



Controversy Stories and Jewish-Christian Relations

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It is usually easier for people in “naturally” or “biologically” determined groups – members of an ethnic group, members of a family – to disagree without facing expulsion or excommunication. People who belong to what we call ‘religions’ or “faith communities” debate less.

When membership is determined by faith and faith is controlled by creedal statements, disagreement with the creed – or with those who control its interpretation – often results in schism or excommunication. Jews, who locate identity as an ethnos with a common ancestry (descent from Abraham and Sarah or conversion, which becomes possible in the Second Temple period), and a recognition of a homeland even if one lives in the Diaspora, debate. Christians, people who identify as members of a community centered around confession of Jesus as Lord, debate less. In general terms, Jews argue while Christians ex - communicate or, more benignly, establish new denominations.

By arguing with fellow Jews about how to interpret Torah, Jesus locates himself within the heart of Judaism. Indeed, he uses Jewish forms of argumentation, such as arguing from precedent in defending his disciples’ plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (e.g., Mt 12.3-5//Mk 2.25-26// Lk 6.3–4) or using *qal v’chomer* (from the lesser to the greater) arguments (e.g., Mt 12.11; Lk 13.15-16, see below) in debating Torah interpretation. Following a brief account of the debate culture in Jewish sources, I discuss a controversy story, the healing of a woman suffering from osteoporosis in Luke 13, to detail how mis - understandings of Judaism lead to mis - understands of Jesus, to show how Jesus participates in Jewish forms of legal discussion, and to suggest how this story, and other controversy stories, can, if understood in their historical context, lead to better Jewish-Christian relations.

Debate in Jewish culture

The Tanakh, an anthology comprised of narrative, prophecy, wisdom literature, and legal material, both reflects internal debate and demands interpretation. For example, Dt 17 affirms the monarchy and provides it guidelines; Judges 21.25 warns that without a king in Israel, the people do what is right in their own eyes, including rape and murder. Conversely, when the people demand a king to unite them against the Philistines, G-d tells Samuel that the people “have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Sam 8.7) and instructs him to itemize the negative things kings do: conscript their sons for his army and their daughters for his palace; claim their fields and vineyards and orchards; enslave the people. For another example, the Tanakh offers multiple views of suffering: it is caused by sin (Deuteronomy); it may be a test of fidelity (Job); it can be vicarious (Isaiah 53) or meaningless (Ecclesiastes). The Tanakh both promotes universalism (Genesis 1-2; Leviticus 19.34; Isaiah, Jonah, Ruth) and warns against non-Israelites (Dt 20; Ezra and Nehemiah). The text always requires interpretation.

Diverse views continue in the time of Jesus, as most famously indicated by the schools of thought Josephus describes: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Rabbinic documents detail debates between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. The Mishnaic tractate *Pirke Avot* (the Ethics of the Fathers), ca. 250 CE, explains that “any dispute (division, faction; Hebrew: *machloket*) that is in the name of heaven (Hebrew: *le-shem shamayim*) will in the end yield results,

and any which is not for the sake of heaven will not in the end yield results.” The first type are disputes between Hillel and Shammai, two teachers, and the rabbinic schools named after them, seeking how best to determine divine will. The second type is epitomized by the debates between Korach and Moses (Numbers 16), where the issue is a fight over who has priestly privileges, that is, a fight that calls genealogy into question. Debate continues among Jews to this day, with disagreement over matters ranging from support for the government of the State Israel to particular practices and beliefs as held by Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Masorti, Reform, and Humanistic Jews. Yet, all Jewish communities today agree that a Jew is a child of a Jewish mother (paternal descent and the requires for conversion to Judaism are matters of debate). More, with the global surge of antisemitism, we Jews are increasingly aware that no matter what we believe or how we practice, antisemites make distinctions regarding practice or belief. The debates Jesus has with fellow Jews are comparable to the debates between Hillel and Shammai. They demonstrate Jesus’ full investment in Torah; as he asserts “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Mt 5.17). “Fulfill” means bring Torah to its fullest potential. As the Sermon on the Mount continues, Jesus does what Pirke Avot 1.1 calls “making a fence for the Torah.” Extending the law forbidding murder, he forbids anger (Mt 5.21-22); extending the law against adultery, he forbids lust (Mt 5.27-30). While these passages are traditionally labelled anti - theses,” they are better called “extensions.” Even the famous Mt 5.38-39, in which Jesus quotes “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Ex 21.23-25; Lev 24.19-20; Dt 19.21) and then teaches, “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also,” does not abrogate Torah. To the contrary, Jesus changes the subject, because losing an eye or a tooth is not the same thing as being slapped on the cheek. Moreover, the Mishnah (Bava Kamma 8.1) regards the law as a legal principal, not an authorization for physical mutilation. It states, “whoever who injures his fellow is liable for five counts: to compensate (monetarily) for injury, pain, medical costs, loss of income and embarrassment.

Healing on the Sabbath

Luke 13.10-17 depicts Jesus teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. For Jews, the Sabbath is a day of rest, both because G-d rested from the work of creation on the Sabbath and so sanctified the day (Gen 2.2- 3) and because it is a guard against slavery, as Dt 5.15 teaches, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your G-d brought you out from... therefore the LORD your G-d commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” But Jews, then and now, debated how to honor the Sabbath. One is not to “work” on the Sabbath, but what constitutes “work”? Eventually, the rabbis determined that “work” is a creative act, since it was from the work of creation that G-d ceased on the Sabbath. The Mishnah (Shabbat 7.2) lists 39 types of work, including making fire (turning on a light; using a computer), writing, and tying knots (knitting and crocheting). The list may appear complicated, but legal matters are not complicated to communities who live by them, as we all live within governmental legal systems.

For our purposes, four additional points are of import. First, the list was not in place at the time of Jesus, so issues such as plucking heads of grain would have been debated. Second, nothing in the list forbids healing. Indeed, according to rabbinic Judaism, saving a life (Hebrew: pikuach nefesh, literally, saving a soul) overrides all the commandments. The Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 84) gives several examples of how saving a life overrides not only the Sabbath but also communal fasts, such as on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In healing on the Sabbath, Jesus extends the concern for saving a life to making life free of disabilities.

Third, there was a Jewish tradition that G-d continued to “work” on the Sabbath. In Jn 5.17, another Sabbath healing story, Jesus states, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” Both the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (Cherubim 87) and the rabbis (Genesis Rabbah 11.10) noted G-d continued to work, albeit with perfect ease, on that first Sabbath. Since the followers of Jesus identified him as divine, he does not violate the command against work since

theologically, it did not apply to him. Finally, Jesus heals by miracle, not by “work.” In the synagogue, Jesus sees a woman “bent over and quite unable to stand erect” (Lk 13.11). Christian commentators frequently exacerbate her situation by describing her as marginalized and ostracized. She is not. She is not in a balcony or behind a screen. Or, they suggest she is ritually impure. Whether she is menstruating or not is just as irrelevant as to whether the synagogue ruler ejaculated that morning. Still others suggest that the people would have understood her disability to be the result of sin. Again, wrong: Jews generally decoupled sin and disability: Isaac and Jacob both cannot see well, but the issue is age, not sin. Peter’s mother-in-law has a fever; the cause is not sin but demon possession. Jesus himself identifies the woman as “bound by Satan.” Worst are the sermons, and I’ve read a number, that describe her as bound “by the law,” as if Torah is a satanic system.

Jesus says to her, “Woman, you are released from your disability” (Lk 13.13). He practices no medicine; he moves no limbs and applies no salve. The synagogue ruler, the community patron, “indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath,” insists, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day” (Lk 13.14). He has a point: for a nonpainful chronic condition, the sanctity of the day might take precedent.

Using *qal v’homer* argument, Jesus argues: “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?” (Lk 13.15). If one can untie an animal, one can surely untie a woman who has been bound by Satan for eighteen years (Lk 13.16). At this point, the “entire crowd” rejoiced. Jesus violates no law; he remains fully within Jewish practice. Both Jews and Christians should not only see Jesus as a faithful Jew, we do well to learn how to debate, for the sake of heaven, among our own groups and between our groups. Debate without demonization, arguments based on tradition and on logic, a general concern for human well-being are practices both Jews and Christians can and should share.

Amy Jill Levine (*1956) ist Rabbi Stanley M. Kessler Distinguished Professor für Neues Testament und Jüdische Studien an der Hartford International University for Religion and Peace in Hartford, Connecticut, und Universitätsprofessorin em. für Neues Testament und Jüdische Studien an der Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee

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