



Jews and Christians; becoming friends: A five-week scripture study course

01.10.2023 | Gervase Vernon

This booklet is a five-week scripture study course. It is based on a course on Christianity and Judaism given alongside Stan Keller, the chairman of the Chelmsford Jewish community, under the auspices of the Anglican diocese of Chelmsford, during Lent 2023. It is designed to be undertaken by a local Christian and a local Jewish community working together either in person or by video-conference. The emphasis is on understanding the other, Judaism in this case, in order to appreciate it better. Knowing the faith of Jews better, to paraphrase Richard of Chichester's famous prayer, we can know them better and love them better. The emphasis is not on using Jewish sources to understand Christianity better. In the following, we reproduce the introduction as well as the second chapter as an example.

1 Introduction

This booklet is based on a five-week course on Christianity and Judaism given alongside Stan Keller, the chairman of the Chelmsford Jewish community, under the auspices of the Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford, during Lent 2023. Some suggestions from the course participants have been incorporated into this written version. I am also grateful to Claire Malone-Lee, a friend and a scholar of Christian-Jewish relations, for her many illuminating comments. It is offered to other Christian churches and local Jewish communities who wish to undergo a similar journey.

It is easy to say what this course is not. It is not a scholarly work. It is obviously not a comprehensive study of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. A brief bibliography suggesting further reading can be found at the end. It is not 'scriptural reasoning' as pioneered by David F Ford and others because, sadly, all the participants, with the exception of Stan Keller, were Christians. [1] It is, on the other hand, an example of receptive ecumenism. The emphasis, in other words, is on understanding the other, Judaism in this case, in order to appreciate it better. Knowing the faith of Jews better, to paraphrase Richard of Chichester's famous prayer, [2] we can know them better and love them better. The emphasis is not on using Jewish sources to understand Christianity better.

I myself am a Christian and a member of the Roman Catholic church. However, my mother, herself half-Jewish, came from a village in Poland, Bobowa (Bobov in Yiddish) where almost all the Jews were killed during the second world war. A study of Christianity and Judaism is not, then, for me purely an intellectual pursuit, but an attempt to address wounds deep within myself and within European society.

How this booklet works

The course is divided into five sections designed to be worked through a week apart by a group meeting together in person or by video conference. The first week looks at Jonathan Sack's commentary on Genesis and the second at his commentary on Exodus. (PowerPoint presentations on which chapters 1 and 2 are based and which can be used by study groups, are to be found on [Dropbox](#).) [3]

In the third week Stan Keller (chairman of the Chelmsford Jewish community) talked about the Holocaust. The fourth week looks at how Christian anti-Judaism contributed to the Holocaust. Finally, the fifth week is a Bible study on Romans 9-11, the chapters where Paul most comprehensively deals with the relations between Christians and Jews, relations which caused him great agony of soul.[\[****\]](#)

Purpose of the booklet

The primary purpose of this course is to know God better and to love him better, through contemporary Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, and through re-interpretations of the New Testament inspired by these Jewish interpretations[\[A1\]](#) .

The secondary purpose of the booklet is to know and love better our 'elder brother' the community of Jews and those who belong to it.

Postscript

At the end of this booklet, for those who are interested, I have added a very short essay on the history of rabbinical Judaism, and on the interaction of Christianity, Judaism and secular philosophy over the ages. Finally I have added a short hand-out by Eva Mroczek, a scholar of ancient Judaism, which eloquently puts to bed the old view that one can contrast a 'Mean, Angry Old Testament God with a Nice, Loving New Testament God.'

3. Week 2. A Jewish Perspective on the Book of Exodus

God as both liberator and educator in Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's commentary on Exodus

Prayer (as week 1)

'In Judaism Faith is a form of listening – to the song creation sings to its creator, and to the message history delivers to those who strive to understand it. That is what Moses says time and again in Deuteronomy: Stop looking; listen. Stop speaking; listen. Create a silence in the soul. Still the clamour of instinct, desire, fear, anger. Strive to listen to the still, small voice beneath the noise. Then you will know that the universe is the work of One beyond the furthest star yet closer to you than you are to yourself – and then you will love the Lord.'[\[1\]](#)

May both Christians and Jews turn to you, God, whose gentleness and mercy are proclaimed throughout the Hebrew scriptures (the OT) and the New Testament.

List of topics in this chapter about the book of Exodus

1. The structure of the book
2. The text, God (and Moses) as liberator
3. The subtext; God (and Moses) as educator
4. Israel as a signal of transcendence
5. Six compassionate women in Exodus
6. How does the book of Exodus help us understand the NT? (Structures and themes)
7. The sanctuary as the type of Christ

1) The structure of the book of Exodus, according to Rabbi Sacks

Exodus, as many OT works, has a chiasmic structure. The theme of the first section is repeated in the last section, the theme of the second section is repeated in the penultimate section and so on.

The themes run: ABCBA.

There are two arcs, the first arc is political.

| | Topic | Chapter |
|---|---------------------------|---------|
| A | Unjust society | 1–6 |
| B | Liberation: ten plagues | 7–13 |
| C | Division of the Red Sea | 14–18 |
| B | Liberty: ten commandments | 19–20 |
| A | Just society | 21–24 |

And it is followed by the second arc which is spiritual.

| | Topic | Chapter |
|---|-------------------------|----------|
| A | Tabernacle instruction | 25–31:11 |
| B | Sabbath | 31:12-18 |
| C | Golden calf | 32–34 |
| B | Sabbath | 35:1-3 |
| A | Tabernacle construction | 35:4-40 |

Chiastic structures are omnipresent in the Pentateuch (first five books of the OT, called by Jews the Torah), not just in whole books, but in individual speeches.^[2] The modern reader searches for a punchline at the end of a passage. Such punchlines can be found in the parables of Jesus who, in this respect stands as a modern man. But in a book or story with a chiastic structure, the ‘punchline’, or moment of high drama, is in the middle. In the first chiastic arc of Exodus, this moment of high drama is the division of the Red Sea. In the second arc, the moment of high drama is the episode of the Golden Calf.

2) The Text: God (and Moses) as liberator

The book of Exodus is a tale of God forming a nation, as promised to Abraham 400 years earlier, by taking a group of slaves out of Egypt. It is a tale of liberation from oppression. But

it is also a description of the setting up of a new covenantal society. A covenantal society is a society where all people agree voluntarily to enter and, having entered the society, to follow its God-based rules. In Exodus 19:8, we read, ‘The people all responded together, “We will do everything the LORD has said”’ (see also Exodus 24:3-7). As Jonathan Sacks puts it, a free God seeks the free worship of free human beings.

The Book of Exodus is an example of God intervening directly in history on behalf of the poor and oppressed and forming them into a nation.

According to Maimonides (Jewish scholar, 11th c.) ‘**What is primary in Exodus is not the miracles, but monotheism**’, the idea of a single God whose sovereignty extends everywhere – hence the plagues in Egypt.^[3] Every people has its own god, but the God of Israel shows that he can act in Egypt, in a foreign country protected by its own gods, for example by provoking plagues. He is the universal God. This is the primary message of Exodus.

3) The subtext: God (and Moses) as educator

According to Jonathan Sacks, Exodus has not only a surface text, God as liberator, but a sub-text, God as educator. For this reason, many episodes in Exodus are related twice (see the table below), first as a miraculous action by God alone and a second time as an action undertaken by the people together with God.

This interpretation of the book of Exodus is a radically different interpretation from Julius Wellhausen's 'documentary hypothesis' (1878), with its four sources Jahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and Priestly (P). Readers familiar with this source criticism of the OT must put it to the back of their minds if they are to learn from the classical interpretations of Rabbinic Judaism which Jonathan Sacks expounds.

In Jonathan Sacks's interpretation, first the Israelites experience a miracle, such as God making the two tablets on Mount Horeb, but this does not change them. Then the episode of the Golden Calf follows and the tablets are smashed. Moses returns to the mountain, but this time Moses hands God the tablets which he has made himself and on which God writes a second time (Exodus 34:1-4).

Before the episode of the Golden Calf, the Israelites miraculously receive God's instructions about making the sanctuary, but do nothing about it. After the episode of the Golden Calf, the Israelites make the sanctuary together, following God's instructions (see table below). It is not seeing miracles, but doing something together that changes the Israelites.

The table below lists examples of this repeat pattern in the book of Exodus.

| The power of God and the passivity of man (dependency) | The will of God internalised by man (inter-dependency) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Battle before crossing the 'sea of reeds' against Pharaoh and his chariots (14:9-31) [4] | Battle immediately after against the Amalekites (17:8-16) |
| First set of stone tablets, prepared and written by God. Then the Golden Calf, broken by Moses | Later second set of stone tablets, Moses prepares the tablets, God writes them |
| God in a cloud of Glory at Sinai (24:15-18) | God in a cloud of Glory in the tabernacle, built by the Israelites (40:34-35) |
| The Sinai covenant declared by God (20:1-14) | A second time by Moses, reading from the 'book of the covenant' which he had written (24:1-11) |
| God's instructions about the construction of the tabernacle before the Golden Calf (25-30) | And after (35-40), how the people carried out God's instructions |

Where man repeats the action with God's help, having internalised God's intentions, this is not some form of Pelagianism, of human beings becoming virtuous in their own strength, but about acting with God. To quote Nicholas Henshall (recently the Dean of Chelmsford Anglican cathedral), 'In the first place [virtues] are God's gift to us and in the second place we need to respond, to embed them in our lives – actively practicing love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' Paul makes the same point in Romans 5:4, 'We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.' It is by acting out the virtues that character is forged, that we develop virtuous habits and that we become virtuous.[\[5\]](#) But it is God who both shows us the goal and gives us the strength to persevere. A footnote in the Jerusalem Bible reads, 'A typical example of Pauline moral teaching: become what you are already. Do in your lives what Christ did in you when you became Christians.'

4) Israel as a signal of transcendence

Israel is called to be a signal of transcendence. As we read in Deuteronomy, 'The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.' (Deuteronomy 7:7). The survival and success of Israel, such a weak and small nation, was in the ancient world and is today a signal that the Israelites' success came not from their own strength, but the powerful help of God. In the same way, in Genesis, God always chooses the younger son. In 1 Cor. 1:27 Paul writes, 'God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.' As Jonathan Sacks concludes, 'The Jewish people, its laws, its way

of life, continually testifies to something greater than itself.'^[6]

5) Six compassionate and courageous women in Exodus

Jonathan Sacks points out that Exodus is not just about men. It also contains the portraits of six compassionate women. Yocheved, Moses's mother, has the courage to have a child when she knows that Pharaoh has ordered that all newborn male children be killed. Then Miriam, Moses's sister speaks to Pharaoh's daughter who has recently discovered baby Moses in the reeds. Miriam cunningly arranges for Yocheved, Moses's real biological mother, to be Moses's milk nurse. This same Miriam later has a major role in the Exodus story.

The two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, defy Pharaoh's genocidal decree. They save the life of Moses and doubtless other Jewish baby boys. We are never told if these two midwives are or are not Jewish themselves. When Moses has grown up, his Midianite wife, Zipporah, saves his life (Exodus 4:25). Finally, most startling of all, Pharaoh's daughter rescues Moses and adopts him, even though she is acting in contravention of her father's will, of the will of Pharaoh, the absolute ruler of the land.

Exercise 1 – How can Exodus help us interpret the New Testament?

Participants in the course are invited to come up with any suggestions.

The application of the Torah to the NT, an overview

The Christian Bible has two main story arcs;

a) A (mainly) political liberation (the book of Exodus). Moses liberates the Hebrew slaves and builds them into a nation.

b) A spiritual liberation (the NT). By his cross and resurrection, Christ frees us from enslavement to sin and leaves us the Holy Spirit to guide us into the full truth and into the Kingdom. (Christ ... rescues us from the present evil age. Galatians 1:4). Note that in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul specifically applies the book of Exodus to the Christian life.

6) How does the book of Exodus help us understand the NT?

Seeing that the Hebrew scriptures, and the Torah in particular, were probably the only text the gospel writers knew, and that they knew it well, it is to be expected that both its structures and its themes are echoed in the New Testament.

A. How the structure of Exodus helps us understand the NT

In Matthew, the Beatitudes are 'the new law' delivered in the 'sermon on the mount' by 'the new Moses' who does not abolish but fulfils the law (Matthew 5:3-10). Note that both the Beatitudes and the Ten Commandments are written so as to be memorised.^[7] The main body of Matthew's gospel has often been seen as a 'mini-Torah' of five books.^[8]

The next interpretation I offer with great hesitation as it is no more than a suggestion. If we consider Luke-Acts as one book, then we can see a chiasmic structure. The crucifixion/resurrection/ascension narrative is in the middle. The 'passion of Paul' in Acts 13-28 mirrors that of Jesus in Luke.^[9]

Luke/Acts begins by promising to give an account to Theophilus of 'the things that have been fulfilled among us' (Luke 1:1). Luke is going to describe, in his two books, the fulfilment of the

Torah, of the promises in the Torah. Luke states that he will give ‘an ordered account’ (Luke 1:3). But by this, does he mean an account with the chiasmic structures seen in the Torah? Or does he mean the logical sequential account that we now think of as an ordered account?

For Luke, Pentecost in Acts is a ‘new giving of the Ten commandments’. Philo (Jewish scholar, 25 BCE to 50 CE), describes Pentecost as the feast of the giving of the Law.^[10] In Acts, at Pentecost, the apostles proclaim how Jesus fulfils Israel’s scriptures. Because Luke places this giving of the new ten commandments at Pentecost, he cannot have a ‘sermon on the mount’, a new ten commandments, in the middle of his gospel as Matthew does, but has instead his ‘sermon on the plain’ (Luke 6:20-49).

Luke – Acts. A proposed chiasmic structure

| | Place | Chapter |
|---|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| A | Galilee | Luke 4:14–9:50 |
| B | The journey to Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria | Luke 9:51–19:40 |
| C | Jerusalem, the passion | Luke 19:41–24:49 |
| D | Ascension/Pentecost, the giving of the new Ten Commandments | Luke 24:50–Acts 2 |
| C | Jerusalem | Acts 1:12–8:1a |
| B | Judea and Samaria | Acts 8:1b–11:18 |
| A | To the ends of the earth | Acts 11:19–28:31 |

Adapted from K. R. Wolfe, “The Chiasmic Structure of Luke-Acts and Some Implications for Worship,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 22 (1980): 67. See at: <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/>

B. How the themes of Exodus help us understand the NT

Here I can do no more than hint at a vast subject. One of the main themes found in Exodus by Jonathan Sacks is, ‘God as educator’. Consider the miracle of the loaves. Jesus does not simply produce bread out of nothing, but chooses to use the few loaves brought voluntarily by the crowd, then gets the disciples to hand them out, thus acting as both miracle maker and educator.

Consider the evil spirit who is cleansed. If we do nothing, the evil spirit comes back with seven friends (Matthew 12:45). After a miraculous cleansing, we must furnish our souls with new habits, or we will fall back into our old ways.

The other main theme is God as liberator. Christ is the new Moses who frees us from Satan and death and overcomes them.^[11] In Mark and the other synoptic gospels, Jesus is often depicted as having power over demons, and freeing people from their demons.

7) The sanctuary as a type of Christ

The emphasis in the second half of the book of Exodus is on plans to build a portable but empty tabernacle instead of making an idol such as the Golden Calf,. This tabernacle the Israelites carried with them and it was a place where God could be especially present. Later, the inner sanctuary of the temple replaced the tabernacle and was also empty. The emptiness of the tabernacle and the temple sanctuary signified that no idol was worshipped. It also signified a God who is beyond human conception or understanding. However, he is a God who reveals Himself, who chooses to communicate with his people not only in deeds but also in words which they can understand. The tabernacle and, later, the inner sanctuary of the temple contained the words of the ten commandments engraved on two tablets, words which God had revealed to his people.

Many people have seen the sanctuary as a type,^[12] as a foreshadowing of Christ.^[13] He is 'greater than the Temple' (Matthew 12:7). Christ is the place where God is on earth, as the empty sanctuary and later the temple had been the place where God was especially present. If we want to follow Christ, we have to empty ourselves, just as the tabernacle was empty. 'How blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of Heaven is theirs' (Mt. 5:3). I love the parallel saying of the Baal Shem Tov (Jewish 18th-century founder of Hasidism), 'Those who are full of themselves, have no room left for God.'^[14]

After the destruction of the second temple and its sanctuary in AD 70, Jewish communities needed a new focus for unity. For the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, this new focus is provided by the 'Heavenly sanctuary' to which Christians have access through Jesus. For many Jews, God's presence, the Shekinah, went into exile with them.^[15]

A summary of Exodus: Becoming what we are

This is Sack's interpretation of the book of Exodus. God miraculously delivers a people, but then he laboriously leads them to become a nation; to internalise what he has already made them by giving them tasks to do together.

In a similar vein Martin Luther King wrote '[God] is seeking at every moment of His existence to lift men from the bondage of some evil Egypt, carrying them through the wilderness of discipline, and finally to the promised land of personal and social integration.'^[16]

This is also the Jerusalem bible's summary of Paul's teaching in the footnote quoted above. Or in a similar mode, Paul in Romans 5:1-5 starts with a classic declaration of justification by faith, but immediately follows with a description of how suffering builds character. (See also Ephesians 2:1-8.)

Questions to consider as a larger group

- 1) Exodus is about 'the liberation of the poor and oppressed'. **How is our church community involved in such work?**
- 2) God, through Moses, did not just liberate the oppressed, but formed them into a nation. He formed them into a nation by living with them and by giving them tasks to do together, tasks to which all could contribute. **What tasks is our church community 'doing together' so that we can become in reality the community we already are 'in Christ'?**
- 3) How can your church become a 'signal of transcendence'?
- 4) Christ as the antitype of the empty sanctuary (as him whom the sanctuary foreshadows). **How can we empty ourselves, so that God may be present in us?**

Further Questions to consider in small groups, if time allows

- 1) Each in turn, in your groups, describe what your church is currently doing.
- 2) Then, each in turn, set out your hopes for what your church might do.
- 3) Ask yourselves how this Jewish reading of the book of Exodus has altered the way in which you think about your church, where it is going and how it might get there.

Gervase Vernon is a retired family doctor. He has published a number of books on Christian topics and his Jewish backgrounds. The above text excerpts are reproduced here with the kind permission of the author.