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**Rabbinic Parallels to Matthean Expression--A Study in the Politics  
and Polemics of Rabbinic Expression**

**Todd Chizner**

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinic Program  
New York, New York

March 8, 1999  
Advisor: Dr. Martin Cohen

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## Summary

- This thesis has four chapters.
- The contribution of this thesis is that it shows the conceptual and textual relationship between the New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism. Also, it shows that there was communication between the early church and the early synagogue. The thesis establishes that one cannot fully understand Rabbinic Judaism without understanding the development of Christianity. Also, one cannot fully understand the development of Christianity without knowing about Rabbinic Judaism. In sum, this thesis puts forth that a sacred text, or any text, can be understood only if it is studied against the context in which it was written.
- The goal of this thesis was to satisfy my own fascination with Jewish/Christian relations by understanding its origins. Also, I wanted to increase my knowledge of Talmud and Midrash.
- This thesis has been divided according to the chronological order of the first chapter of Matthew. Thus, the first chapter is devoted to genealogy, which comprises the first seventeen verses in the Gospel of Matthew. The second chapter analyzes 'righteousness,' which appears in the nineteenth verse. This is followed by an analysis of the angel scene, which begins in verse 20. Finally, the issue of miraculous conception is discussed because the angel confirms its truth in verse 21.
- The materials used for this thesis were primary sources; including the Tanakh, the New Testament, the Pseudepigrapha, the Apocrypha, the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Midrash Rabbah. There were several secondary sources used in order to focus my search. For example, Strack, Hermann L. and Paul Billerbeck's Das Evangelium Nach Mattheus Erlautert Aus Talmud und Midrasch, which richly anthologized parallels between Rabbinic Literature and Matthew. Also, to gain a clearer understanding of the world in which Matthew was written, I used Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community, by J. Andrew Overman, Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source, by S. Pines, and Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community, Anthony J. Saldarini.

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My greatest influence in pursuing a career in the rabbinate was Rabbi Jack Bemporad. Rabbi Bemporad served as the senior rabbi of my home congregation, Temple Israel of Lawrence, NY. Although he was there for only a short period of time, he managed to inspire me and open my eyes to the intellectual and philosophical side of the rabbinate. Rabbi Bemporad's true love was, and still is, Jewish/Christian relations. He was the first to show me how significant Judaism was in shaping Christianity, past and present.

My interest in Jewish/ Christian relations fell by the wayside during my first three year's of school, which were devoted to learning Hebrew, Bible and practical rabbinic skills. In my fourth year, I returned to New York from the Los Angeles campus of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. I knew few students and even fewer professors. I recognized one professor, Dr. Martin Cohen, who had been introduced to me four years prior by his close friend, Rabbi Jack Bemporad.

I enrolled in Dr. Cohen's History courses, and as the time went on I became fonder and fonder of him. Dr. Cohen opened my eyes to the role that socio-political context plays in the development of sacred text. Dr. Cohen also reminded me of my fascination with Jewish/Christian relations. Over the past couple of years, Dr. Cohen has helped me learn about History, Judaism, and life in general.

My advisor, Dr. Cohen always found the time to meet with me and guide me along. I will always be grateful to him for helping to make my thesis experience and the conclusion of studies at HUC, so fulfilling.

Finally, I would like to thank my entire extended family who have supported me through this whole process. Most of all I would like to thank my wife - she is my love and my best friend. And of course, I would like to thank my newest inspiration, my son Jacob.

## INTRODUCTION

Jewish text and tradition, just as all societies, has been effected by the ebbs and flows of history and political struggles.<sup>1</sup> Even the most sacred Jewish texts, such as the Bible and the Mishnah, contain traces of apologetics over its own apparent shortcomings and polemics against the forces that threatened its survival. These influences attest to the variations of thought in the Jewish tradition and, at certain times in Jewish history, they even suggest the existence of many groups without a centralized leadership.<sup>2</sup> One such time in Jewish history is in the first century CE.

During the period of time leading up to and directly following the destruction of the Temple, there were many differences of thought in Judaism.<sup>3</sup> Rome was in power and the Jewish people had no leader of their own. When the Temple was destroyed, a main part of the religion was destroyed as well. Undefined sub-groups emerged as a result and Jews gravitated towards particular sub-groups.

Even as late as the early second century, the differences of opinion amongst the Jews did not keep them from living, working, and praying together. Gittin 45a and b alludes to the practice of the *minim* who wrote Torah scrolls, *mezuzot*, and *tefilin*. The *minim* refer to any Jews who had heretical beliefs. The fact that *minim* were writing these holy texts meant that they were Jews and had similar practices to other Jews. In order to write such texts it took a great deal of time and money. Brachot 28b and 29a records a circumstance

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Dr. Martin, Two Sister Faiths, pg. 6

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* pg. 23

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 12

that validates the notion that the *minim* prayed with other Jews. After Rabban Gamliel II (80 - 110 CE) standardized the eighteen blessings of the *Ameeda*, he asked the Sages of Yavneh if any of them could write a blessing/ curse against *minim*. Shmuel HaKatan offered to write the curse against *minim*, and indeed he wrote it. A year later, Shmuel HaKatan was leading prayer and forgot the text of the blessing. How could he forget the prayer after he himself had composed it just a year before? Shmuel HaKatan stood there for two or three hours trying to remember the words. The Gemara asks,

"Why didn't they remove him?" The answer is given by Rav Yehuda, a second generation Babylonian Amora, in the name of Rav, a first generation Babylonian Amora, "If the prayer leader made mistakes in any of the blessing, we do not remove him. However, in the blessing of the *minim* we remove him, because we suspect he is a *min*."<sup>4</sup>

There came a time when there was a concerted effort by Jewish groups to separate from competing factions. Groups vied for support from Jews outside their core constituency. They found ways to authenticate their own beliefs and they sought to polemicize other groups in order to make their own group appear to know the true or new Jewish way.

Amongst the groups of Jews who vied for support and acceptance were those who believed in Jesus as the messiah. These groups did not intend on opposing Jewish custom or law. In fact, they saw themselves as fully Jewish people. Their belief of the messiah was a Jewish ideal and their adherents were Jewish. They only had one major difference

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<sup>4</sup> Brachot 29a

between themselves and other Jewish groups; they believed that the messiah had come, had been resurrected and his name was Jesus.

Between the years 65 and 100 CE, several authors wrote about Jesus; including his background, his birth, his deeds, his teachings, and his death. These narratives would later come to be known as the "Gospels." "The title 'Gospel' probably derives from the opening words of one of these narratives document, that attributed to Mark ("The beginning of the Gospel...")."<sup>5</sup> The word gospel literally means "good news." Four of the Gospels were canonized as part of the New Testament and make up the first books of the New Testament. These narratives of Jesus' life are distinguished by the headings "According to Matthew", "According to Mark", "According to Luke," and "According to John."<sup>6</sup>

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are closely related. "All are developed narratives which culminate in passion and resurrection accounts; they agree in beginning their story of Jesus' public career with the activity of John the Baptist. Between the Baptist's appearance and the passion, they relate encounters, mighty deeds, and teaching. Such similarities suggest that these books are connected."<sup>7</sup> Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so closely related that they are referred to as the Synoptic Gospels.

In spite of the general similarities, the Gospels are also distinguished by significant variances. For example, the Gospel of Matthew stands out because of its inclusion of more verses of Jewish Scriptures than any of the other three Gospels. It has erroneously been called the most Jewish of the Gospels. Many Christian commentators view Matthew from a

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<sup>5</sup> The Oxford Study Bible, pg. 1263

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

Christian context. They incorrectly place a much later understanding of Christianity onto the words of the Gospel.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the “Jewish” references are viewed merely as means of synthesizing a Jewish past with the Christian present. Yet it is clear, beyond the direct citations of Matthew, that this Gospel was very much a part of the Judaic world from which it came, as can be seen in the consistent usage of Jewish personages and terms. Also, this is evident from endless parallels to proto-rabbinic and later rabbinic thought. The Gospel of Matthew was written at the end of the first century.<sup>9</sup>

In Matthew, those who Jesus speaks to are Jews. For example, Jesus addresses the people as “Israel”, “people”, “Jews”, and “children of Abraham.” These facts lend support to the idea that the authors of Matthew were Jews and that they saw themselves as full members of the first century Jewish society in which they lived.

“Israel” is a name that Jews have called themselves for many years. It refers to the entire group of people who identify themselves as Jews and is a term used in rabbinic literature and in the Bible. When “Israel” is used in Matthew it retains this same meaning.<sup>10</sup> For example in Matthew 19:28, Jesus promises to the twelve disciples,

Truly I tell you: in the world that is to be, when the Son of Man is seated on his glorious throne, you also will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel that his disciples will judge the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

The term “people” refers to the Jewish people (“עַם”) not only as a whole, but also as specific groups. “People” appears five times in association with specifically designated

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<sup>8</sup> Saldarini, Anthony J., Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community, pg. 11

<sup>9</sup> The Oxford Study Bible, pg. 1267

<sup>10</sup> Saldarini, Anthony J., Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community, pg. 28

<sup>11</sup> The Oxford Study Bible, Matthew 19:28, pg. 1289



groups. For example, in Matthew 2:4 there are "the scribes of the people" and in Matthew 21:23 there are the "elders of the people."

The authors of Matthew used the Greek word for "Jew", *Ioudaios*. Yet, why would Jews refer to themselves with foreign a term? On all but one occasion when Matthew uses *Ioudaios*, it is a non Jew who is speaking. In the one instance where the author of Matthew uses *Ioudaios* to refer to his own people, (28:15), he does so with an "explicitly polemic passage."<sup>12</sup> Even then, it was not unheard of for a Jew to refer to himself in this way because even Josephus refers to the Jews using this term.<sup>13</sup>

The different terms for the groups of people who listened to Jesus is another proof of the existence of "Judaisms" as opposed to a united Judaism. With that in mind, it is clear that Matthew's group was not isolated from these other Judaisms. Rather, they were connected with them, similar to them, and part of them.

The leaders of Jewish groups are spoken about in a pejorative sense in Matthew. The leaders are the Pharisees, scribes, chief priests, elders of the people, Sadducees, and the Herodians. According to Matthew, the leaders, as opposed to the groups, are responsible for Jesus' death.<sup>14</sup> The leaders are the ones who compete for support from the same "crowds" of Israel as Matthew. Matthew's polemics are directed at the leaders and not at the entirety of the Jewish people. Matthew 23:2-3 states,

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<sup>12</sup> Saldarini, Anthony J., Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community, pg. 35

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* pg. 36

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* pg. 44

"The scribes and the Pharisees occupy Moses' seat; so be careful to do whatever they tell you. But do not follow their practice; for they say one thing and do another."<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Matthew uses seven "woe oracles"<sup>16</sup> (e.g. "Woe to you Pharisees, scribes, and hypocrites") to further discredit the Pharisees and scribes. The woe oracles attack the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, their insincerity, their interpretation of the law, and their intentions.

Even though the authors of Matthew slight the leaders of the Jewish community, they do not paint them as "monsters." The attacks that the leaders waged against Jesus were done so in a rabbinic style. The Pharisees questioned Jesus about the hot issues of the day, such as blasphemy in Matthew 9:3, proper Sabbath observance in Matthew 12:2 and 12:10, and divorce in Matthew 19:3. These topics were central to the Jewish religion that was in the process of reshaping itself. (It is interesting to note that these same topics are the primary issues of the day when Jews argue about its changes.)

The disputes between Jesus and the Jewish leaders reveal much about the authors' knowledge of Judaism. Jesus is portrayed as an observant Jew who is well informed and able to support his disagreements with firm Jewish arguments. The first dispute that is brought up is concerning the restrictions of the Sabbath. One of the reasons why this was a hot issue was because there may not have been a specified list of restrictions on Shabbat. For example, in Exodus 20:8-11 the restrictions for Shabbat are spelled out. However, Nehemiah 11:31 adds that people should not buy from gentiles on the Sabbath. Also, in

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<sup>15</sup> The Oxford Study Bible, pg. 1294

<sup>16</sup> the "woe oracles" appear in vv. 23:13, 15, 16, 25, 27, 29



Jeremiah 17:21, the prophet states that goods should not be transported on the Sabbath. In fact, it is not until third century when Mishnah Shabbat 7:2 established the thirty nine forms of work that are prohibited on the Sabbath.

In Matthew 12:1-13, two disputes over Sabbath observance are raised. The first dispute occurs when the Pharisees observe Jesus and his disciples picking grain in the field in order to satisfy hunger. The first note to point out is that Jesus and the Pharisees are standing together in the field. This means that they spoke with one another and that the restriction of traveling was not fixed as of this time. Secondly, Jesus defends the picking of grain by comparing their actions to that of David. David took bread from the Temple priests because of hunger. Then Jesus uses a classic Rabbinic argument, "How much the more so..."<sup>17</sup>, implying that he, the son of God, is greater than the Temple.<sup>18</sup> Jesus then supports the Jewishly accepted violation of Shabbat, the principle of *pikuach nefesh*.

In another instance Jesus cures a man with a withered arm. Jesus states, "Suppose you had one sheep, and it fell into a ditch on the Sabbath; is there a single one of you who not catch hold of it and lift it out?"<sup>19</sup> This is followed with another familiar argument, "How much the more is a man worth than a sheep?"<sup>20</sup> Not only do these arguments show Jesus' knowledge of scripture, they indicate something more important about the time in which Matthew was written. The authors used the same language as the rabbis in later generations. The authors saw themselves as Jews who believed that Jesus was following Jewish law in a legitimate way.

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew, 12:6

<sup>18</sup> Saldarini, Anthony J., Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community, pg. 130

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 12:11

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, v. 12

The other disputes over legal interpretation in the Gospel of Matthew include purity and diet<sup>21</sup>, tithes and taxes<sup>22</sup>, divorce<sup>23</sup>, and oaths and vows.<sup>24</sup> It is apparent from the arguments given over these legal issues that Matthew is trying to discredit the other subgroup leaders. The authors appealed to reason and fundamental truths to be their authority.

Matthew is a very well balanced book. Chapters one and two contain Jesus' genealogy and Jesus' birth. The last two chapters deal with Jesus' death and resurrection. Sandwiched between these sections, are chapters of narrative and discourse. Chapters three and four are devoted to the narratives of Jesus' interaction with John the Baptist and with Satan, respectively. Chapter's five through seven are Jesus' great discourse known as the Sermon on the Mount. In chapter's eight and nine, there are narratives of Jesus' miracles and teachings. Jesus speaks to the twelve disciples in chapter ten. In eleven and twelve, there are narratives about Jesus' uniqueness and his disputes with the Pharisees, followed by a discourse in chapter thirteen. Chapter's fourteen through seventeen contain more narratives about Jesus' teachings, and miracles, followed in chapter eighteen when Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven. Chapters nineteen through twenty three include narratives about Jesus' run-in with the Pharisees on the road to Jerusalem and Jesus in the Temple. The final discourse before Jesus' death is a warning about the end.

The Gospel of Matthew informs us about first century Judaism, and teaches that Judaism did not exist in a vacuum. Matthew's effect on the later rabbinic tradition is evident in later Jewish texts. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to write this thesis. I

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<sup>21</sup> for example, Mt. 15:1-20

<sup>22</sup> for example, Mt. 23:23

<sup>23</sup> for example, Mt. 5:31-32, 19:3-9

<sup>24</sup> for example, Mt. 5:33-48

take key texts in this Gospel to study parallel rabbinic thought and obviously polemical writings. I will try to place all of the texts, generically in groups, and, where possible, individually in their historical and sociopolitical context in order to illuminate their meaning and impact on the society in which they were created.

This paper will examine verses 1:1-17, which is the genealogy of Jesus. Specific attention is given to the four women mentioned in the genealogy. All four women are Biblical characters and their Biblical accounts will be reviewed. In addition, the qualities attributed to these women in Talmud and Midrash, along with the polemics surrounding these women, will be analyzed. Also, this paper will examine the birth of Jesus in verses 1:18 - 25. Specifically, Joseph's righteousness will be viewed against the backdrop of Jewish tradition, Apocrypha, and Pseudepigrapha. The angel speaking in a dream to Joseph will be compared to Tanakh, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Talmud and Midrash. Finally, the miraculous conception of Jesus will be compared and contrasted with all of Jewish tradition up till the time of the Midrash.

## GENEALOGY

The first chapter of Matthew begins with a genealogy traced through Jesus' father. Four women are mentioned in this genealogy; Tamar, Rahab, Bath Sheba and Ruth. Each of them have Biblical roots. These same four women are also mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, most often in connection with either men or their offspring. It can be shown by various examples in Midrash that these women are elevated to a higher status level because of a polemical response to Matthew's genealogy. Also, the rabbis of the Midrash seemed to accentuate certain characteristics of these women in order for them to more closely resemble Mary, while making them authentically Jewish.

Tamar is a curious character in the Bible. She is first introduced to the reader in Genesis 38, in which it states that, "Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar."<sup>25</sup> Er died before he could impregnate Tamar and so she then married Judah's second son, abiding by the laws of levirate marriage. Judah's second son also died before impregnating Tamar, and she then sought after Judah's youngest son. However, Judah forbade Tamar from marrying his youngest son out of fear that he, too, would die. Judah broke the law by not allowing the marriage to take place. Tamar moved back to her home town, Adullam, a Canaanite city.<sup>26</sup> Some time later, after Judah's wife had died, Tamar heard that Judah was coming to her home town. She decided to disguise herself as a prostitute and wait for Judah at the entrance to the town. When Judah saw the woman at

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<sup>25</sup> Genesis 38:6

<sup>26</sup> The fact that Tamar is Canaanite poses a slight problem for the rabbis because Canaanite women were forbidden.

the entrance, he asked to sleep with her. Tamar requested payment and he offered to send her a child. Tamar keenly asked for Judah's seal, cord and staff as collateral for payment. Following their encounter, Tamar conceived.

Three months later Judah heard that Tamar was pregnant, accused her of playing the harlot, and pronounced that she should be burned. Tamar produced the cord and seal and staff and Judah then realized that he was the father of this child. Judah admitted that the items were his and that Tamar was correct for acting the way she did. Judah admitted that he was wrong in his actions.

The Babylonian Talmud was compiled in Babylon at a time when the Christian presence had no great influence. The Midrash, which was composed in Palestine, at around the same time as the Talmud, contains vast amounts of polemics against Christianity, specifically as they apply to the four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy. The Babylonian Talmud does not contain as many polemical statements. It is important to note that there is no mention of these four women in either Apocryphal or Mishnaic literature. Therefore, all the changes in attitude toward these four women occur after the third century.

The Babylonian Talmud speaks of the Tamar and Judah scene (Genesis 38) with apologetics. Judah's actions are illustrated with much respect, whereas Tamar is spoken about either with a negative tone or apologetically. For example, Sotah 10b praises Judah's actions, and appears to ignore any wrongdoing;

"Judah, however, who sanctified the heavenly Name in public merited that the whole of his name should be called after the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He. When

he confessed and said, 'She is more righteous than I, a Bat Kol came forth and proclaimed, 'You rescued Tamar and her two sons from the fire. By your life, I will rescue through your merit three of your descendants from the fire.'"<sup>27</sup>

Sotah 10a begins with an apologetic about Joseph, but quickly takes on a negative attitude towards Tamar;

"When [Judah] solicited her, he asked her, 'Are you a Gentile?' She (Tamar) replied, 'I am a proselyte'. 'Perhaps you are a married woman?' She replied, 'I am unmarried'. 'Perhaps your father has accepted on your behalf betrothals?' She replied, 'I am an orphan'. 'Perhaps you are unclean?' She replied, 'I am clean'... When Judah saw her, he thought her to be an harlot; for she had covered her face. Because she had covered her face he thought her to be an harlot!"<sup>28</sup>

Thus, Judah's apparent misdeed is explained by Tamar's trickery.

On the other hand, the Talmud does acknowledge that Tamar is an ancestor of King David. This is a fact that the rabbis can not control. The rabbis employ apologetics in order to smooth over the apparent inconsistency between Tamar's harlotry and her connection to King David. In Nazir 23b,

"Ulla states, both Tamar and Zimri committed adultery. Tamar committed adultery and gave birth to kings and prophets. Zimri committed adultery and on his account many tens of thousands of Israel perished. R. Nahman b. Isaac said, 'A

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<sup>27</sup> Sotah 10b

<sup>28</sup> Sotah 10a



transgression performed with good intention is better than a precept performed with evil intention.<sup>29</sup>

The Midrash, written in Palestine at a time when Christianity was established and gaining popularity, continues the praise of Judah, but has a different portrayal of Tamar than the Talmud. The rabbis' change in attitude toward Tamar is a result of Christianity's influence on the Jewish society. By placing Tamar in the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew painted a very positive picture of Tamar. Judaism responded by doing the same. However, in polemical fashion, the rabbis insist that the Messiah has yet to come.

The rabbis of the Midrash focus in on Judah's righteousness. In their opinion, Judah could have denied that Tamar was carrying his child. Had he simply stated that Tamar was nothing but a lying harlot, she would have been burned to death and no one would have known how he illegally withheld his youngest son from Tamar.<sup>30</sup>

The Midrash also commends Tamar's actions, which is a marked difference from the negative and apologetic tone that the Talmud took with her. Genesis Rabbah 79:1 reveals the rabbis' respect for the way Tamar secured a child. In this section, the rabbis allude to Judah and Tamar by citing Job 5:24, "And you shall know that all is in peace in your tent."<sup>31</sup> In other words, Tamar acted correctly since the end result was peace for everyone.

When compared to Rebecca, Tamar is placed in a very favorable light. In Genesis Rabbah, 60:15-16, a discussion takes place about Rebecca seeing Isaac for the first time and covering herself with a veil. This scene is compared to Tamar covering herself with a veil in

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<sup>29</sup> Nazir 23b

<sup>30</sup> Examples are given below, in the chapter entitled "Righteousness".

<sup>31</sup> Job 5:24

order to seduce Judah. The rabbis conclude that "Two covered themselves with a veil, Rebecca and Tamar, and they both gave birth to twins." It is important to note that in this same Midrash, a comparison is made between Rebecca and Sarah, which indirectly connects Tamar to Sarah.

The next reference to Tamar is also in connection with Rebecca and the fact that they both had twins. However, in Genesis Rabbah 63:8, Tamar appears to have more honor than Rebecca. The rabbis point out that the word for "twins" used in Tamar's birth is the whole word, whereas with Rebecca's birth it is missing the letter *vav*.

כתיב תאומים פרץ וזרח שניהם צדיקים וכאן תומים יעקב צדיק ועשו רשע

Thus, Tamar is merited for having two righteous children while Rebecca only had one righteous child.

It is important to note that in this Midrashic passage, Tamar's children are mentioned by name and both of them are included in Matthew's genealogy. Also, the reference to Esau as "the evil one" is significant. From a historical perspective, "Esau" is used as another name for Christianity. When "Christianity" is replaced with "Esau" in this example, Rebecca has little to do with the agenda of the rabbis. Rebecca is just a means by which to say the name Esau and thereby slight the Christians. Following this negative reference to Esau, is a passage about the Messiah. The passage is written in the future tense, implying that the Messiah has yet to come; another assault on Christianity.

In Genesis Rabbah 85:9, the rabbis explain the meaning of the seal, the cord and the staff that Tamar requested as collateral from Judah. "Rabbi Hunia said, 'The Holy Spirit

<sup>32</sup> Genesis Rabbah 63:8



was enkindled within her."<sup>33</sup> (Hunia's use of the expression "Holy Spirit," in the Hebrew רוח הקודש, is an interesting allusion to the Holy Spirit who impregnates Mary.)

'Your seal' alludes to kingship, as in the verse, "O King Coniah, son of Jehoiakim, of Judah were the signet on my right hand..." (Jer. 22:24). "And your cord" alludes to the Sanhedrin, as in the verse, "Let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner" (Num. 15:38) "And you staff" alludes to the royal Messiah, as in the verse, "Adonai will stretch forth from Zion your mighty staff" (Ps. 110:2).<sup>34</sup>

Genesis Rabbah Vayeshev continues the rabbis' praise of Tamar, connecting her to the Messiah. It is stated, "...Judah was busy taking a wife, while the Holy One blessed be He, was creating the light of the Messiah..."<sup>35</sup> It is implied that the Messiah was ultimately to issue from Tamar. The connection between Tamar and the Messiah is a basic part of Jewish tradition, yet, referring to the Holy Spirit as נִצְנָצָה בָּהּ (enkindled in her) is unusual.

The expression is not found at all in Talmud and occurs only four times in Midrash.

There is an obvious connection that the rabbis make between Tamar and Mary; Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. They also have several similar characteristics. Both women act in a manner, that at first could be perceived as wrong, but turns out to be correct. Tamar dressed as a prostitute and was accused of harlotry. It is later discovered that her actions were appropriate because she bore a child. Mary was impregnated while betrothed, but it was later found that she was impregnated through the Holy Spirit. Also, both Tamar and Mary provided situations in which their husbands, Judah and Joseph,

<sup>33</sup> ibid., 85:9

<sup>34</sup> ibid.

<sup>35</sup> ibid., 85:1

respectively, were able to act in a 'righteous' manner. Judah admitted his wrongdoing and spared Tamar's life, while Joseph hid Mary away and spared her life as well.

In sum, Tamar is a Biblical figure who is an ancestor of the Messiah. She did not figure prominently in Jewish tradition until the presence of Christianity posed a threat. The explanation for this is the polemic response to Matthew's genealogy, which names Tamar as a ancestor of the Messiah.

Rahab is the next woman mentioned in the Matthew genealogy. Rahab was an actual prostitute who provided a safe haven for two of Joshua's spies while they were spying out Jericho. She not only provided a place for the spies to lodge, but she also saved their lives by misdirecting the king's soldiers when they came looking for them. Rahab keenly used her wit to secure her own safety, knowing that the Israelites were going to attack Jericho. When Jericho was conquered, Rahab and her family's lives were spared.

The Babylonian Talmud writes about Rahab's beauty and her descendants, but mentions nothing about her moral character. In Megillah 15a, it is taught that Rahab was one of the four most beautiful women of all time.<sup>36</sup> In Ta'anit 5b, R. Isaac claims that Rahab was so beautiful that repeating her name would evoke the same response as love making.<sup>37</sup> The Talmud does acknowledge that eight prophets, all of whom were priests, and Hulda the prophetess, were descended from Rahab.<sup>38</sup> Nowhere in the Talmud is Rahab honored for her brave actions in saving the spies, or for her choice to convert.

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<sup>36</sup> Megillah 15a, the other women were Sarah, Abigail and Esther

<sup>37</sup> Ta'anit 5b, the literal translation is "Whosoever repeats 'Rahab, Rahab,' becomes immediately subject to an onset of issue."

<sup>38</sup> Megillah 14b, the prophets are Neriah, Baruch, Serayah, Mahseyah, Jeremiah, Hilkiah, Hanamel and Shallum.

However, the Midrash views Rahab as an exemplar of a God fearing convert. She is first mentioned in Exodus Rabbah, 27:4, in connection with Jethro. Both Rahab and Jethro "heard" all that God had done for the Israelites. The text states, "Had not Rahab when she heard of the [miracles] cleave to You, as it says, 'And she said to the men: I know that Adonai has given you the land....for we have heard how Adonai dried up the water of the Red Sea before you (Josh. 2:9) - a proof that "Adonai, my strength, and my stronghold, and my refuge, in the day of affliction."<sup>39</sup> Rahab is an example of a "true proselyte", meaning that her "conversion is due to pure motives."<sup>40</sup> The Midrash suggests that a convert who faithfully believes in God, such as Rahab, is able to win God's favor more so than a person who was born a Jew. Numbers Rabbah 3:2 states,

"'Jacob whom I have chosen' (Isaiah 61:8). He did not, however, bring him near to himself; he brought himself near to Him of his own accord; as it is said, 'and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents' (Genesis 25:27). He chose Moses; as it is said, 'Had not Moses His chosen stood before him (Psalms 106:23). He did not, however, bring him near. Happy are these whom the Holy One, blessed be He, chose, even though He did not bring them near. **Come and see. The Holy One, blessed be He, brought Jethro near to Himself but did not choose him. He brought Rahab near to himself but did not choose her. Happy are those whom He brought near to Himself even though He did not choose them!**"

"Come and see. The Holy One, blessed be He, brought Jethro near to Himself but did not choose him. He brought Rahab near to himself but did not choose her.

<sup>39</sup> Exodus Rabbah 27:4

<sup>40</sup> Numbers Rabbah

Happy are those whom He brought near to Himself even though He did not choose them!"<sup>41</sup>

It appears as if these two proselytes are considered more special to God than even Jacob and Moses. This 'new' interest in Rahab shows the rabbis' reaction to Matthew's genealogy. The rabbis are also showing that they are open to proselytes, which is a response to Christianity at large.

The rabbis seem to walk a fine line at times: wanting to attract the masses without invalidating the tradition they worked so hard to endorse. With respect to Rahab, the rabbis knew that Christianity viewed her in a positive manner. Rahab was a harlot and a proselyte and thus, the rabbis make a most interesting apologetic comment in order to rationalize their support of her without violating tradition. They make the argument that Abraham and Sarah were the models of true proselytes. They grew up in pagan societies and did not believe in the One God. Numbers Rabbah 8:9 explains, "they (proselytes) will possess seed that shall endure forever."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the rabbis promise the proselyte security. "Your merit will stand your sons in good stead, for by reason of your table your children will be privileged to attain high virtues."<sup>43</sup> In addition, the proselytes offspring have honor. Keeping with the tradition, one needs to fear the One God. "This, in fact, we find to have been the case with Abraham and Sarah, who were proselytes. Abraham, having been a God-fearing man, was blessed in this manner, and so will all proselytes be blessed who will practice what these practiced."<sup>44</sup> The passage goes on to say that the proselytes'

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<sup>41</sup> Numbers Rabbah 3:2

<sup>42</sup> Numbers Rabbah 8:9

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

descendants will see the Messiah. The passage then connects the true proselyte to the Messiah and finally to Rahab:

"the text speaks of a sincere proselyte and indicates that he will be privileged to give his daughter in marriage to a priest and will have the further privilege that children will rise up from her, being his grandchildren, who will be priests and will bless Israel...In the same manner we find in connection with Rahab, the harlot, that because she brought spies into her house and rescued them, the Holy One, Blessed be He, accredited it to her as though she had performed the act for Him, and He gave her a reward...What reward did she receive? Some of her daughters were married into the priesthood and bore sons who stood and performed service upon the altar and entered the sanctuary, where, uttering the Ineffable Name of God, they would bless Israel."<sup>45</sup>

Another connection exists between Rahab and the coming of the Messiah. In the Midrash on Song of Songs 1:3, there is a discussion on the Genesis verse where Abram and Sarai bring the souls that they had gathered. "The souls" are interpreted as proselytes who Abram and Sarah converted. The Midrash implies that with the creation of new Jewish souls, such as Jethro and Tamar, redemption will come.

"Rabbi Berakiah said, 'Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He, Sovereign of the Universe, because You bring light into the world Your name is magnified in the world. And what is the light? Redemption. For when You bring light, many proselytes come and join us, as for instance Jethro and Rahab.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Midrash to Song of Songs, 3:3



In Deuteronomy Rabbah II: 26-27, the rabbis expand upon the details of Rahab's love for God with the verse, "Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone in God in Heaven above and earth below; there is no other" (Deuteronomy, 4:39). The rabbis understand the verse, "there is no other," as referring to 'other gods'. The verse allows the rabbis to complement Rahab on her faith, despite the fact that she once worshipped other gods. The text states, "Rahab placed God in heaven and upon earth, as it is said, 'For the Lord our God, He is God in heaven above, and on earth below.'"<sup>47</sup> In the following verse, the Midrash elevates Rahab's status as she is compared to Moses. It states, Moses placed Him also in the intervening space, as it is said, 'That the Lord alone is God in heaven above and earth below...'<sup>48</sup>

Finally, there is a connection between Rahab and an angel, which brings to mind the connection between Rahab and Mary. In Numbers Rabbah 16:1, there is an explanation of the verse, "And the woman (Rahab) took the two men and she hid him."<sup>49</sup> The Midrash asks the question why only one man was hidden. The reason given is that one of the spies, Pinhas, was a priest and therefore, also an angel. As an angel, he held the ability to appear and disappear. Mary had interactions with a divine being as well. In addition, Mary's impregnation could appear as illicit, further connecting the two women.

Rahab the harlot went from being of little significance in the time of the Talmud, to being a woman of importance and notoriety in the Midrash. She is a great example of the

<sup>47</sup> Joshua 2:2

<sup>48</sup> Deuteronomy Rabbah, 2:27

<sup>49</sup> Joshua 2:4

polemical responses of the rabbis towards Christianity. Yet the rabbis were able to bridge the gap between their new understanding of Rahab and the ancient traditions.

Ruth is the third woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy. Like the two before her, Ruth is a character referred to in Biblical Midrash. Unlike the other women, she is also written about in a book of her own, complete with its own extensive Midrash. It will be interesting to see first how Ruth is viewed outside of the Book of Ruth, and then to give an overview of the Midrash.

Ruth was a Moabite woman who married Mahlon, a Judahite. Mahlon died and Ruth decided to remain with her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth followed Naomi to Bethlehem and abandoned her homeland, her family, and her faith. Ruth then met Boaz and after spending a night alone with him, the two married.

The Babylonian Talmud had to overcome several obstacles concerning Ruth, and thereby employed apologetics. Ruth was a convert, a Moabite (a forbidden race), and the great grandmother of King David. She is also considered to have committed a suspicious act with Boaz.

In Yevamot, Ruth's proselyte status is validated and she is connected to Abraham.<sup>50</sup> "Rabbi Eleazar stated, 'What is meant by the text, And in you shall the families of the earth be blessed? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham, 'I have two goodly shoots to engraft on you: Ruth the Moabite and Naamah the Ammonite.'"<sup>51</sup>

Ruth's Moabite status is a little harder for the Talmud to explain as it appears to violate a Biblical ordinance. In Deuteronomy 23:4 it states, "No Ammonite nor Moabite

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<sup>50</sup> as with Rahab

<sup>51</sup> Yevamot 63a

shall enter into the assembly of Adonai - none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted in the congregation of the Lord..." In Yevamot, the discussion arises around the interpretation of this Deuteronomy text. It is decided that it prohibits Amonite, but not *Ammonitess*, Moabite, but not *Moabitess*. This was considered to be a new law.

Ruth's suspicious act is explained by showing that she followed the advice of her mother-in-law and did nothing wrong. In Shabbat 113b, Rabbi Eleazar examined the instruction Naomi gave to Ruth and Ruth's actions that followed. It states in Ruth's defense, "Give instructions to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser. Rabbi Eleazar said, 'This alludes to Ruth the Moabitess...because Naomi said to her, Wash yourself, and anoint yourself, and put your raiment on, and go down to the threshing floor, yet of her it is written, And she went down to the threshing-floor, and [only] subsequently, and did according to all that her mother-in-law bade her."<sup>52</sup> Thus, Ruth changed the order as to not appear as a harlot.<sup>53</sup>

The Midrash, as did the Talmud, dealt with the problems of Ruth. The first problem facing the rabbis of the Midrash was a result of Ruth's nationality as a Moabite. In addition to the Moabites being a forbidden race, the Midrash is reminded that the Moabites were the result of an incestuous affair between Lot and one of his daughters.<sup>54</sup> Lot is another euphemism for Christianity and when Christianity is substituted in this Genesis Rabbah quote, one can see the polemic; "Lot enjoyed four favors on account of Abraham...Now in

<sup>52</sup> Shabbat 113a

<sup>53</sup> as suggested in Soncino Edition of the Talmud

<sup>54</sup> Lot's other daughter gave birth to Ammon. Both Ammon and Moab are eponyms for the nations they represent.



return for these, his descendants should have requited us with kindness, yet not alone did they not requite us with kindness, but they even did us evil."<sup>55</sup> The Midrash then gives a list of Lot's evil descendants, including Balaam. Balaam is considered to be a euphemism for Jesus.<sup>56</sup>

The Midrashim on Ruth expose some of the challenges that faced the rabbis. Ruth Rabbah 4:1 is a prime example of the fine craftsmanship the rabbis employ in order to weave together the past statements with the present beliefs. "This is the meaning of the verse, And Shaharaim (שחרים) had children in the country of Moab after he had sent away Hushim and Baara his wives. He had children by Hodesh his wife (I Chron. 8:8)."<sup>57</sup> The rabbis craftily play on the words in this verse to make their case.

"Elijah, of blessed memory, asked Rabbi Nehorai: What is the meaning of the verse, 'And Shaharaim had children in the country of Moab'? He answered him, 'It means that a great man begat children in the country of Moab. 'After he had sent them away', means that they came of the tribe of Benjamin, as it is written, 'And the tribes of Israel sent men through all the tribe of Benjamin, saying (Judg. 22:12). Another interpretation is that Shaharaim is Boaz; and why is he called Shaharaim? Because he was free from iniquity."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Genesis Rabbah, 41:3

<sup>56</sup> When one looks at all the references to Balaam in the Talmud and takes into consideration the anachronistic nature of their context, it is apparent that the evil doer is Jesus.

<sup>57</sup> Ruth Rabbah 4:1

<sup>58</sup> ibid.

The word שחרר is substituted for שחרר, meaning 'to liberate'. This is the rabbis way of absolving Boaz from any suspicion of wrongdoing with Ruth. It is done not only for themselves, but also for those who challenged the descent of King David. The Midrash continues its apologetic by explaining, the I Chronicles phrase, "...had children in the country of Moab."<sup>59</sup> The rabbi's say that it means that he had children with Ruth the Moabitess. They go on by explaining, "After he had sent them away"<sup>60</sup> means that he was of the tribe of Judah, as it is said, 'And he sent Judah before him unto Joseph' (Gen. 46: 28). Then the rabbi's make a play on the names of the wives, Hushim חושים and Baara בערא and Hodesh חודש, in order to illucidate the interpretation that they see fit.

חושים ואת בערא גשו ויש אדם מוליד גשו אלא שחש כנמר וביאר את ההלכה

עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית ויולד מן חודש אשתו לא צורכה אלא ויולד מן

בערא אשתו אלא בימיו נתחדשה הלכה עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית<sup>61</sup>

Thus, the rabbis show that Judah was swift as a leopard and able to explain the law. Also, that the Judah instituted a new law, "Ammonite but not Ammonitess, Moabite but not Moabitess."<sup>62</sup> In this way, the law existed prior to Boaz, so he was not in any way liable. The rabbi's weaved themselves a brilliant rationale to apologetically explain Boaz's actions.

The enactment of this new law undoubtedly caused controversy amidst competing factions within the Jewish community. This is evidenced in Ruth Rabbah 4:6, in which a

<sup>59</sup> I Chronicles 8:8

<sup>60</sup> ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ruth Rabbah 4:1

<sup>62</sup> ibid.

heretic approaches Abner and states, "Even if he (David) is a descendant of Perez, is he not of impure descent? Is he not a descendant of Ruth, the Moabitess?" But Abner said to him, 'But has not the new law been made,' Ammonite but not Ammonitess, Moabite but not Moabitess?"<sup>63</sup> The Midrash wants to make sure that its solution is proven and its argument closed with a one-two punch: it supports Ruth, yet insults Christianity. "Doeg is a heretic and will not depart from this world in peace, and yet I cannot let you leave without an answer. 'All glorious is the king's daughter within' (Psalms 45:14). It is not for a woman to go out and bring food, but only for a man. 'And because they hired against you Balaam' (Deuteronomy 23: 5). Bringing Balaam into the picture at this point, the rabbis remind the reader that Jesus is bad. But their apologetic argument does not exactly seem to satisfy them. The Midrashic passage ends by saying that if all of these arguments do not convince you that David's ancestors are legitimate, then consider Ruth's mother-in-law a legitimate Jew, who taught Ruth everything she knew.

Ruth is considered a righteous woman in the Midrash. Number 21:20 states, "The righteous eat to the satisfaction of his soul" applies to Ruth the Moabitess, of whom it is written, 'She ate and was satisfied, and had some left over' (Ruth 2:14). This verse implies there was a blessing in the mouth of this righteous woman.

This same Midrash takes the opportunity to caution against equating Jewish tradition with Christian tradition. In other words, the rabbis were aware that the two traditions drew from the same sources. People can become confused over which is the

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<sup>63</sup> Ruth Rabbah 4:6

'true' one, and therefore, they must stress the importance of being aware of the differences between Christians and Jews.

"'But the belly of the wicked shall want' applies to the nations of the world. A story is told of a certain heretic who invited all the people of his town to a party. R. Dostai said, 'He invited me to that party together with all the people of his town. His table lacked none of the dainties of the world except cracknuts. What did he do? He took away from us the board, which was worth as much as six talents of silver, and broke it. I asked him, 'Why have you done this?' He answered me, 'You assert that this world is ours and the next world is yours. If we do not eat now, when shall we eat?' I applied to him the text, 'But the belly of the wicked shall want!'"<sup>64</sup>

Leviticus Rabbah 34:8 describes the merits of performing a good deed. Not only does it cite Ruth as an exemplar of one who performs good deeds, but it also alludes to a uniquely Christian concept of the trinity. "R. Kohen and R. Joshua son of R. Simon in the name of R. Levi said, 'In times past when a man did a good deed the prophet used to record it, but now if a man does a good deed who records it? Elijah and the King Messiah, the Holy One, blessed be He, signing beside them.'<sup>65</sup> The Midrash goes on to explain Ruth's merit, "R. Joshua taught: The poor man does more for the master of the house than the latter does for him, as evidenced by the fact that Ruth says to Naomi, 'The man's name with whom I wrought today is Boaz (Ruth 2, 19). It is not written, 'Who wrought with me' but

<sup>64</sup> Numbers Rabbah 22:20

<sup>65</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 34:8

'With whom I wrought' by which she intimated to her: I have wrought many services and favors with him today for the morsel which he gave me.

Ruth is perceived as a righteous woman and a true proselyte,<sup>66</sup> and the references to her in Midrash include polemical views of Christianity. The Midrash to the Book of Ruth raises many interesting issues which can be compared to proto-Christianity and specifically, to the Gospel of Matthew. On the one hand, the book takes up a polemic against the Christian view of the Messiah. The Midrash was likely to be written during a time when Christianity was powerful.<sup>67</sup>

In the Midrash's proem, the rabbis set forth their agenda of a messianic polemic by expounding the very first verse of Ruth, "And it came to pass in the days that the judges judged..."<sup>68</sup> For example, Rabbi Johanan said 'Hear, O my people', to that [which was said] in the past; 'and I will speak' in the future; 'Hear, O my people' in this world; 'and I will speak' in the World to Come, in order that I may have a retort to the princes of the nations of the world."<sup>69</sup> The proem continues its exposition on Ruth's opening verse by claiming that Esau (which the rabbis use as a euphemism for Christianity) will be judged in the world to come. "The way of man is forward and strange" (Prov. 21, 8). This passage refers to Esau, who is constantly planning evil decrees to assail evil."<sup>70</sup> It goes on to further accuse the Christians by commenting that 'strange' refers to the way 'he (Esau)

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<sup>66</sup> Ecclesiastes Rabbah

<sup>67</sup> From the research I was able to conduct I found that the earliest *aggadic* Midrashim were written in the fifth century, therefore, at any time after this Christianity was very powerful.

<sup>68</sup> Ruth 1:1

<sup>69</sup> Ruth Rabbah, proem 1

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.* proem 3

estranged himself from circumcision and from commandments of the Torah."<sup>71</sup> To further demarcate this polemical writing, the rabbis conclude this section of Midrash with, "the Holy One, blessed be He, says 'My children are rebellious; yet to destroy them is impossible, to take them back to Egypt is impossible, change them for another people I cannot...'"<sup>72</sup> The poem makes it apparent that the rabbis have agendas to discuss and not just the merits of the Book of Ruth.

Throughout the rest of the Midrash, the messianic polemic is interwoven into the fabric of the text. For example, chapter two begins by expounding verse 4:21 of I Chronicles. Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani believed that the verse refers to David. The verse mentions 'linen' and David wove the curtain for the Ark.<sup>73</sup> The verse also mentions *oregim*, interpreted to mean, "they brought him the law, and he wove it."<sup>74</sup> Also, in chapter 4:3, the Midrash comments on the verse "And Naomi had a moda of her husband's a mighty man of valor"(2:1). Thus, "Rabbi Abbahu said: If a giant marries a giantess, what do they produce? Mighty men. Boaz married Ruth. Whom did they produce? David of whom it is said, 'Skillful in playing, and a man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in his affairs, and a comely person and the Lord is with him (I Sam. 16, 18).'"<sup>75</sup> Abbahu adds this quote from I Samuel in order to point out the nature of the Messiah, which happens to be antithetical to that which Jesus had become in his time.<sup>76</sup> He adds the "skillful in playing", referring to his knowledge of Scripture. "A mighty man of valor", in the Mishnah; "And a

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> II Samuel 4

<sup>74</sup> Ruth Rabbah 2:1

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.* 4:3

<sup>76</sup> third generation Amora, approximately 600 CE



mighty man of war" who knows how to give and take in contests of the Torah; "And prudent in affairs" in good deeds; "And a comely person" in Talmud. Essentially, the person destined to be a Messiah was not much different than every other boy, studying hard and trying to be the best person he could be. To the Christians, Jesus was God, he was perfect, and no one could be like him.

The rabbis not only find it effective to oppose Christianity by stating its opposite, but they also use a uniquely Christian idea within a Jewish framework to invalidate it. For example, in chapter 5:6, the Midrash states that one should perform a good deed as if their acts will be recorded. "R. Cohen and R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: In the past when a man performed a good deed, the prophet placed it on record; but nowadays when a man performs a good deed, who records it? Elijah records it and the Messiah and the Holy One, blessed be He, subscribe their seal to it."<sup>77</sup> It would appear from this that the 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' are Jewish ideas that are quite naturally part of the tradition, as opposed to Christian in origin.

The text of the Book of Ruth closes with a short genealogy beginning with Perez and ending with David. The line of David is a requisite for the Messiah, and therefore, Ruth plays a key role in the messiah. The Midrash acknowledges that Ruth deserves the reward of David and the Messiah as her descendants by stating, "R. Judah b. Simon said: The meaning is that as reward for, 'And he measured six barley's and laid [them] on her', he was vouchsafed that there should arise six righteous men, each of them possessing six outstanding virtues, viz. David, Hezekiah, Josiah, Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah, Daniel

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<sup>77</sup> Ruth Rabbah, 5:6

and the Messiah...The Messiah, as it is said, 'And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, etc. (Isa. 11, 2).'<sup>78</sup>

R. Simeon b. Lakish's remarks elevate Ruth's status to that of an extremely special person, on par with none other than Sarah. He states, "She (Ruth) lacked the main portion of the womb, but the Holy One Blessed be He, shaped a womb for her."<sup>79</sup> This explains the phrase 'and the Lord gave her conception',<sup>80</sup> The same comments are made of Sarah in the Midrash to Genesis 21, where 'God visits her'.

The final woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy is Bath Sheba. Bath Sheba enters into II Samuel 11 in a most interesting way. She was bathing and King David saw her. After inquiring about her, he found out her name and that she was married to Uriah the Hittite. David summoned her to him. The two lied together, and she conceived. David brought Uriah in from the front lines of combat in order to have Uriah sleep at his home with his wife, and thereby cover up his act. However, Uriah never returned home. David apparently thought Uriah went home as he proceeded to sent him out to the front lines in order to be killed. David's plan failed. Uriah died and David had to own up to his crime. Bath Sheba had the child, but it died shortly after. David lied with her again and this time she gave birth to Solomon. David promised that Solomon would succeed him as king to make up for his actions. This was a controversial decision since David had other sons who believed that they should be king.

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.* 7:2

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* 7:14

<sup>80</sup> Ruth 4:13



The Talmud has very little to say about Bath Sheba, and plenty to say about David. In the Talmud's view, David was wrong for doing what he did, but Satan tricked him, he acknowledged his mistake, and therefore, God forgave him. In Sanhedrin 107a, David went to look from his roof and "he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look at. Now Bath Sheba was cleansing her hair behind a screen, when Satan came to him, appearing in the shape of a bird. He shot an arrow, which broke the screen, thus she stood revealed, and he saw her. Immediately, David sent for and inquired about the woman."<sup>81</sup> Bath Sheba is not blamed for this incident, though she is not directly praised either. She is, of course, connected to her son, King Solomon.

The Midrash also looks down upon this incident between David and Bath Sheba. However, David and Bath Sheba themselves are viewed in a very positive light. Bath Sheba is a strong and virtuous woman. The first example in the Midrash that shows Bath Sheba's moral character is a Leviticus Rabbah passage in which Bath Sheba reminds Solomon how a king should act. The rabbi's discussion begins with the negative aspects of drinking wine, specifically as it applies to Bithiah, the daughter of Pharaoh, who married King Solomon immediately before the new temple was dedicated. Rabbi Judah said that "all seven years during which Solomon was building the Temple he did not drink wine"<sup>82</sup> but, right before the temple was to be dedicated, Solomon and Bithiah began drinking and dancing excessively. Solomon got so drunk that he slept until the fourth hour of the day. According to the rabbis, Bath Sheba walked in to scold and reprimand her son, the king, as it is stated:

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<sup>81</sup> Sanhedrin 107a

<sup>82</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 7:5

Certainly his mother rebuked him, [as it is said, The burden wherewith his mother corrected him (Prov. 31:1)]. She took her slipper and slapped him this way and that and said to him, What my son? And what, O son of my womb? R. Hoshaya said: It is written here [for 'my son'] not בן, but בר, referring to the commandments and admonitions of the Torah which is called bar, as it is said, *Do homage to bar* (Ps. II, 12)...She said to him: 'My son, the generation of the Flood, because they were steeped in licentiousness, were blotted out from the world. It is not for kings, Lemuel<sup>83</sup> ...<sup>84</sup>

Bath Sheba is portrayed as an incredibly strong woman. She reprimands King Solomon both physically and verbally. She reminds her son of his responsibility to keep God's commandments.

The image of Bath Sheba as a moral teacher and a righteous woman is even more vivid in Numbers Rabbah, 10:4. Here too, the subject of drinking wine leads to Bathiah's bad influence on Solomon. In this Midrash, Solomon is asleep for four days, the same day the new temple was to be dedicated. No one would awaken Solomon out of fear of being killed, so they asked Bath Sheba. When she entered his room, she chided him and said 'What, my son! Everyone knows that your father was a God fearing man. Now they will speak thus: "Bath Sheba is his mother; she taught him like this!" The rabbis do what they can to exalt Bat Sheba's status. It can even be inferred that the rabbis intended for Bath

<sup>83</sup> *lammah lo el* - what is God to him

<sup>84</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 7:5

Sheba to be the one who taught both Solomon and David to fear God. As was the case with the true proselyte, fear of God is most honorable.

Bath Sheba's tirade to Solomon continues with, "All the women of your father's house, when they became pregnant, would make vows and say: 'May we have a son worthy of kingship,' but I made a vow and said: 'May I have a son diligent and learned in the Torah and worthy of prophecy!'"<sup>85</sup> Bath Sheba's lesson to her son concludes with some very stern advice:

She said to him: 'Justice was entrusted to the royal house of David; as you read, *O house of David, says the Lord: Execute justice this morning* (Jer. 31:12). If you drink wine you will pervert the justice due to those who are afflicted; you will acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent.'<sup>86</sup>

Thus, it was Bath Sheba, despite her adulterous affair, who explained how to make the 'right' and fair decisions. When she commented on Solomon's drinking, she was not referring to moral ethics, rather legal ones. This is the same issue of righteousness that has cropped up in the Tamar and Rahab stories. Those who support or suggest righteousness are the ones who the tradition favors. Also, it is unclear what Bath Sheba's nationality is. She could be a proselyte just as Rahab.

All four women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bath Sheba were included in Matthew's genealogy, and extolled in the Midrash in order to make the same powerful political statement. All four women share similar characteristics. They can be associated with

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

sexual impropriety, yet are also associated with King David and the Messiah. In an analogous manner, every woman who was ever associated with a sexually immoral act could also attain prestige and blessings of God, by accepting the faith. Also, none of the women were of Israelite origin. This fact told all people of non-Israelite origin, such as Romans and Canaanites, that they could have the same status in the Jewish community as someone born a Jew. Although separated by hundreds of years, the Midrash saw the same need as Matthew to the open doors of exclusivity to include people of all kinds.

In the modern world, the same kind of borrowing of political statements occurs. For example, the Chasidic community has always espoused spirituality. Spirituality was a means by which to make disenchanted Jews, who felt that they were not learned enough to be a part of mainstream Judaism, feel connected. Recently, spirituality is used in all modern branches of Judaism, in order to accomplish the same goal.

## RIGHTEOUSNESS

Following the genealogy in chapter one of the Gospel of Matthew, the text goes into the birth scene of Jesus. The entire birth scene is only seven verses, yet it contains plenty of evidence to anchor it to Jewish tradition. In addition, these seven verses provide ample material for the rabbis of the Midrash to attack the Christians with controversial statements. The Matthew verses are as follows:

18. Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. 19. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, not wanting to disgrace her, planned<sup>87</sup> to send her away secretly. 20. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21. She will bear a son; and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. 22. Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."<sup>88</sup> 24. And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as

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<sup>87</sup> or divorce her

<sup>88</sup> Isaiah 7:14, \*in this verse the Hebrew of the Tanakh does not convey the meaning of 'virgin', rather 'young woman.'

his wife, 25.<sup>89</sup> but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a son; and called his name Jesus.<sup>90</sup>

The first point of note is that Joseph is called a righteous man. "The righteous man" has a very specific connotation in the Bible and early rabbinic Judaism. "In the Bible righteousness bears a distinctly legal character; the righteous man is the innocent party, while the wicked man is the guilty one."<sup>91</sup> For example, in Deuteronomy 25:1 it states,

א כִּי־יִהְיֶה רִיב בֵּין אַנְשִׁים וְנָגַשׁ אֶל־הַמִּשְׁפָּט וְשִׁפְטוּם

וְהַצִּדִּיק אֶת־הַצִּדִּיק וְהַרְשִׁיעַ אֶת־הַרְשָׁע:

If there is a controversy between men, and they come to judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked."

Righteousness can also mean following God's laws. For example, in Genesis 18, God decides that Abraham should hear God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorra. God says, "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the ways of the Lord, to do in righteousness (צדקה) and judgment..."<sup>92</sup>

In the books of Prophets and Writings, the term, 'righteous' continues to mean the same as in the Torah, but it gains the additional nuance of behaving ethically and morally. In Isaiah 33:15, "He who walks righteously, and speaks in an upright manner; he who despises the gain, of oppression, he who shakes his hands from holding bribes, he who stops his ears from hearing of blood, and shuts his eyes from seeing evil. He shall dwell on high;

<sup>89</sup> lit. and was not knowing her

<sup>90</sup> New American Standard Bible

<sup>91</sup> Encyclopedia of Judaism CD ROM Edition "Righteousness"

<sup>92</sup> Genesis 18:19



his place of defense shall be the fortresses of rocks; bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure."<sup>93</sup>

Jewish Apocryphal literature espouses the same understanding of righteousness as does the Bible. In Ecclesiasticus, otherwise known as Ben Sirach, written about 180 BCE<sup>94</sup>, it states,

"To be accepted, a man must serve the Lord as he requires, and then his prayers will reach the clouds. The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds; before it reaches its goal there is no comfort for him. He does not desist until the Most High intervenes, giving the righteous their rights and seeing justice done."<sup>95</sup>

Jewish Pseudepigrapha also attests to the definition of righteousness that has been established. In the Fourth Book of Maccabees, written approximately in 40 CE,<sup>96</sup> there is a reference to righteousness that sums up all that has been said about it. "...These seven brothers possessed an even closer bond of sympathy with one another; for having been trained in the same law and having cultivated the same virtues: they were brought up together in a life of righteousness..."<sup>97</sup>

Since the authors of the Gospel of Matthew were Jews, it can be assumed that they had a clear understanding of the term "righteous man". It is thereby reasonable to ask, did Joseph make the right/righteous decision when he decided to hide Mary away/divorce her in secret in order to spare her from ridicule and possibly even death? The answer is not so

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<sup>93</sup> Isaiah 33:15

<sup>94</sup> The Oxford Study Bible, pg. 11 f6

<sup>95</sup> Ecclesiasticus 35:14, *ibid.* pg. 1156

<sup>96</sup> The Other Bible, pg. 153

<sup>97</sup> The Fourth Book of Maccabees, The Other Bible pg. 166

simple. Mary was a pregnant betrothed maiden. Yet, it was found out that the Holy Spirit impregnated her. It is unclear from the text whether Joseph knew, or even believed that the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary. It can be argued that Joseph did not believe Mary's story because an angel came to reassure Joseph that Mary had not been defiled and that he could marry her. Joseph's skepticism leads one to question his righteousness. This being the case, it is important to examine the relevant material on the topic of adultery. It is also important to see how the authors of the Gospel of Matthew saw Joseph's decision as part of a Jewish world view.

The Torah has very stern laws associated with adultery. In Deuteronomy 22, there are laws of adultery that specifically apply to a betrothed maiden, which was the status of Mary was when Joseph found out she was pregnant.

If a girl who is a virgin is betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city, and lies with her; then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death; the girl because she did not cry out for help in the city; and the man because he violated another man's wife. So you shall put away evil from among you. But if a man finds a betrothed girl in the field, and the man forces her, and lies with her; then only the man who lay with her shall die; but to the girl you shall do nothing; there is no sin in the girl deserving of death; for as when a man rises against his neighbor, and slays him, so is this matter; For he found her in the field, and the betrothed girl cried, and there was no one to save her.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Deuteronomy 22:22

Joseph had to consider the punishment of death by stoning for Mary. This severe punishment was carried out by members of the community. It is implied in the law that the accuser had the responsibility to inform the authorities, or at least the public, so the punishment could be carried out. Joseph did the opposite of that when he decided to deal with Mary's situation in secret. Even if Joseph gave Mary the benefit of the doubt and agreed that the man attacked her in a field, the onus was on Joseph to inform the others that a grievous crime was committed.

It is implied in the Matthew text that Joseph suspected Mary of adultery. The angel's first words to Joseph are, "fear not...", as if to say, 'do not be afraid because Mary was not unfaithful.' The Torah records a prescription for the husband who suspects his wife of adultery and wants to rid himself of jealousy. In Numbers 5 it states:

The man shall bring his wife to the priest...The priest shall bring her near, and set her before the Lord. And the priest shall take holy water in an earthen utensil; and of the dust that is in the floor of the tabernacle the priest shall take, and put it into the water...And the priest shall charge her by an oath, and say to the woman, If no man has lain with you, and if you have not gone astray to uncleanness with another instead of your husband, you will be free from this bitter water that causes the curse. But if you have gone astray with another instead of your husband, and if you are defiled, and some man has lain with you other than your husband...then the priest shall charge the woman with an oath of cursing, and the priest shall say to the woman, The Lord make you a curse and an evil thing among your people, as

the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly to swell...And if the woman is not defiled, but is clean; then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed.<sup>99</sup>

Joseph suspected his wife of adultery and yet he did not bring her to the priest. Even if Joseph was not sure how Mary got pregnant, the facts were clear that she was pregnant by someone other than himself.

Sotah 7a includes a Mishnah passage which addresses the issue of the husband's responsibility when he suspects adultery. It asks, "How does [the husband] deal with her? He brings her to the court of Justice in the place where he resides..."<sup>100</sup>

In Pesachim 25b, the Gemara goes over the finer points of the laws of adultery. It explains the connection between a murderer and a betrothed maiden.

Rabbi said, For as when a man rises against his neighbour, and slays him, even so is this matter. Now, what connection has a murderer with a betrothed maiden?

Thus this sheds light, and is itself illumined. The murderer is compared to a betrothed maiden: just as a betrothed maiden must be saved from dishonor at the cost of his (the rapist's) life, so it is [in the case of] a murderer, he [the victim] must be saved at the cost of his [the attacker's] life. Conversely, a betrothed maiden [teaches about] a murderer: just as with a murder, one must be slain rather than transgress, so a betrothed maiden must be slain yet not transgress. And how do we know it of murder itself? It is common sense. Even as one who came before Raba and said to him: The governor of my town has ordered me, 'Go and

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<sup>99</sup> Numbers 5:11-27

<sup>100</sup> Sotah 7a

kill So-and-so, if not, I will kill you.' He answered him: 'Let him kill you rather that you should commit murder...' <sup>101</sup>

The laws of adultery were not changed from the time of the Bible to the time of the Mishnah, through the time of the Gemara. It is reasonable to assume that Joseph would have been aware of the laws and cognizant that he was subject to them.

All the evidence seems to indicate that Joseph did not make the right decision. Yet, this does not make sense. The Matthean community was made up of Jews. They believed Joseph to be a righteous man. The last thing that they wanted to do was contradict Jewish doctrine and thereby turn away adherents and perspective adherents. Therefore, it stands to reason that the authors of Matthew believed that Joseph's decision was indeed righteous and that his decision did fall within a Jewish world view. There are two possible solutions to this apparent quandary: the first possibility is that Joseph made a *שעה הוראת*, 'ruling for the hour', the second possibility is that the Gospel of Matthew is a sanitized version of a much more detailed account.

The *שעה הוראת*, or ruling for the hour, is an ad hoc legal decision justified by special or emergency circumstances. The need for the *שעה הוראת* arises when there is "a conflict between law and principle. In Talmudic terms, the authority of the sages to temporarily suspend a Biblical law in order to safeguard a basic principle of Judaism..." <sup>102</sup> The use of the *שעה הוראת* is quite old. For example, in I Kings 18:31-39, Elijah offers a sacrifice on Mount Carmel at a time when sacrifices were only to be done in the Temple.

<sup>101</sup> Pesachim 25b

<sup>102</sup> *Encyclopedia of Judaism* CD ROM Edition, *Halakhah*

Elijah's actions were a direct violation of Torah law, but given the circumstances he was justified.<sup>103</sup> Also, Mishnah Parah 7:6 condones the use of the ruling of the hour to decide an exceptional case. It states,

If a man carried the rope in his hand, it is valid if he keeps to his usual way. But if he goes out of his way, it is invalid. The question was sent to Yavneh on three festivals and on the third festival it was ruled that the mixture was valid only as a temporary measure

(ו) המוליך את החבל בידו לדרכו. כשר ושלא לדרכו

פסול זה הלך ליבנה שלשה מועדות. ובמועד שלישי הכשירו לו הוראת שעה :

Was Joseph in an emergency situation which required the implementation of the הוראת שעה? Was Joseph's decision based upon a need to safeguard a Jewish principle?

The answer to both these questions is, Yes!

Joseph was faced with a most unusual and difficult circumstance. He was aware of the possibility that Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. That being the case, Joseph had to consider the option of revealing Mary's divine conception to the public. However, if Joseph went ahead with that decision he would have had to convince the general public and the priests about Mary's special impregnation. That option carried with it several potential problems.

If the story was not believed Joseph would have been accused of making blasphemous remarks. In Talmud Sanhedrin, the Mishnah states that the blasphemer is

<sup>103</sup> Yevamot 90b



hanged.<sup>104</sup> The reason given by the Sages is that the blasphemer denied the fundamental principle of faith. Thus, Joseph would have risked his own life by trying to convince others about Mary's story. Also, if Joseph was unable to convince the priests of Mary's story she would have undergone the test of the priests, as prescribed in the fifth chapter of Numbers. The waters of testing may not have killed Mary, but it certainly would have scared her emotionally and it would have made her a pariah in the community. The stress of the whole situation could have caused a miscarriage.

There was an even greater danger if Joseph wrongly accused Mary of adultery. Joseph would have denied the divinity of the embryo. He would have committed a heinous crime directly against God if the embryo was indeed divine. If the embryo died as a result of the bitter water test, Joseph would have been guilty of killing God. According to Talmud Kiddushin 40a, 'Rabbi Abbahu said on Rabbi Hanina's authority, 'It is better that a man secretly transgress than publicly profane God's name, for it is said, 'As for you, O house of Israel, thus said the Lord God: Go, every one of you, worship his idols and such, if you will not obey me: But do not profane my holy name.'<sup>105</sup> <sup>106</sup>

Joseph had justification for making a *הוראת שעה* (i.e. hiding Mary away instead of reporting her pregnancy.) In the end, he saved his own life, Mary's life and the life of the embryo. Also, Joseph safeguarded the basic principle of honoring God's name. Finally, Joseph ensured that he was not accused of doubting the divinity of the embryo for the rest of time.

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<sup>104</sup> Sanhedrin

<sup>105</sup> Ezekiel 20:39

<sup>106</sup> Sanhedrin 46a

The rabbis of the Talmud may have disagreed with this positive view of Joseph's decision. The situation that Joseph was faced with was very similar to that of Judah. Both Judah and Joseph had to decide whether revealing the truth would result in making the right decision. Also, Judah and Joseph had to make decisions about a woman for whom they were legally responsible. The rabbis extol Judah's decision to such an extent that one can see it as polemical.

Joseph's decision is clear: he decides to deal with Mary quietly. Judah's decision is also clear but he decides to bring everything out into the open. As it is stated in Genesis 38:26

כּו וַיִּכְרַח יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִי־עָלֵכֶן

לֹא־נִתְּתִיהָ לְשִׁלָּה בְּנִי וְלֹא־יָסֹף עוֹד לִדְעֹתָהּ:

"And Judah acknowledged them (the cord the seal and the staff), and said, She has been more righteous than I; because I did not give her to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more."<sup>107</sup>

The rabbis see Judah's admission as true righteousness. It is stated in Genesis Rabbah, "He who covers his transgressions shall not prosper..." (Prov. 28:13) (this applies to Cain); "...But he who confesses and gives them up shall obtain mercy" (ib.) (this applies to the righteous Judah, who put himself to shame in the incident of Tamar.)"<sup>108</sup> The rabbis boast that because Judah and Tamar had confessed their deeds and were not ashamed, "They inherited life in the next world."<sup>109</sup> The rabbis exult Judah in Exodus Rabbah 30:19,

<sup>107</sup> Genesis 38:26

<sup>108</sup> Genesis Rabbah XCVII

<sup>109</sup> Number Rabbah 9:17

"Why did God give the crown to Judah? Surely, he was not the only brave one of all his brothers...But because he dealt justly with Tamar did he become the judge of the world..."<sup>110</sup> The Midrash views Judah's actions with such esteem that it makes a most unusual analogy between Judah and God. It states, "A just balance and scales are the Lord's. This also we find in the case of Judah; because he save three souls from the fire - Tamar and her two sons - God delivered his three descendants from the fire."<sup>111</sup>

The rabbis, however, would have felt differently about Joseph's decision if they knew the account of Jesus' birth from the Infancy Gospel of James. The Infancy Gospel of James, an example of Christian Apocrypha, contains the missing material that answers many questions about the birth scene in the Gospel of Matthew. Unfortunately, the Infancy Gospel was not included in the cannon of Christian scriptures. Many Christian scholars believe that the Infancy Gospel was written no earlier than 150 CE,<sup>112</sup> since it appears to conflate the Matthew and Luke accounts of Jesus' birth. However, just because the Infancy Gospel of James contains material from both Matthew and Luke does not mean that it could not have preceded them. It is also argued by Christian scholars that a Gentile wrote the Infancy Gospel of James.<sup>113</sup> However, that is even more unlikely because the Infancy Gospel contains specific details of Jewish law and custom that only a Jew would know.

The Infancy Gospel of James answers the questions surrounding Joseph's decision. It also fills in the missing information about who Mary and Joseph were. The Infancy

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<sup>110</sup> Exodus Rabbah 30:19

<sup>111</sup> Exodus Rabbah, 17:1

<sup>112</sup> *The Other Bible*, The infancy Gospel of James, pg. 383

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 384

Gospel is considered apochraphal because of internal polemics in the early Christian Church. It may have been the original version of Jesus' birth scene.

In the Infancy Gospel of James, Mary grows up in the Temple as a virgin of the Lord because she is a descendent of David. This information solves the problem of Matthew's genealogy which ends with Joseph, who did not sire Jesus. When Mary turned twelve years old, before her menarche, the priests decided that to ensure that she did not defile the Temple's sanctuary, Mary had to be given to a widower of Israel. Joseph is chosen to receive Mary as his ward. Joseph was an adult and he had sons of his own. This knowledge explains how Jesus had brothers even though Mary remained a virgin her whole life. Joseph also had a job as a builder that took him away from his home for long periods of time. He did not necessarily want the responsibility of guarding this virgin.

Once, when Joseph returned home after building, he found Mary pregnant. Joseph's reactions are real and raw unlike the silence in the Matthew account. Joseph "struck his face and threw himself to the ground on the sackcloth and wept bitterly, saying, 'With what sort of countenance shall I look at the Lord? What shall I pray concerning this maiden? For I received her a virgin from the Temple of the Lord God, and I did not guard her.'<sup>114</sup> Thus, Joseph's first reaction is surprise and sadness, which simply makes sense. Joseph then assumes that Mary was attacked by a man. He says, "Who is he who has deceived me? Who did this evil thing in my house and defiled her?"<sup>115</sup> Joseph's tirade continues by turning on Mary. He asks, "Why did you do this, forgetting the Lord your God? Why have

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<sup>114</sup> The Other Bible, pg. 389

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

you humbled your soul, you who were nurtured in the Holy of Holies?"<sup>116</sup> The mention of Holy of Holies, a sacred room inside the Temple, points to a Jewish author. Mary cried bitterly and protested that she did not know a man. Joseph asked her,

"Whence then is this which is in your womb?" She said, 'As the Lord my God lives, I do not know whence it came to me.' Then Joseph feared greatly and stopped talking with her, considering what he would do with her. Joseph said, **"If I should hide her sin, I will be found disputing with the law of the Lord; If I show her to the children of Israel, I am afraid lest that which is in her is angelic and I shall be found delivering innocent blood to the judgment of death"**<sup>117</sup>

This scene explains Joseph's righteousness. He carefully considered his options. Yet, Joseph did not make a decision on how to deal with Mary in the Infancy account. When he went to sleep that night, an angel came to him and stated exactly what the angel stated in Matthew. Only then did Joseph know that he had nothing to fear.

The next day, a scribe came to see why Joseph had not appeared in the assembly. The scribe saw that Mary was pregnant and he reported it to the priest. The scribe told the priest, "The virgin whom Joseph received from the Temple of the Lord he has defiled; he married her secretly and **did not reveal it to the children of Israel.**"<sup>118</sup> Here is another point that hints at a Jewish author. The scribe knew that Joseph should have reported any misconduct with Mary.

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.* pg. 390

Finally, the priest made Joseph and Mary drink the waters of testing. Both of them were found to be not guilty and there was no curse from the water. Joseph and Mary were free to do as they pleased after that. This is the greatest hint that the author was Jewish. The waters of testing was performed in a time when the Temple stood and was a highly specialized Jewish ritual. For a Gentile to know about it in such detail, one hundred and fifty years after it happened is very unlikely.



## THE ANGEL VISITS

In Chapter 1:20 of Matthew, an angel visits Joseph in a dream, saying "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."<sup>119</sup> The style in which the angel visits Joseph and the words that it chooses to use follow a particular pattern. This pattern, where a divine being visits a human in order to tell about a future event concerning a son, can be referred to as a "type-scene"<sup>120</sup>. In the Tanakh there are several notable occasions where this type-scene occurs. The authors of Matthew use something from each of the Tanakh type-scene's in order to make Jesus a universal savior. Also, by connecting Jesus to the Tanakh, he becomes an authentic part of the tradition.

The first occurrence of this type-scene is in Genesis chapter 15. There are many similarities between it and the scene in Matthew.

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying,  
**Fear not, Abram; I am your shield, and your reward will be great.** And Abram said, Lord God, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me you have given no seed; and, lo, one born in my house is my heir. **And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, This shall not be your heir; but he who shall come forth from your own bowels shall be your heir.** And he brought him outside, and

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<sup>119</sup> "New King James", pg. 7 of The Contemporary Parallel New Testament

<sup>120</sup> see chapter 3 of Robert Alter's Art of Biblical narrative.

said, **Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them; and he said to him, So shall your seed be.**<sup>121</sup>

Abram is told to "fear not" and that he is having a son the same way Joseph was. Abram is comforted by the knowledge that this child, Isaac, will be part of a larger plan to be the first of a numerous nation. Joseph is told that Jesus is part of a larger plan to save his people. It is apparent that Jesus is intentionally modeled after Abram. Abram is righteous and God-fearing. And Abram is a proselyte, which shows that even proselytes can achieve God's blessing.

In Genesis 16, Hagar is visited by an angel, she is told that her seed will be a part of a larger plan, that she will have a son, and that her son is to have a specific name.

And Sarai said to Abram, My wrong be upon you; I have given my maid to your bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes; the Lord judge between me and you. But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your maid is in your hand; do to her as it pleases you. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face. **And the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur.** And he said, Hagar,

Sarai's maid, where did you come from? and where will you go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hands. And the angel of the Lord said to her, I will multiply your seed exceedingly, that it shall not be counted for multitude. **And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are with child,**

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<sup>121</sup> Genesis 15:1-4

**and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael; because the Lord has heard your affliction.**<sup>122</sup>

This scene is also similar to the scene in Matthew. Hagar is told she will have a son and that he is to have a specific name, just as Joseph is told.

Hagar is a person to have in the genealogy of Matthew because she represents the lower class of society. She is a slave, who was mistreated by her mistress, yet God still blessed her.

In Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three divine messengers who inform them that Sarah will give birth at a set time in the upcoming year. It can be inferred that God will intervene on Sarah's behalf.<sup>123</sup>

In Genesis 21, an angel visits Hagar again.

**And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, What ails you, Hagar? fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in your hand; for I will make him a great nation.**<sup>124</sup>

The angel confirms what was said earlier and adds the important words "fear not" to this scene.

In Genesis 22, Abraham is visited by an angel and Isaac is saved as a result.

**And the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham; and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not your hand upon**

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<sup>122</sup> Genesis 16:5-10

<sup>123</sup> there is more extensive discussion on this in the chapter "Miraculous Conception."

<sup>124</sup> Genesis 21:17-18

the lad, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you did not withheld your son, your only son from me.<sup>125</sup>

Although, this scene does not tell about the birth of a child, it does represent an important significance with respect to the birth scene of Matthew. Abraham was asked to make a sacrifice for the good of his people. Joseph, too, had to make a sacrifice. He had to accept that his wife had a child in her womb that was not his, because it was for the good of the people.

In Judges Chapter 13, the type-scene occurs with a remarkable resemblance to Matthew. The angel visits and tells the woman that she will bear a son. She is then told that the child, referring to Samson, will save Israel. Thus, Samson and Jesus have similar missions.

And the people of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren, and bore not. And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman, and said to her, Behold now, you are barren, and bear not; but you shall conceive, and bear a son. Now therefore beware, I beseech you, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing; For, behold, you shall conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head; for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines. Then the woman came and told her husband, saying,

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<sup>125</sup> Genesis 22:11-12

A man of God came to me, and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, **very frightening.**<sup>126</sup>

In I Kings chapter 13, a man of God forewarns that a child from the house of David will be born in order to save the people from their sins. It states:

And, behold, there came **a man of God** from Judah by the word of the Lord to Beth-El; and Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense. And he cried against the altar in the word of the Lord, and said, O altar, altar, thus said the Lord; **Behold, a child shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and upon you shall he slay the priests of the high places that burn incense upon you, and men's bones shall be burned upon you.**<sup>127</sup>

All of these examples from Tanakh play some role in shaping the birth scene from Matthew. Jesus' birth is not exactly like any single birth in the Tanakh, but it is a conglomerate of the of Isaac's birth, Ishmael's birth, Samson's birth, and Josiah's birth. Jesus is connected with all types of people, from a slave woman to a king. He is a universal savior connected to the tradition.

There are many similarities between Jesus' birth and other birth's from the Tanakh yet there is one major difference. The angels' use of the dream as a medium to speak with Joseph is not connected to antiquity, but is a reflection of the times in which Matthew was written. There is only one instance in the entire Tanakh where an angel visits a human in a dream. In Genesis 31:11-13, Jacob is visited by an angel in a dream in order to inform him

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<sup>126</sup> Judges 13:1-6

<sup>127</sup> I Kings 13:1-2

that his flocks will be improved as a result of what Laban's actions. Jacob's revelation is rather unimportant with respect to the future of his people.

In the latter parts of the Bible dreams and their interpretations are very prevalent, but there are no examples of angels speaking with humans. For example, in Judges 7, a dream and its interpretation is taken as the word of God. It states,

When Gideon came, behold, there was a man who told a dream to his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and a slice of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to a tent, and struck it so that it fell, and overturned it, so that the tent tumbled down. And his fellow answered and said, 'This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; for to his hand has God delivered Midian, and all the army. And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and its interpretation, that he bowed down to the ground, and returned to the camp of Israel, and said, Arise; for the Lord has delivered to your hand the army of Midian.<sup>128</sup>

In I Kings 3, Solomon has a dream in which God speaks with him. In the dream Solomon requests that God grant him the understanding of mind to properly judge people. In essence, Solomon asks God to make him righteous, and God grants Solomon his wish.<sup>129</sup>

It is important to realize that dreams are noted as a subject of controversy in the latter parts of the Bible. The increased importance of dreams and the greater reliance on their interpretations produced suspicion over fraudulent dreams. In Jeremiah 23, God states,

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<sup>128</sup> Judges 7:13-15

<sup>129</sup> I Kings 3:9-11



“I have heard what the prophets said, who prophesy lies in My name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed’... The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has received My word speak My word faithfully... Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams -declare the Lord- who lead My people astray with their reckless lies...”<sup>130</sup>

God warns against those who prophesy falsely, while being sure not to say that all dreams are false. Thus, dreams are the medium for divine communication, but not everyone is spoken to by God or angels. This idea is substantiated in Joel 3:1 where it states, “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”<sup>131</sup>

The Book of Daniel, one of the latest books of the Bible, has parts that can be dated to 168-165 BCE.<sup>132</sup> In Daniel there are many references to dreams and interpretations. Daniel is not the one having the dreams, rather he is merely interpreting them for the King, in a similar fashion to Joseph (of the Torah). The relevance of the dreams in the Book of Daniel is the acceptability of dreams and their ability to foretell the future at this time in history.

Contemporary to the Book of Daniel is I Enoch. I Enoch is a book of Pseudepigrapha written between 165 and 100 BCE.<sup>133</sup> In this book, the main character, Enoch, speaks with angels solely through dreams. The content of his conversations with

<sup>130</sup> Jeremiah 23: 25-32

<sup>131</sup> Joel 1:3

<sup>132</sup> Encyclopedia of Judaism, pg. 190.

<sup>133</sup> Reading the Old Testament, pg. 513

the angels is similar to Both Old Testament and Matthew. For example Enoch recalls a dream he had where an angel spoke to him with the word of God, saying, “Come near to me, Enoch, and to my holy word.’... **‘Do not fear, Enoch righteous man, scribe of righteousness; come near to me and hear my voice.’**”<sup>134</sup> Thus Enoch is addressed in the same way as Abraham and Hagar and Jesus’ Father. Enoch is also connected to the Tanakh and to Matthew in that Enoch is given a mission. His mission is to save humanity from the sins of the fallen angels and from evil people.

The use of dreams as the medium for divine revelations continues after I Enoch, gaining more and more significance. In fact, dreams become the essential medium for communication between humans and divine beings in both the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha.

2 Esdras is an apocryphal book written around the year 100 BCE<sup>135</sup> in which angels speak with Ezra. In one particular example it is evident that Matthew was strongly influenced from this source. In Ezra’s third vision, the angel Uriel speaks to Ezra and tells him:

“Listen! The time will come when the signs I have foretold will be seen; the city which is now invisible will appear and the country now hidden be revealed.

Everyone who has been delivered from the calamities I have foretold will see for himself the wonderful things I shall do. My son the Messiah will appear with his companions, bringing four hundred years of joy to all who survive.”<sup>136</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Enoch 14:24, 15:1

<sup>135</sup> The Oxford Study Bible, pg. 1007

<sup>136</sup> 2 Esdras 7:26-28

Following this vision, the messages that Ezra receives from his dreams become more and more concerned with the redemption of the righteous and the condemnation of the sinners by the intervention of a Messiah. In Ezra's fifth vision, it is stated that the Messiah "will arise from the stock of David and will address those rulers, taxing them openly with their sins, their crimes and their defiance. First, he will bring them alive to judgment; then, after convicting them, he will destroy them."<sup>137</sup> Thus, 2 Esdras and Matthew are connected in that both deal with the subject of a Messiah from the stock of David who will save people from their sins.

Dreams and their interpretations were also used as a means of motivation. In 2 Maccabees, chapter 15, Judah recounts a dream he had in order to boost the morale of the soldiers. "He armed each one of them, not so much with shield and spear for protection, as with brave and reassuring words; and he cheered them all by recounting a dream he had had."<sup>138</sup> Judah describes the dream in detail,

"There had appeared to him the former high priest Onias, a good and noble man of modest bearing and mild disposition, a ready and apt speaker, an exemplar from childhood of every virtue; with uplifted hands Onias was praying for the whole Jewish community. Next there appeared in the same attitude a figure of great age and dignity, whose wonderful air of authority marked him as a man of the utmost distinction. Onias then spoke; 'This is God's prophet Jeremiah,' he said, 'one who loves his fellow-Jews and constantly offers prayers for the people and for the Holy City.' Extending his right hand Jeremiah presented a golden sword to Judas,

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<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, 12:32-33

<sup>138</sup> 2 Maccabees 15:11

saying as he did so, 'Take this holy sword, a gift from God, and with it shatter the enemy.'<sup>139</sup>

It is apparent that many believed certain dreams were directly from the divine. It is also evident that dreams were a well established medium for divine revelation by the time that 2 Maccabees was written.

In one Talmud, the subject of dreams is covered extensively, revealing the spectrum of opinions that the rabbis (of several different generations) had on dreams. For example, in Baba Batra 10a, one of the first Tannaim attests to the use of dreams as a proper means of prophecy. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who lived during the early to mid part of the first century,

saw in a dream that they (his nephews) were to lose seven hundred dinars in that year. He accordingly forced them to give him money for charity until only seventeen dinars were left. On the eve of the Day of Atonement the Government came and seized the seventeen dinars. R. Yohanan b. Zakkai said to them, 'Do not fear [that you will lose any more]; you had seventeen dinars and these they have taken.' They said to him, 'How did you know that this was going to happen?' He replied, 'I saw it in a dream.'<sup>140</sup>

A fifth generation Tanna (135 - 170 CE), Shimon ben Yohai states, 'just as wheat cannot be without straw, so there cannot be a dream without some nonsense.'<sup>141</sup> That is to say that Shimon ben Yohai upheld the view of skepticism on dreams, while acknowledging their

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.* 15:12-16

<sup>140</sup> Baba Batra 10a

<sup>141</sup> Berachot 55a

importance. Rabbi Meir, who lived in the same generation as ben Yohai, outright denies any significance of dreams. He states, "Dreams are of no consequence."<sup>142</sup> On another occasion, Rabbi Meir had a dream in which a voice instructed him to "build" but paid no heed. He stated, "Dreams are of no effect either one way or the other."<sup>143</sup> Yet, in Berachot 55a, Rav Chisda<sup>144</sup> states, "a dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not read...neither a bad dream or a good dream is every completely fulfilled...a bad dream is better than a good dream."<sup>145</sup> Also in Berachot 55a, Rav Yehuda, a second generation Babylonian Amora (approximately 250 - 290 CE), states in the name of Rav, a first generation Babylonian Amora (approximately 220 - 250 CE), "Three things require God's mercy: a good king, a good year, and a good dream."<sup>146</sup> Thus, the notion of divine intervention in the dream was still a factor.

In Berachot 56a, example upon example are given to illustrate the prophetic nature of dreams. The examples begin, 'If one sees x in his dream than y will occur in the future.' The Gemara adds that "a dream is one sixtieth part of prophecy."<sup>147</sup> As in the Bible, the skeptics speak out once there is a fear that too much power was afforded to a dream. Rabbi Berekiah, a fourth generation Israeli Amora, cautions, "While part of a dream may be fulfilled, the whole of it is never fulfilled."<sup>148</sup>

<sup>142</sup> Horayot, 13b

<sup>143</sup> Gittin 52a

<sup>144</sup> Chisda was a third generation Babylonian Amora (approximately 290-320 CE)

<sup>145</sup> Berachot 55a

<sup>146</sup> Berachot, 55a

<sup>147</sup> ibid., 57b

<sup>148</sup> ibid. 55a

The Talmud seems to go in circles in its opinions on dreams. It acknowledges that dreams have importance and that they ought to be interpreted. It is comfortable giving the prophetic meaning of certain dreams, yet, it also claims that dreams should not be taken so seriously and dreams are worthless. This kind of reasoning can be called a *machloket*, a Talmudic disagreement. The Gemara tries to limit the Tannaitic disagreements by bridging gaps. An example of this is from Berachot 55b:

When Samuel had a bad dream, he used to say, 'The dreams speak falsely'.

When he had a good dream, he used to say, 'Do these dreams speak falsely?

seeing that it is written, 'I (God) do speak with him in a dream'. Raba pointed out

a contradiction. It is written, 'I (God) do speak with him in a dream', and it is

written, 'the dreams speak falsely'. There is no contradiction; in the one case it is

through an angel, in the other through a demon.<sup>149</sup>

The Gemara's ability to connect disparate views of dreams gives the rabbis much latitude in the acceptability of certain dreams. For instance, if an individual claimed that he received divine communication in a dream the rabbis could say that it was not through an angel, but rather through a demon. Such a dream would thereby be worthless.

In addition, the fact that there is a *machloket* on the subject of dreams shows that what the New Testament records is not totally uncommon. Dreams are within the context of life. In fact, from the example shown above, dreams were a part of society from the earliest sections of the Torah through the Hagiography, through the apocrypha, through Matthew, continuing on to the Talmud. The authors of the Book of Matthew used the

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<sup>149</sup> Berachot 55b



dream sequence because it was used as a medium for divine communication and was something that was part of the general culture.

Dreams were strongly rooted in society, as can be seen through the rabbis' positive attitude toward the reliability of dreams. The fact that there was opposition may show that that was a natural tendency towards dreams. It also may show that there was an opposition to Christianity. One conclusion is clear - any attempt to oppose the dream convention from the basis of its role in Christianity was not viable in Judaism.

## MIRACULOUS CONCEPTION

In Matthew 1:20, an angel informs Joseph that—the embryo which had been conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph accepts the story of the angel and proceeds to marry Mary. Joseph is not surprised, nor is he upset, because he feels that the Holy Spirit's actions are in alignment with the tradition - with respect to the birth of a special child. There are several occasions in the Tanakh where there is divine intervention in child birth. Also, the Talmud and the Midrash, which historically follow the Gospel of Matthew, expound on the ideas of divine intervention with respect to child birth. The tradition of Jesus' conception is grounded in tradition and at later times the subject of polemics.

The tradition of divine intervention in the birth of children is well rooted in Judaism prior to the conception of Jesus. In Genesis 6, בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים, literally, 'the children of God,' have relations with human women and they have offspring. Judaism is quiet on the subject of בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים outside of Genesis. In fact there is no mention of בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים in the Mishnah and there is no discussion (only allusion to) בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים in the Babylonian Talmud. The scant discussion of בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים in the Midrash is only negative.<sup>150</sup>

There are occasions in the Tanakh where God plays an important role in the birth of a child which are not overlooked by the tradition. For example, in Genesis 18 a messenger of God informs Abraham that his wife, Sarah, will have a child at specific time in the upcoming year.<sup>151</sup> Sarah expresses doubt that she and Abraham could give birth in their old age. God reassures Abraham, "Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I

<sup>150</sup> Genesis Rabbah 29:5

<sup>151</sup> Genesis 18:10

will return to you, at this season, and Sarah shall have a son."<sup>152</sup> Indeed Sarah gives birth at that set time. She gives birth because God remembered her and did to her as he said he would. The text states,

The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as He had spoken. And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.

א ויהיה פקד את-שרה כאשר אמר ויעש יהוה לשרה כאשר דבר:

ב ותהר ותלד שרה לאברהם בן זקנה למועד אשר דבר אתו אלהים.<sup>153</sup>

The Talmud and Midrash are quite verbal about God's relationship with Sarah and the birth of Isaac. In Baba Matsia 87a, there is an apologetic response to Sarah's doubt of God's power and to anyone who doubts that anything is too difficult for God.

R. Levi said: On the day that Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he made a great banquet, and all the peoples of the world derided him, saying, 'Have you seen that old man and woman, who brought a foundling from the street, and now claim him as their son! And what is more, they make a great banquet to establish their claim!' What did our father Abraham do? — He went and invited all the great men of the age, and our mother Sarah invited their wives. Each one brought her child with her, but not the wet nurse, and a miracle happened unto our mother Sarah, her breasts opened like two fountains, and she suckled them all. Yet they still scoffed, saying, 'Granted that Sarah could give birth at the age of ninety, could Abraham

<sup>152</sup> Genesis 18:14

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*, 21:1-2

beget [child] at the age of a hundred?' Immediately the features of Isaac's face changed and became like Abraham's, whereupon they all cried out, 'Abraham begat Isaac!'<sup>154</sup>

In Yevamot 64b, the Talmud implies that God fashioned a new womb for Sarah in order that Isaac could be born.

"Rabbi Isaac stated, 'Why were our ancestors barren? — Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous. R. Isaac further stated, 'Why is the prayer of the righteous compared to a pitchfork? As a pitchfork turns the sheaves of grain from one position to another, so does the prayer of the righteous turn the dispensations of the Holy One, blessed be He, from the attribute of anger to the attribute of mercy...R. Nahman stated in the name of Rabbah b.

Abbuha: Our mother Sarah was incapable of procreation; for it is said, 'And Sarai was barren,' she had no child, she did not even have a womb.<sup>155</sup>

The Midrash expands upon Sarah's special relationship with God. In Genesis Rabbah 33:1, the Midrash strongly suggests that God caused Sarah's conception of Isaac.

"And the Lord remembered Sarah as he had said"<sup>156</sup> It is thus that Scripture writes, And all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish; I the Lord have spoken and done it (Ezek. 27: 24). R. Judah said: Not like those who speak but do not perform. R. Berekiah said on the verse, 'I the

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<sup>154</sup> Baba Metsia 87a

<sup>155</sup> Yevamot 64a,b

<sup>156</sup> Genesis 21:1

Lord have spoken and done it': Where did He speak it? - 'At the set time I will return to you... and Sarah shall have a son (Gen. 18:14). And I have done it - 'And the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken...' <sup>157</sup>

The Midrash uses an analogy of how God's power is mightier than anything in nature and it therefore can make Sarah pregnant.

In Megillah 14a, Sarah's relationship with God is connected to Mary's. After being classified as a prophetess, Sarah is said to have been visited by the רוח הקדש. According to

Rabbi Isaac:

Yiscah is Sarah. And why was she called Yiscah? Because she could see the future by means of the holy spirit, as it is said, "In all that Sarah says to you, hearken to her voice." <sup>158</sup>

ואמר רבי יצחק: יסכה זו שרה ולמה נקרא שמה יסכה - שסכתה ברוח הקדש.

שנאמר (בראשית כ"א) כל אשר תאמר אליך שרה שמע בקלה

In this example, the Midrash expresses a polemical response to the relationship that Mary had with God. Essentially Rabbi Isaac claimed that there was nothing unique about Mary since Sarah was the first to have interactions with the Holy Spirit.

In addition, Sarah is said to have had god-like abilities, similar in some ways to Mary, and in some ways to Jesus. In Genesis Rabbah, 47:2 the Midrash alludes to the Baba Matsia passage and embellishes from there. It states;

<sup>157</sup> Genesis Rabbah 33:1

<sup>158</sup> Megillah 14a

"I will bless her, and I will also give you a son from her -from her - I will bless her..."<sup>159</sup> Rabbi Judah said, 'This means- 'I will bless her' that she should have a son - 'I will bless her' in respect to milk. Rabbi Nehemia said to him, 'Had she been informed about her milk? This teaches, however, that **God restored to her her youth.** Rabbi Abbahu explained it thus in the name of R. Jose b. R. Hanina: I will inspire all peoples with awe of her, so that they should not call her, 'barren woman.' R. Judan said in the name of Resh Lakish: **She lacked an ovary, but the Lord fashioned an ovary for her.**"<sup>160</sup>

When God made Sarah young again she began to menstruate, and she became a virgin. Also, God provided Sarah with the means to produce ova. Sarah is very similar to Mary in that God effected their youthful condition and placed something inside each of them.

Sarah is also accredited with healing powers akin to Jesus. In Genesis Rabbah 33:8, it is said that when Sarah was remembered by God many deaf gained the ability to hear, the blind gained the ability to see, and the insane became sane. In addition, those who came to suckle their children from Sarah's breasts became God fearing and so did their future descendants as they stood at Sinai.

Finally, Sarah is connected to Mary and Jesus in a circuitous manner in Genesis Rabbah 33:5. It begins with a quote from I Kings 8:24, "You have kept the promises you made to your servant, David, my father."<sup>161</sup> The Midrash draws an analogy between Abraham and David by stating that "your servant" refers to Abraham. However, the I

<sup>159</sup> Genesis 17:16

<sup>160</sup> Genesis Rabbah 47:2

<sup>161</sup> I Kings 8:24



Kings verse is very clear about “your servant” meaning King David. Therefore, the rabbis reveal a hidden message about Abraham and Sarah, which, because of its connection with David, is messianic. Add that to the text of I Kings 8:24 (which is not included in the Midrash), “And now, Lord - God of Israel, keep the further promise that You made to Your servant, my father David - ‘Your line on the throne of Israel shall never end...’”, and the theme of a messiah is evident *a fortiori*. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that the Midrash continues with verse I Kings 8:15,

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּפִי אֶת דְּוִד אָבִי וּבִידָן מַלְא לְאָמִר:

“And he said, Blessed be Adonai, God of Israel, who spoke with his mouth to

David my father, and has with his hand fulfilled it ...”<sup>162</sup>

Then Midrash craftily connects this verse with “And God remembered Sarah”, in order to drive home the point that God impregnated Sarah and this offspring is messiah-like.

However, this conclusion leaves one confused. If Abraham and Sarah are the Messiah’s parents, or even messiah archetypes, why was there a need for David in the first place? One answer is that the rabbis wanted to invalidate Mary and Joseph, and Jesus. By showing that the tradition already had similar characters, and by showing that these characters are merely part of an unending family tree, the rabbi’s were destroying the myth of a single human messiah.

In Rosh Hashanah 11a, the Talmud connects Sarah to the Messiah and to two other special women. In Rosh Hashanah 11a it states, “It has been taught, R. Eliezer says...on

<sup>162</sup> I Kings 8:15

New Year Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were visited (by God) on New Year the bondage of our ancestors in Egypt ceased. in Nisan they were redeemed and in Nisan they will be redeemed in the time to come. The Rosh Hashanah passage goes on to explain that Sarah was remembered by God in Genesis 21:1 and she conceived and bore Isaac. Rachel was "remembered" by God in Genesis 30:22 and she conceived and bore Joseph. Hannah was remembered by God in I Samuel 1:19, and she then conceived and bore Samuel.

Rosh Hashanah 11a connects these women to New Year by showing that there is an analogy between how God remembered Sarah and Rachel and how the New Year is the day of remembrance.<sup>164</sup> The New Year is the celebration of the creation of the world which endows these women's children with cosmic significance.

Hannah's special relationship to God is displayed in Megillah 14a. Hannah is considered a prophetess just as Sarah, and is also linked to King David. As it is written,

"And Hannah prayed, 'My heart exults in the Lord, my horn is exalted through the Lord'<sup>165</sup> [She said], 'my horn is exalted', and not, 'my cruse is exalted', thus implying the royalty of David and Solomon, who were anointed from a horn would be prolonged, but the royalty of Saul and Jehu, who were anointed with a cruse, would not be prolonged.<sup>166</sup>

In Berachot 10a it is implied that God created the embryo within Hannah. It states, "Come and observe how the capacity of human beings falls short of the capacity of the Holy One, blessed be He. It is in the capacity of a human being to draw a

<sup>163</sup> Rosh Hashanah 11a

<sup>164</sup> Leviticus 23:24

<sup>165</sup> I Samuel 2:1

<sup>166</sup> Megillah 14a

figure on a wall, but he cannot invest it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so; He shapes one form in the midst of another, and invests it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. And that is what Hannah said, 'There is none holy as the Lord, for there is none beside You, neither is there any rock like our God.'<sup>167</sup>

The Midrash also reveals its familiarity with the idea of divine intervention in child birth. In the Midrash to the Song of Songs a question is asked of the verse, "A garden locked up, my sister, my bride."<sup>168</sup> "What is meant by 'a garden locked up'?" Said the Holy One, blessed be He, 'My garden is closed shut, but still it is maligned.' Rabbi Pinhas said, 'At that time God summoned the angel who has charge of conception and said: 'Go forth and form them with all the features of their fathers.'<sup>169</sup>

In the Midrash to Ruth, God plays a crucial role in Ruth's conception. As it is stated,

'Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went into her and the Lord gave her conception.'<sup>170</sup> Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish said, 'She lacked the main portion of the womb, but the Holy One, blessed be He, shaped a womb for her.'<sup>171</sup>

Directly following this passage in the Midrash to Ruth it becomes apparent that God's role in the birth of Ruth's child has a special purpose. It states that Ruth's seed will produce one who shall hold dominion and rule over Israel for ever.<sup>172</sup> The rabbis made

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<sup>167</sup> Berachot 10a

<sup>168</sup> Song of Songs 4:12

<sup>169</sup> Midrash Song of Songs 4:25

<sup>170</sup> Ruth 4:13

<sup>171</sup> Midrash Ruth 7:14

<sup>172</sup> Midrash Ruth 7:15

sure that their allusion to their Messiah is clear. It is stressed. "It is not written 'son', rather 'seed' - that seed which comes from another place. Who is it referring to? The Messiah."<sup>173</sup> The Midrash is not referring to Jesus.

The Midrash is clear that the Messiah has yet to come. All of the statements that proclaim divine intervention in child birth are tempered by the rabbi's staunch opposition to Christianity. The rabbis would not want any misunderstanding about what they consider legitimate and what the Christian's consider legitimate. In the Midrash to Exodus there is a discussion over the verse, "I am the Lord your God."<sup>174</sup> Rabbi Abbahu, a third generation Israeli Amora (290 - 320 CE), who lived at a time when Christianity was well established and on its way to becoming very popular, comments:

A human king may rule, but he has a father and brother, but God said: 'I am not like this - I am the first, for I have no father, and I am the last for I have no brother, and besides Me there is no God, for I have no son.'<sup>175</sup>

Joseph's lack of surprise at the angels words may have been due to his belief that divine intervention in child birth was part of the tradition. The fact that the tradition is so comfortable to talk about divine childbirth attests to the acceptance of it in the society. The way the rabbis go out of their way to talk about it while maintaining that it is not the same as Jesus' birth is simply a polemic.

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<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Exodus 20:2

<sup>175</sup> Midrash Exodus 29:5

## CONCLUSION

There is a conceptual and textual relationship between the New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism. The two traditions stem from the same parents. For a relatively short period of time while the Temple stood, Judaism was a centralized religion. Following the split of the empire, and the exile in Babylon, splinter groups emerged. Greek thought and philosophy effected the Jewish outlook on life. When the Romans came into power, dissatisfaction reached a threshold. Jews sought new leaders and new meaning in their religion. The time arose when the Jewish people were ready for a change. Study and prayer replaced sacrifice and Temple worship. Following the destruction of the Temple, some Jews were ready to embrace the belief in Jesus as the Christ, some Jews were ready to accept reason as their guide, still other's sought asceticism, etc. What resulted was a period of tumult in which Judaism was comprised of many subgroups.

There was communication between the early church and the synagogue. The proto-Christians were a part of the larger Jewish society, just as those who would eventually become the rabbis. These Jews prayed together and they argued with each other until the beginning of the second century.

One such sub-group was the Matthean community. The Gospel of Matthew records their beliefs of Jesus as a Jewish teacher. They saw themselves as the new Israel, who were struggling to gain support from the same Jews as the other Jewish sub-groups. The Gospel of Matthew contains many citations from Tanakh. It uses language that the rabbis used in Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. Also, the ideas that are expressed in Matthew convey the same goals and ideals set forth in rabbinic texts.

One cannot fully appreciate rabbinic Judaism without understanding the relationship that it had with early Christianity. Rabbinic Judaism gives evidence of a struggle with those who believed that Jesus was the messiah. The Midrash Rabbah, written at a time and place where Christianity was a popular political force, shows they employed similar methods of 'out-reach' at the Christians. The rabbis glorify the women the proselyte, the widow, the harlot and the impoverished.

In the same respect, one cannot understand the development of Christianity without Rabbinic Judaism. Christianity was thrust away from the community that they called home. The Matthean community desperately tried to maintain their standing within the larger Jewish community. The authors of Matthew proved that they were learned in Tanakh, skilled in rabbinic style arguments, and devoted to Jewish practice. Yet, the tension between the Matthean community and the larger Jewish population can be felt in the expressions of dissatisfaction with the Jewish leaders.

This thesis proves that texts, any texts, can be understood only if they are studied against the context of the society in which they were written. This is still a relatively young field and more needs to be done in this area.



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