

# Redemption and the Power of Man

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A venerable Jewish anecdote describes a man hired by his *shtetl* to sit at the outskirts of town and alert his brethren should he see the messiah coming. When asked why he had accepted such a monotonous form of employment, the watchman would invariably reply: “The pay’s not so good, but it’s a lifetime job.” Indeed, waiting for the redeemer of Israel *is* considered a lifetime job for the Jews. According to the Talmud, Jews are obligated not only to believe in the messiah, but to yearn for his arrival. Thus the list of credos recited daily by many traditional Jews concludes: “I believe with perfect faith in the advent of the messiah, and though he may tarry, I will await his arrival every day.”

This expectation of a tarrying messiah has always been uniquely Jewish. The Protestant theologian Harvey Cox, who is married to a Jew, marveled at this theological point in a book he wrote describing his experience of the Jewish rituals. In a chapter devoted to his reflections on the Passover seder, Cox describes the tradition of opening the door for Elijah, who, according to the prophet Malachi, will precede the messiah to herald the coming redemption. “If no one is there,” Cox notes, “none of the dinner guests seem too upset. From a Jewish perspective, the wait has already been a long

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one. There are smiles and jokes, maybe in part because the adults have already consumed the seder's requisite four cups of wine. But the light touch cannot fully obscure my recognition that here we come to a great divide."<sup>1</sup> For Jews and Christians famously disagree as to the identity of the messiah. Christians argue that Israel's messianic expectations were realized with the birth, life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth; moreover, Christian doctrine asserts that Jesus was divine, God incarnate, and the second person of the divine Trinity. Jews not only argue that the messiah has not yet appeared, but also disagree vehemently with the concept of incarnation. Jewish tradition has always insisted that the messiah will be a human, rather than divine, redeemer, who will restore the Davidic dynasty and defend Israel from its enemies.

All too many Christians and Jews, however, assume that this is the only essential difference between Jewish and Christian eschatology. Cox reflects that "as a child in Sunday school, I was taught that the main difference—sometimes it was put as the only difference—between Jews and Christians was that 'they believe the messiah is yet to come.' I do not recall that this was ever said in a deprecating way. It was just a difference... but nothing more than that."<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, many texts focus only on this theological distinction in describing the disagreement between Judaism and Christianity. For example, the catechism of the Catholic Church, in its one discussion of post-biblical Judaism, reads as follows: "And when one considers the future, God's People of the Old Covenant and the new People of God tend toward similar goals: Expectation of the coming (or the return) of the messiah. But one awaits the return of the messiah who died and rose from the dead and is recognized as Lord and Son of God; the other awaits the coming of a messiah, whose features remain hidden till the end of time; and the latter waiting is accompanied by the drama of not knowing or of misunderstanding Christ Jesus."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Reinhold Niebuhr, in his book *Pious and Secular America*, notes that Jews and Christians disagree as to whether the messiah has already arrived, and adds that the issue is only one "of emphasis, but there is no radical contrast."<sup>4</sup>

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It is true that the question of the messiah's arrival is one that will divide Jews and Christians until the end of days. Yet there is a more profound divide in the way Jews and Christians conceive the idea of the messiah. This distinction relates not to whether he has already come, but rather to what part humanity plays in bringing about the messianic redemption, a distinction that reveals very different approaches to the moral capacities of mankind. For Christians, redemption is essentially an act of divine grace, the salvation of a humanity that is incapable of saving itself. For Jews, however, the reverse is true: Redemption depends entirely on the repentance of man, who is responsible for his own fate. As such, the difference in the respective religions' approach to the messiah is, in truth, a difference in the understanding of man's own moral capacity, and of the nature of good and evil itself.

## II

**T**he Jewish approach to the messiah takes its cues from the Hebrew Bible. The book of Deuteronomy, for example, in describing the suffering that will befall Israel in the future, appears to assert that the Jewish people will be saved from such a fate only if it turns wholeheartedly to God:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have put before you, and you shall have a turn of heart while still among all the nations.... And you shall return to the Eternal your God and shall obey him.... Then the Eternal your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and gather you from among the all nations, whither the Eternal your God has scattered you.<sup>5</sup>

The passage implies that redemption cannot take place without repentance; the messiah will not come unless we are deserving of his arrival. Maimonides,

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the most influential of medieval Jewish philosophers, interprets the passage in its most literal sense, asserting in his Laws of Repentance that “Israel will be redeemed only if it repents.”<sup>6</sup> Whether the messiah comes, Maimonides seems to be saying, is up to us; whether he redeems us depends on whether we become worthy of redemption. Yet Maimonides’ assertion, which is based on talmudic precedent,<sup>7</sup> begs the following question: What if we never repent, and therefore never become worthy of redemption? If the messiah’s coming depends on our own worthiness, how can traditional Jews be so certain—indeed, why are we obligated to believe—that he will eventually come? This question was posed by one of the leading Jewish philosophers of the last century, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in a lecture on the subject of repentance:

If one accepts Maimonides’ opinion... that the coming of the messiah is dependent upon repentance, and that if it does not take place then there will be no redemption; how is it possible to declare, “I believe with complete faith in the advent of the messiah and though he may tarry I will await his coming every day”? It is possible that he will tarry indefinitely if Israel does not repent; what sense is there in awaiting his coming daily?<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Soloveitchik’s answer is startling: Because the messiah will come only when Israel is worthy of his coming, the belief in the certainty of redemption is of necessity a belief that Israel will prove itself worthy of the messiah. Maimonides himself stresses that “The Tora has already assured us that Israel will finally repent at the end of its exile and immediately be redeemed.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, writes Rabbi Soloveitchik, the portion of the Jewish credo that expresses belief in the coming of the messiah is “based upon faith in *kneset yisrael* [the congregation of Israel]. It is not an easy faith.”<sup>10</sup> Faith in the messiah is faith in ourselves, in our ability to bring the messiah by becoming worthy of his arrival.

This idea, that human beings may become worthy of the messiah, and, further, that the messiah will continue to tarry until humanity is deserving

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of redemption, does not exist in Christian scripture. As set out in the New Testament, the messianic redemption of the world was made necessary by the disobedience of Adam and Eve, an “original sin” that infected all of humanity. Because of the fall of man, Paul argued in the book of Romans, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”<sup>11</sup> and are therefore incapable of earning redemption. Salvation, Paul writes, depends not on “human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.”<sup>12</sup> Human beings after Adam’s sin are incapable of full repentance or true goodness, and require the grace provided by the crucified messiah if they are to be redeemed. Only through Jesus, the son of God who became man in order to save humanity, is mankind saved from the perdition that it deserves: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus saves humanity by taking Adam’s sin upon himself: “For just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Catholics and Protestants have long debated the nature and meaning of salvation, the doctrine of redemption through Jesus—of a messiah who saves humanity because it cannot save itself—unites all traditional Christians. A joint statement issued in 1998 by Evangelicals and Catholics Together, a group that includes some of America’s most influential Catholic and Evangelical theologians, articulates this shared theological belief:

God created us to manifest his glory and to give us eternal life in fellowship with himself, but our disobedience intervened and brought us under condemnation. As members of the fallen human race, we come into the world estranged from God and in a state of rebellion. This original sin is compounded by our personal acts of sinfulness. The catastrophic consequences of sin are such that we are powerless to restore the ruptured bonds of union with God. Only in the light of what God has done to restore our fellowship with him do we see the full enormity of our loss.

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The gravity of our plight and the greatness of God's love are brought home to us by the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ... The restoration of communion with God is absolutely dependent upon Jesus Christ, true God and true man, for he is "the one mediator between God and men,"<sup>15</sup> and "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."<sup>16</sup>

The difference between the Jewish and Christian approaches to the messiah can now be clearly discerned. Jews contend, as Rabbi Soloveitchik put it, that belief in the messiah by definition means belief in our ability to become worthy of the messiah. Christians, on the other hand, argue that belief in the messiah by definition means belief in our *inability* to become worthy of the messiah, in our needing the messiah to take our sins upon himself. For Christians, the coming of the messiah makes repentance possible; for Jews, repentance makes the messiah possible. Yale's Evangelical theologian Miroslav Volf, asked by several American scholars of Jewish studies to reflect on the theological differences between Judaism and Christianity, responded by describing the contrast in the following fashion:

It is quite correct to say, with Abraham Heschel, that repentance is my response to God who is in search for me. But Christians claim more, significantly more... God has gone to such lengths as to be able to tell me: "The sins that weigh you down have already been 'taken away'!"<sup>17</sup>

Repentance, Volf argues, is made possible only because God has taken our sins upon himself. C.S. Lewis, in his *Mere Christianity*, describes the Christian approach to man's moral capacity even more starkly, arguing that his ability to be good is predicated entirely upon Jesus:

Even the best Christian that ever lived is not acting on his own steam—he is only nourishing or protecting a life he could never have acquired by his own efforts.... That is why the Christian is in a different position from other people who are trying to be good. They hope, by being good, to

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please God.... But the Christian thinks any good he does comes from the Christ-life inside him. He does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because he loves us.<sup>18</sup>

The debate over whether Jesus was the messiah is therefore also an argument about the inherent ability of man. For Christians, repentance is impossible if the messiah has not yet come; for Jews, the messiah cannot come if repentance has not yet occurred. Christians proclaim the coming of Christ by citing Christian scripture: "He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy."<sup>19</sup> Jews, often under pain of persecution, continued to insist that the messiah had yet to come, because it was up to us to bring him: "Israel will be redeemed only if it repents."

### III

These two approaches to redemption—and the differing attitudes toward human potential that they represent—are manifest most strikingly in the manner through which the two traditions depict the messianic lineage. The prophets—Isaiah most explicitly—describe the future redeemer of Israel as a descendant of the Davidic dynasty. At first blush, this seems the obvious choice. David, whom the Almighty affectionately calls "my servant," was Israel's greatest king and mightiest warrior. Yet a brief study of David's lineage reveals an ancestry rife with sin, scandal, and sexual impropriety. This is evident already with Judah, David's tribal forebear. The patriarch Jacob chose Judah as the forefather of the Israelite monarchy, a designation that passed to Peretz, Judah's heir. Yet Peretz seems blemished; he was not conceived in the sanctity of wedlock, nor apparently with the purest of intentions. Tamar, widow of Judah's first two sons

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and desperate for a child, engaged in deception in order to bring Judah to her bed:

She put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and set down at the entrance to Enaim.... When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He went over to her at the roadside, and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law.... So he... went in to her, and she conceived by him.<sup>20</sup>

Thus did the ancestor of the messiah come into the world a son of sin and deception. With a final swipe at the messiah's lineage, the Bible confirms our sense of the impropriety of Judah's relations with his former daughter-in-law, noting that "he did not lie with her again."<sup>21</sup>

Yet another scandal can be found in the story of David's most famous female ancestor: Ruth, wife of Boaz, a Moabite who converted to the Israelite faith. Moab's lineage was more questionable than even that of Peretz, tracing its biblical origins to a relationship that was not merely promiscuous, but incestuous: That of Lot and his daughter. Moab, moreover, is described in the book of Numbers as a dangerous enemy of Israel whose women enticed Israelite men to engage in idolatry, bringing plague and destruction in their wake.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Moabite blood flowed through David's veins—that Israel's enemy is the ancestor of its greatest defender, and that an idolatrous child of incest fathered Israel's messianic family—is shocking, and counterintuitive.

Even after David is designated the king of Israel and the ancestor of the messiah, his own choice of heir is counterintuitive. Of David's children, the future of the dynasty rests not with the progeny of Michal, daughter of King Saul, but rather with Solomon, son of Bathsheba, whose relationship with David is tainted by sexual sin:

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a



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woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, “This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her.... But what David had done displeased the Eternal.<sup>23</sup>

Once again, one of the messiah’s ancestors is enveloped in scandal. The book of Kings records that Israel’s elites challenged the accession of Solomon to the throne, supporting Adoniah, David’s eldest living son.<sup>24</sup> The reluctance of these Israelites to embrace Solomon’s kingship was, perhaps, predicated on his lineage; it troubled them that a man of questionable background should rule God’s chosen nation. Yet they failed to understand that the rulers and redeemers of Israel were to be born not of purity, but of depravity.

The Christian tradition took this Jewish conception of the messianic heritage and turned it on its head. With the birth of Jesus, no longer will the lineage of the messiah be tainted by sin; indeed, the holiness of the Christian savior is assured by the purity of his creation:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.... The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.... Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”<sup>25</sup>

It is precisely the lack of lust in Jesus’ origin—a virgin birth and an Almighty father—that guarantees Jesus’ status as savior. Yet Jesus is

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believed to be the son not only of God, but of Mary as well; in fact, the New Testament claims Mary as Jesus' biological link to the Davidic dynasty. But was that dynasty not produced through the various scandals enumerated above? Is not, then, the Christian messiah maternally linked to a scandalous and sinful past? The Catholic Church need not address this issue, for it asserts the doctrine of "immaculate conception," according to which the mother of Jesus was unlike her ancestors: She was untainted by Adam's fall, and therefore not in need of the salvation that her son would offer humanity. Mary, Pius IX declared in 1854, "in the first instance of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace granted by God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved exempt from all stain of original sin."<sup>26</sup> Because of the sanctity of the savior, his mother is Eve personified: Woman as she was before the Fall, and unlike her sinful ancestors in every way—without urges, without desires, tempted by nothing but the opportunity to serve God.

Here, then, lies the remarkable contrast in the way each faith depicts its messiah. According to Christianity, the messiah was born of a virgin, conceived without the slightest sense of sexual desire. Moreover, not only the messiah himself but also his mother was born untainted. For Jews, however, the messiah descends from a history of scandalous affairs, each more perverse than the next. On his family tree, one will find kings, warriors, and poets—but also bastards, prostitutes, and sworn enemies of Israel. Nor did the rabbinic sages shy away from the salaciousness of the messianic narrative; on the contrary, they embraced it. Where will you find the son of Jesse? asks the midrash. "He is in Sodom."<sup>27</sup> The midrash goes so far as to tell of *other* scandals not explicitly enumerated in the Bible, suggesting at one point that Bathsheba was raped by David, and that David himself was also conceived under dubious circumstances.<sup>28</sup>

This disparity in the account of the messianic lineage is a reflection of how each religion sees the connection between repentance and redemption. Christians believe in a messiah whose righteousness made up for the

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wickedness of all others, and whose own perfection redeemed the imperfections of humanity. Such a messiah was born, lived, and died in purity, thereby redeeming an impure world that could not redeem itself. Jews, on the other hand, believe that the messiah exists not to save the world from damnation, but rather to inspire the world to earn its *own* redemption. “Fortunate is a generation,” remarks the Talmud, “whose leaders must atone for their sins.”<sup>29</sup> This does not mean, the Talmud assures us, that we should desire wicked leaders, but that only a generation whose leaders overcame their own flaws can genuinely inspire their subjects to act likewise. Thus, in designating David as the ancestor of the messiah, the Jewish tradition teaches that the messiah can rise above his family history and even his own sinfulness—and so can every man. While Paul saw humanity as forever cursed by the sins of its ancestor Adam, the messiah of Hebrew scripture symbolizes the ability of man to defy his own past, and to bring about his own redemption.

#### IV

**I**f Christians and Jews differ on the nature of the messianic figure and on the capacity of man to redeem himself, this difference has broad implications for the way man may bring himself closer to God, even in the absence of the messianic redemption. And indeed, these two approaches—of man who needs to be saved versus man who saves himself—find powerful expression in the respective attitudes of Christianity and Judaism towards repentance.

The Christian approach to repentance owes its origins in large part to the parable of “The Pharisee and the Publican,” which appears in the book of Luke:

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Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: Thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.<sup>30</sup>

In a sermon on the above parable, Martin Luther urged the emulation of the publican and the adoption of the following attitude:

I am indeed a sinner, but still God is gracious to me; I am God’s enemy, but he is now my friend; I should justly be condemned, yet I know that he does not desire to condemn me, but to save me as an heir of heaven. This is his will, which he has had preached to me, and commanded me to believe for the sake of his dear Son, whom he has given for me.<sup>31</sup>

How ought we approach God in repentance? What should our orientation be when we beg forgiveness from the Almighty? Jesus’ answer is that we come before God not merely as men who have sinned and now wish to repent, but rather as sinners, whose sins reveal something ontologically awry, a metaphysical flaw in ourselves, that we cannot repair on our own.

In contrast, the paradigmatic penitent in Hebrew scripture, David, consistently strikes a different posture than does the publican. David never asks God’s mercy as an inveterate sinner, but rather as one who has sinned:

Nathan said to David.... “Why have you despised the word of the Eternal, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites....” And David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Eternal.”<sup>32</sup>

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We find a similar response from David after he takes a census of his subjects, in apparent violation of the biblical law. The book of Samuel reports that “David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. David said to the Eternal, ‘I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Eternal, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly.’”<sup>33</sup> Once again, David’s focus is not on a fundamental flaw in his soul, but rather on the actions that he has committed, and for which he seeks to repent.

Likewise, a distinction can be discerned in the way that Christians and Jews pray for repentance. In its opening section on “Prayer,” the catechism of the Catholic Church draws on the story of the publican:

The prayer of the Church, nourished by the Word of God and the celebration of the liturgy, teaches us to pray to the Lord Jesus. Even though her prayer is addressed above all to the Father, it includes in all the liturgical traditions forms of prayer addressed to Christ.... The most usual formulation, transmitted by the spiritual writers of the Sinai, Syria, and Mount Athos, is the invocation, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners”.... By it the heart is opened to human wretchedness and the Savior’s mercy.<sup>34</sup>

Jewish liturgy, too, makes manifold references to our sins; the *vidui*, the lengthy list of wrongs that we have committed, is an essential part of the prayer services on Yom Kippur, and, for many Jews, throughout the rest of the year as well. Yet the focus is always on the specific actions that we have committed: At no point does the liturgy describe our sins as indicative of a deeper, sinful human state, of a wretchedness inherent in the human condition. Indeed, the first prayer said each morning by traditional Jews begins as follows:

My God, the soul you placed within me is pure. You created it, you fashioned it, you breathed it into me, you safeguard it within me, and eventually you will take it from me, and restore it to me in time to come.

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As long as the soul is within me, I am grateful to you, Eternal my God and the God of my forefathers, Master of all works, Eternal of all souls. Blessed are you, Eternal, who restores souls to dead bodies.

Note the grammatical tense: Jews do not say merely that the soul God gave man *was* pure, on that day long ago when the Almighty blew into Adam's nostrils the "spirit of life." Rather, the soul given to each man *today* is pure. In other words, the Jews reciting this prayer begin their day by stressing that man does not come into the world "estranged from God and in a state of rebellion." On the contrary, the midrash stresses, in what could be interpreted as a pithy response to the publican, "If you should say that the evil impulse is not in your power to prevent, I [God] have declared to you in scripture, 'Unto you is its desire, but you may rule over it.'"<sup>35</sup>

It is this confidence in our abilities, the rabbis argued, and not a focus on our abject sinfulness, that is the first necessary step toward repentance. For instance, in the *amida*—the central element of the Jewish liturgy, recited in silence three times a day—confession is not the first act of the worshipper. Traditional Jewish prayer begins with praise of God, and then turns to requests of the Divine. This is the first request:

You graciously endow man with wisdom and teach insight to a mortal.  
Endow us graciously from yourself with wisdom, insight, and discernment. Blessed are you, Eternal, gracious giver of wisdom.

Only then, after affirming man's God-endowed capacity for wisdom and insight, does the Jew turn to confession and repentance:

Bring us back, our Father, to your Tora, and bring us near, our King, to your service, and influence us to return in perfect repentance before you. Blessed are you, Eternal, who desires repentance. Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred; pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned; for you pardon and forgive. Blessed are you, Eternal, the gracious One who pardons abundantly.

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This is immediately followed by a plea for redemption:

Behold our affliction, take up our grievance, and redeem us speedily for your name's sake, for you are a powerful Redeemer. Blessed are you, Eternal, Redeemer of Israel.

The order of the blessings is theologically instructive. The first step toward repentance, Judaism argues, is realization of the awesome abilities with which man has been endowed. Only from within this confident perspective is it appropriate to speak of overcoming our flaws and repenting our sins. Only then, after man has established his moral and intellectual stature and repented for his sins, is God asked to act as the "Redeemer of Israel." The path to God's presence, and ultimately to redemption, is thus founded on the dignity of man rather than on his wretchedness.

Jewish liturgy almost never speaks about an irreparably flawed and wretched humanity. The one apparent exception occurs in the *ne'ila* service, the climactic end to the Yom Kippur prayers, when man's penitence reaches its most intense, desperate expression:

What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? What is our virtue? What our help? What our strength? What our might? What can we say to you, Eternal our God and God of our fathers? Indeed, all heroes are as nothing in your sight, the men of renown as though they never existed, the wise as though they lacked knowledge, the intelligent as though they lacked insight; for most of their actions are worthless, the days of their lives are like nothing in your presence: "So that man has no preeminence above a beast; for all is fleeting."<sup>36</sup>

Man can be beastlike; he has been so in the past and will be so again in the future. When he does not use his God-given capacity in a moral manner, man is truly insignificant, no matter how revered among other men he may be. But then, in the same breath, the prayer switches tones, and concludes as follows:

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[Nevertheless,] you have chosen man at the very inception, and you have recognized him as worthy of standing before you.

Despite the depths to which humanity is capable of sinking, Judaism maintains the belief that in spite of the sin of Adam and all those who followed him, man is still worthy of standing before God. Even as man has fallen, he can rise again of his own accord.

We have in the publican, writes Luther, “a beautiful example of true Christian repentance and faith, and an excellent masterpiece of high spiritual wisdom or theology, of which the Pharisee and those like him have never received a taste or smell.”<sup>37</sup> Luther was right to the extent that Jews have never followed the publican’s example; we ask for God’s forgiveness by telling him that we can earn his friendship, rather than by asserting that we deserve his enmity. The publican’s approach to repentance focuses on human wretchedness, Judaism’s on human worthiness.

## V

Thus far we have addressed the gulf separating the Jewish and Christian approaches to redemption, messiah, and repentance. Yet there is a sense in which these differences all indicate a deeper divide, one that colors the way each religion relates to the world in which we live. This divide concerns the meaning of history itself.

Paul’s doctrine of original sin is a picture of a world gone awry, reflected in humanity’s inability to live righteously. The nineteenth century’s most famous Catholic convert, John Cardinal Newman, reflected that a brief look at the world should convince any theist of the truth of Paul’s doctrine:



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If I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me, when I look into this living busy world, and see no reflection of its Creator.... [To consider] the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turns out to be great powers or truths, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, not towards final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words, "having no hope and without God in the world"—all this is a vision to dizzy and appall; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution. What shall be said to this heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer, that either there is no Creator, or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from his presence.<sup>38</sup>

Here Newman is presenting us not merely with a defense of the idea of original sin, but also with a theodicy, an approach to evil's existence in this world. The wretchedness of man, Newman argues, and evil's reign on this earth allow us only one of two approaches: Either God does not exist, or something has gone terribly wrong with humanity. Those who affirm the existence of God must also admit that a wrench has been lodged in the machinery that is man, fettering his conscience and his ability to do good. According to Newman, this wrench can be removed only by Jesus' death on the cross.

In Maimonides' *Laws of Kings*, by contrast, we find a thoroughly different theodicy. In reflecting upon the crimes committed by Christians and Muslims and upon the terrible and unfair suffering of the Jews, Maimonides presents us with a vision of a sinful world that is nonetheless able to become worthy of redemption:

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All the prophets affirmed that the messiah would redeem Israel, save them, gather their dispersed, and confirm the commandments. But he [Jesus] caused Israel to be destroyed by the sword, their remnant to be dispersed and humiliated. He was instrumental in changing the Tora and causing the world to err and serve another beside God. But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator; for our ways are not his ways, neither are our thoughts his thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite [Muhammad] who came after him only served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written, “For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they all call upon the name of the Eternal to serve him with one consent.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, the messianic hope, the Tora, and the commandments have become widely known—discussed even in the far isles and among many peoples, uncircumcised of heart and flesh. They are discussing these matters and the commandments of the Tora.<sup>40</sup>

This passage makes several striking points. First, Maimonides is convinced that theological error, as well as virulent anti-Semitism, is alive and well among the adherents of Christianity. Yet he does not look out at this world and pronounce, as did Newman, that he sees “no reflection of its Creator.” Even as Maimonides argues that Christianity unfairly distorted Judaism in an idolatrous way, and even as he reflects upon the Christian persecution from which so many Jews suffered, he depicts a humanity that can improve and learn from God’s teaching. Ultimately, in Maimonides’ view, man is capable of making himself worthy of the messianic era.

Moreover, Maimonides here expands on the connection between the messianic redemption and the worthiness of those who will be redeemed. In *Laws of Repentance*, we were informed of the prophets’ promise that the Jews would repent. Now, however, Maimonides takes up a more universal theme: The preparation for the messiah involves not only Israel, but also the influence of Jewish teaching on humanity. This may not require that all

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mankind become righteous in the period prior to the end of days. Nevertheless, Maimonides' vision insists not only that the redemption of Israel is dependent on the repentance of the Jews, but also that humanity, at least partially, will first have to become worthy. In the messianic era, the world will finally, of its own accord, learn to worship God with "one consent," with no salvational messiah taking its sins upon himself.

This, then, is the theological essence of Judaism: A belief that man has been blessed with the ability to become deserving of redemption, an ability that man's sinfulness does not foreclose. Reflecting on this contrast between Maimonides and the New Testament, Haifa University philosophy professor Menachem Kellner noted that Paul, "because of his revolutionary, un-Jewish view of human nature as necessarily falling short of the glory of God, was led to ask the wrong question. The question that Jews must ask is: What must we do in order to make the world messiah-worthy?"<sup>41</sup> For Christians, the messiah arrived because man could not conquer his own lust. Judaism, in contrast, has always insisted that the redeemer will not arrive until man has learned to rule himself—and that man has the ability to do so.

## VI

In light of the foregoing, one may anticipate the following objection: Does not so positive an attitude toward mankind's abilities lead inevitably to hubris, to the belief that man can achieve greatness without God's assistance at all? Has not the modern era been plagued by worldviews such as communism and fascism, ideologies that were based precisely on the belief in man's ability to recreate the world anew? This question was posed by Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the twentieth century's most influential

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American theologians, and one of the most eloquent defenders of the concept of original sin:

The utopian illusions and sentimental aberrations of modern liberal culture are really all derived from the basic error of negating the fact of original sin. This error... continually betrays modern men to equate the goodness of men with the virtue of their various schemes for social justice and international peace. When these schemes fail of realization or are realized only after tragic conflicts, modern men either turn from utopianism to disillusionment and despair, or they seek to place the onus of their failure upon some particular social group, ... [which is why] both modern liberalism and modern Marxism are always facing the alternatives of moral futility or moral fanaticism. Liberalism in its pure form [that is, pacifism] usually succumbs to the peril of futility. It will not act against evil until it is able to find a vantage point of guiltlessness from which to operate. This means that it cannot act at all. Sometimes it imagines that this inaction is the guiltlessness for which it has been seeking. A minority of liberals and most of the Marxists solve the problem by assuming that they have found a position of guiltlessness in action. Thereby they are betrayed into the error of fanaticism.<sup>42</sup>

There is, Niebuhr argues, a danger in denying original sin, and in taking a positive attitude toward humanity's redemptive potential. In other words, the Jewish approach to man can be misused. "I have read enough," writes columnist John Derbyshire, "to know what a stupendous debt our civilization owes to the Jews. At the same time, there are aspects of distinctly Jewish ways of thinking that I dislike very much. The world-perfecting idealism, for example, that is rooted in the most fundamental premises of Judaism, has, it seems to me, done great harm in the modern age."<sup>43</sup>

The point is a powerful one, and it therefore bears mentioning that Judaism never asserted that man is inherently good. In fact, God's observation in Genesis that "the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth"

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has never been lost upon Jewish thinkers.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, unlike Christianity, Judaism never understood Adam as being inherently good before what Christians term the Fall. Rather, human beings were created with the ability to determine their own fate, an ability undiminished by the events in Eden. The Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits puts it rightly:

Judaism disagrees with the Christian interpretation of human nature. Man is, of course, not good, but he is capable of goodness. He is a responsible creature.... From the Jewish point of view, Christianity has not discovered an idea of God which is superior to the one taught by Judaism; rather, it has adopted a radically pessimistic evaluation of human nature as compared with the critical optimism of Judaism concerning all creation.<sup>45</sup>

It is true that Judaism is fundamentally optimistic regarding humanity's moral capacity, and that it rejects Christianity's thoroughly negative assessment of it. But this is, as Berkovits points out, a "critical optimism": Man must have pride in what he can accomplish, but also humility regarding what he must learn in order to do so.

It is for this reason that Judaism has always stressed the importance of law as the medium through which man may improve himself. The Tora represents, on the one hand, the idea that man is beholden to a divinely decreed morality; he cannot seek to redeem the world in whatever fashion he sees fit. On the other hand, the very idea that man is obligated to a complex of laws such as the Tora is itself indicative of God's faith in man's potential. Berkovits writes:

The law is a sign of God's confidence in man. Man *can* follow it and the responsibility is his.... If, as a result of original sin, man's nature is corrupt, if he can do no good by his own strength, then of course the rigor of a code of "Thou Shalt" is meaningless. If, however—as Judaism teaches—man has been equipped by the love of God with the potential

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for continuous moral and spiritual increase, then the law expresses the idea that God does consider and regard man.<sup>46</sup>

Judaism stresses man's inherent capacity, but emphasizes that if he is ever to flourish, he must first pay fealty to a transcendent moral order. Indeed, the very sentence that epitomizes the Jewish approach to redemption—"Israel will be redeemed only if it repents"—reflects both our faith in man and our awareness of the need for man to repent. Before redemption becomes a possibility, man must adhere to a rigorous moral standard. Judaism thus rejects both original sin and utopianism. To those who argue that man cannot save himself from sin, Judaism says stoutly: "Israel will be redeemed only if it repents." And to those who maintain that man can achieve a redemptive end through any means that he sees fit, Judaism responds stubbornly: "Israel will be redeemed only if it repents."

## VII

**W**e have delineated Jews' and Christians' differing approaches to redemption, and how these approaches reflect two unique views of humanity. Yet it is not impertinent to ask: Why is this contrast so important? Why is it necessary to highlight the differences between these two faiths? Some would advise instead that in an age of nihilism and secularism, Jews and Christians ought to focus on what they have in common, rather than on what divides them. Jews and Christians certainly share a commitment to something that so many others today deny: The idea that there is a purpose to history, and that we are participants in a history endowed with meaning. As Richard John Neuhaus has put it: "For both Christians and Jews, past and present participate in what Paul calls 'the fullness of time'.... Jews disagree with Jews and Christians disagree with Christians over the

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eschatological scenarios and apocalyptic details by which ‘the fullness of time’ will be achieved, but all are agreed that history is not, in the words of the cynic, just one damn thing after another; history will be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.”<sup>47</sup>

The answer is that although the two faiths look at history through a religious lens, it must be stressed that the Jewish and Christian perspectives on man’s role in the unfolding of history could not be more different. This difference has, in fact, prevailed since the emergence of Christianity from Judaism two thousand years ago. As the era of the Second Temple drew to a close, Jews began to grapple with the seeming failure of the prophets to predict the future. After all, the Bible had assured Israel of the advent of a kingdom of God here on earth, in which all of mankind would serve God “with one consent.” Yet humanity had not turned to worship the Almighty; evil was rampant on earth, which for Jews was epitomized by Roman rule over the Holy Land. One Jew, a former Pharisee named Paul, proposed a solution: Humanity had not turned to God on its own because it *could not*; Israel did not earn redemption because it was not able to do so on its own. Redemption was not something that humanity earned; rather, it required that God take the sins of his servants upon himself.

While most Jews rejected Paul’s theology, it is all too often assumed that they did so solely because they rejected Jesus as the messiah. Such a view ignores the far more profound disagreement between the two faiths, a disagreement which persists to this day. The Jews rejected the Pauline view not merely because it conflicted with their view of the messiah—indeed, Jewish history is filled with disputes over proposed messiahs, disputes that did not necessarily bring about the kind of rupture that separated Jews from Christians. Rather, the Jews rejected Christianity because Pauline theology contradicted everything they believed about the relationship between God and man, and about man’s role in history. Evil, according to the Jews, could not be blamed on a cosmic flaw or original sin, for that would deny man’s moral capacity. The messiah had yet to arrive, Judaism insisted, because man had yet to become worthy of his arrival.

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Over several centuries, Paul's perspective triumphed throughout the civilized world. Meanwhile, the Jews went into exile, reviled by much of humanity as a scourge. Yet despite centuries of persecution, despite witnessing the evil that humanity can commit, Jews never lost faith in the possibility that man would choose the good, and thereby earn redemption. If anyone over the centuries should have adopted Paul's picture of inherent evil and a belief in original sin, it should have been the Jews; yet their faith in man never waned. The story of Jewish history over the last thousand years is, to no small extent, the story of concentration camp prisoners who, as a part of the Yom Kippur prayers, declared that man is "worthy of standing before God"; of Jewish scholars, persecuted by Gentiles, who nonetheless looked for signs that humanity was improving; and of Jews in the ghettos of Europe who, with faith in themselves and in humanity, sat at their seder on Passover night, and waited expectantly for a knock on their door.

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## **Notes**

1. Harvey Cox, *Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian's Journey Through the Jewish Year* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), p. 124.
2. Cox, *Common Prayers*, p. 125.
3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 840.
4. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), p. 101.
5. Deuteronomy 30:1-3.



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6. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Repentance 7:5.

7. It is often assumed that this issue—whether the Jewish people must deserve redemption in order to be redeemed—is a subject of great debate among the rabbis of the Mishna. Yet a study of the relevant passage reveals this not to be the case. The passage appears in Sanhedrin 97b:

Rav said: All predestined dates [for redemption] have passed, and the matter [now] depends only on repentance and good deeds. But Samuel maintained: It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his [period of] mourning. This matter is disputed by Tannaim: R. Eliezer said: If Israel repents, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed. R. Joshua said to him: If they do not repent, will they not be redeemed? Rather, the Holy One, blessed be he, will set up a king over them, whose decrees shall be as cruel as Haman's, whereby Israel shall engage in repentance, and he will thus bring them back to the right path.

In other words, both mishnaic opinions, as well as both talmudic opinions, assume that the redemption will not take place before repentance occurs; the debate focuses merely on whether there is a guaranteed date by which the Jews, because of historical circumstance, will be motivated to repent, or if, in Rav's words, "all predestined dates [for redemption] have passed."

8. Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Orot, 1980), pp. 134-135.

9. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Repentance 7:5.

10. Peli, *On Repentance*, pp. 135-136.

11. Romans 3:23.

12. Romans 9:16.

13. John 3:16.

14. Romans 5:18.

15. I Timothy 2:5.

16. Acts 4:12; "The Gift of Salvation," *First Things* (January 1998), pp. 20-23.

17. Miroslav Volf, "The Lamb of God and the Sin of the World," in Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et al., eds., *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Oxford: Westview, 2000), pp. 317-318.

18. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 64.

19. Titus 3:5.

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20. Genesis 38:14-18.

21. Genesis 38:26. It is noteworthy that throughout the book of Genesis, it is Joseph, and not Judah, who seems most suited for leadership. He was, after all, the regent of Egypt, the man who saved the world from certain starvation, and who paved the way for the Exodus. Moreover, unlike Judah, Joseph is a paradigm of sexual restraint, resisting the charms of Potifar's wife. According to the Talmud, Joseph was saved from sin by his desire to honor his father. Yet it is Judah, and not Joseph, from whom, as Jacob himself declares, "the scepter shall not pass." Genesis 49:10. Joseph was destined to lead in Egypt, but not in Israel. For a man who is pious, perfect, and pure is one whom we may very much admire, but who can by no means inspire those who are not like him. Only one who is flawed, one who is like the subjects he was chosen to rule, can inspire those he leads to overcome their own flaws. Throughout the medieval period, the Jews spoke of a second messiah, a messianic descendant of Joseph who would attempt to redeem Israel and die trying. For Christians, the death of one perfect, pious man is sufficient to provide redemption for all, but Jews insisted that the death of a "messiah of Joseph" would not redeem Israel; rather, it was a son of Judah that would lead Israel—but only after Israel itself repents, and the world is made worthy of the messianic kingdom.

22. "When Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. Thus Israel tied itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Eternal's anger was kindled against Israel.... Those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand...." Numbers 25:1-3, 9.

23. II Samuel 11:2-4, 27.

24. See I Kings 1.

25. Luke 1:26-35, emphasis added.

26. Frederick G. Holweck, "Immaculate Conception," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, [www.newadvent.org/cathen/07674d.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07674d.htm).

27. Genesis Rabba 41:4.

28. For this they found support in a verse in Psalms bearing David's name, declaring that "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Psalms 51:7.

29. Horayot 10b.

30. Luke 18:10-14.

31. Martin Luther, *The Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1983), vol. iv, p. 366.

32. II Samuel 12:7-13.

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33. II Samuel 24:17.
  34. *Catechism*, paragraphs 2665-2667.
  35. Genesis Rabba 22:6.
  36. Ecclesiastes 3:19.
  37. Luther, *Sermons*, p. 366.
  38. Edward T. Oakes, "Original Sin: A Disputation," *First Things* (November 1998), pp. 16-24.
  39. Zephaniah 3:9.
  40. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Kings 11:4.
  41. Menachem Kellner, "How Ought a Jew View Christian Beliefs About Redemption?" in Frymer-Kensky, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, p. 275.
  42. Oakes, "Original Sin," pp. 16-24.
  43. John Derbyshire, "The Jews and I," *National Review Online*, [www.nationalreview.com/derbyshire/derbyshire041001.shtml](http://www.nationalreview.com/derbyshire/derbyshire041001.shtml).
  44. Genesis 8:21.
  45. Eliezer Berkovits, "Law and Morality in Jewish Tradition," in Eliezer Berkovits, *Essential Essays on Judaism*, ed. David Hazony (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2002), pp. 350-351.
  46. Eliezer Berkovits, *Judaism: Fossil or Ferment?* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 61.
  47. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Idea of Moral Progress," *First Things* (August 1999), pp. 21-27.