Me'iri, introduction to the second chapter of Talmud Avodah.

⁸ Me'iri on Talmud Yoma 84a.

⁹ Me'iri on Talmud Baba Kama 113b.

¹⁰ Including the *Tosafot* (Rabbi Tam) and Rabbi Yeruham who lived in a Christian environment. See HaCohen, A. Christianity and Christians in rabbinical prism in the modern times: From Rabbi Kook to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. *Mahanaim* (15), Merkaz Sapir, Jerusalem 2003 (hereinafter, HaCohen, *Christianity*.)

¹¹ Rabbi Kook wrote that in practice "we should follow Me'iri's opinion, that all nations which keep decent laws of interpersonal relationship are already considered *Ger Toshav* [resident alien] and they deserve all the privileges of the law." (Rabbi Kook, *Rabbi Kook's Letter*, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1961, letter 1:89). *Ger toshav* is a "gentile who undertakes to observe the Seven Noahide Laws" From Talmud (Soncino) Avodah Zarah 24b, footnote 7.

¹² See Harlap, Y. "Associationalism and Noahide's", *Tehumin* (19), Machon Tzomet, Alon Shvut 1999, pg. 149-150. This definition is based on Talmud Sanhedrin 63a and on the Maharsha commentary ad loc.

¹³ Kaplan, J. *Radical Religion in America*, Syracuse University Press, New York 1997, pg. 112.

¹⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Yesode HaTorah*, 1:7.

¹⁵ This is because while Jews are obliged to fully observe the Mitzvah (command) of God's unity, as God's messengers of the monotheistic belief, gentiles are not compelled to maintain the highest level of monotheism. This is not surprising as the Seven Noahide Laws are different in part from the same law (Mitzvah) that applies to Jews. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Melachim* chapter 9

his idol, whilst the Torah hath said 'Neither let it be heard out through thy mouth.'¹⁷ However, the *Ba'alei HaTosafot* allow for this kind of partnership and commented that "in our days, that everyone swear by their gods but nevertheless do not consider them to be truly 'divine' . . . and although they associate God and idolatry (while they take an oath)—however, it is not forbidden to be the cause that others [gentiles] associate [God and other divinities] . . . as Noahides [gentiles] were not commanded to refrain from it."¹⁸

This position that holds that non-Jews were not prohibited to practice a belief of the kind of associationalism, was accepted in *halachah*¹⁹ and had a direct impact on the Jewish perception of Christianity that was considered a belief that associates God with Jesus. The *Maharatz Hayut* writes: "The Christians who believe in religious laws and that the Torah was given from heaven, and acknowledge God's presence and justice in the world to come, and in other principles of belief, *with no doubt* fall in the category of *ger toshav*²⁰ . . . and although they practice associationalism, the Ran and Rabbi Yerucham already ruled that non-Jews were not commanded to refrain from associationalism."²¹ It should be noted that other Rabbis (e.g. Rashi) inferred that Christians are not considered idol worshippers regardless of the debate about associationalism.²²

Nevertheless, other rabbis maintained that a Noahide is considered an idol worshipper if he practices associationalism,²³ thus, for them, Christianity is defined as idolatry. Maimonides²⁴ considered Christianity to be idolatry but did not explicitly reveal their reasons for this conclusion.

As mentioned above, the Me'iri disagrees with Maimonides' ruling and states that the "Christians" mentioned as idolaters in the Talmud, most likely Maimonides' source for his *halachah* here, refer to another sect of sun worshippers that celebrated 'Sunday' as their holy day.²⁵

The different positions stated above are apparent in current rabbinic rulings. For example, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's²⁶ opinion concerning Christianity shifts between two seemingly conflicting views. On the one hand, he concludes that the Christians are not considered idol worshippers concerning several issues,²⁷ as gentiles were *not* commanded to refrain from associationalism. On the other hand he prohibits Jews to

¹⁷Talmud Sanhedrin 63b.

¹⁸ Tosafot *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Bet Yosef Yoreh-De'ah 147, Ot 3, *Ibid.*, Hoshen Mishpat 182. Shach Yoreh-De'ah 151:7. *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 156:1,

²⁰ Resident alien—"A gentile who undertakes to observe the Seven Noahide Laws." Talmud (Soncino) Avodah Zarah 24b footnote 7.

²¹ In Tiferet Yisrael In Ateret Zvi.

²² His view is found in Tosafot on Talmud Avodah Zarah 57b. See Gershuni, Y. "The minorities and their rights in the state of Israel according to the Halacha", *Tehumin* (2), Machon Tzomet, Alon Shvut 1981, pg. 190 (hereinafter, Gershuni, *The Minorities*.)

²³ Pitche Teshuva (Yoreh-De'ah 147, par. 2), Responsa Sha'ar Efraim 24, Responsa Me'il Zedaka 22, Hazon Ish (Yoreh-De'ah 62:19), Responsa Hatam Sofer (part A, Orach-Ha'im 84).

²⁴ Maimonides, on Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:3. See also *Ibid* Hilchot Avodat Kochavim, 9:4.

²⁵ See Gershuni, *The Minorities*, pg. 187.

²⁶ Rabbi Yosef was the Chief Sephardic chief Rabbi of Israel.

²⁷ Responsa Yabi'a-Omer, vol.7, Orach-Haim 22. Responsa Yehave-Da'at 6:9.

enter a church as it is a place of idolatry,²⁸ and writes that gentiles *were* commanded to refrain from associationalism!²⁹ This approach, which tries to reconcile and balance the various and often contradictory sources, is, to say the least, complex.³⁰

This example demonstrates the problem of the current Jewish attitude to Christianity. Rabbinical views on Christianity were substantially formulated in medieval times, before major reform developments in Christianity, and it is worth examining whether new questions have arisen that merit the reexamination of rabbis in our age. Maimonides, for instance, lived in the 12th century, and defined Christianity as idolatry without specifying a reason for this statement. Does his opinion apply automatically to Christianity today, when Christianity has evolved in many significant ways?

It could be constructive for modern rabbis to examine Christianity and its concepts in order to rule more precisely about it. For instance, the concept of the Trinity—is it equivalent to the term “associationalism”? Does Christianity “associate” God and Jesus or whether “associationalism” is not the most credible definition for the Christian belief? We know that e.g. the Trinity is regarded by Christian thinkers themselves as a “complete mystery” (*mysterium absolutum*) which simultaneously involves God's unity and differentiation. Is it possible, in a Jewish approach, that the Trinity concept doesn't fall under the category of associationalism and requires a new definition? As some rabbis³¹ did, in fact, consider Christianity to be a monotheistic belief, the question is even more pressing. In this context, it is important to shed light on a point reviewed closely later in this paper, that almost all the *rishonim*, including the Rambam, the Ramban and others,³² considered Christianity as a belief in some ways widely divergent from the teachings of Jesus. Rabbis throughout the generations made the distinction between Jesus, whom they tended to regard positively as a sincere Jewish teacher, and a later theology that was forged under the influence of the Roman Empire.

Another key facet of Christianity that emerged only after the twelfth century, when key rabbinic views were formulated, is the diversity in faith systems within Christianity itself. As this differentiation requires some basic knowledge of the history of Christianity and of the various streams of Christian theology, most rabbis, mainly due to the ban to study idolatry, are not aware of these developments at all.³³ Differentiation between the different movements and sects could lead to a more informed and detailed Jewish approach to Christianity as is found only in one

²⁸ He substantiates this multifaceted view via the Rama, that purports that Christians are not considered idol worshippers; however he does consider the cross an object of idolatry.

²⁹ Responsa Yahaveh-Da'at 4, 45.

³⁰ Rabbi Yosef's practical rulings, needless to say, are very logical, as he differentiates between the prohibitions that apply on the Jewish individual concerning idolatry and the human approach towards the other individual that is, in any form, related to that belief. The problem here lies in the disclarity of the definition of Christianity, as follows.

³¹ e.g. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, in the *Kuzari*.

³² Ram Ben-Shalom, *Facing Christian Culture*, Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem 2006, pg. 147-208,

³³ See HaCohen, *Christianity*, pg. 92, footnote 10.

Responsa.³⁴ It seems unfortunate for rabbis, especially while ruling in issues that concern Christianity, to remain largely unfamiliar with Christianity due to the ban on the study of idolatry, when, in fact, closer examination of the modern practice of Christianity, separated into many different creeds, could in fact demonstrate that this ban does not apply automatically on all Christian sects and has questionable validity in some contexts. As will be reviewed below, Christianity is evolving, even "classic" Christianity, and this transformation has not been adequately considered in current halachic positions on Christianity.

In summarizing the above, we conclude with the words of Rabbi Herzog, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel. He considers the creed of Christianity's as "believing in the unity of God, Who created the world and rules over it." However, he notes that these concepts are not entirely clear to Christians themselves (who also make strenuous efforts to reconcile monotheism with the dogma of the Trinity). He defines their belief as associationalism and further rules that Noahides were not commanded to refrain from it, hence Christians are not considered to be idol worshippers and "all that applies to Muslims applies to them as well"³⁵ He adds that, "In any case, following the saying of our sages, that non-Jews, not in the Land of Israel, are not considered real idol-worshippers as they merely follow the customs of their ancestors (Talmud Hulin 13b), Therefore today's Christians, including Catholics, are not considered idol worshippers in the original sense, but their heart is turned to heaven [the One God]"³⁶

B. The Transformation of Christianity.

The halachahic commentaries about Christianity do not reveal the deep and complex feelings that Jews held towards Christianity from the era of its founding to modern times. A key factor shaping both Jewish attitudes toward Christianity as well as Christian yearnings for something perhaps lost from its inception, was the fact that the Roman Empire, which victimized Jews and Christians by the hundreds of thousands for centuries, became, in 325 C.E, the guiding power behind the emergence of a theology based upon the teachings of Jesus. A brief review of key historical events is in order.

Jesus (*Yehoshua* or *Yeshua*) taught and preached in the Galilee, Samaria and in Jerusalem in the Land of Israel, all of which were at that time a Principality of the Roman Empire (*Provincia Iudaea*), in the Second Temple era. The generally accepted position is that he was born and raised in Nazareth around the year 2 C.E. in the Galilee and became a teacher with a considerable following among *am-haaretz* (common people). Jesus' teaching reflected the spirit of the Prophets throughout Tanach, emphasizing personal devotion to God, exemplary moral behavior and care for justice for those on the fringes of society.

³⁴ See Responsa *Bnei Banim* 3, 35. This Responsa of this Rabbi is unique in his knowledge of Christianity, and he does differentiate between Catholic, Protestant, and Unitarian beliefs. For example, he says that Unitarians are not considered idol worshippers but still prohibits Jewish people to enter their churches "Mipne Hachashad."

³⁵ See our paper [The Jewish approach to Islam](#).

³⁶ Rabbi Dr. Isaac Halevi Herzog, "The rights of minorities according to Halachah," *Tehumin* (2). Machon Tsomet, Alon Shevut, 1981.

According to the Gospel writings, Jesus traveled to Jerusalem with his disciples to preach his teachings there. During his sojourn to Jerusalem for *Pesach* (Passover), the *Cohen HaGadol* (The High Priest, Caiaphas) and the *Sanhedrin* (The Jewish High Court), brought Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Procurator of Judea at that time, and insisted he be killed.³⁷ Pontius Pilate, protesting ("I am innocent of this man's blood."³⁸), yet in the end, to appease the Jews, crucified him.

Despite this tragic end, Jesus' death was the impetus for a new, fast growing movement, that turned out to be, 300 years later, a significant force in the Roman Empire. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the chronology of the transformation of Christianity, but a clear milestone was the activity of the Apostle Paul (originally Saul of Tarsus), who considered himself as a messenger of the Gospel to the gentiles,³⁹ declaring that the Torah's ritual commandments were irrelevant for personal salvation.⁴⁰ His position, however, was the cause of a major dispute with James (*Ya'acov*), a brother of Jesus, and with Peter, who was the head of the fledgling Christian community in Jerusalem, both of whom obligated Jews to continue to observe all the mitzvot of the Torah.⁴¹ Peter, whose name remained *Shimon* (Simon) in Jewish circles, insisted on *brit milah* (circumcision) even for the new male gentile believers,⁴² thereby bringing him into direct conflict with Paul's creed of the New Covenant.⁴³ Eventually, due to its overall rejection by Jews and widespread acceptance by gentiles, Christianity disengaged from Judaism and left behind the Jewish-Christians who emphasized the Jewishness and humanness of Jesus, as best articulated by with James as their leader.⁴⁴

At its beginning, Christianity was denounced by the Romans as *superstitio Iudaica* (a superstition based on Judaism) and hence declared as a *religio illicita* (illegal religion). For three centuries following the death of Jesus, Christians were subject to constant persecutions and mass killing by the Roman regime. One infamous incident occurred in the year 64, when the Emperor Nero falsely accused the Christian community for starting the great fire that broke out in Rome. Tacitus recounts that "a vast multitude, were convicted, not so much of the crime of fire vandalism as of hatred of the human race. And in their deaths they were made the subjects of sport; for they were wrapped in the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set on fire, and when day declined, were burned to serve for nocturnal lights."⁴⁵ In many occasions, Christians, as occurred many times

³⁷ The *Sanhedrin's* main accusation, according to the three Synoptic Gospels, was that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah and the Son of God. See Mark 14:61, Matt. 26:63, Luke 22:67-71.

³⁸ Mathew 27:24.

³⁹ Sanders, E.P., *Paul, -A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York 1991 pg. 3.

⁴⁰ See Romans chapters 3 & 4, Ephesians 3:11-22, Acts, chapter 10, Galatians 2:11, Kleinberg, A. *Christianity from its Beginning to the Reformation*, Ministry of Defense, Tel Aviv 1995, pg. 33.

⁴¹ Acts, 21:21.

⁴² Galatians 2:11-21

⁴³ Acts, 21:21.

⁴⁴ Limor, O. *The Beginnings of Europe*, The Open University, Tel Aviv 2003, pg. 35 (hereinafter, Limor, *The beginnings.*)

throughout history to Jews, were given the choice to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods and so escape punishment. If they refused, they were subject to imprisonment, torture, and various gruesome forms of execution including crucifixion.

Despite these constant persecutions by the Romans, the Christians, motivated by their faith, became by the time of the emperor Constantine—three centuries after Jesus' death—ten percent of the Roman Empire's population. Their supporters continued to join the movement, which evolved into a well organized, hierarchal organization.

However, in the year 313, a dramatic change occurred in the status of Christianity under the Roman Empire. The Emperor at the time, Constantine, declared that this formally illegal religion was now legal and tolerated, and furthermore, later on, made it Rome's state religion. Constantine claimed that underlying this dramatic transformation in the status of Christianity was a vision of Jesus in dream, on the eve of the decisive battle (in 312 C.E) that made him a single ruler of Western Roman Empire. Yet, Constantine himself maintained pagan practices, alongside his Christian faith, until his death 24 years later, and was actually baptized only on his deathbed.⁴⁶

In order to ingratiate himself and Rome with Christians, Constantine did all in his power to overcome 300 years of Rome's brutality against them, including providing financial support for churches and granting privileges to the priesthood. He built cathedrals and even banned the crucifixion punishment, so identified as a symbol of Roman brutality.⁴⁷ Another major effort in erasing the inconvenient history of Roman paganism and persecution of Christianity was the establishment of a brand new capital, Byzantium, (Constantinopolis) or *Nova Roma* (New Rome) between 324-330 C.E, instead of Rome, free of pagan shrines but with impressive churches.⁴⁸

Constantine, motivated by his belief that Christianity, given its inherently cosmopolitan nature,⁴⁹ would help him unify the empire under one religion, assembled hundreds of bishops from throughout the empire for the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 CE). He was anxious to resolve the disputes in Christianity (e.g. The Arianich dispute) and to achieve a consensus-based, unified statement of belief (credo) that could lead to a situation of "One God, One Religion, One Empire," in order to strengthen and ensure his regime. Constantine also took actions to canonize and unify the large amount of different versions of Christian texts that were dispersed throughout the empire. This process of standardizing Christian texts, initiated by the Roman Empire, took many tens of years, and Constantine was a key force behind it. For instance, in 331, six year after the Council of Nicaea, he commissioned Bishop Eusebius to create an official Christian Bible. We know about

⁴⁶ Some scholars claim that Constantine identified Jesus as the god of the sun and that is why he chose Sunday as the ritual day and also chose to set December 25th, near the Winter Solstice and also the birthday of the sun god, as the date for celebrating Jesus' birthday. December 25 is also the birthday of the sun god. Constantine also coined pagan symbols on Roman money and in general it seems that he used Christianity more than truly believed in it.

⁴⁷ Wikipedia, *Crucifixion*.

⁴⁸ Gerberding, R. Moran Cruz, J. H. *Medieval Worlds*, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 2004, pp. 55–56. In Wikipedia, *History of Christianity*.

⁴⁹ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul's Letter to the Galatians 3:28.

50 copies that were made at Constantine's expense to be distributed in new Churches in Constantinopolis.⁵⁰ It is noteworthy to mention that Bishop Eusebius was considered to be one of the first to assign blame to the Jews for their own exile, troubles and calamities since the destruction of the Second Temple due to their alleged role in Jesus' death.⁵¹

Rome.

The Roman history of persecution, first against Christian and Jews, and later, against non Christians ("heretical" Christians, pagans⁵² and Jews) in the empire, mirrored the overall brutality of the Romans.⁵³ This brutality of Roman culture is reflected more than anything in the Roman entertainment.⁵⁴ In this respect, the most identified place of this "entertainment," was the Coliseum. Built in the 80's, The Coliseum, which according to some historical reports was financed with Second Temple's treasures and erected with the aid of Jewish slaves brought to Rome, was in essence the greatest authorized human slaughterhouse of the ancient world. During its activity over hundreds of years, approximately 500,000 people were killed for the free amusement of the Roman Citizens. Dio Cassius, recounts that after a successful victory in 107 C.E., the emperor Trajan hosted 123 days of gladiatorial festival. During its course, a total number of five million Romans watched gladiators fighting slaves and wild beasts—eventually 11,000 people were killed and 10,000 animals as well.⁵⁵

The wealth that was gained in wars, occupations and taxes, was distributed mainly among Rome's limited elite circles. The official benevolence, providing free wheat to some of the poor, was to abide the cynical rule of "Bread and circuses" (*panem et circenses*), that is, to supply the minimum needs of the citizens while occupying their free time in public entertainments as the gladiators fights at the Coliseum, and thus keeping them placated into submission.

In the Roman provinces, the life of the non-Roman citizens was virtually unbearable. In the name of the Roman Peace (*pax romana*) the Romans conquered and killed millions of people, other millions became slaves, and the population in Rome's provinces was systematically extorted by Rome's customs officials.

⁵⁰ (Wikipedia, *Banned from the Bible*)

⁵¹Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*: Book II, Chapter 6. Following Eusebius, the Jews were eternally guilty of the crime of *Deicide*, the killing of (the Son of) God.

⁵² In 350, Constantinus the 2nd, the son on Constantine, closed pagan Temples and commanded death penalty to pagans if they practice their beliefs. During this period, widespread persecutions against pagans took place around the Roman Empire.

⁵³The Romans imported the Greek culture to a great degree but their culture was extremely brutal and aggressive in comparison. For instance, the Greeks were tolerant of to all the beliefs in their empire as opposed to the Romans that banned almost all other non-Roman creeds.

⁵⁴ Comparing the Roman culture of entertainment to that of the Greeks, we find that the Greek sports were focused mainly on personal physical achievements, as opposed to that of the Romans that specialized in explicit violence and outright killing.

⁵⁵See Wikipedia entries Trajan, *Colosseum*. The following sections were written with references from relevant entries in Wikipedia.

This Roman well-oiled system of organized, state-controlled extortion by "taxes" was fully implemented in the provinces, with exorbitant tax "rates" that exceeded 70% of the crop yield. In the Gospel Writings, the Roman tax collectors are referred to as sinners,⁵⁶ as they exploited draconically the poor, taking much above that rate.⁵⁷

In the provinces, especially in to *Provincia Iudaea*, the Romans used the terrible punishment of crucifixion and crucified thousands upon thousands of Jews as well as Christians. This form of capital punishment, also known as *servile supplicium* (slaves punishment), the most humiliating and painful way of death,⁵⁸ was not used against Roman Citizens but otherwise was fully implemented against thousands in Rome's colonies. It was especially "useful" in crushing revolts: During the siege on Jerusalem (70 C.E.) the Romans, in order to terrorize the population, crucified around the walls of Jerusalem, 500 Jews a day.⁵⁹ Josephus recounts that there was no wood left eventually in the area as "Tens of thousands of crucified bodies encircled Jerusalem by the end of the siege."⁶⁰ These incredible figures were not uncommon under the Roman regime, and the Spartacus revolt was crushed down in the same way—the Romans crucified 6,600 of Spartacus followers along the Appian Way in 71 B.C.E.,⁶¹ and other examples are apparent.⁶² Nevertheless, this "slave punishment" was a horrifying routine for slaves as well as non-Roman citizens in Rome's provinces.

The hopeless economic situation in Judea, in addition to the Roman constant acts of disrespect against the monotheistic, non-idolatrous Jewish religion, caused constant revolts by Jews that were brutally crushed by the Romans—e.g, the seven years of the great Jewish revolt (66-73 C.E.) resulted in 1,100,000 Jews dead and close to 100,000 that were captured and sent to slavery at Rome, and of course, the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.⁶³ The Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 C.E.) resulted in 580,000 Jews killed, as recounted by Dio Cassus, the Roman historian, and "nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate." Other revolts were suppressed in the same manner.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the Romans attempted always to be viewed as benevolent and beneficial to their citizens, and therefore severely punished every criticism or rejection towards the empire and rewarded its supporters, as recounted in the Talmud.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ e.g. Luke 19:7.

⁵⁷ Also in the Talmud, the Roman tax collectors (*moches*) were known for their brutality. In fact, as an outstanding exception, the Mishnah (Nedarim 3:4) permitted to make a false oath to them, despite the regular halachic principle of "The law of the land is the law" (*dina de'malchuta dina*) that obligates to pay taxes to the ruling government. See Talmud Nedarim 28a, and Lau, B. *Hachamim* (vol.1), Beit Morasha Press, Jerusalem 2006.

⁵⁸ "the most wretched of deaths." Josephus, *Wars*, 7.203.

⁵⁹ *Wars* 5:11.

⁶⁰ Wikipedia, The First Jewish Roman *War*.

⁶¹ *Bella Civilia* 1.120.

⁶² See also Josephus, *Antiquities* 17:10.

⁶³ Josephus, *War of the Jews* 6, 9.3

⁶⁴ Another large scale revolt was the Kitos war (115-117).

⁶⁵ See for instance Talmud Shabat 33b.

In Jewish sources of the time we find a deep hatred towards the Roman Empire, which was referred to as *Malchut HaResha'a* (The Evil Kingdom). Rome was allegorized as a pig, the ultimate sign of impure, non-kosher food. In the Midrash, the analogy of Rome to a pig was expanded upon to decry the hypocrisy of Rome, with the observation that the pig is an animal that actually has a Kashrut sign of cloven hooves, yet does not ruminate (chew its cud) like the truly kosher mammals.⁶⁶ The pig spreads out its hooves, showing that they are cloven, as if to say falsely "I am pure [kosher]." ⁶⁷ Rome, according to the Midrash, robbed, stole and murdered, but yet showed itself as been charitable and benevolent, marking this as the main difference between Rome and other cruel rulers the Jewish People and the world had encountered—Rome *pretended* to act by the law and to abide morality.

Going back to *Provincia Iudaea* in Jesus' time, one of the most deadly periods was under the governing of *Prefect* (Procurator) Pontius Pilate, which governed from the year 26 to 36 C.E. He is recounted in historical documents as a vicious ruler, exploiting people and murdering them without a trial.⁶⁸ In fact, Pontius Pilate was the *only* Roman governor that was called back to Rome and replaced, after an extreme brutal mass killing of an innocent Samaritan religious procession.⁶⁹ His ten years of rule was characterized by his utter contempt towards Jewish tradition⁷⁰ and by implementation of brutal methods, even by Roman standards, to deal with any potential resistance.⁷¹

D. The Role of the Roman Empire: Benevolence or Subversion?

Given the vicious and extortionate character of the Roman Empire, in contrast to the image portrayed in the Empire's best attempts to rewrite its history, it is appropriate to scrutinize the actions of Constantine in making Christianity the state religion and in convening the Council of Nicaea, during which theological principles were formulated. In particular, the key question is whether these were acts of grand benevolence or perhaps of something more insidious, introducing elements of subversion to Christianity, that pose a challenge for Christians and Jews to study and unravel in modern times? A helpful analogy is provided in the opening scene of the 2002 movie, *The Road to Perdition*.

The movie begins with a dramatic incident based upon historical events that occurred during a period of overt gangster influence in the United States during the early twentieth century. A Mafia Godfather, played by the renowned U.S. actor Paul Newman, has been kind enough to pay for an elegant funeral of one of his criminal underlings. Several guests at the funeral express appreciation to the benevolent Mafia boss for this generous act. Only one of the guests has the temerity to publicly

⁶⁶ See Lev. 11:7.

⁶⁷ Midrash *Sechel Tov*, *Bereshit* 26.

⁶⁸ Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, pg. 135-136. In Daniel-Nataf, S. (Editor), *Philo of Alexandria – writings*, The Bialik Institute and The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1986 (hereinafter Daniel-Nataf, *Philo*.)

⁶⁹ Wikipedia, Pontius Pilate.

⁷⁰ Josephus, *Wars* 2, 9:2-3, *Antiquities*, 18.55-59.

⁷¹ Josephus, *Wars* 2, 175–177; *Antiquities*. 18.60–62

state one small point known to all present: that it was the Mafia boss who had ordered the victim shot to death.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to closely review the extensive Jewish and Christian sources concerning culpability for the crucifixion, this dramatic incident certainly has suggestive implications concerning what was perhaps the primal cover-up in history. Crucifixion was a Roman method of killing that Rome had been used to kill thousands of Jews prior to Jesus, and Pontius Pilate, as noted above, had been eventually recalled by Rome, the only Judean governor so recalled, due to brutality and murder against another religious sect, the Samaritans. The plain facts of the death of Jesus by Roman governor Pontius Pilate using a Roman method of execution, crucifixion, which Rome had used against thousands of other Jews, were so well known that the editors of the gospels could not omit them.⁷² The story of the death being instigated by the Jewish Sanhedrin violates key known procedures of the Jewish ruling body and is clearly not historical.⁷³

Given the perspective of countless instances of cover-up since exposed in history, the pressure upon gospel editors writing under Roman rule to deflect culpability from Rome for the killing of Jesus is evident. Would the gospel editors, including those finally convened by Constantine at the Council of Nicea, have been any more anxious to recount the historical culpability of Rome for the killing of Jesus than those enjoying the Mafia boss's gracious hospitality at the elegant funeral to mention his culpability for the victim's murder? Would Constantine really have founded a state religion featuring Rome as the killer of its founder?

Rather, it was far more convenient to interject "the Jews made me do it" or "his blood be on us, and on our children"⁷⁴ and so on, into the historical crucifixion of Jesus by Pontius Pilate. This myth was destructive on many fronts, setting Christian against Jew and Jew against Christian, per the Roman method of divide and conquer, and per the technique of using lies to divide people as natural as breathing to petty tyrants since. This myth deflected moral outrage against the actual murderers, while still conveying the message that the penalty for defying the Empire was death, according to the clear unspoken truth about the crucifixion.

The crucifixion and the allegations of a Jewish role in it will continue to be a subject of close historical scholarship. Given the confusion and divisions wrought and persecutions justified by that allegation, it will certainly continue to be a subject of interest to Jews. Yet the implications for Christians could be even more profound.

⁷² In the full quote of Tacitus brought above (pg. 7) we find that for him, writing his book in the 1st century, it is obvious that the Romans killed Jesus, and he doesn't mention the Jews at all— Tacitus there explains about this sect called "*Christianos*" and says that "The founder of that name, *Christus*, had been put to death (*supplicio affectus erat*) by the procurator of Judaea, Pontius Pilate, in the reign of Tiberius." Tacitus' *Annals* XV.44

⁷³ The court trial that is described in the Gospels is loaded with so many contradictions with the known legal routine of the *Sanhedrin* that researchers have doubted even it really took place, and claimed that it is more plausible to assume that there was an attempt by the Jewish leadership to save Jesus. See Haim Cohen, *The Trial and Death of Jesus*, Devir Publishing, Tel Aviv 1968. It should be noted, on the other hand, that many Jews in power in Judea at the time were puppets of Rome.

⁷⁴ As allegedly say the Jews, Mathew 27:25.

Could the story of one who taught belief in God and doing good in opposition to the vilest of powers in the darkest of times, knowing that it would lead to his certain death by that evil power, and then of the transmission of his teachings by increasing numbers of followers, despite extreme persecutions,⁷⁵ be a story of more power, inspiration, clarity and authenticity than that which covers up Roman culpability for the killing of Jesus?

As will be discussed below, Christians over the centuries, both Catholics and Protestants, have sought to turn closer to the authentic teachings of Jesus and to question some distortions of those teachings under the auspices of the Roman Empire. It was also reflected, for example, by prominent founders of the United States, such as Thomas Jefferson, who wrote that the teachings of Jesus were "perverted into an engine for enslaving mankind, and aggrandizing their oppressors in Church and state."⁷⁶ This quest has sought to emphasize the primacy of the actual teachings of Jesus, which are in essence those of other rabbis and prophets of that era. This focus is clearly reflected in Gospel writings in the letter of James, the brother of Jesus.⁷⁷

E. The Historical Jesus as Viewed by Scholars and Rabbis.

It is appropriate here to reiterate the disclaimer stated above that the points we present, including those below, are from a Jewish perspective, based upon a Jewish theological foundation. None of these observations is offered to suggest that the same conclusions would be reached by Christians considering these issues from a Christian theological foundation or to offer any stipulations concerning the latter.

Limor states, "Almost all the great researchers of Christianity from Adolf Harnack to Rudolf Bultmann claimed that [Jesus] did not intend to establish a new religion."⁷⁸ Indeed, focusing on historical sources and filtering out distortions introduced under the auspices of the Roman Empire, Jesus is found to be a Jewish rabbi who taught with particular emphasis on righteousness. His social reality was of a "flourishing Judaism . . . of the Torah and the Oral law [Mishnah and Talmud],"⁷⁹ And he too was educated as a Pharisee and studied the Torah as the Pharisees understood it.

⁷⁵ According to classic Christian theology, the events described above are integrally linked to the resurrection of Jesus, as described in the Christian Bible.

⁷⁶ Cousins, N. *In God We Trust*, Harper and Brothers, New York 1958, pg. 139.

⁷⁷ James commands his fellow Jews to observe the whole law (James 2:10), and condemns those who, for example, follow the prohibition against adultery but commit murder (2:11). He states that faith without moral deeds is "dead" (2:17; 2:26) and "barren" or "useless" (2:20), and compares those who profess faith but do not practice it as similar to the demons (2:19). And in many verses about sin and atonement, he says nothing about the death of Jesus, but rather instructs his readers to "'confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed" (5:16). The latter omission suggests a novel interpretation that an exaggerated notion of a populace degraded by sin, going beyond ideas concerning human frailty refined later by Catholic and Protestant theologians, was promulgated in part for cynical ends under the auspices of the Roman Empire. Was this emphasis on sin promulgated under Roman auspices in part to justify its persecutions of the populace and distract attention from its own evil, and further, to excuse its transparent culpability in killing Jesus, as if the Empire really did the people a favor by saving them from their degraded condition?

⁷⁸ Limor, *The Beginnings*, pg. 11.

⁷⁹ Flusser, D. *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*, Ministry of Defense, Tel Aviv 1980, pg. 19, (hereinafter, Flusser, Jewish sources.)

However, his emphasis on teachings of a righteousness beyond the letter of the law, focusing on inner disposition as well as deeds, added to his uncommon mode of teaching—to the poor and disadvantaged—made him a target of criticism by some circles of the Pharisees.

As the prophets often accused the People of Israel for their nullifying the internal meaning of the Torah's commands,⁸⁰ so was the case with Jesus in relation to some of his peers, the Pharisees. However, Jesus never rejected the laws of the Torah "not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished"⁸¹ His adherence to Jewish law is evident in the Gospels: "*Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill.*"⁸² His opposition to the Pharisees was not about their *principal* views, but only their implementation or, in fact, the lack of it—"All things therefore whatever they [Scribes and Pharisees] tell you to observe, observe and do, but don't do their works; for they say, and don't do."⁸³

His self-belief that he was the messiah was not at all heretical to Jewish belief.⁸⁴ The concept of the Messiah does not imply divinity, and in fact, during the Bar-Kochba revolt against the Romans (132-135 C.E.), Rabbi Akiva, the most influential rabbi of the time, believed that Bar Kochba, the charismatic leader of the revolt, was the messiah. History judges Rabbi Akiva mistaken, but still a great rabbi, and certainly not heretical to Jewish beliefs.⁸⁵

Jesus never claimed to be divine. His statements about God as his father, "my Father in Heaven", or just "Father." in different variations, are often applied in Jewish literary and metaphorical usage to signify the godly connection of man, not literal parentage. In the Tanach⁸⁶ and Talmud⁸⁷ we find numerous expressions that use this analogy to describe close relationship with God, e.g. "Thus saith the Lord: Israel is My son, My

⁸⁰ For instance, Isaiah taught that the quality of a fast is not merely measured by implementing difficult fasting customs, but by increasing one's compassion for the oppressed. God doesn't request a person just to "bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him as a bed." The meaning of the repentance affected by a fast is "to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free . . . to divide your bread to the hungry, and to bring the poor that are cast out into your house." (Isaiah 58:5-7). An apparent comparison is found in Jesus' teachings—Jesus demands that fasting and prayers be done without externalization and self-importance (Mathew 6:16-18), and it should be noted that, of course, there were Pharisees who also valued this view and identified and concur with Jesus (Mark 12:28-34).

⁸¹ Mathew 5:17-19.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 23:2-3. See Klausner, J. *Jesus from Nazareth*, Mada publishing, Tel Aviv 1951, pg. 205 (hereinafter, Klausner, *Jesus*.)

⁸⁴ Talmud Sanhedrin 98b.

⁸⁵ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim 11:3. See also Talmud Sanhedrin 98b.

⁸⁶ Likewise, Jesus' self description (most often found in Luke) "Son of Man" as found in the book of Daniel (17:3).

⁸⁷ Talmud Ta'anit 23a, Midrash Tehilim 12 and many more.

first-born"⁸⁸; "Ye are the children of the Lord your God."⁸⁹ Jesus compared God to his merciful father, but clearly devoid of literal intent.⁹⁰

Interestingly, the most common view of rabbis throughout history, including Maimonides,⁹¹ differentiated between Jesus' life and teaching and the Christian doctrines subsequently established.⁹² Although some rabbis considered Jesus as a Jew who wanted to change and nullify the Torah's commands, many other rabbis saw Jesus as an observant and lawful Jew that never intended to establish a new religion. This view is, as stated, an influential theory in the study of Christianity and is held by prominent scholars—"Jesus was not Christian, but was Jewish. He did not declare a new belief but taught people to obey God's will, which is found, like Jewish teachings, in the Torah and Holy Scriptures."⁹³

Two hundred years before modern research on Jesus, Rabbi Yehuda-Arye di Modina⁹⁴ (the Riam), wrote a detailed account on his view about Jesus. In his book *Magen Va'cherev* he claims that Jesus never intended to assert self-divinity. He mentions Jesus' prayer on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" and other sources to prove this claim and states, "I am in no doubt that not only he never said that he is God, or part of God, as the Christians say about him today and believe he was so, but as we can tell from his behavior and words, that thought never crossed his mind"⁹⁵ As scholars later on noted, there are prominent examples that demonstrate this assertion in the Gospels. When a man turned to Jesus, using the term "Good Teacher", Jesus starkly replies: "Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God."⁹⁶ Jesus teaches no identification of himself with God, but rather an obligation to worship the One God. Further, when one of the scribes asked him, "Which commandment is the greatest of all?" Jesus replied "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, *the Lord is One*." To which the scribe answered "Truly, teacher, you have said well that He is one, and there is none other but He."⁹⁷

The Riam shows that Jesus constantly humbles himself in relation to God, turning down his disciples inquiries about the time of "Kingdom of Heaven" with the words,

⁸⁸ Exodus 4:22.

⁸⁹ Deut. 14:1.

⁹⁰ Only in the Gospel of John does Jesus speak at length about his heavenly nature, but this Gospel, as scholars note, has a polemic and highly mystical nature, and is less of an historical account like the 3 Synoptic Gospels. A proper understanding of the Gospel of John as a Jewish mystical writing is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹¹ Ram Ben-Shalom, *Facing Christian Culture*, Ben Zvi Institute, Jerusalem 2006, pg. 147-208.

⁹² "and long after the new religion emerged from the descendants of Esau [the Romans] it was attributed to him but that was not his intention" Maimonides, *Igeret Teman*, Maaliot Publishing, Jerusalem 1987. However, according to him, Jesus did attempt to nullify the Torah.

⁹³ J. Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien*, Berlin 1905. In Klausner, *Jesus*, pg. 197. See also Limor, *The Beginnings*, pg. 11.

⁹⁴ Rabbi Yehuda-Arye Di Modina (Venice, 1571-1648). He mastered many arts and was a famous preacher among priests and Italian aristocrats.

⁹⁵ The following quotes are from A. Shin'an, *Jesus through Jewish eyes*, Lamiskal Publishing, Tel Aviv 1999, pg. 140 ff.

⁹⁶ Mark 10:17-18.

⁹⁷ Mathew. 12:28 ff.

"No one knows of that day and hour . . . *but my Father only.*"⁹⁸ His dependency on God is expressed in his prayers, in which he appears as a servant before his master. A few hours prior to his arrest he cried—"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me; nevertheless, not what I will—not what I desire—but *as You will and desire.*"⁹⁹ And again, when dying on the cross he turned to God in a moment of pain and crisis like any Jew, turning to the words of the Psalmist: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"¹⁰⁰ Even if Jesus did consider himself to be the Messiah, "it was to fulfill Jewish aspirations . . . Jesus did not establish a new concept of God, his God was the God of Israel . . ." ¹⁰¹ The Riam also states that the term "son of God" is not used by Jesus in the literal sense. "Jesus referred to himself as 'the 'son of man' or just 'man' in several places and attributed his powers and sovereignty to his Father in Heaven."

According to the Riam, Jesus remained a devoted Pharisee and did not change Torah laws—"and it is stated in the Gospels that he said to his disciples, 'On Moses' chair sit the scribes and Pharisees, whatever they tell you to observe, observe and do, but do not do according to their works.'" The Riam remarked that Jesus contradicted the Pharisees only on minor issues (e. g. regarding washing one's hands for purity), and that his special emphasis on the moral aspect that governs the laws, was never meant to replace the *halachah* itself—"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, but you bypass justice and the love of God. You ought to have done these, *and not to have left the other undone.*"¹⁰²

This is, in fact, the general view shared by modern scholars. According to the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as a Pharisee that fully observed Jewish tradition: He wore *tzitzit*,¹⁰³ he made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (*aliya la'regel*), he celebrated the Passover *seder* (Passover's night) and all its incumbent traditional rituals,¹⁰⁴ and more.¹⁰⁵ His methods of teaching Torah were those employed by the Pharisees and all his disciples were committed Jews observing the Mitzvoth as well. After Jesus' death, Peter and James continued in Jesus' model of moral conduct and led their community as observant Jews while they rejected any changes in Jewish law, suggested by Paul.¹⁰⁶

As the Riam wrote, the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees were not about fundamental issues, and at heart, were not different from any internal Jewish arguments found in abundance throughout the Mishnah and Talmud.¹⁰⁷ Hence "it

⁹⁸ *Ibid* 24:36.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 26:39.

¹⁰⁰ Mathew 27:46.

¹⁰¹ Flusser, D. (1979). *Judaism and the origins of Christianity – Studies and Masses*, Poalim: Tel Aviv, pg. 448-455 (hereinafter, Flusser, Judaism).

¹⁰² Luke 11:42. See also Mathew 23:23.

¹⁰³ The Jewish mitzvah to add fringes (*tzitzit*) to the corners of an upper garment.

¹⁰⁴ A festive meal conducted on the first night of Passover. Jesus made *kiddush*, ate the *matzah*, poured four glasses of wine, sang "hymns" (The *Hallel* Psalms), etc.

¹⁰⁵ See Klausner, *Jesus*, pg. 198.

¹⁰⁶ See Acts of the Apostles chapters 10,11,15. Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 2.

¹⁰⁷ See Flusser, *Jewish Sources*, pg. 19 on the argument on washing hands before eating bread and on the matter of curing a sick man on the Sabbath.

seems that there is no difference between Jesus and any other Jewish authentic tradition."¹⁰⁸

The prominent Rabbi Ya'akov Emdin spoke positively about Jesus: "Truly, even according to the writers of the Gospel . . . it is clear that Jesus¹⁰⁹ and his apostles did not claim to take the Torah from the people of Israel . . . and I always say this—Jesus did double good for the world: on the one hand he strengthened the Torah, as there is not one of our sages that talks so wholeheartedly in favor of the obligation to observe the Torah. On the other hand, he did good for the nations by abolishing idolatry and commanding them to observe the Seven Noahide Laws . . . and attributed them moral virtues and was even stricter than what the Torah commands, as is known".¹¹⁰

The fact is that some of the teachings of Jesus are at variance with "classic" Christianity. For instance, in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus does not dispute that the Jewish people were the chosen people of God,¹¹¹ and in fact, his harsh approach towards non-Jews¹¹² was generally more extreme than the Pharisees.¹¹³ His message was sent only to the Jews, and he commanded his apostles: "Do not go among the Gentiles . . . Rather, go to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."¹¹⁴ Considering his approach it is difficult to understand the historical paradox wherein Jesus is portrayed as the founder of a new religion.¹¹⁵

Indeed, the first Christians considered the message of the "Kingdom of Heaven" as directed to Jews alone. During the first seventeen years after Jesus' death his teachings were not spread among non-Jews. There is evidence of the tension between Paul and the church in Jerusalem on the issue of allowing gentiles, without adherence to Jewish Torah observance into the new movement. Paul, who wanted to open the movement to all, including uncircumcised gentiles, was opposed by Peter and James.¹¹⁶

F. The Christian Quest for the Historical Jesus.

The inconsistencies pointed out above, led not only rabbis and scholars to decipher the historical Jesus, but initiated a parallel process within Christianity. It may be surprising to some Jews—for whom the face of Christianity has been those who committed brutality in the name of Jesus—that there have been passionate feelings among masses of Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, sharing the view that

¹⁰⁸ Flusser, Jewish sources, pg. 21.

¹⁰⁹ In this source Jesus is called *HaNotsri*, meaning "the Nazarene."

¹¹⁰ "Seder Olam Zuta". This is taken from HaCohen, Mahanaim, pg. 90, footnote 4.

¹¹¹ Only in John's Gospel there is a tendency to represent, according to some interpretations, an approach that emphasizes the new leading role of the nations as God's Chosen in relation to the People of Israel. However, scholars see this Gospel as a polemic document that is not a historical one. See Hebrew Encyclopedia, vol. 20, entry "Jesus".

¹¹² Jesus refuses even to heal non-Jews, see Mathew 15:24, (A contradictory saying is found in Mark 7:24-30), and this general degrading attitude towards non-Jews. Mathew 6:7.

¹¹³ Jesus criticized the Pharisees who proselytized. Mathew 23:15

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 10:5-6. See Klausner, Jesus, pg. 84.

¹¹⁵ See Flusser, Judaism, pg. 448-455.

¹¹⁶ Acts 10, 11, 15.

Jesus' teachings were, at least in part, distorted throughout history and seeking to reconnect with the more Judaic roots of Christianity. The search for the historical Jesus and the roots of Christianity is a powerful, mainstream quest among, for example, Christians in the United States. This is not surprising given the very outspoken thoughts of the most influential founding philosophers of that nation.

Thomas Jefferson, for instance, points to the Roman Empire, and those who acted on its behalf, as those who distorted the rational belief in the One God, towards a mythical, irrational belief. The belief in early Christianity was "pure and uncompounded" and this belief was not "ousted from the Christian creed by the force of reason, but by the sword of civil government, wielded at the will of the fanatic Athanasius."^{117,118}

He further writes—"but a short time elapsed after the death of the great reformer of the Jewish religion, before his principles were departed from by those who professed to be his special servants, and perverted into an engine for enslaving mankind, and aggrandizing their oppressors in Church and state; that the purest system of morals ever before preached to man has been adulterated and sophisticated by artificial construction, into a mere contrivance to filch wealth and power to themselves"

Benjamin Franklin wrote extensively on this issue: "Here is my creed. I believe in the one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by His providence. That He ought to be worshipped . . . As to Jesus of Nazareth . . . I think the system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, is the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupt changes" Other noted figures during that period in U.S. history wrote along the same lines.

In the Catholic Church, there is an internal debate on some theological terms. There is a position that is held that they should be reinterpreted, as their interpretation was made in the forth to six centuries in a Greco-Roman philosophical environment, whereas a more authentic interpretation might be derived by going back to the Jewish-monotheistic roots of Christianity. The Vatican itself appointed a special committee that is in charge of Bible interpretation and in 2001 it published a paper that determined that Christians can gain from the Jewish learning and interpretation of the Bible.

The transformation in the church comes to fruition in the classic Christianity approach to the Jewish people. For 2000 years, the Church identified itself as the "real Israel," considering that it is inheriting all the biblical blessings once addressed for the Jewish people, and moreover, regarding the Jews as eternally punished for their lack of belief in Jesus. However, in the statement "Nostra Aetate" made at the 2nd Vatican Council in 1965, the Jews are considered to be the "elder brothers of the eternal covenant that was never breached and never will,"¹¹⁹ and also refraining from the

¹¹⁷ Athanasius, a bishop from Alexandria, was very active in the Council of Nicaea, and his opinion concerning the divinity of Jesus was accepted by the council that formed the "credo" accordingly.

¹¹⁸ The citations are taken from: Cousins, *In God We Trust*.

¹¹⁹ Pope John Paul the 2nd. Rozen, D. "The Jewish-Christian dialog in the USA". *Mahanim* (15), Merkaz Sapir, Jerusalem 2004, pg. 61 onwards.

collective accusation of the Jews for crucifying Jesus. This is not less than a "historical revolution" and an "amazing transformation,"¹²⁰ in Christian theology.

Conclusion.

The prophetic vision, expressed throughout Tanach, that one day all peoples will come to acknowledge the One God, is a core belief of Judaism. Various Jewish sources point out that this crystallization of the belief in the One God is an evolutionary process, developing over time to its complete realization.¹²¹ Paralleling the opening quotation of Maimonides, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, as well, considered the offshoots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as "preparations and preface to the expected Messiah that is the fruit, and at the End of Days, when they will acknowledge him, they will become his fruit, and the tree will be one."¹²² It follows, therefore, that Christians and Muslims are partners with Jews in this process.

¹²⁰ Rozen, *Jewish*. See also Aharon Lopez. "Israel and the Vatican", Machanim (15), Merkaz Sapir, Jerusalem 2004, pg. 12.

¹²¹ Mechilta, Yalkut shimoni 229. See also Urbach, E. E. *The Sages—their concepts and beliefs*, The Magness press, Jerusalem 1986, pg. 16-17.

¹²² Hakuzari, 4:23.