

Chapter 3.01 Hebrews and Jews 1: Basics

This chapter and the next two, three in all, give background information about Judaism. They focus on what is relevant to Jesus. Even if you skip these three chapters, read this section.

Jews are a group within Hebrews, who are a group within Semites. Semites includes people that speak a language related to Hebrew such as Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, and Arabs. The old nation of Israel was for the Hebrews. Jews were one Hebrew group within the old nation of Israel. Jews eventually took over Israel and took over Hebrew identity so that nearly all Hebrews came to be called "Jews". Sometimes I use the term "Hebrew" to refer to the Hebrew people before Jews dominated.

Christianity developed in part by caricaturizing Judaism and opposing itself to a distorted picture of Judaism. Jews were the bad guys while Christians were the good guys. Christians attributed bad features to Jews so that Christians could be the opposite of Jews in those features and could be all good, like one child calling another "dirty and smelly" so that he-she can be clean and fragrant by contrast. This tactic is common in ethnic-religious relations generally and not found just with Christians and Jews. Non-Jews too often misunderstand Jews and use bad ideas about Jews as an excuse to hurt Jews. We have to keep the record straight so as not to repeat past faults and so as to end present mistakes.

The biased portrait of Jews goes like this: Jews murdered Jesus and so Jews are collectively responsible for his murder even now. Jewish religion is overly legalistic, and many Jewish laws are arbitrary without any obvious value for protecting people or society, such as laws against eating pork and shellfish. There are some good laws within Judaism. But Jewish legalism takes away the benefit of good laws and it makes people feel they are constantly at fault. Judaism uses layers of external mechanistic legalism to smother any life-giving interior spirit. Christianity arose to advance the true interior life-giving spirit of God's wishes without being subverted by external mechanistic legalism. Legalistic Judaism is like machines, like death; spiritual Christianity is like organisms, like life.

All this is wrong. Actual practicing Judaism is not more legalistic than most religions in state societies such as Lutheranism in Germany or Roman Catholicism in France and it is not more legalistic than the case law tradition in America. It is not more arbitrary. Christianity did not arise primarily to correct faults found only in Judaism. Christianity did arise out of Judaism and does have some contrasts with Judaism. But the contrasts are not "across the board" and are not only with Judaism. Christianity owes Judaism much. It is wrong and bad to see Judaism as spiritless, mechanistic, external, and all in error while seeing Christianity as spiritual, full of life, internal, and all correct.

Like all religious and ethnic groups, Jews show prejudice too. But they have seldom held the power and seldom done the damage. Even if some Jews sometimes are prejudiced against some Christians, their prejudice is no excuse for Christians to hurt them or for anybody to hurt them. We can be honest, objective, fair, and kind without falling into over-compensation, liberal guilt, or guilt over the Holocaust, and without giving blanket endorsement to Israel and to everything Jewish.

The task is to see how Jesus was unique and universal without falling into bigotry, without painting Jews in dark colors so that Jesus stands out as a white speck. We need to do this not by biasing the evidence but through seeing Jesus' uniqueness and universality as truths that emerge from the evidence. Because Jesus was a Jew, this task is harder. If we wish to do justice to his Jewish identity then we risk losing his uniqueness and universality. If we make Jesus stand out among Jews and make him universal, then we risk painting Jews in false colors that make him stand out. It would be easier to make Jesus distinct if I believed that he is God because that alone makes him distinct and universal. Since I do not believe Jesus is God but I do believe that his teachings are important, I have to see how his teachings were Jewish, not Jewish, and more-than-Jewish. Beginning in the 1930s, scholars have intensively investigated how Jesus was a Jew of his times and how he might have been distinct from Jews of his times. Anything I say is only derived from their great work. I list some of the work in the readings for this part of the book.

Liberal Christian scholars that do not believe Jesus was God, or do not think it is key, are in the same boat that I am: they have to make Jesus special and universal without insulting Jews. Since about 1980, they have responded by getting around the question of his Jewish identity. They have seen the intentions, mostly-is, and all-about of Jesus in a mostly-is that has little to do with his Jewish identity: a Cynic philosopher, Indian guru, magician, revolutionary, peasant politician, or end-of-the-world weirdo. Liberal Christian scholars are not put-off by his Jewish roots. They enjoy the idea that Jesus was a Jew. But they do not find his specialness and universality there and they do not always know what to make of his Jewish identity.

Oddly enough, some conservative and orthodox Christian scholars that believe Jesus was God have actually explored Jesus' Jewish identity thoroughly. Jesus' Jewish identity is no threat as long as they can believe that his "all about" is his identity as God. They have come to like the idea that Jesus was a Jew. They even see Jesus as a kind of "super Jew" who embodies the best of Jewish identity, discards aspects of Jewish identity that do not fit with Christian orthodoxy, adds to Judaism, and transforms Judaism for the better. I do not know if this new attitude makes up for two millennia of orthodox Christians maligning Jews and overlooking the fact that Jesus was a Jew but I learned a lot from reading their material about Jesus and Judaism.

Of course, Jewish scholars cannot accept the idea that Jesus was God. Jewish scholars who tackle the question of Jesus tend to see Jesus as an exemplary Jew but not as a super Jew. They do not see him as qualitatively special or as beyond the limits of Judaism but as a good extension of tendencies that were already in Judaism. Some Jewish scholars seem to accept the idea that Jesus is a prophet. They seem to like the idea that concepts within Judaism lend themselves well to being universal. They vary on what they do with the Kingdom of God. I often agree with them, and sometimes I do find it hard to see Jesus as absolutely unique. I repeat that it might not be necessary to see him as absolutely unique as long as we can see the value of his ideals.

Historical Synopsis.

Judaism did not start out as it is now. It had at least four distinct currents contribute to it and it went through half-a-dozen distinct phases. I do not think it makes sense to say all this was one religion. I think the major phases within Judaism are about as distinct from each other as Judaism was distinct from the

religion of Egypt. Many Jews would disagree with me. They see Judaism as a single attitude toward a single God even if it is expressed differently in different historical conditions, and you should keep their attitude in mind. It does not matter much for this book as long as you get a sense of what contributed to Judaism. If each current was distinct and each was limited to one historical period then the story would be easy to tell but contributions were not distinct and the influence of one trend often extended across periods. Still you can get a sense of the identity in each period and of the overall development to modern Judaism.

According to legend, all Semites began with the man Abraham. God told Abraham to go west from Ur in Babylonia. Abraham eventually settled in what would become southern Israel or northern Arabia. Abraham had Isaac, the son that God told Abraham to sacrifice but that God later spared. Abraham had other children, who became ancestors of other Semitic groups. Isaac had Jacob, who added "Israel" to his name so that eventually Hebrews came to be called Israelites. Jacob had twelve sons, who were ancestors to the twelve tribes of the Hebrews. Jacob's most famous son was Joseph, who went to Egypt and became an assistant to Pharaoh, and thereby began the Hebrew residence in Egypt. The residence in Egypt ended with a mass exodus into Palestine under the leadership of Moses.

From legend, now we move to fuzzy facts. At least some of the ancestors of the Hebrews lived in Palestine and northern Arabia as herders and maybe traders. Egypt had a group of crafts people and merchants that might have been another contributor to the Hebrew grouping. Some of the mobile traders and herders in northern Arabia and southern Palestine might have been related to the people in Egypt. The name "Hebrew" might come from an Egyptian term for the crafts people, merchants, traders, or herders. At first, any or all of these people might have been as much an occupational group as a single ethnic group, and they might have been made of several loosely related ethnic groups. Later, they seem to fuse into one ethnic group. The Hebrews probably were related to other Semitic groups found in northern Arabia, Palestine, the area of modern Lebanon, and perhaps in Syria and western Babylon (Iraq).

After 2000 BCE (4000 years ago), the Hebrews overran what is now Palestine. At the time, they called it "Canaan". It is not accurate to say they invaded because they were probably always already there along with other groups. Eventually the Hebrews became the most numerous and dominant group. Immigrants from Egypt, perhaps other Hebrews, might have helped the Hebrews in Palestine overcome the other residents. Immigrants from Egypt might have induced the conflict by putting population pressure and economic pressure on the area. The influence from Egypt might have generated myths about an exodus. In tradition, Moses led the movement out of Egypt and through the desert, and then Joshua conquered Palestine.

Early Politics.

Now we come to better facts. While they were mobile, the Hebrews had only mild social hierarchy and no formal permanent political institutions. They did have a hereditary priesthood and some hereditary leadership. As they conquered Palestine, they settled down into agriculture, and developed what anthropologists call "chiefdoms" in which a single family or group of families has hereditary rule over areas of land and the people living on the land. The Bible calls these leaders the "judges", which is a good description of their role. Scottish "lairds" or English "lords" were similar. As in Scotland, eventually

a few Hebrew families gained more power, developed the office of king, and supplied the hereditary kings. They did this partly in response to developed chiefdoms and states around them. See the movie "Brave Heart". The first king was traditionally Saul, who came to power around 1050 BCE. David succeeded Saul. David flourished about 1000 BCE.

The early history of Israel is typical for tribes, chiefdoms, and nascent states. The chief religious literature of Israel, the Tanakh (the Old Testament), also is not unusual for groups going through that kind of development. We see similar development and ideas among the Sumerians and Babylonians, Indians, and Chinese. The Tanakh often is a rationale to excuse conflict between Israel and her neighbors. The Tanakh excuses Israel dominating neighbors, taking their land and women, and even murdering them. It excuses the development of class differences in wealth and power within Israel. The Tanakh excuses priests and the aristocracy taking land and people. It provides a rationale for a near theocracy. It is a classic example of religion in the service of power and privilege. Yet the Tanakh also fights abuses and strives for social justice. The Tanakh also is an instrument of good and it sometimes contradicts the stereotype of religion as mere ideology.

Israel was located in a multiple crossroads, and so in a position either to become wealthy and important or to be used. Egypt lay to the southwest. Babylon and Syria were to the east. Further east were Persia and Media (together now Iran). To the immediate north was Lebanon with its wooded hills, fertile small valleys, and skilled sea-going traders. Even further north was Anatolia (Turkey) with its huge fertile plains and Hittite empire. The sea was on the west.

Israel reached the height of its power during the Davidic line, which began with Kings David and Solomon around 1000 BCE. The territories on which Israelites lived never extended much beyond the boundaries of modern Israel including the Gaza strip, the Golan Heights, and the "Occupied Territories" but traditional Israel did sometimes exert commercial control over a wider area.

North, South, and Temple.

Solomon built the first temple to God in Jerusalem. It is called "the first temple". That temple became the focus of Israel's identity, Jewish nationality, and Jewish religion, and has remained so in idea ever since. It is more important to Jews than structures like Notre Dame in France, the Kremlin in Russia, or the Imperial compound in China, are to their people. Americans have nothing like the temple as a focus of our identity. Later successor temples carried on the same role. The idea of a temple carried on the same role even when there was no physical building. Priests conducted regular ceremonies at the temple so as to maintain Israel's close relation with its God. Ideally, every Israelite should go to the temple three times a year for specific religious festivals, especially at Passover to celebrate the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt. In practical reality, most Israelites were happy to go to the temple a few times in their lives, during which pilgrimages they were awed.

Israel had always been divided in two, a north and south, because of differences in political organization and religious ideas. The south consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin while the north consisted of the other ten tribes. The southerners were well organized and centralized, including a hierarchic priesthood centered on the temple in Jerusalem, and with a powerful king. Jerusalem was located on Mount Zion, and so was the original "shining city on a hill". The northerners were decentralized and more

egalitarian, with ceremonies at various centers, but especially at Mount Gerazim, which was a rival to Mount Zion and the temple in Jerusalem. Northerners did not recognize Mount Zion as the one dominant religious mountain but insisted that several mountains and cities in the north had equal claim to religious salience. Their priests had no clearly superior hereditary leaders. They did not have a powerful king. The parts of the Bible written by southerners disparagingly call the northern ritual centers “the high places”, assert that northerners were idolatrous, and assert that ceremonies at the high places of the north are blasphemous rituals to other gods. The southern area came to be called “Judea” or “Judah” after its dominant tribe. The term “Israel” ideally refers collectively to the Hebrews and to their homeland but its use in practice can be confusing. Sometimes the north alone was called “Israel”, and that might have been its original meaning. Sometimes both areas together were called “Israel”, and that came to be its widely understood meaning. Modern Israelis think of Israel as the two areas together. The north and south were united politically, but not culturally, under Saul, the king who preceded David, probably around 1050 BCE. The south dominated the north politically and militarily. After the north disappeared as a separate entity after about 722 BCE (see below), the term “Israel” applied to the south and especially to its dominant tribe of Judah. Because Judah dominated, all Hebrews and all Israelites came to be called “Jews”. The term “Jew” superseded the term “Israel” except in ideals, at least until the establishment of the modern nation of Israel. The ideal of an Israel that includes the north continued on in Jewish culture and politics, even with all Israelites, and later all Israelis, called “Jews”.

Neighbors Pick Israel Apart.

Under Rehoboam, the grandson of David, the kingdoms formally split politically in 922 BCE. Israel's neighbors saw their chance to divide and conquer, and so went after Israel in the North. The first invaders were the Assyrians in 722 - 721 BCE, who engulfed the northern kingdom but spared the southern kingdom. The Tanakh says the Assyrians took the ten northern tribes and the tribes never fully returned. Although the Assyrians did take people, most of the remaining population was still Hebrew. It was not non-Hebrew as southerners sometimes assert and as some Christians seem to think. The north lost its separate tribal identities but reconstituted with regional identities. The area of the northern kingdom became Samaria and Galilee. After that, the area of the north is not often called “Israel” anymore, and so the term “Israel” comes to mean “Judah” or “all the Hebrews that once were in the dual kingdoms but now look to Judah”. The term “Jew” came to mean “Israelite” and came to include both the southerners and the northerners that remained.

The idea that the northern ten tribes were taken away but are still somehow “out there” became important in later Jewish thinking. Eventually after all of Israel, even the Jews of the south, were scattered out of the homeland, after about 200 CE (AD), the idea that Jews were “out there” but waiting to return fueled Jewish imagination and politics. Israel the nation could only be fully recovered when all twelve tribes, including the lost ten, were fully recovered and when the entire territory was fully recovered. The restoration of all twelve tribes is a sign that collective Israel is once again right with God. It is a goal about which Jews dreamed and toward which Jews worked. It is a sign that the world is changing and that God will restore Israel to be pre-eminent among nations again and to lead nations. Keep this in mind for later chapters on Jesus.

Restoration Yet Continued Division.

In 587 BCE, the Babylonians defeated the Syrians; defeated the Israelite southern kingdom; destroyed the first temple; and took crafts people, scribes, priests, and other skilled Israelites to Babylon. This is the famous "Babylonian Captivity" about which reggae artists sing so well. It seemed Israel was doomed. Then suddenly the Persians defeated Babylon, and in 538 BCE allowed the Jews in Babylon to return. Two centuries later, in a process that culminated in a great battle, Alexander the Great of Macedonia (Greece) defeated the Persians in 333 BCE. His successors took control of the Persian territories including Israel, took some land in Israel, and built cities in Israel, but did not really occupy it. In a process completed under Mark Antony (Anthony) around 33 BCE, the Romans defeated the Greeks and took over the Alexandrian empire.

When the Jews returned from Babylon, they built the "second temple". This temple became even more the focus of Jewish religion and identity than had the first temple under Solomon because there was not a strong office of king to share the burden of Jewish unity and identity; the temple alone carried Jewish unity and identity.

After Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom, the two kingdoms did not reunite again until recently under modern Israel. Gradually after Assyria, the two areas became even more culturally, politically, and linguistically distinct. When southerners returned from Babylon, they held themselves apart as a superior elite. The returning southerners took control of the country and of Jewish identity. They imposed their ideas of religion, government, and culture, including ideas that they had picked up in Babylon. Their way of life created the basis for the modern Jewish way of life. After the elites from Babylon returned, all Hebrews and Israelites became Jews and have stayed Jews since. The returning elites looked down on the common people that had remained even in the south and especially they looked down on all Hebrews in the north. The people from the north might have connections to old Israel but the people of the south no longer thought of them as Israelites. To some extent, the returning elites also looked down on all farmers and herders, whom they called "people of the land" ("am ha'aretz"). Northerners began to speak a language called "Aramaic" that was related to the language of western Syria and was the common commercial language in the Middle East of the time. Eventually Aramaic even displaced Hebrew in the south.

People of the south looked at people of the north as idolaters who did not really know God and who did not worship God properly, much as Muslims, Christians, and Jews look down on each other or as urban and rural American Christians look down on each other. The southern view was wrong. Northerners began to look to the temple in Jerusalem much as southerners did. They did not look to it quite as did southerners, and especially they did not accept the southern priesthood in the same way; but they recognized the same God and only that God. Northerners were just as Hebrew even if not just as Jewish. Differences in northern and southern belief were more a question of attitude and stress than of content. Also keep this in mind for later chapters on Jesus because Jesus was a northerner.

Guiding Myth of Restoration.

That Israel could be re-born after it seemed annihilated under the Assyrians and Babylonians was as important as the return of the ten tribes. The Israelites interpreted the situation thus: God wanted a close relation with Israel. When Israel behaved badly, God used foreign powers to punish Israel. If Israel repented and returned to God, God would restore Israel to unity and to greatness, even on the brink of

extinction. As long as some Israelites worked with him, God would restore and improve any damaged relation. God could even make new Israelites of stones or bones. Israel would someday become the leader of the world and a light to all nations as the representative of God. Israelites had to keep strict observance of the relation with God. Israelites looked for signs that God was again “on the move” for them and that Israel would be fully restored. Every time the Jews are “down”, they recall this scenario. Every time they are down and something happens to give them hope, they remember God and his promise, and they anticipate another rising up and return. This is how some of them saw the idea of a messiah in later centuries, for which see later chapters. Keep this in mind for later chapters on Jesus too. Do not make fun of dreams of restoration. Nearly all nations that have once been great have dreams of restoration. Living in Alabama, the idea that “the South will rise again” is no idle slogan; Southern Americans took President George W. Bush as a sign of God’s favor on the South. England, France, Italy, Greece, Persia, Egypt, Iraq, China, and India all dream this way. Chinese policy has been fueled by this dream at least since about 1970.

More Foreign Domination and Culture Shock.

After the Greeks conquered much of the Middle East, most people began to adopt Greek language and Greek customs as a way of having a language and practice in common. At first this process went well, but some Greek customs and some Jewish customs did not mix. Greeks made fun of Jewish men because Jewish men were circumcised. Greeks considered circumcision as genital mutilation, the way Americans used to think of garish tattoos and piercings. Greeks never understood Jewish monotheism and the Jewish refusal to acknowledge any other gods. Jews thought Greeks were idolatrous and sexually lax. Jews wanted to keep their ethnic and religious identity. They maintained dietary rules and purity rules that kept them from some social activities with Greeks, such as dining. Pork (not beef or lamb) was the staple meat of most of Europe and Asia, but Jews would not eat it, and so could not eat with most non-Jews. Greeks ate food that had first been ceremonially offered to one of their gods, much as Americans “say grace” before a meal, but Jews could not eat any food like that either. Greeks did not understand why not. The Greeks took some land from the Jews to give to Greek military leaders and politicians. Taking the land dispossessed some Jews and thereby put population pressure on the Jews that kept their land.

Israel was part of an area ruled by the Greek dynasty called the Seleucids. The Seleucids tried to push the Jews into Greek practice. Part of the push included trying to establish worship of foreign gods in the temple at Jerusalem. The Jews label the king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Mithridates) as the worst offender because in 167 BCE he tried to set up an altar to Zeus in the temple. He might not be as bad as portrayed, but, in any case, the Jews revolted. A rural priest, a Hasmonian, named Mattathias, began the open revolt against Antiochus IV after Mattathias killed a Jew who had tried to offer a sacrifice to an idol at the temple. He and his five sons fled to the wilderness where they led a guerilla war. The eldest son, Judah, soon took over after his father died. Judah was also called “Maccabee”, which might mean, “hammer”. Later the family was called “the Maccabees” and their dynasty is often called “the Maccabees” although it is more properly called the “Hasmonian” dynasty. They rededicated the temple in 165 BCE, an event commemorated in the festival of Hannukah. They effectively won in 160 BCE when the rest of the Seleucid empire agreed to grant them religious freedom and a fair degree of political freedom. The Maccabees reintroduced some Jewish leadership, and gained control of temple worship and the

priesthood. Jews still use the phrase “Hebrew Hammer” to describe a strong Jew, sometimes with typical Jewish irony; see the very funny film of that name.

According to a legend, which is probably based in history, during the revolt, a woman and her seven sons all preferred to die rather than surrender to the Seleucids. Their actions inspired other Jews to victory. Normally Jews tended to see deliberate martyrdom as a sin, as suicide, which is prohibited under the Law, and is denying the sanctity of life. But Jews at that time reinterpreted the action of this woman and her sons not as suicide but as a sacrifice to God for the greater good. A small group of good people, or a good individual, can offer themselves as a sacrifice to cleanse the sins of other people and thus restore a good relation with God. These were new ideas in Jewish thought, and became popular during the Hasmonean and Herodian dynasties. Jews looked to some exemplary Jews among them to follow the example in fighting corrupt Jewish leadership or the Romans. Later Christians adopted this group of martyrs as prefiguring Jesus and as establishing the ideas that somebody can die for the good of the people, to expiate the sins of the people, and to restore a good relation with God. They saw Jesus in the same tradition, as the person who did this first for Jews and then for everybody.

About 150 BCE, the Hasmoneans destroyed the northern central temple on Mount Gerazim. They did to the northerners what they did not want others to do to them. In doing so, they permanently sealed the animosity between northerners and southerners. From then on, in effect, only Jews were Israelites, and all Israelites were Jews.

The Hasmoneans fought among themselves. Hasmonean rule ended in 37 BCE when Herod, the First, the Great, of Idumea, south of Judea, came to power and then allied with Rome. Herod astutely foresaw the rise of the Romans and allied with Roman leaders as they came to power. Herod kept the Romans from asserting direct rule. The Romans ruled through the Jewish leaders. Jews retained autonomy of religion and of most politics. Jewish leaders paid taxes to the Romans, allowed Romans access to the land, and supported some Roman military actions. The Romans did not occupy Israel through a large military presence. Mostly the Roman administrators and soldiers stayed in modern towns near the ocean. The Romans did take some Jewish land for estates as the Greeks had done. The Romans did not collect taxes directly. The Roman occupation of Israel was less intrusive than the American occupation of Iraq after 2003.

Herod the First rebuilt the second temple into one of the greatest structures and compounds in history anywhere. Herod died in 4 BCE. Herod’s temple is what Jesus saw as the temple. Herod was probably the king when Jesus was born. When he died, his sons split his kingdom.

His sons were kings when John the Baptist was active and when Jesus died. His sons were called “Herod” too and so the casual reader has to pay attention to which Herod is meant.

Away from centers of political unrest, the Romans brought peace, prosperity, and contentment. Contrary to popular opinion now, Roman soldiers did not walk the streets looking for ways to debase and harass Jews. Many regions of Israel did not even see a Roman soldier for months at a time. Galilee had few Roman soldiers. In many ways, and for a long time, Roman rule was better than anything that had gone before, including much Jewish self-rule. Proponents of law-and-order in modern American would likely be on the side of the Romans.

Usually Roman taxes were not high by prevailing standards. Jewish leaders under Rome were not particularly bad by world standards then, and sometimes were good leaders by those standards. Except for court intrigues and acute paranoia toward the end of his life, even Herod the Great was generally quite a good leader. But the leaders could not make the Jews and Romans get along. Sometimes both Roman and Jewish leaders repressed the Jews. Sometimes both Roman and Jewish leaders called for heavy taxes to support military actions and building projects. In areas of political unrest and heavy taxes, the people were unhappy.

Roman customs and religion were similar to Greek ones, so Romans also had trouble with the Jews. To the Romans, the Jews were not devout ethical believers in one supreme God but were anti-social atheists. Their "one god" was merely a cover for not accepting divine grace in general. Their ethical rules were not about good morals but about finding a way to maintain a divide between themselves and others. Romans never fully understood Jewish monotheism or desire for ethnic identity. The Romans did learn to leave the temple and priesthood alone, and did learn not to interfere in festivals except in case of disorder. The Romans kept the peace strictly. The Jews agitated sometimes, and the Romans punished them harshly as a group when they did, much as the Israelis do now to the Palestinians. Beginning in 66 CE, Jews rebelled, the Romans had had enough, and so the Romans waged harsh war against the Jews. In 70 CE, the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the second temple. The destruction of the temple devastated Jews because Jews had expected God to intervene for them and because the temple represented the relation between God and Jews. The destruction of the temple seemed to mean that God had abandoned the Jews and had severed the relation, the "Covenant". The Romans did not try to kill off the Jews in Israel, but many Jews fled then just as after 1948 Palestinians fled when Jews invaded Palestine. Where before the Romans had required only token observance of religious ceremonies that were designed to support the state, after 70 CE the Romans required fuller Roman style civic worship and they forbade circumcision. The new policy would be like requiring everybody in the United States to eat a ritual meal of pork at Christmas in a church, requiring everybody to burn incense to the President, and forbidding men to wear pants. The laws made it hard to be a Jew. These new Roman laws set the pattern for later persecutions. In 130 CE, the Jews revolted again. This time, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and forced all the Jews out of the city. That completed the destruction of Israel and the dispersion of the Jews.

After the Romans ravaged Israel and the Jews dispersed, the people of the north merged with their non-Jewish neighbors and eventually disappeared as an ethnic group. The people of the south, especially under the Pharisees (see next chapter), eventually became what modern people think of as Jews with the system of rabbis (teachers) and synagogues.

Jesus lived while Rome dominated Israel, northerners were still part of greater Hebrew identity, and yet southerners looked down on people of the north. Jesus died before the Romans destroyed the second temple in 70 CE. To better understand his world, we need to look at the development of Jewish religion. Before that, we need to look more at some general human religious ideas.

Monotheism, Covenant, and Ethics.

Jewish religion has features that distinguish it from other major religions. Although other major religions have some version of these features, the Jews stress these features and so we need to understand them. We cannot understand them just by looking at how the features survived into Christianity but have to see them in their Jewish setting. I do not discuss these features as they appear in other religions such as Egyptian religion, Babylonian religion, or Islam, or discuss how the Jewish version differs from the version in other religions. Jewish religion took a long time in the making, was hard to achieve, and hard to maintain. Jews become nervous when non-Jews point out that Jewish religion did not spring full blown and isolated from Jews but emerged out of ideas, beliefs, myths, and practices that Jews held in common with their neighbors and had borrowed from their neighbors. The story of the creation of Jewish religion is truly fascinating, and sheds much light on Jewish religion, but it is too much for here. Please see the suggested readings.

Monotheism.

Philosophers perfected the idea of monotheism in which there is only one god, and that god is all-knowing, all-powerful, all good, and only good. But common people do not listen to philosophers. The Jews rightfully have the credit for pioneering monotheism as a religion for a group of ordinary non-philosophers and have the credit for spreading that religion around the world.

In theory, ever since Moses, Hebrews (including Jews) believed in monotheism. In practice, monotheism even among Hebrews was not consistent until at least after the Assyrian invasion. Until then, Hebrews held various ideas in which one God dominated but was not necessarily alone and was not necessarily all-powerful, all-knowing, or all good and only good. Until then, individual Hebrews varied in their beliefs so that not everybody was a monotheist. It is not useful to go into various beliefs and groupings. Modern Jews vary in how closely they hold ideal traditional Jewish monotheism but I think most of them adhere quite closely or else they believe in a modern version of a single God that has been influenced by philosophy. Some modern Jews are atheists. Very few Jews converted to other religions until recently when some Jews converted to Buddhism. Jews consider orthodox Christianity with the Trinity as not truly monotheistic.

Some people over-stress how unique the Hebrew idea of monotheism is, so it is useful to point out that the first Hebrews shared their basic religious ideas, myths, and practices with their Semitic neighbors and that originally the Hebrews believed in a group of gods, collectively called the "Elohim", or "the gods", or "the children of god". At first, Hebrews accepted that other peoples had other Gods; they only insisted that their God was more powerful than other gods.

They did not think their God was all-powerful or all-knowing. Philosophical speculation about God did not come up. Thus the first Hebrews were not ideally monotheistic. Over time, the original small group of gods got narrowed down, God gradually came to be more powerful and more knowing, and the gods of other peoples came to be considered false - all for reasons that are not clear.

Before and after the narrowing down to one God, Hebrews have always used two names for God that point to different personalities: "Yahweh" and "El". Yahweh and El were two different gods originally but by the time Hebrews began to write about them, by the time of the earliest before about 1300 BCE, they already had begun to merge, so I call them "godly persons" rather than distinct gods.

“El” means something like “God” while “Yahweh” might mean something like “I am what (really) is” or “I am that I am”. Scholars dispute over the exact meaning of “Yahweh”. Yahweh originally might have been a storm and military god much like Zeus, Odin, Thor, or Indra. “Elohim” is the plural of “El” although it was not always used like a plural. In the beginning, El might not have been a single god alone but the leader in a council of gods. El began with a wife and probably at least one son. Some angelic figures from the Tanakh, and even the Holy Spirit, might have come from the idea of a group of gods under one leader. “Elohim” originally likely meant both group and leader, then came to mean primarily the leader, and then only the leader. Yahweh was tied more with the south while El was tied more with the north. The Tanakh duplicates many stories, such as the Creation, because it preserves a story from the perspective of each deity and from the perspectives of the north and south. Names for people, angels, and places that have “el” in them, such as “Micha-el” and “Beth-el”, derive from the “El” title. Some names have the “Yah” or “Ja(h)” root in them such as “Johannes” or “John”. The name “Elijah” means something like, “My God (El) is Yahweh”. It is fun to look up these names to see what roots they come from and what they mean. The term “El” might be related to the Arab word “Allah” and the Semitic word “Baal”. I do not know what modern Jews make of the distinction between El and Yahweh. Out of respect, Hebrews since about the time of the judges have referred to God only by roundabout terms, such as “lord” (“adonai” or “mara(na)”), “the blessed one”, or “heaven”. This practice can make it hard to sort out the precise identity of God and precise ideas about God in Hebrew-Jewish history. The phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” in the New Testament, particularly in Mathew, is a polite way of saying “Kingdom of God”.

In addition to Yahweh or El, Jews recognize a force that emanates from God by which God acts, called the “breath” of God, or the Holy Spirit. It is not clear how this force relates to God and how important this force is for modern Jews. Jews sometimes feel the presence of God, as in worship; they refer to the presence as the “Shekinah”. The proper response to the Shekinah is awe.

I do not know the official Jewish theological formulas that precisely relate El, Elohim, Yahweh, the Spirit, and the Shekinah. Regardless of any fuzzy edges or the fact of more-than-one term, most Jews since the return from Babylon have been quite strictly monotheistic by world standards. I take the terms “Yahweh”, “El”, “Elohim”, “God”, “Allah” and the “Holy Spirit” all to refer to the same thing; and I take the term “Shekinah” to refer to the presence of that one thing. When I say “God” I do not mean just “El” but mean all the referents to the Hebrew-Jewish-Christian-Muslim supreme and only deity.

Covenant and Law.

God made a deal with the Hebrews. If the Hebrews recognized him as the one and only God, and kept the Law that he gave them, then he would help them out as a nation. God chose the Hebrews as his special people. This deal is called “the Covenant”. The Covenant refers to the relation between God and the collective people the Hebrews, the Hebrew nation.

The original sign of the collective Covenant is the Law that God gave to the Hebrews. The Law is not a physical thing such as the tablets but is a set of ideas for right living. Eventually the Law came to imply some institutions too, such as the festival cycle of the Jews, the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, purity, and customs. The best example of the Law is the Ten Commandments. I do not often refer to

other points of the Law when talking about the Law in Jewish life because I am ignorant about most other points of the Law.

The first physical signs of the Covenant were the tablets of the Commandments and the Arc in which the tablets were kept, made famous by Indiana Jones movies. The tablets resided in the temple until the Babylonians looted the first temple. Then they were lost. After the temple was rebuilt, the temple itself became the most important physical sign of the collective relation to God. After the second temple was destroyed, any copy of the Torah could be a physical sign of the Covenant but old Torah scrolls are the most revered such signs.

In men, the definitive personal sign of belonging to the nation of the Covenant is circumcision ("cutting round away") of the foreskin of the penis. The Egyptians practiced circumcision, well before the first Biblical writings, so some scholars assume Hebrews got it from Egyptians. I am not sure why Egyptians practiced it.

For all Hebrews (Jews) keeping the customs and festivals is a physical sign of keeping the Law, the Covenant, and a relation with God. It is a behavior sign that is roughly equivalent to the bodily sign of circumcision and the material sign of a Torah and the temple.

Although the Covenant pertains to a relation between God and the Hebrews as a nation collectively, in some cases, God also helps individual people, particularly people that he asks to do tasks, such as Abraham, Moses, and David. Probably not anybody can make a personal deal with God but I do not know the rules. God does not call just anybody, and God does not bless just anybody.

It is not always clear what God does for his chosen people. Often he tells them when they are doing right or wrong. He corrects them and makes them better. At first, God helped the Hebrews leave Egypt, get a land for themselves, set up a priesthood, and set up leaders. He sometimes helped them in wars with their neighbors. I think most Jews think that God helps them to maintain their identity and their relation to God even outside of Israel, and even when they do not have access to the traditional temple and ceremonies. I think most Jews think God helps them to maintain their festivals and customs and identity. I think some Jews think God helps protect them against hostile groups, and helps preserve physical signs of the Covenant such as scrolls of the Torah. I think some Jews think God helped establish the modern state of Israel.

Sometimes individual Jews that are successful in business, a profession, or family life, feel God has blessed them. Whether these people feel they deserve the blessing according to the Law, or in addition to the Law, depends on the individual. Whether they think this kind of blessing is part of the Covenant, I do not know. I think officially this kind of blessing should not be seen as part of the Covenant but can be accepted as a gift from God. Most successful Jews seem about as humble or as proud as other successful people I have met. I do not know any definitive theological analysis based on the Covenant or Law of why God would bless particular people. I am not sure if Jews in general would take worldly success as a sign of God's blessing them personally as Max Weber said Protestants did, but I think at least some Jews take it that way because it seems only human nature to do so.

Acknowledging another God, or worshipping a person, is a sign of abandoning the Covenant. It is idolatry. It signals that a person is not a Hebrew or is not a Hebrew any longer. Because Hebrews do not wish to inadvertently worship another god or a person, Hebrews had to be careful about participating in civic rituals that focused around a god, such as the festivals of Athena or paying respect to the Roman Emperor; and had to be careful about participating in the festivals of other ethnic groups such as New Year. Deliberately breaking the Law also signals that a person is not a Hebrew (Jew) or is not a Hebrew any more. The Law has provisions for accidentally breaking it.

Relation.

The people of Israel have a relationship with God. They can talk to him. He sometimes talks back. They have permission to feel that he helps them collectively and personally. They can complain to him, and he might do something about it. This is true not just of priests, prophets, or kings but even of individual common people if they are in good standing with the Law and with God. God does not necessarily bless individuals as he does the nation but he does guide individuals. This is the sense of a relation with God that came into Christianity. It is probably not good to see this relation as a personal covenant but I do not know Jewish thinking on the topic.

Ethics and Monotheism.

The Law is not so much about particular points but about the right way to live. The Law is not so much about how far you can walk from your house on the Sabbath as that the Sabbath gives people, animals, and the land a needed rest. The Hebrews and Jews were clear about deep understanding of the Law as goodness and ethics. Much of what God wants the Hebrews to do is ethical and good. God wants Jews to do the right things, to do morally good things. God, goodness, and rightness all go together.

The link of God to morality in Hebrew thought is important because the link is not as clear in other religions. We take the link for granted because we have inherited the Hebrew way of looking. Gods in other religions are not usually morally horrible but often they are not morally consistent and sometimes they do bad things. Religions with more than one god often have at least one god that is a troublemaker such as Loki in Norse Mythology or Kali Durga in Hindu mythology. People that imitate the gods do not always act well because they sometimes imitate a troublemaking god. It is not conceivable to a Hebrew that God would not be good or would not want good. When atheists say ethics and morality are intrinsic to human life, and say people can be moral without God, they unknowingly echo the Hebrew idea that morality and the core of existence intrinsically go together.

The idea that God is good seems to go along with the idea that God is one. It is possible to have many gods and for them all to be good, or for them all to show various aspects of goodness, but this system is hard to keep up. To some extent, the Greeks did this with gods that had good personalities with distinctive good traits, such as Apollo and Athena. To some extent, the Hindus do this with gods that have a good personality and distinctive good traits, such as the various incarnations of Vishnu like Krishna. But if you really want your god to be consistently good, then your god usually is one god and only one god.

I do not know how Jews deal with the fact that God did encourage their ancestors to do bad things, even bad things such as genocide that the Jews now feel deeply as wrong. I do not think this problem makes Jews any more hypocritical or less ethical than any other people.

Great Gifts.

Perhaps the greatest gift of the Hebrews to modern life are the associated ideas that there is one God, that God has a relation with people (the Covenant), and that God and good go together so that God wants us to be good. I cannot stress the value of these ideas enough by adding more words.

Students of religion say that the Hebrews (and Jews) developed the ideas of “covenantal monotheism” or “monotheist ethics” or “covenantal ethics”. They put the three major gifts together in pairs depending on which relation they see as key in general or to a specific situation. Students of religion do not always refer to the philosophical use of these ideas but sometimes refer to the specific way the Hebrews used the ideas in their history, such as the historical development of the idea of the Covenant. Still, the importance of the ideas is not any less. We will see that Jesus’ teaching depends on the ideas.

Legal Particularity.

It is true that some particular points of the Law do not have any obvious practical purpose, some points came from the past, some points seem odd to people that came afterwards, and some points just seem odd such as the prohibition against eating shellfish. Still, the particular points of the Law are important because Jews think they are part of the right way to live. The connection between the particular points of the Law and the spirit of the Law might not always be evident but often the connection can be found. For instance, restrictions against work on the Sabbath seem annoying when somebody has to get something done but they also cultivate the right attitudes and they keep people from rationalizing the Law and thus eroding the main spirit of the Law. Usually particular points are not hard to keep, so, even if somebody now cannot see the relation between a particular point and the spirit of the Law, it is not a great hardship to keep the particular point. It was not hard to avoid shellfish in the hills of Israel. It was harder to avoid pork but not too hard if a family also kept sheep and goats. Unless it was abused, legal detail was not seen as a stumbling block to the spirit of the Law but was considered an aid. People could usually tell when somebody was abusing the details of the law and would not go along with such abuse.

As with many modern non-Jews, I try to understand the spirit of the Law while not worrying about most of its particular precepts such as the prohibition on shellfish. I do not look down on people who do follow the Law as long as they do not look down on me too much. I find following the Law admirable. I respect modern Jews who try to follow the spirit of the Law without worrying too much about points that no longer make sense or that inhibit life too much. I do not think a Jew who sometimes eats ham does great and irreparable harm to the Law as long as he-she understands the spirit of the Law and works to keep that. The Law, in all points, has a long tradition and a continued meaning for Jews. I do not see how respecting that diminishes me.

The Jewish Law has about 613 main points with sub-points of interpretation. Surprisingly to many people, the Jewish law is not particularly detailed and rigorous by modern standards. Every town in the United States has far more laws and ordinances than the Jewish Law. Most Americans now know as

many laws and ordinances as most Jews knew points of the Law in the time of Jesus. The Roman Catholic laws are more extensive than Jewish Law, and probably the same is true for the rules of Episcopalians, Orthodox churches, Lutherans, and the Churches of Christ. A mere glance at United States tax laws is enough to show which is vastly heavier in pounds and on the soul, and the tax laws are only one book out of many in the American legal system. The Jews had lawyers but not like Americans do now. We should not let puzzlement over a few laws such as about bathing and about not eating pork mislead us into missing the basic foundations of the Jewish Law in doing the will of God, in promoting right living, and promoting abundant living. Keep in mind that Jews could summarize the entire Law in the two main points of "love God" and "love your neighbor".

Prosperity and Holiness.

A nation that accepts God and the Law should also prosper. There is a link between God, accepting the Law, and prosperity. God blesses obedient Israel. This link still survives in Jewish thought and Christian thought. It is not always clear what prosperity means but usually it means being wealthy and having large healthy families. It can mean being politically free and not being under the dominance of other nations. It can mean having citizens that are respectful, kind, and that uphold the Law. It can mean widespread social justice. To some people, it means being a powerful nation and controlling other nations.

Nations that uphold the Law are more prosperous. Nations that are prosperous usually have an easier time to uphold the Law (unless their prosperity leads them into indulgence and into breaking the Law). Regardless of specifics about the nature of prosperity, upholding the Law and prosperity reinforce each other.

Nations can try to achieve prosperity by trying to be more holy and pure. If they are holy and pure, they can expect God to reward them with prosperity. It is not clear if this possibility exists for nations other than the Jews but Christians certainly have acted as if this relation did exist for them too.

It is not clear if there is a link between God, the Law, and prosperity for individual people. Jews know quite well that a particular person can be good but not prosper in the usual ways. They know that bad people can prosper. Like many of us, Jews hope that bad people cannot get away with flaunting God and the Law forever and hope that God rewards good people somehow.

For Jews, being holy and pure means upholding the Law. If Jews wish to have God's blessing and prosper, they need to uphold the Law. The more they uphold the Law, the more they will prosper. The idea that greater strictness in the Law means greater prosperity can be abused to result in extreme legalism, but, again that happens only in certain situations with certain people, and most Jews have been able to see through this trap in the long run.

Collective Punishment for Transgression.

The flip side of prosperity is punishment. At least since the time when Hebrews originally overran Palestine, and strongly since the Assyrian invasion, Jews have interpreted national problems as punishment from God. During the wars in Palestine, defeat was a sign that the Hebrews had done something wrong and that God was no longer on their side. The Assyrian invasion was a sign that Jews

had not been strict in upholding the Law and especially that Jews had worshiped other gods. Jews turned to other gods because Jewish men had married non-Jewish women who turned them astray. The pattern is: Jews do something to anger God, so God uses plagues, famines, and outsiders as a way to punish the Jews and to restore the Jews to right behavior. Usually the crime is inattentiveness to worship of Yahweh, in particular laxity in observing the Law and in performing the rites and ceremonies, and laxity in letting people worship idols and other Gods. Sometimes the crime is laxity in social justice, as when good people and officials allow the rich to take advantage of the poor or when officials take advantage of the poor. The cure is greater attentiveness to the Law and to worship of Yahweh, or greater diligence in social justice.

Jews understand that not all problems are the result of bad behavior but there is no clear line between problems that are God's way to correct behavior versus problems that arise from other causes. This is one reason why God sends prophets, to warn the Jews, to explain the problems, to explain what needs to be done to avoid punishment, to describe what punishments will likely befall in case the Jews do not amend behavior, and to point to better ways of life.

The fact that punishment falls collectively raises questions. Jews expect good people to remain even among a nation that has gone wrong. They understand that any collective punishment is likely to fall on the good as well as the bad and that the good do not deserve to be punished in this way. This is the major theme in the story from the book of Exodus in which Abraham bargains with God over how many good people have to remain in Sodom and Gomorrah before God will refrain from destroying those cities. It takes only a few good people among thousands to keep punishment away. If there were no good people remaining to interpret events then bad people would not know they were being punished, why they were being punished, or what to do about it. Jews hope that God rewards good people for their endurance with prosperity later when the nation returns to God and returns to prosperity.

Even now, nations other than Israel think of national events in these terms. Even non-Jews and non-Christians ask what people did wrong when a tsunami happens, and ask how God could allow that to happen to the good people that live among the bad. The Chinese felt that Heaven would punish and reward the nation for bad behavior and good behavior, and I think some modern Chinese still think like this. There is still no good answer.

Christians assume that they have inherited this part of the relation with God, so they tend to interpret prosperity in terms of diligence in Christian morality and bad times as the result of lax morality. This is why Pat Robertson can threaten Pennsylvania when a town does not teach Creationism.

The fact that laxity in the Law leads to punishment can also reinforce overly strict adherence to the Law and can lead to neurotic behavior. It is a mistake similar to "I do not have a girlfriend because I am not a truly good person. If I am only good enough, everybody will like me, and I will succeed in my job, romantic life, and social life". I doubt that the Jewish Law leads to this mindset much more than do rules and ideas in most other religions or societies.

Looking Down on Others.

Nearly all ethnic groups see their own group as superior, purer, holier, nearer to god, and more ethical than other groups. They see other groups as ranging from slightly inferior to generally depraved. How widely people see the gulf, and what people do on the basis of this ethno-centric view, depends on the groups and the situation. In some situations, ethnic pride coupled with looking down on other groups helps your group to maintain identity and keep its people alive. In some situations, it excuses exploitation of other groups. Even after decades of work to improve ethnic relations in the United States, many Whites still look down on Blacks, and many Blacks still look down on Whites. Yes, minority and oppressed groups are about as prejudiced as the dominant or powerful groups but do not have the chance to express prejudice in the same way. Ethnic pride and disdain for other ethnic groups excuses terrorism.

So it should come as no surprise that Jews looked down on non-Jews and non-Jews looked down on Jews. Jews saw non-Jews as dirtier, less pure, less holy, and not able to have a relation with God. Non-Jews saw Jews as having the same faults, and, in addition, as a threat to the social and religious order because Jews would not participate in the simple ceremonies of normal civic life such as burning incense for the welfare of the Emperor. Non-Jews tended to blame the Jews for a plague or natural disaster such as an earthquake because the gods were angry at the impiety of the Jews. Even now in the United States, fundamentalist Christians blame secularists for natural disasters, as when non-Christians refuse to honor Christmas and later we have a bad hurricane or the stock market crashes. When Jews and non-Jews lived together without conflict over material resources, power, and mates, sometimes they could overcome ethnic bias to learn the best features of each other's culture, religion, and history; but that story is too much for here.

Now we come to a touchy point. When the Tanakh said, "love thy neighbor", it did not originally mean, "love everybody of all ethnic groups and religions". A neighbor was a fellow Hebrew. A non-Hebrew was not originally a neighbor. Non-neighbors could be exploited, including taking their land and enslaving them. When the Tanakh prohibited getting interest on loans it did not prohibit getting interest from any loan to anybody but only on loans by a Hebrew to a Hebrew. A Hebrew could loan money at interest to a non-Hebrew. As time went by, the interpretation and the actual practice differed from the early parochial ideal. Jews began to charge interest to other Jews as well as to non-Jews. Jews began to see non-Jewish neighbors as humans, and began to extend common Jewish courtesy to them as well. They allowed non-Jews to glean from fields. They helped a non-Jewish widow or orphan. Several books of the prophets deal exactly with this kind of extension and they offer praise to non-Jews. I do not know how much kindness really did extend across ethnic boundaries but the fact that it did extend at least a bit is important. Christians, non-Jews, and critics of religion, today point to the narrow idea of neighbor in the early Tanakh as evidence that the Jews were especially ethnocentric and that all religion is a moral cover for selfish behavior. Neither idea is correct. The Jews could be quite ethnocentric sometimes but in daily practice they were likely not much more ethnocentric than most groups. Religion can justify ethnocentrism and other bad behavior but bad behavior usually does not need much religious justification. Religion does not often cause bad behavior but religion does serve as the justification for bad behavior too often.

Whether or not Jesus deliberately overcame Jewish ethnocentrism is a matter of debate, which debate itself is usually an indication of ethnocentrism or of religious bias among the debaters. What Jesus actually achieved does not matter as long as we see the need to overcome ethnocentrism and we know how to do it. I say more about this problem later in the book.

Transcending Legalistic Selection.

This subsection repeats points made in an earlier chapter on practical reasons why we cannot follow ideals. Every once in a while on the Internet, a list circulates of practices that are in the Bible but that people do not follow anymore, including:

-Men can divorce their wives at will but women cannot divorce their husbands -A man can have more than one wife

-People may own, buy, and sell slaves

-People can become slaves through debt

-Parents may sell their children into slavery

-You may try to buy a child

-Prostitution is not illegal

-Every seven years, debts are forgiven and land reverts to its original owners

-We may attack our national neighbors, taking their land, and taking them as slaves

-We should kill an animal and burn parts of it as an offering to God

-We may kill and burn only perfect animals

-If a neighbor kills and burns blemished animals, we must stone him to death

-Only if sacrifice accompanies prayers can prayers be effective

-We should stone to death all male homosexuals

-We should stone to death all adulterers

-We should stone to death all people that do not keep the Sabbath strictly

-All men must be circumcised or they are not neighbors

-We owe the priests 10% of our income for their upkeep

-Priests may not own land or work land

-Priests may come only from the tribe of Levi

-We may not collect interest from a neighbor, ever

-We may not eat pork or shellfish, including we may not eat shrimp or lobster

That is enough to show that nobody follows these rules to the letter, and many rules were abandoned entirely. Not even strict Jews and Muslims follow these rules to the letter. We abandon, select, emphasize, de-emphasize, and interpret.

Jews and Muslims developed guidelines about which rules have to be followed, to what extent, the exceptions, and what to do in case of confusion. The spirit of the guidelines is something apart from the Laws. The spirit of the guidelines may be a logical extension of some Laws, such as the idea of loving our neighbor, but the spirit of the guidelines cannot be just the Laws or we would not need selection or interpretation. I have no trouble with the idea that we use principles other than the Laws to select from the Laws and to interpret the Laws but some people do have trouble with this idea. Because the Tanakh and New Testament are not entirely self-consistent, and are sometimes are self-contradictory, we cannot avoid selection and interpretation.

Christians have an added problem because they want both to keep the Law and to jettison the Law. They want to have their cake and eat it too. Officially, Christians say Jesus made the Law obsolete, and that his teachings take precedence over any specific points of the Law. Christians took this position early in their history when they wished to attract converts from outside Judaism, and knew that some laws would keep away non-Jewish people, such as the laws requiring circumcision of men or against eating pork. Yet many Christians quickly invoke old laws when they wish to condemn something they do not like, such as homosexuality. They do not invoke all the laws, or do not invoke all the laws equally. They do not require burnt offerings and they do not stone their fellows for working on the Sabbath. They do not forbid the collecting of interest. They invoke and emphasize the laws that support their social-political-economic outlook. They select and interpret for reasons outside the Law.

This is why we need to be explicit about all the ideas that go into our religious viewpoint. Thinking about which laws we accept, reject, or modify is a good way to examine ourselves to see what we really think and why. If we find contradictions within ourselves, we need to think about how we can hold those contradictions, why we might want to hold them, and what would happen if we abandoned them. We need to think about our central stance, our key guidelines, or the core spirit we use, when we select, reject, modify, and interpret laws. What are we really about? Can we see our core principles as consistent with particular points of the law, such as the ideal of loving our neighbor? Can we see our core principles as a good extension of particular points of the law, such as extending the idea of "neighbor" to include people outside our religion, race, nation, class, or gender? Why are we strict about some things? Do we support a social, economic, or political agenda? Are we suppressing the poor?

If we use principles from outside the Law to select from the Law and to interpret it, then why bother with the Law at all? Why not just revert to the principles as basic, derive specific behaviors from basic principles, and dispense with the Law? In effect, this is what most people do, usually implicitly, including fundamentalists who believe they follow the Law and only the Law. Modern atheists do this explicitly, for which I give them credit. I can think of several reasons to keep the Law in mind. Many principles that we

use developed from the Hebrew Law, and so it helps to keep the Law as a reference for the source of our basic principles. People usually do not think up principles on their own but learn them from other people. When learning, it helps to see more than one set of principles and to think about which to adopt. We can use both the Hebrew Law and Greek philosophy. The Law makes a good reference set of beginning principles that can guide us in our adoption of all principles. The Law has coherence to it even if it has some silly points. We can learn about coherence from it. We can use not only the Law of the Hebrews as a touchstone but we can use the laws of other peoples, such as the Hindus or Chinese. When we accept the value of one set of laws, such as from the Hebrews, but do not get “hung up” on that set, it is easier to put in perspective the laws from other nations and to see the relation between the laws of all nations and the deeper principles we seek. If we discard the Hebrew Laws, then it is hard to say why we should pay any attention to the laws of any other peoples. If we discard all traditional law, it is hard to say why we should pay attention to our supposed basic philosophical principles either. We need to start with some set of laws, and the Hebrew Law is a good place.