

DEAR RABBI

Letters from Steve Schwartz, a Jew, to Rabbi Cohen

Introduction

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord. Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

This verse from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah has meant much to me. It reveals that God wants to *reason* with us. He doesn't expect us to take a blind leap of faith into unreality or non-reason. He gives us credit for being intelligent, reasoning creatures, and He desires to communicate certain truths to us in His written word, the Bible.

Upon hearing that someone was a "Bible-believer," I used to think: "How can a person of such intelligence accept such foolishness?" But that was before I studied the Bible for myself. In 1975 I found out for myself what it was like to be a Bible-believer, and I discovered that it was more intellectually, emotionally and spiritually satisfying than anything else I had ever experienced. It required faith but not a blind leap of faith.

To the contrary, before I accepted the Bible as God's truth, I first investigated both sides, devouring books by both the skeptic and the believer. I read books on history, archaeology, theology and philosophy. I studied the Bible, the Talmud, and many Jewish and Christian writings. I didn't begin my studies in an objective manner; I was a non-believer through-and-through.

But when my preconceptions started to crumble under the weight of facts, I had no other choice but to accept the Word of God without reservation. Of course, this meant that my new belief was bound to be at odds with modern Jewish thought, especially as it concerns the Messiah.

Naturally, I had many questions which I felt could best be answered by a rabbi. The material you see here consists of correspondence between myself and a Conservative Jewish rabbi who is head of a large congregation in the Midwest.

It is my sincere hope that you read the letters with an open mind and an honest desire to discover the truth. Weigh both sides of the debate and then make up your own mind.

Letter #1 - My First Letter to the Rabbi

Dear Rabbi,

It's been a long time, rabbi. I don't know if you'll even remember me. I'm happy to report that my wife and I are doing fine, and we are the proud parents of a

baby girl. We named her Rebecca after the wife of Isaac, the Old Testament patriarch.

Speaking of the Old Testament, I have been studying it intensively for the past two years, and I've found many remarkable things in it. I have many questions that I'd like to ask you, rabbi, which is really the primary reason I am writing you at this time. I'd like to hear how you would answer the following questions.

According to the 70 rabbis who worked on the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word "almah" ([Isaiah 7:14](#)) is translated "parthenos" meaning virgin.* Why do the rabbis today say it means "young woman"?

Are they simply trying to dispose of the argument for the virgin birth of Christ?

I'm sure you know the meaning of the two words "yachid" and "echad" for *one*. Why is the word "echad" (meaning a *composite* oneness) used to describe God in the *Shema* while Moses Maimonides uses "yachid" (meaning *absolute* oneness) in his Thirteen Articles of Faith?

Is Maimonides trying to dispose of Old Testament evidence in support of the trinity of God?

Why are the 52nd and 54th chapters of Isaiah read aloud every year in the synagogue, but the Isaiah 53 is *never* read? This chapter seems to describe the life, trial, death and resurrection of Jesus. Is this why the chapter is skipped over?

Furthermore, if the suffering Servant of this chapter is "Israel" as the rabbis today claim, how can the servant die as a substitute for the sins of Isaiah's people - Israel? That would mean that Israel is dying as a *substitute* for the sins of Israel...which doesn't make much sense.

Whose death is described by David in the 22nd Psalm? Also, how could David describe death by crucifixion when that manner of capital punishment was unknown at the time? I know that Christians believe this psalm predicts the sufferings and death of Jesus.

The Old Testament (particularly Leviticus) testifies that there is no atonement without blood, sacrificed on the altar. Where do we get the idea that our sins are forgiven by going without food or water for a 24-hour period? It seems to me that God is pretty specific...and He never lifted His requirement for the atoning blood.

It seems to me that today we have a Day of Atonement...but no atonement.

Finally, the Old Testament says that the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham through Isaac through Jacob through Judah, of the house of David, that he would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14) in the town of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that he would be preceded by a forerunner (Malachi 3:1), and it even predicts that he would arrive before the destruction of the Temple - which occurred in the year 70 C.E. (Daniel 9:24-26).

Furthermore, the Messiah would be a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18-19), rejected by his own people (Isaiah 53:3), betrayed by a friend (Psalm 41:9), sold for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12), smitten, spat upon and mocked (Psalm 22:7-8), crucified (Psalm 22), but would be raised from the dead in three days (Psalm 16:10, Jonah 1:17).

There are more than 300 prophecies in the Old Testament which all find their fulfillment in one particular man...and you know which man I'm speaking about. Now, who do *you* say the prophets are speaking about?

Permit me one more question, rabbi. Who is Jesus of Nazareth? I know you don't think that he is God, and that's certainly what I believed; but who, then, is he? If he is not God, then he must be either a lunatic (who really believed he was the Messiah) or a liar who was despicable enough to draw people away from God.

From the staggering things he said about himself, it doesn't seem possible to dismiss him simply as a good or wise man. My final question is, Who is Jesus Christ: lunatic, liar or Lord?

I know these aren't easy questions for you to answer, but I would greatly appreciate hearing from you as soon as you have the time.

Incidentally, I happen to believe-like the great Jewish philosophers and theologians-that the Old Testament is the actual Word of God, so I hope you'll use Moses and the prophets as your authority.

Thank you for your help, rabbi, and I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Steve Schwartz

Letter #2 - The Rabbi's Response

Dear Steve,

It was really a wonderful surprise to hear from you. I do remember you, and I'm glad to hear that you and Carol are happy and that your Rebecca is a wonderful young lady. May she grow in health and peace.

I'm most happy to answer your questions. However, I would suggest that you try to get either of two books from the public library. The first is entitled, "A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament," by Samuel Sandmel. The second is by the same author, entitled, "We Jews and You Christians."

If you cannot find them either at the library or at the local synagogue, please let me know and I will try to find them for you. They are by a professor who is considered the leading Jewish expert on early Christianity and the New Testament.

I now hasten to answer your seven questions as quickly as possible.

The Hebrew word, "almah" is recognized by 99% of Biblical scholars today as meaning young woman. The translation of the Septuagint into "parthenos" is accepted even by most Christian scholars as a misinterpretation.

That is why such versions of the Bible as the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible—both published by Protestant groups—translate the virgin as "young woman." It did not mean only a virgin, although a young woman of that age could be a virgin.

The question, Steve, is whether you are going to read something into the Biblical story or to accept it as it is. In its context, Isaiah is merely telling the king that before this young woman gives birth, the two kings to the north will be destroyed.

I believe in reading the Bible for what it contains, not reading a later thought into it.

The two words "yachid" and "echad" actually mean the same thing. Maimonides uses "yachid" which was the popular form of the Hebrew during the Middle Ages. Just as Old English of the Middle Ages is different from Modern English, so the Biblical Hebrew was slightly different from the medieval Hebrew.

However, there is absolutely no difference between the words one and unity. As a matter of fact, they are based on the same three Hebrew letters. Once again, to read in the idea of "composite oneness" distorts the meaning of the original Hebrew.

It is not true that the 53rd chapter of the Book of Isaiah is never read. All of the section known as "Suffering Servant" is read during the synagogue year. We Jews have taken the "Suffering Servant" to be a symbol of the Jewish people.

All Jews are suffering servants and all serve to purify God through their suffering. When you say that the "Suffering Servant" is Israel, I think that you are misinterpreting this to mean the State of Israel. Israel in this context means the chil-

dren of Israel, the people of Israel, the Jewish people.

Many Jews have died and suffered not only for our sins but for the sins of the Christians and Moslems who inflicted death upon us.

David's Psalm 22 describes the "Prayer of a Lonely Soul." Never once is crucifixion mentioned in David's Psalm. Again, Steve, why read things into the Bible that are not there? May I suggest that you go to the library and get a copy of "The Interpreter's Bible," Volume 4. Beginning on page 115, you will see commentaries on the Psalm.

Certainly, Jesus, having been a Jew, knowing this verse, quoted it when on the cross. But because he did doesn't mean that David was crucified. This was merely the prayer of one who was very lonely and upset.

The Bible does say that sacrifices are necessary. However, the Talmud tells us that, after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70 of this Era, sacrifices were replaced by prayer, good deeds and charity. In this way, the Jew not only atones for his sins, but acts in a way to bring praise to himself and God.

Yom Kippur is one day out of the year that we remember about our sins. However, our atonement goes on forever. We are told that we cannot pray to God for forgiveness unless we first ask our fellowman for forgiveness. Atonement must be a very personal thing, and we Jews atone directly to God rather than through an intermediary or a middle-man.

I can understand your feelings by pulling a verse here and a verse there about the Messiah. However, you have to understand that many of these sections of the bible were written hundreds of years apart. It would be easy for me to pull verses from any book after I have a belief in a certain man as Messiah, and say that they proved it.

It is impossible to answer your question in a short paragraph. You have to know all about the Bible, about Jewish history, and about each of the authors and the contexts of their statements to understand it.

May I suggest that you read the books that I have mentioned to see the Jewish point of view. May I also suggest that you find a book called "The History of Messianic Speculation in Israel" by Abba Hillel Silver. He covers many of these questions in his book.

The basic problem is this, Steve. The Jews expected a Messiah who would come to change the world order—who would bring peace on earth and resurrection of the dead. Jesus of Nazareth came and died and did not do this. The prophets were each speaking in their own way about their hopes for the future.

Their prophecies were certainly not fulfilled in the life of Jesus—at least for the Jews. If anything, the world got worse rather than better. The Jews could not accept him as a Messiah, because he did not do what the Messiah was supposed to do.

We Jews believe that Jesus was a wonderful man who lived and died within the Jewish community. We believe that his followers made him into the only begotten son of God—but that his writings, as far as we can read them, were very similar to Jewish belief at the time.

Remember that the four Gospel writers had never met him—neither had St. Paul. They all came much later and wrote about him but had not been with him. Therefore, we do not feel that he was either a lunatic or a liar. We feel that he was a great teacher and rabbi who had great love in his heart.

I hope that these answers are satisfactory and look forward to hearing from you.

Cordially,
Rabbi Cohen

Letter #3 - My Response to the Rabbi

Dear Rabbi,

Thank you very much for responding to my letter and for saying such nice things about my 10-month-old daughter. I certainly want to raise Becky in a proper way and this means most of all a proper spiritual upbringing.

More than anything else, I want to teach her the Scriptural truths concerning God, man and man's relationship to God. That's why the subject I brought up in my last letter is so important to me. I believe that God wrote the Old Testament (through the prophets) to let us know what He expects of us.

And I believe with all my heart that a Messianic theme runs through every book of the Old Testament. I have to say that your answers to the questions in my last letter seem to be the modernistic Jewish answers which really don't reflect the traditional Jewish thought. I will attempt to back this up, using Jewish writings to do so.

You say the Hebrew word "[almah](#)" is recognized by 99% of Biblical scholars as meaning young woman. I don't know where

you got your information, but I could list here scores of Jewish and Gentile scholars who believe the word "almah" is properly translated "virgin."

And you can't deny, Rabbi, that the 70 top Jewish scholars who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek all thought that "almah" means virgin, since they used the Greek word "parthenos"-virgin.

Furthermore, I find that the word "almah" is used just seven times in the Old Testament and each time it refers to what can only be a virgin. So when you say "almah" is mistranslated, you are disagreeing with traditional Jewish thought.

One more thing before leaving this area. Looking ahead to chapter 9, verse 6 of the same book, one finds a description of this special child:

"For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on his shoulders; and his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."

A child will be born who will be called "Mighty God"? Jewish commentators did not dispute the Messianic nature of this prophecy until modern times. As proof, let me cite the paraphrase of this passage given in *Targum Jonathan*:

"And there was called His name from of old, Wonderful, counselor, Mighty God, He who lives for ever, the messiah in whose days peace shall increase." (Targum of Isaiah)

Rabbi, I agree with you that you shouldn't read something into the Biblical story that isn't there. However, I think it is just as dangerous to delete things that *are* there.

Now to your statement that the words "yachid" and "echad" mean the same thing. I have studied this intensively, and I have found that they definitely do *not* mean the same thing.

"Yachid" is used in the Bible when an absolute, *indivisible* one is intended; this is the word Moses [Maimonides used to describe God in his second Principle of Faith](#). On the other hand, "echad" is used in the Bible for a compound, *divisible* unity, as, for example, when God says in Genesis 2:24, "And they (husband and wife) shall be one (echad) flesh."

In your letter, you say that "yachid" was simply the Medieval Hebrew meaning the same thing as the Biblical Hebrew word

"echad." This doesn't hold true, however, because Moses used *both* words in the Torah, so we see they were used concurrently. The only conclusion I can reach is that Maimonides was trying to cover up important Biblical evidence for the tri-unity of God by calling Him an *absolute one* (yachid).

The Biblical use of the word "echad," however, is by no means the only evidence that establishes the fact of the tri-unity of God. Beginning in Genesis, we find that a common name given to God is *Elohim*, a plural word. Why didn't Moses use the singular form, El? Also, many times we come across the use of *plural* pronouns for God as in Genesis 1:26: "Then God said, 'Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness...'"

Even the sacred Jewish book, the *Zohar*, testifies to the truth of the trinity in its comment on the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one, " (Deuteronomy 6:4).

"Why is there need of mentioning the name of God three times in this verse? The first Jehovah is the Father above. The second is the stem of Jesse, the Messiah Who is to come from the family of Jesse through David. And the third one is the way which is below (meaning the Holy Spirit who shows us the way) and these three are one."

I'm afraid my research doesn't bear out your answer that the "Suffering Servant" section is read in the synagogue.

According to the Jewish calendar of Haftorah readings, the 53rd chapter of Isaiah is *not* read. In point of fact, the Haftorah reading for Shofetim includes chapters 51 and 52 while the Haftorah reading for Noah, Sephardi ritual and Ki Tetze begins at the 54th chapter. Isaiah 53 is blatantly skipped over.

I think it is important to note that Rashi (11th century) was the first one to suggest that the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 represents Israel. Until then, the Suffering Servant was almost universally understood by the Jews as referring to the Messiah. By no means does Rashi's interpretation represent the traditional Jewish interpretation.

Here are a few references to back me up:

Rabbi Moshe Kohen Ibn Crispin (14th century) states that those who for controversial reasons apply the prophecy of the Suffering Servant to Israel find it impossible to understand the true meaning of this prophecy, "having forsaken the

knowledge of our teachers, and inclined after the stubbornness of their own opinions."

Their misinterpretation, he declares, "distorts the passage from its natural meaning," for "it was given of God as a description of the Messiah, whereby, when any should claim to be the Messiah, to judge by the resemblance or nonresemblance to it whether he were the Messiah or no."

He also said, "I'm pleased to interpret the passage in accordance with the teaching of our rabbis, of the King Messiah...and adhere to the literal sense. Thus, I shall be free from forced and far-fetched interpretations of which others are guilty."

Rabbi Elijah de Vidas (16th century) said: "Since the Messiah bears our iniquities, which produce the effect of his being bruised, it follows that whoso will not admit that the Messiah thus suffers for our iniquities must endure and suffer for them himself."

Rabbi Moshe el Sheikh, chief Rabbi of Safed, stated: "Our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view."

Isaac Abrabanel, a bitter opponent of Christianity, made the following statement about Isaiah 53: "Jonathan ben Uzziel interprets it in the Targum of the future Messiah; and this is also the opinion of our learned men in the majority of their Midrashim."

The original Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 survives to this day. It is preserved in Jewish liturgy for the Day of Atonement in the Musaf prayer:

"We are shrunk up in our misery even until now! Our rock hath not come to us; Messiah, our righteousness, hath turned from us; we are in terror, and there is none to justify us! Our iniquities and the yoke of our transgressions he will bear, for he was wounded for our transgressions; he will carry our sins upon his shoulder that we may find forgiveness for our iniquities, and by his stripes we are healed. O eternal One, the time is come to make a new creation, from the vault of heaven bring him up..."

Thus, it is obvious from the above prayer that the Jews of that era (8th century) believed that the Messiah had already come and were praying that He may come a second time.

Rabbi, I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that the Talmud, the Zohar, the Midrashim, and the Jewish Prayer Book all support the view that Isaiah 53 refers to the Messiah *not* the people of Israel.

The modern Jewish answer can't be taken seriously by either the scholar or the casual reader. According to the Scripture passage in question, the Servant is described as "righteous," as "sinless," as a willing sufferer, and actually dying.

Not one of these statements can be applied to the Jewish people, as any unbiased person would be willing to admit.

Moving right along, we come to Psalm 22. You say the psalm doesn't mention crucifixion. Of course it doesn't! How could David use the word "crucifixion" when this manner of capital punishment was unknown to the Jews of his time?

But the psalm does say, "They pierced my hands and my feet" (Psalm 22:16). Sure sounds like crucifixion to me. In fact, the Midrashim (called the *Pesiqta Rabbati*) applies this psalm to the sufferings of the Messiah, so once again we find that traditional Jewish thought and modernistic Jewish thought are at odds with one another.

You're quite right in saying that David wasn't crucified; it was David's descendant, the Messiah, who was crucified-David predicts the manner of the Messiah's death in this psalm. Jesus even quoted the first verse of this psalm from the cross.

Now we move into the heart of our discussion-the need for a blood sacrifice to atone for our sins. You agree with me when you say, "The Bible does say that sacrifices are necessary." But then you say that the Talmud replaces sacrifices with prayer, good deeds and charity. While there are many fine and beautiful statements in the Talmud, I have to call a halt when the Talmud (a commentary written by men) starts contradicting the Bible. The Bible says:

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for our souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement" (Leviticus 17:11).

Who gives anyone the authority to say, "You don't have to obey that rule anymore. You can simply fast and do good deeds." Wherever you look in the Old Testament, you find His people offering blood sacrifices to become acceptable in God's

sight.

The Hebrews had to apply the blood of a slain lamb to the doorposts of their homes if they wanted their firstborn to survive. As God put it, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Exodus 12:13).

Much of the Torah-almost the entire book of Leviticus-is devoted to the subject of blood sacrifices.

Let's turn to the article on atonement given in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*:

"...the blood, which to the ancients was the life-power of the soul, forms the essential part of the sacrificial Atonement. This is the interpretation given by all Jewish commentators, ancient and modern, on the passage... The life of the victim was offered... as a typical ransom of 'life by life'; the blood sprinkled by the priest upon the altar serving as the means of a renewal of man's covenant of life with God... The cessation of sacrifice, in consequence of the destruction of the Temple, came, therefore, as a shock to the people... It was then that Johanan b. Zakkai, declared works of benevolence to have atoning powers as great as those of sacrifice. This view, however, did not solve satisfactorily for all the problem of sin... Hence, a large number of Jews accepted the Christian faith in the Atonement by the blood shed for many for the remission of sins." (Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler)

The "Christian faith" mentioned above is actually the faith to which I adhere. May I suggest you read a book called *Christianity Is Jewish* by Edith Schaeffer (Tyndale House) for additional light on the subject. Hebrew Christians base their atonement with God on the Biblical basis of "blood atonement sacrificially provided." Modern Jewish thought bases atonement on the Talmud, the word of man.

You say that Jesus did not do what the Messiah was supposed to do and for this reason the Jews do not accept Him as the Messiah. I disagree. The Bible says the Messiah would come first as a Suffering Servant, that He would die for the sins of His people, that He would be raised from the dead on the third day, and that He would return as a conquering King who would rule forever.

Multitudes of first-century Jews accepted Jesus as the Messiah; some estimates say that *millions* of Jews accepted Him. Others, however, desired and expected the Messiah to imme-

diately set up His eternal Kingdom, directly in conflict with Scriptures that said the Messiah must first die.

Jesus did exactly what the Old Testament Scriptures predicted. What more could be asked of Him? Isaiah (chapter 53) and Daniel (chapter 9) both predict the death of Messiah and His resurrection. And Zechariah tells us something very interesting about the Messiah's return:

"And I (God) will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a firstborn" (Zechariah 12:10).

In other words, someday the Jewish people will be confronted by the Messiah "whom they have pierced" and will suddenly realize how wrong they have been to reject Him. This is the true Day of Atonement, when all of Israel will repent and turn to the Messiah.

Before you tell me I'm reading something into this passage that isn't there -that it isn't speaking of the Messiah-let me just quote from two respected and authoritative Jewish sources.

Commenting on this passage first is Rabbi Abraham ben Ezra (12th century):

"All the heathen shall look to me to see what I shall do to those who pierced Messiah, the son of Joseph." Next is a rather lengthy quote from Rabbi Moshe el Sheikh, chief rabbi of Safed:

"I will do yet a third thing, and that is, that 'they shall look unto me,' for they shall lift up their eyes unto me in perfect repentance, when they see Him whom they pierced, that is Messiah, the Son of Joseph; for our Rabbis, of blessed memory, have said that He will take upon Himself all the guilt of Israel, and shall then be slain in the war to make an atonement in such manner that it shall be accounted as if Israel had pierced Him, for on account of their sin He has died; and, therefore, in order that it may be reckoned to them as a perfect atonement, they will repent and look to the blessed One, saying, that there is none beside Him to forgive those that mourn on account of Him who died for their sin: this is the meaning of 'They shall look upon me.'"

You tell me "it would be easy for me to pull verses from any book after I have a belief in a certain man as Messiah." I'd like to challenge you to do just that. A Mr. Fred J. Meldau has offered a \$1,000 reward to anyone who can "produce any Christ, living or dead (other than Jesus of Nazareth) who can fulfill even half of the predictions concerning Messiah."

Looking at the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, we find that hundreds of prophecies were all fulfilled in the life of one individual- Jesus of Nazareth. Speaking of eight key prophecies, Peter Stoner, a mathematician, points out, "We find that the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled eight of the prophecies is one in 100,000,000,000,000,000" (*Science Speaks*, Moody Press). And the probability of any one man fulfilling all of these hundreds of prophecies is a number too large to write down.

To conclude this section, let me just add one more thing. You say that Jesus "came and died." But you make no mention of His resurrection. You may deny it really happened, but the resurrection is the best-attested event in history. Many books have been written on the subject, and it's much too deep to go into at this time. But let me quote former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brewer:

"The existing evidence of Christ's resurrection is satisfactory to me. I have not examined it from the legal standpoint, but Greenleaf has done so, and he is the highest authority on evidence cited in our courts."

I am enclosing a copy of Simon Greenleaf's evidence for your edification(*available free-of-charge from Book Fellowship International, P.O. Box 164, No. Syracuse, NY 13212*). May I also suggest you read *Who Moved the Stone?* (Zondervan Press) by Frank Morrison. It's particularly interesting, because it was written by a man who started to write a book disproving the reality of the resurrection. By the time he was finished, he was a believer!

You seem to be unwilling to take a stand on [whether Jesus was Lord, liar or lunatic, preferring to describe him as a "wonderful man."](#) Does such a description fit a person who claimed to be equal with God, who forgave sins but said he had no sins of his own, who predicted his own death and resurrection?

No, I still maintain that your "wonderful man" option is implausible.

You tell me that "the four gospel writers had never met" Jesus and that "they all came much later." This is not true. Listen to the testimony of William F. Albright, who is considered to be the world's foremost Biblical archaeologist:

"We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about A.D. 80, two full generations before the date between 130-150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today. In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D."

Since the New Testament was completed so soon after the events it describes, the one element necessary to the creation of myths-time-was not available.

In effect, what you're saying is that the Gospel writers "made up" the Gospel accounts and that they bear little resemblance to what really happened and what Jesus really said. Considering the fact that most of the apostles and early Christians laid down their lives rather than their faith, your contention lacks credibility.

Could you imagine Mark Twain and all of his associates submitting to torture and death to prove that Huckleberry Finn really existed? Some of the top psychologists and experts in legal evidence have said that this just couldn't happen, and they have become believers on this very basis.

People might lay down their lives for a lie in which they sincerely believe, but they don't for a lie of their own invention.

You suggested that I read a couple of books by Samuel Sandmel. I have already read his *We Jews and Jesus* and believe he is quite honest when he admits, "I must be straightforward in saying that my approach is partisan; it is Jewish and not neutral."

All in all, I would say that Sandmel presents a very unbiblical account of which I disapprove. Please keep in mind that when I started investigating the claims of Hebrew-Christianity, I, too, was very biased *on the Jewish side*. I read Hugh Schonfield's book, *The Passover Plot*, and a number of other books by Jewish authors. After studying both sides, I came to the inescapable conclusion that the modernistic Jewish approach to the Scriptures is dishonest.

While I didn't want to believe the Christian side, the Old Testament evidence was all in their favor.

Now may I suggest you read a few books that will explain the Hebrew-Christian position better than I can. In addition to the books previously mentioned, read:

- *Judaism and Christianity, Are They the Same?* by David Bronstein (O'Neil, Oliver, MacKenzie, Inc.)
- *Jesus, the Jew's Jew* by Zola Levitt (Creation House).
- *Jesus Was a Jew* by Arnold Fruchtenbaum (Broadman Press).
- *The Bible, the Supernatural and the Jews* by McCandlish Phillips (Bethany Fellowship).
- *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy* by Arnold Fruchtenbaum (Baker Books).
- *The Messianic Hope* by Arthur W. Kac, M.D. (Baker Books).
- *The Chosen People Question Box II* by Dr. Henry Heydt (American Board of Missions to the Jews).
- *The Prophet Isaiah* by Victor Buksbazen (Spearhead Press).
- *Where in the World Are the Jews Today?* by James and Marti Hefley (Victor Books).
- *A Hebrew Christian Looks at Isaiah 53* by Sanford Mills (American Board of Missions to the Jews).

If you haven't already guessed, I am a Hebrew Christian. I maintain that I can believe the Old Testament and in the Messiah it predicts, and still remain a Jew. While some Jews consider me to be a traitor, my question to them would be, "If Jesus really is the Messiah, who's the traitor?"

I'm not condemning you or anybody else, rabbi. God will judge us all in the end. But upon what *basis* will we be judged? According to the Bible, we will be judged by whether we believed God and believed in the blood sacrifice He Himself provided for the remission of our sins.

I've got something now that I never had before-the joyful assurance that I'm acceptable in God's sight through the shed blood of His Son. I base my views solidly on Scriptural ground. I read the Bible and I pray every day, something I never dreamed of doing in the past.

I consider myself a better Jew than before, because now I am a Jew in the Biblical sense of the word. As you know, Abraham became "righteous in God's sight" when he *believed* God. He wasn't circumcised until later, and the Mosaic law came much later still, so neither of these things made him righteous. Now that I too believe God, I know that I am "righteous in God's sight" and that I am a complete Jew.

Rabbi, I wouldn't have taken the time to write this lengthy letter if I

didn't care about you. Let me close by saying that many rabbis have put their trust in the Messiah and have gone on to do great things, never regretting their decision.

Have you seriously considered what the Bible says about the Messiah and about blood atonement? As Jesus said, "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote of Me." My final question to you is, do you believe Moses?

From Deuteronomy 18:18-19:

"I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you (Moses), and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him."

Sincerely,
Steve Schwartz

Letter #4 - The Rabbi's Final Response to Me

Dear Steve:

Thank you very much for your lengthy letter of December 29. I must say that I am happy that you have found happiness in your new faith. I don't think it is necessary for us to continue arguing.

You have taken certain sources and wish to read into them what you wish. I, as a rabbi, have spent over 16 years in deep, scholarly research of Judaism. If I would say to you that you are reading things into the Bible, you would not agree with me.

Since I respect your decision, I am most happy that it is meaningful to you. I, as a Jew, cannot accept that one who is a Christian still wishes to call himself a Jew. Why not be honest and say that you are a Christian, and leave it at that?

Furthermore, I think that Judaism respects Christianity's right to see God in its way. I, therefore, would not only ask but demand the same of those who are Christians. As I said before, I really don't think it necessary to continue the dialogue as I will not dissuade you from your belief, neither shall you dissuade me from mine.

I would only say that you are reading one type of literature and one type of book. To quote the sources such as Rashi and others and even begin to think that they would consider belief in Jesus as the Messiah is absolutely ridiculous. They never did and never would, and therefore should not be used in that way.

Faith should be a personal thing, and if you wish to believe that way, that is fine. Just please don't try to falsify what is truly Judaism to fulfill your personal needs.

I hope you continue to find fulfillment in your faith.

Sincerely,
Rabbi Cohen

Letter #5 - My Final Response to the Rabbi

Dear Rabbi,

I'm disappointed you don't wish to correspond anymore, but I will respect your wishes. However, before we stop communicating, I just had to respond to some of the issues you brought up in your last letter. Don't feel obligated to write back. But if you do, your letter will be most welcome.

First of all, I considered this correspondence a legitimate form of expression called a discussion; I'm sorry you thought it was an argument. What I really object to is your implying that I'm not in your league because I haven't "spent over 16 years in deep scholarly research." The length of time spent in study doesn't necessarily mean anything. It certainly doesn't mean that you have the truth and that I do not. For one, I know of many people who have studied much longer than you and who have not reached the same conclusions as yourself. For another, I'm sure you'll admit that your studies consisted mainly of Talmudic rather than Old Testament studies.

The Old Testament claims for itself that it is the Word of God - more than 2,600 times, in fact. The Talmud never claims for itself such a distinction. It is merely a commentary on the Old Testament and a commentary on the commentary. Therefore, the Talmud is the word of man, and man has a good record of being wrong. Focusing one's study on the word of men, therefore, is a good way of perpetuating error. The men who wrote the Talmud lived thousands of years ago, long before the tremendous advances in Biblical studies, Hebraic linguistics, archaeology and anthropology. However, I must say it's remarkable how often the Talmud itself lends support to the Hebrew-Christian position. Alfred Edersheim's monumental work, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, concludes with a lengthy appendix which cites hundreds of Old Testament passages considered by the writers of the Talmud to concern the Person or times of the Messiah. in agreement with the Hebrew-Christian position.

How can you suggest I'm no longer a Jew because I believe in the Old Testament and in the Messiah it predicts? You can call me anything you like, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm still a Jew. If you were to ask a Jew in Israel, he would say that we American Jews are not real Jews because we have not returned to the land of Israel. Orthodox and Reform Jews also look upon each other with disdain and engage in name calling. Remember that a Jew is one who is a descendant of Jacob through any of his twelve sons. Even your colleague, Samuel Sandmel,

recognizes that Christianity is Jewish when he writes in his book, "If one rises above nomenclature, then, it is by no means incorrect to speak of Christianity as Judaism. Indeed, of the many varieties of Judaism which existed in the days of Jesus, two alone have abided into our time, rabbinic Judaism and Christianity" - *We Jews and Jesus*, page 151.

I, too, respect your right to see God in your way; I'm not forcing anything on you. All I'm trying to do is show you that one's faith must be based on truth. Neither sincerity nor intensity of faith can create truth. Faith is no more valid than the object in which it is placed. Believing doesn't make something true, per se, and refusing to believe a truth cannot make it false.

The real issue is the question of truth. Now, if Jesus is "God made flesh" - as the Bible says - He deserves the worship due God. If, on the other hand, Jesus is not God, worshiping Him would be a terrible mistake. So while I continue to respect your right to see God in your own way, surely you must see that we cannot both be correct. The basic issue, once again, is truth.

I disagree when you say that I cannot be dissuaded from my beliefs. If you could present pertinent facts refuting my position, I would have to listen. I agree with you, however, that I wouldn't be able to dissuade you from your beliefs.

I know of a Rabbi Max Wertheimer, of Dayton, Ohio, who came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and suffered some of the consequences. When his alma mater - Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati - found out about his belief in Jesus, his name was dropped from the roll of graduates.

I maintain that your major objection to Jesus is not theological in nature but sociological.

In your letter, you accuse me of reading "one type of literature and one type of book." I would invite you, rabbi, to examine my personal library to see exactly what I've been reading. I have read - and continue to read - books which try to refute my beliefs.

I find in all such books one thing in common - a lack of respect for the Bible. I don't have to defend the Bible; it can stand on its own merits and has done so for thousands of years.

I believe that the Bible makes a true claim for itself - that it is God's written word. It is either God's Book about man and of infinite value, or it is man's book about God and of questionable value.

Oh, the book's ethics and moral standards are on a high plane. But you'll find much the same sort of thing in other religious and philosophical works. But if the Bible claims to be God's Word - but in reality is not - then it's a book of lies and deserves to be disregarded.

Furthermore, I never said that Rashi or my other sources believed Jesus

to be the Messiah. Some may have believed but never said so for the sociological reason I gave above. More likely, they didn't believe because people who claimed to be Christians were, at their time, persecuting the Jews.

Let's take Rashi, for example. During Rashi's time, the Crusaders, with a cross in one hand and a sword in the other, were herding Jews into synagogues and burning them to the ground.

But were these Crusaders really Christians? They went against every teaching of Jesus. They claimed to love the king of the Jews, yet went around killing Jews. No, they weren't real Christians; they were counterfeits. But the Jews couldn't know that.

It is to be expected that Rashi's writings would reflect this animosity toward Christians. Consider the intellectual honesty of Rashi's statement on that crucial passage, Isaiah 53:

"Since Christians interpret Isaiah 53 as being a prophecy concerning Jesus, we maintain that this is a prophecy concerning the people of Israel."

As I have already pointed out in a previous letter, most of Rashi's contemporaries disagreed with his new interpretation. Furthermore, you cannot say with certainty that Rashi or my other sources "never did and never would" accept the Christian faith. By the things they wrote, I'd say that some of them did, but of course I cannot be certain.

I'm certainly not alone in my beliefs. Current estimates state that there are some 100,000 Messianic Jews (Hebrew Christians) at the present moment, but many more who haven't "gone public" with their beliefs.

You say that "faith should be a personal thing." That sounds reasonable on the surface, but your view is directly in opposition to the entire teaching of the Old Testament.

Somehow I can't remember God telling the Israelites: "Go ahead and build your golden calf; it makes no difference to Me." Or: "Go ahead and worship Baal; faith should be a personal thing."

Finally, you say, "I hope that you continue to find fulfillment in your faith." Thank you, rabbi, I will. Here's how I know this. My faith works because it is true. Many people think their faith is true because it works and gives them the feeling of closeness to God.

My feelings are probably indistinguishable from yours, but when it comes down to that final day, the day of standing before God, I want my faith to be grounded in God's truth. Subjective feelings of "fulfillment" are very weak grounds upon which to base your faith.

Why do people believe in absolutes in the field of mathematics and science, yet feel that "man's approach to God is up to the individual"? The Bible says there is just one way to God - through the Messiah, His Son, and no other.

My faith is based on the Bible and on historical, objective facts, not on feelings, nor the philosophical reasonings of men. After all, men are too prone to be wrong, so I cannot put my trust in them. I have to go along with King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, and say: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5).

Sincerely,
Steve Schwartz

P.S. Rabbi, I really would appreciate hearing from you again. I hope you don't think I'm writing these letters just to be argumentative. You see, I'm proud of my Jewish heritage, but I'm not proud of the way we have strayed from God and from the Old Testament teachings.

My desire is to return to the faith of the Old Testament. The very essence, or core, of Biblical Judaism is the Messiah. Without the Messiah, the only thing left in Judaism is tradition. And tradition cannot put us into a close relationship with God. Neither can tradition atone for our transgressions.

As for me, I can't reject the Messiah just because most Jews reject the Messiah. Since when is truth determined by a majority vote? The hundreds of Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament all point to one Person, and I can't reject Him without rejecting the prophets, the bible and God for making a promise He didn't keep. I believe God did keep His promise and that the Messiah came right on schedule. I also believe I'm a better Jew, because I have accepted and believed God's Word, You see, I'd rather call Jesus "God" than call God "a deceiver."

Please feel free to write me again.

Postscript

The rabbi never responded to this letter.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I will let the letters speak for themselves and allow you to draw your own conclusions. May I just encourage you to read the Bible for yourself. Remember, both the Old and the New Testament were written by Jewish authors and were intended for a Jewish audience; they set forth the basis of the Jewish faith and are indispensable to the Jew seeking his religious heritage.

Determine the truth for yourself; it's too important a matter for you to depend on someone else's opinion, be it mine or a rabbi's.

Sincerely,
Steve Schwartz

The Old Testament Chapter that Was Banned from the Synagogue

In "Dear Rabbi," I made the claim that Isaiah 53 is never read in the

synagogue, although the chapters immediately before and after it are read. The rabbi, on the other hand, claimed that Isaiah 53 is read. Who's right? The Haftorah readings in synagogues and temples all over the world are identical for the designated Sabbath days. The following chart reveals the way this "Suffering Servant" passage - from Isaiah 52:13 through Isaiah 53:12 - is omitted.

Haftorah Reading

Ekeb

Isaiah 49:14 - 51:3

Shofetim

Isaiah 51:12 - 52:12

Noah

Isaiah 54:1 - 55:5

Sephardi Ritual

Isaiah 54:1-10

Ki Tetze

Isaiah 54:1-10

Re'eh

Isaiah 54:11 - 55:5

So we see that the Haftorah readings heard in the synagogue conclude at the very verse which begins the controversial "Suffering Servant" passage. and the readings pick up just after the 53rd chapter of Isaiah.

While some Jewish authorities state that the omission was not purposeful, others see a good deal of significance in the omission. For example, Herbert Loewe - a Reader in Rabbinics at Cambridge University and co-author with Claude Montefiore of A Rabbinic Anthology - had this to say on the subject:

"Quotations from the famous 53rd chapter of Isaiah are rare in the Rabbinic literature. Because of the christological interpretation given to the chapter by Christians, it is omitted from the series of prophetic lessons (HAFTAROT) for the Deuteronomy Sabbaths. The omission is deliberate and striking." (op. Cit. P. 544)

If you'd like to see for yourself if the "Suffering Servant" passage is skipped, you can find the schedule of synagogue readings listed in many Jewish calendars and in Jewish Bibles.

Isaiah 53

Make up your own mind as to why this chapter is omitted from the Haftorah readings. Also, ask yourself as you read this passage - writ-

ten about 700 years before the time of Jesus: "Of whom does the prophet speak?"

1 Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?

2 For he shall grow up before him like a tender plant, and like a root out of a dry ground; he hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

3 He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

8 He was taken from prison and from judgment; and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

9 And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief. When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

11 He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied; by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bore

the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Notes:

"Almah"

There are hundreds of Jewish and Gentile Bible scholars who believe that the prophet Isaiah was predicting the virgin birth of the Messiah. A list of the Jewish scholars alone would include such names as Dr. Sanford C. Mills, Milton Lindberg, Dr. Arthur W. Kac, Dr. Henry J. Heydt, Dr. Leopold Cohn, Dr. Jacob Gartenhaus and Dr. David L. Cooper. All of these eminent Jewish theologians believe that the Hebrew word "almah" is best translated by the word "virgin."

"Yachid"

The second Principle of Jewish Faith by Moses Maimonides: "I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is an absolute one (yachid) and there there is no oneness in any manner like unto His, and that He alone is our God, who was, is and will be." Compare this with the words of the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4 from the Jewish Scriptures: Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one ("echad" - unity consisting of more than one part).

Isaiah 7:14

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

Lunatic, Liar or Lord

C.S. Lewis, the one-time agnostic who became a Cambridge University professor and brilliant man of letters, had this to say about the subject of Jesus being a "wonderful man":

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic-on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg-or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse" (*Mere Christianity*, Macmillan Publishing Co.).

All of the above is from:

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