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Why Were Humans Created? Because God loves stories

The Story of Nelly Sachs

Kierkegaard & Levinas: A Christian & Jewish Reading of the Akedah
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The Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) was established in 1942 to: (1) promote religious and cultural understanding between Christians and Jews; (2) to work for the elimination of religious and racial prejudice, hatred and discrimination particularly antisemitism and (3) to promote religious and racial harmony on the basis of the ethical and social teachings common to Christianity and Judaism

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Contents

2 Editorial and Farewell
   Editor-in-Chief: The Revd. David Gifford

3 Guest Editorial
   Guest Editor: Dr Steve Innes

4 Why Were Humans Created?
   Jason Phillips

6 The Story of Nelly Sachs
   Andrew Shanks

8 Jews, Christians and the Biblical Narrative
   Ed Kessler

10 'I Will Not Die'
   Nicholas Mercer

12 Kierkegaard and Levinas
   Steve Innes

14 A Pilgrimage to Hell
   Jim Forest

16 Stories from the Holocaust
   Marcus Braybrooke

18 A Sculpture Bears Witness
   Edmund Newey

20 Making Sense of Jesus in his Jewish Background
   Patrick Morrow

22 Book Shelf

26 The Restless Quest for Identity
   James Martin

27 Local & Global
   Harris Manchester College Chapel Society

29 Members & People

30 Creating Accepting, Just and Caring Young People
   Kelly Allchin

31 The Last Word...
   John Franks

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This Common Ground explores the theme of story. Story is a huge word! It is full of expectation, anticipation, reflection and meaning. It has the power to bring to the forefront of our consciousness the breadth and depth of human experience; its nobility and its depravity, its courage and vision but also its darkness and error. But above all, perhaps greater, is its potential, because of its power to transform.

In so many ways, Christians have received from Jews the gift of story; the history, poetry, myths, parables, imagery of the Bible. Together we may use it to reflect and then progress to draw truths about our walk with God and to become all He would have us be, as Jews and Christians. This issue hears predominantly Christian voices talking of the Jewish narratives they have encountered and its deep effect on them.

When we approach another’s story this way it really does become truly transformational. Such has been my experience of almost nine years leading CCJ. To have spent countless hours listening to my Jewish friends and colleagues and reading Biblical and Rabbinic stories has prompted profound reflection, both theological and personal: more questions, yes, but also a deeper appreciation, greater empathy and understanding of Judaism and contemporary Jewish life with its enriching impact on Christian belief. The story and narratives offered in this issue of Common Ground, so ably edited by Dr Steve Innes, open up for us new perspectives, of seeing, of listening and, hopefully, of being.

As I depart, I am forever grateful for your story.

The Revd David Gifford
Chief Executive and Editor in Chief: Common Ground

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Guest Editorial

Our Guest Editor for this issue of Common Ground is Dr Stephen Innes, lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion at King's College, London and member of the volunteer team at the CCJ Central Office. His expertise and passion for the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas has provided us with a unique perspective for thinking about Jewish-Christian relations.

This issue of Common Ground seeks to offer some reflection on the theme of stories or narratives in the context of Jewish-Christian relations. More specifically, we wanted to explore questions with regard to how Jews and Christians tell stories: What are some of the unique ways each tradition tell their stories? Are there areas of overlap between the two traditions as to the way stories are told? What is the relation between Jewish or Christian identity and the way stories are both told and interpreted? How might these questions challenge our thinking with regard to how we approach Jewish-Christian dialogue?

The contributors to this issue of Common Ground have addressed these questions in fascinating ways, such as stories about the Holocaust and its continued implications for Jewish-Christian dialogue; telling Jewish and Christian stories through the arts; the importance of religious identity in both telling and interpreting a story's significance; Jewish and Christian interpretation of biblical narratives; and examples of 'new' or 'innovative' ways of telling familiar stories. Our lead article, from the Revd. Dr Jason Phillips, shows how recent research has discovered that human brains are 'hard-wired' for narrative; that is, humans are the story-telling animal and that stories constitute part of the very fabric that makes us human. Dr Marcus Braybrooke reminds us that we must always return again and again to hear particular stories about the Holocaust, because the individual stories of those who died, or survived, or risked their lives to save the life of another helps us to examine our own hearts and challenge certain assumptions we may have. Jim Forest tells his own story of his 'pilgrimage' to Auschwitz and reflects upon the impact it had upon his Christian faith.

On telling Jewish and Christian stories through the arts, The Revd. Canon Dr Edmund Newey writes of the experience of having Charlotte Mayer’s thought-provoking sculpture, The Thornflower, on display at Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford. The sculpture was originally conceived as a memorial to the victims of the Shoah, but it is also intended as a witness to the hope for reconciliation. The Revd. Canon Dr Andrew Shanks is a translator of the deeply prophetic poetry of the German Jew, Nelly Sachs, Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1966. He writes of how Sachs’ poetry functions largely as a response to the Shoah, which involved a radical poetic re-appropriation of religious tradition, both Christian and Jewish; seeking to break the natural cycle of bitter vengefulness. From the perspective of telling stories through music, the Revd. Nicholas Mercer shares the fascinating story of the Terezin Oratorio, a work inspired by the poetry and paintings of children who lived in the Terezin (Theresienstadt) Ghetto and concentration camp.

Addressing the question of religious identity in telling and interpreting a story’s significance, my article looks at how Kierkegaard and Levinas read the story of the Akedah as a way of examining the question of whether there is something about being a Christian or a Jew that uniquely influences the way one reads the story, whilst Dr Edward Kessler looks at some of the broader ways in which Jews and Christians approach the interpretation of a biblical narrative. One of our Programme Managers, the Revd. Patrick Morrow, provides a special book review of two books on the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Our end pieces from John Franks looks at recent scientific discoveries that may influence the debate about the date of the Exodus from Egypt.

It is our hope that these reflections about stories and narratives represent an invitation to think more deeply, perhaps in new ways, about the many fascinating and creative ways in which we engage in dialogue with each other.
Why Were Humans Created?
Because God loves stories...

In our lead article the Reverend Dr Jason Phillips, Anglican priest and former school headmaster argues that we are genetically programmed for storytelling, fitting well with Jewish and Christian heritage.

We learn from the Book of Genesis that humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. Ever since those words were committed to the oral and written canon, people have debated the nature of that image and likeness. Certain Jewish traditions suggest that we have a storytelling God. Further, certain Christian traditions have taught that we have a God who delights in the varied expression of that story; that is in narrative.

It is not surprising, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, that conclusions from research on ‘cognition, narrative and religion’ boil down to the fact that our human brains are hot-wired for narrative. Other academics conclude likewise: humans are the story telling animal and that stories constitute part of the very fabric that makes us human.

We function as human beings mentally, spiritually and socially through narrative. At the level of biological survival we use narrative to rehearse past experience and to project scenarios into unknown situations; enabling strategic decisions for our own wellbeing.

We use narrative to create our own social worlds and to present ourselves as socially acceptable beings both to ourselves and to others. In day-to-day conversation and in re-articulating memory, people relegate and foreground certain aspects of their experience and identity to the audience and context in which they operate. The psychologist Jerome Bruner argues, ‘it is through narrative that we create and recreate selfhood.’ That context shapes our presentation of who we are and how we understand our own narratives.

Perhaps most importantly, narrative is at the core of religion and arguably one of its key dimensions. Narrative is how the stories and the key moral codes of a religion are articulated. For many contemporary religious studies scholars, it is what people do that makes them religious, not necessarily what they believe (belief being a Christian lens through which to view religion). So what makes them do the things they do? And what role does narrative play in forming our decisions about what we do in a given situation?

Part of the fabric of being human is the need to understand, to have purpose and to have value. Rising from these needs are the great existential questions: Why am I here? What is my life worth? What are the principles to inner happiness? Why is there unfathomable evil such as that of the Shoah?

Through millennia, the experiences of Jews and Christians are narrated and mediated by their sacred texts, by tradition, ritual and festival and by many religious communities and cultures. Intertwined are the great themes of the religious narratives shedding light on those existential questions.

It is important to remember, too, that religious narratives are not necessarily time bound or in the past tense but can be played out in simultaneous time frames. For Jews the eternal and immediate significance of Pesach and for Christians the imminence of the Eucharist are both told in ‘real time’.

It is upon these grand narratives of the religions that people can interject or over-lay their own experiences to shape their lives into a comprehensible, worthwhile, immensely valuable story. When this happens religion has relevance and immediacy to its adherents. It meets their basic needs as people. Indeed, such narratives aid the broader articulation of one’s own story that starts to define who we are.

People attend religious communities and adhere to a religious tradition in part because they gain value, purpose and identity through the mingling of their narrative with those of that particular religion. For others, religious narratives open up the possibility for them of a belief in a God and starts to structure their understanding of the divine.

It has long been established that the more we socialise our families and communities through
It is upon these grand narratives of the religions that people can interject or overlay their own experiences to shape their lives into a comprehensible, worthwhile, immensely valuable story.

education and the enactment of the narratives in the context of the home and family (such as the marking of Shabbat, Pesach or Easter), then the more likely the religious narratives will both be known and have a relevance. In the crucible of the family, an emotional connection between religious narratives and the individual is established which secures this relevance. The religious narratives become entangled with me; my life, my family, my history and my future; they become my context that creates my identity. It is therefore the relevance of the narrative that transmits the religious tradition.

Most Jews and Christians operate in the wider world which potentially gives the narratives of the religions huge significance. The narratives of the world, as Paul Ricoeur says, present a new lens through which to establish further horizons of meaning and layers of relevance for the religious narratives and to inform life choices. Engaging with the ‘world-as-it-is’ strengthens the relevance of the religious narratives. Indeed Rabbi Lord Sacks argues that it is imperative for Jews to engage with the world if Judaism is to inspire younger generations of Jews. Judaism, he contends, ‘honours both the universality of the human condition and the particularity of Jewish faith.’ Christian leaders would argue likewise from a Christian perspective.

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The Story of Nelly Sachs

The Revd Canon Dr Andrew Shanks is a retired residentiary canon of Manchester Cathedral. There he worked and studied alongside Manchester’s vibrant Jewish Community. Here he writes about a little-known Nobel prize winner for literature.

The following poem (in the original German, Wenn die Propheten einbrächen) dates from 1946:

Say the prophets came,
knock-knocking on the doors of night,
heads wreathed in horror, circled
by the zodiac
of demon-gods,
the secrets of the mutant sky
weighed, rocking, on their shoulders –
to those who’d, long since, fled in panic –

Say the prophets came
and hammered on the doors of night,
the pathways of the stars engraved
in shining gold upon their palms –
to those long sunk in sleep –

Say the prophets came,
say they burst swinging through the flimsy
doors of night,
and then began to slice with sickle-words
the nodding grain,
to harvest star-lit dreams
of justice for the poor –

who’d, long ago, lost hope and turned aside –

Say they exploded
through the doors of night
in search of fellow-listeners to the word –

O you,
nettles-patch ear,
what chance of a hearing?

Or say the prophets
fashioned flutes
from slaughtered children’s bones,
or say they
cramped the air with ash –
or say they piled up, high, a bridge of sighs,
a rainbow-message from the veterans of the camps –

O you addict
to chatter,
then would you hear?
Say the prophets swept in,
riding the tempest, from heaven,
smashed through your defences,
and clamoured: Beware, lest, warring with Nature,
you’re trapped, in new ways, by what threatens all!

Say the prophets arose
in our midnight,
like lovers intent on their loves –
O midnight,
have you the heart to respond?

Nelly Sachs.

A German Jew, Sachs had escaped with her mother on the 16th May 1940, catching the very last flight from Berlin to Stockholm before the service was discontinued for the duration of the War. She had already received her summons to forced labour from the Nazi authorities before the Swedish visa arrived.

When she escaped, she was 49. Prior to this time she had written one or two things, but nothing really notable. All the work for which she is remembered today emerged from the trauma of survival and exile. First: a poetry of, so to speak, monumental lamentation, as exemplified above. Then, increasingly: a quieter, still more compacted sort of riddling religious meditation.

Nowadays, I find, very few English-speaking people have even heard of her. This seems to me a shame. The name of that other great 20th century German-Jewish poet Paul Celan is more familiar. They became friends. But there is a fundamental contrast between Celan’s work and Sachs’. He came from an observant Jewish-religious background; yet, in responding to the
horrors of the Shoah, lost his faith. She, on the other hand, had been brought up in a fundamentally secular sort of environment. Nonetheless, her response to the Shoah involved a radical poetic re-appropriation of religious tradition, both Christian and Jewish; seeking to break the natural cycle of bitter vengefulness.

Celan repudiates any religious consolation. Sachs, for her part, represents a form of religious faith which simply has nothing to do with consolation in the first place. Her faith is, indeed, entirely tragic. It is, in essence, an infinite intensification of lament, and hence a sheer refusal of anaesthetic despair.

In 1966 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature; jointly, with Shmuel Yosef Agnon. But during the 1960s she also spent several years in psychiatric hospitals, suffering severe bouts of paranoia. Her poetry remains, I think, quite sane to the end, albeit mysterious. Only, the writing of it involved a deliberately willed, sustained exposure to the trauma which she had lived through, and which she sought to commemorate. It seems that this eventually broke her.

For some years now, I have been translating Sachs’s poetry into English. And I have just begun posting some of those translations on a blog. The blog’s web address, for those who might be interested in reading more, can be found at http://drandrewshanks.blogspot.co.uk

I know of no modern poetry that is more authentically, I am inclined say, ‘prophetic’ in character. None indeed that more consistently, or vividly, itself, as a whole, enacts the moral urgency which the lines I have quoted are meant to evoke.

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Jews, Christians and the Biblical Narrative: The Binding of Isaac

In this essay Ed Kessler of the Woolf Institute examines the response of Jewish sages and the Church Fathers to the story of Binding of Isaac.

The story of Abraham’s attempted sacrifice of Isaac has been an important passage for Judaism and Christianity from an early period. For Jews, from at least as early as the third century CE, the passage has been read on Rosh ha-Shana. For Christians, from around the same period, the Sacrifice of Isaac was mentioned in the Eucharistic prayers and the story is read in the period leading up to Easter.

In the interpretations of the Church Fathers, Isaac is described like the biblical account as a child. Cyril of Alexandria (early 5th century), for example, emphasizes Isaac’s youth by describing him as ‘small and lying in the breast of his own father’. Origen, (3rd century) explains how, during the tortuous three-day journey, Abraham viewed Isaac as ‘the child who might weigh in his father’s embrace for so many nights, who might cling to his breast, who might lie in his bosom...’

The rabbinic position was quite different. The rabbis stated that 'Isaac was 37 years of age when he was offered upon the altar'. Other interpretations gave 26 or 36 years. It is significant that, whilst the precise age varied, the rabbis were consistent in their portrayal of Isaac as an adult. None of the rabbinic interpretations, in direct contrast to those of the Church Fathers, hinted that Isaac might have still been a child.

Could Isaac’s willingness to give up his life be a rabbinic response to the Christian teaching that Jesus was willing to give up his life for Israel?

Both Jews and Christians lived—and continue to live—in a biblically orientated culture which has resulted in similarities between Jewish and Christian approaches to Scripture. There is an insistence on the harmony of scripture and an emphasis on the unity of the text. Consequently, many Jewish and Christian interpretations were understandable to adherents of both religions.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together. Gen 22: 6-8

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it was incomplete. Isaac represents Jesus, who was going to suffer. He parallels Jesus and also looks forward to Jesus.

Typology not only provided parallels between Isaac and Christ but also contrasts. Isaac pointed forward to the even more amazing deed in the sacrifice of Christ. These contrasts, such as Melito’s comment that ‘Christ suffered, [but] Isaac did not suffer’, demonstrate that it was important that the sacrifice of Isaac was not completed in any way but simply prefigured the future sacrifice. Isaac remained the model, the child, waiting to be fulfilled by Jesus, the adult.

The rabbis, on the other hand, maintained that Isaac was an adult. His action was not to be interpreted in the light of any later event but had significance in its own right.

Like the Church Fathers, the rabbis also commented on Isaac carrying the wood and the following interpretation appears remarkably similar:

‘And Abraham placed the wood of the burnt-offering on Isaac his son.’ Like a man who carries his cross (tzaluv) on his shoulder.

This interpretation is not found in a relatively unknown collection but in one of the best-known rabbinic texts—Genesis Rabbah—which is also one of the oldest exegetical midrashim. The reference to a cross is, I would suggest, influenced by descriptions of Jesus carrying his cross to the crucifixion.

There are other indications of what I would call an exegetical encounter between Jewish and Christian commentators. For both the rabbis and the Church Fathers, Isaac was willing to give up his life at his father’s command. He offered himself up. For both, Isaac was not forced by human hand to carry the cross but carried it freely and willingly. So the rabbis:

Sovereign of the Universe, when my father said to me, ‘God will provide for Himself a lamb for the burnt offering’, I raised no objection to the carrying out of Your words and I willingly let myself be bound on top of the altar and stretched out my neck under the knife.

Could Isaac’s willingness to give up his life be a rabbinic response to the Christian teaching that Jesus was willing to give up his life for Israel? In their view, so willing was Isaac to give up his life that they described the Akedah in terms such as ‘the blood of the binding of Isaac’ as well as ‘the ashes of Isaac’. This is startling because the biblical account explicitly states that the angel stopped Abraham from harming his son and commanded him ‘not to do anything’ to Isaac.

The eighth-century CE Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, states that not only did Isaac die but, soon after, experienced resurrection:

When the sword touched his neck the soul of Isaac took flight and departed but when he heard the voice from between the two cherubim saying, ‘do not lay a hand’ his soul returned to his body and [Abraham] set him free, and he stood on his feet. And Isaac knew the resurrection of the dead as taught by the Torah, that all the dead in the future would be revived. At that moment he opened [his mouth] and said, ‘Blessed are You, O Lord, who revives the dead.’

Like the rabbinic reference to carrying a cross, the interpretation of the death and resurrection of Isaac is clearly influenced by Christianity. It was not a big step for the rabbis to view the Akedah as redemptive and as illustrative of God’s miraculous life-saving power. It was then cited in connection with the resurrection of the dead. ‘Through the merit of Isaac, who offered himself upon the altar the Holy One, Blessed be He, shall raise the dead.’

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The Binding of Isaac is not only a text that is of significance for both Judaism and Christianity but its interpretations reveal an encounter which took place many centuries ago, the echoes of which may still be heard today.
There can be few more moving stories than that contained in this article about a unique choral work. The Reverend Nicholas Mercer, 2012 Human Rights Lawyer of the Year, explains how a chance encounter opened up life changing insights.

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest’ Isaiah 62 v 1

Shortly before I went on the trip to Israel earlier this year with CCJ and its partners AIA and Greenwood, I was very fortunate to meet Marion Rice-Oxley. It was one of those chance encounters in life which happened, in this case, whilst we were waiting in the local Post Office. Neither of us had ever met the other but a conversation about mundane things quickly led to the unfolding of a remarkable story.

During the Holocaust, the Terezin (Theresienstadt) Ghetto in Czechoslovakia was a waiting station for the Nazi death camps. It was deliberately designed to deceive the International Committee of the Red Cross and fifteen thousand Jewish girls and boys passed through the gates of Terezin. Fewer than one hundred survived. Many of the children expressed their feelings and thoughts in the art and poetry which they produced while in the Ghetto. Some of these works survived and were eventually published in 1964 in a book entitled I Never Saw Another Butterfly. Included in the book was an anonymous poem from barracks L318 which read,

‘The world’s abloom and seems to smile, I want to fly, but where, how high? If in barbed wire things can bloom, Why couldn’t I – I Will Not Die.’

The poems and paintings inspired Canadian violinist, Ruth Fazal, to compose Oratorio Terezin. Ruth felt compelled to respond to the sense of hope that she felt in the children's work: 'I was deeply touched by the sense of hope in the children's poems despite their terrible conditions. She felt a deep spiritual connection with the story and 'the whole process of writing the piece was out of a relationship with God and allowing Him to show me the things that break His heart'. The Oratorio beautifully tells the story of the Jewish children, of God, of suffering, and of the Hebrew scriptures. As Ruth said, it was 'a love song... a message of hope, composed in the context of so much darkness' – 'I was responding to what I felt God was asking of me'. As well as Ruth's response there was an 'extraordinary response' to her Oratorio at its debut in Toronto in 2003. Thanks to the help of a legacy from a Christian benefactor, the Oratorio was then taken on tour across Europe and finally to Israel, where it was performed in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2005. The journey of the oratorio was captured by the filmmaker Marion Rice-Oxley, which resulted in a film of the tour entitled I Will Not Die.
The re-telling of a story many times has a Biblical resonance. Whereas in the Bible the story would be told orally before being reduced to writing, in our modern age the transmission of a story passes through many different mediums. In this case the story has been told first in poetry and art and then through music and film, and finally in print including the internet. However, the remarkable element of this story is the fact that a Jewish story has been retold by Christians, all of whom have been deeply touched by the narrative. Why would Christians be moved to tell a Jewish story? This could be explained, in part, by our common Biblical heritage as well as a mutual response to the suffering of others—whether the slaves of Egypt, the Holy innocents or the suffering servant. There is also something much deeper at work which cannot be fully explained. The compulsion to tell the story may come from God himself and be part of his narrative at the same time: As the prophet Isaiah said to all descendants of the Hebrew scriptures, ‘For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest’.

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest.
Kierkegaard and Levinas: On a Christian and Jewish Reading of the Akedah

It is widely understood that for both Christians and Jews the Akedah—the story in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac—belongs to what one might call the 'common treasure', a paradigmatic story of the mysterium tremendum that pervades both of the so-called 'religions of the Book'.

But do Jews and Christians read the story’s significance in the same way? Or said differently, is there something about being a Christian or a Jew that uniquely influences the way one reads the story?

One way of answering this question is to turn to Søren Kierkegaard’s reading of the Akedah in his well-known work Fear and Trembling, as well as Emmanuel Levinas’s response to Kierkegaard’s reading in an essay entitled Existence and Ethics. As we will see, Levinas’s response suggests that Kierkegaard’s presentation of the story is viewed through a specifically (and importantly, unacknowledged) Christian lens. Consequently, there is in Levinas’s response a suggestion that the apex of the story—and hence its significance—is different for Jews than it is for Christians.

Writing under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard examines the paradox that lies at the heart of Abraham’s obedience to the command to sacrifice Isaac. In both Christian and Jewish traditions, Abraham is acknowledged as the father of faith, but in contemporary times, de Silentio remarks, no one is content with faith. Everyone thinks that they can begin with faith and go further (through reason, for example).

Early in Fear and Trembling, de Silentio expresses bewilderment at how incomprehensible Abraham’s faith is: Abraham didn’t question God, he didn’t explain himself to anyone; he simply obeyed God’s command. He then presents the reader with four alternative paths that Abraham might have taken, any of which might have rendered Abraham’s actions more understandable, but with the consequence of seeing him as something less than the father of faith. But for de Silentio—and this is one of the crucial themes in Fear and Trembling—it is not possible to understand Abraham, or what he did.

De Silentio distinguishes between the tragic hero, who expresses the 'ethical' or universal (a form of generality that forms the basis of our ethical duty), and the knight of faith, who expresses the ‘religious’. For Kierkegaard, the ‘religious’ is a sphere of existence in which the interior life of the individual remains hidden and incommensurable with the ethical sphere. That is to say, there is a hiddenness in each individual which cannot be communicated, mediated, or understood by anyone. The tragic hero gives up everything in the movement of infinite resignation or duty, and in so doing expresses the universal. The knight of faith also makes the movement of infinite
resignation, but s/he makes another movement as well, the 'leap of faith', where one gets everything back by virtue of the absurd. While the tragic hero is universally admired and wept for, no one can understand the knight of faith.

Kierkegaard sees a parallel between Abraham's knight of faith and the paradoxical duty of which Jesus speaks in Luke 14:26: 'If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and his wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.' He suggests that Abraham's suspension of the ethical and thus for his own family must remain a source of pain. That is, I cannot sacrifice what I hate; I can only sacrifice what I love. Therefore the knight of faith must offer what Jacques Derrida calls the 'gift of death', a sacrifice of what is loved in the name of love.

And yet, as Derrida observes, is Kierkegaard's knight of faith Jewish, Christian, or Judeo-Christian-Islamic? Kierkegaard insists that the radical paradox of the Akedah must be taken seriously, as should Jesus' admonition recorded in the Gospel of Luke. But does this rhetoric of sacrifice betray a uniquely Christian reading of the story? Derrida suspects so: 'As a Christian thinker, Kierkegaard ends by reinscribing the secret of Abraham within a space that seems...to be evangelical [that is, uniquely Christian]. That doesn't necessarily exclude a Judaic or Islamic reading, but it is a certain evangelical text that seems to orient or dominate Kierkegaard's interpretation.'

In his essay Existence and Ethics, Levinas suggests that Kierkegaard describes the encounter with God as the individual rising to the religious level: a private, unmediated relation with God that transcends the ethical order. But, he argues, the story can be given a different orientation. Perhaps ethics is not at all where Kierkegaard sees it. Instead of thinking the religious above the ethical, one could see the opposite: the apex of the story is not Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but it is rather Abraham's attentiveness that led him back to the ethical order—that is, his responsibility for Isaac— forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice. For Levinas, following a broadly Jewish reading, the religious is the ethical. He writes, '[t]hat he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential.'

Moreover, as Levinas observes, Kierkegaard never mentions Abraham's plea on behalf of the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah, a plea which speaks of his concern not just for his absolute duty to God, but for the welfare of the Other. It is in this sense that, for Levinas, the significance of the Akedah reflects a more uniquely Jewish reading:

Death is powerless over the finite life that receives a meaning from an infinite responsibility for the other, from a diacony constituting the subjectivity of the subject, which is totally a [devotion] toward the other. It is here, in ethics, that there is an appeal to the uniqueness of the subject, and a bestowing of meaning to life, despite death.

We see that with Kierkegaard and Levinas, writing from a broadly Christian and Jewish orientation, respectively, even the reading of a common or shared story can have a different significance depending upon one's religious identity. To embrace this reality has significant ethical implications, particularly for interfaith dialogue. For to accept the particularity of one's own identity opens oneself up to welcome the Other not as an individual whose perspective must be viewed through the lens of a supposedly neutral third term (such as Absolute Truth), but precisely as Other, who calls my perspective of the world into question.

Levinas also suspects that there is a uniquely Christian perspective offered by Fear and Trembling, but he takes a different approach. For Levinas, Kierkegaard has missed the apex of the story, and to see the true significance of the story requires a Jewish reading.

### Notes

3. Ibid, 77.
In this article Jim Forest leads the reader to that experience nearly all visitors to Auschwitz struggle with today: that of its horror – and encapsulated in one story.

‘Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and act without asking questions...’
— Primo Levi, survivor of Auschwitz, ‘If This is a Man’

No one is certain how many people died at Auschwitz. Most prisoners were gassed soon after arrival without having been registered, while, for those who were registered, the SS destroyed the bulk of their records before abandoning the camp. But years of research have shown that the figure is not less than 1.1 million: a figure leaving us with a number beyond comprehension. There is no way to envision such a number meaningfully; I cannot take it in.

The way we usually deal with so large a number of human casualties is to focus on just a single face. One face, one story. This is manageable. A single life can open a window on a vast crowd.

One of the most well-known faces of the Holocaust is Anne Frank, who was fifteen when she and her family arrived at Auschwitz (from there transferred to Bergen-Belsen, where she died.) It is consoling to know that her diary has been read or seen enacted in film or on stage by far more people than died in all the Nazi concentration camps combined. Millions have visited her hiding place in Amsterdam. In July 1944, shortly before she and her family were taken away, she wrote in her diary, ‘I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.’

Or there is the face of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish scholar who wrote another widely-read diary of life in Amsterdam during the German occupation, in her case living in the open. Turning down offers to go into hiding, she explained to friends that she wished to share her family’s and her people’s fate. She died at Auschwitz on the last day of November 1943. ‘They [the Nazis] are out to destroy us completely,’ she wrote in her diary. ‘We must accept that and go on from there.... Very well then ... I accept it.... God, take me by Your Hand. I shall follow You faithfully, and not resist too much. I shall evade none of the tempests life has in store for me, I shall try to face it all as best I can. I shall try to spread some of my warmth, of my genuine love for others, wherever I go.... I know that a new and kinder day will come. I would so much like to live on, if only to express all the love I carry within me. And there is only one way of preparing for the new age, by living it, even now, in our hearts.’

So many names, so many stories, so many faces to choose from. More than a million.

It had long been a hope of mine to visit this hell of the modern world. Though far from the only one, Auschwitz provides the most vivid image of the assembly-line production of dead bodies — a factory of absolute nihilism, a revelation of a demonic longing to assassinate God and the divine image in man.

The chance to visit Auschwitz finally came, thanks to an invitation to give a lecture at an interfaith peace conference held in October at the University of Wroclaw in Poland. I was one of three Orthodox Christians from outside Poland who came to the conference.
I had imagined Auschwitz-Birkenau as one interconnected camp, but soon learned that Auschwitz served as the nucleus for more than forty other camps, with nearby Birkenau the point of delivery for the daily trainloads of prisoners, mainly Jews but also Christians, gypsies, homosexuals and political opponents of the Nazis.

During the visit to Auschwitz, I kept thinking of Easter and the resurrection of the crucified Christ from his tomb, an event which, for Christians at least, ought to equip us not to fear death and no longer to be prisoners of hell. But how rare are the Paschal people — and how numerous those who obey orders no matter how deadly the consequences.

Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.

Walking from place to place in the two camps, I felt as if I had turned to wood. Words failed me — indeed my emotions failed me, and they still do. It’s not possible to respond in word or sentiment in an adequate way to evil of such magnitude. The awful images are unerasable. Having been there in the flesh, the events that happened in this rural corner of Poland are forever real to me. Any pilgrim to Auschwitz is brought closer to the mainly anonymous people who died here.

Leaving Auschwitz, I remembered the words of one of its victims, Etty Hillesum: ‘Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled world.’

Photos of our visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum can be found here: http://www.flickr.com/photos/jimforest/set/72157628042735399/
Stories from the Holocaust: Speaking to the Heart

The Revd Dr. Marcus Braybrooke, well known to Common Ground readers here draws us to reflect on the stories of Holocaust survivors and ponder too the untold stories of those who perished.

At the beautiful and moving Children’s Memorial at Yad Vashem (pictured below), recorded voices read the name, age and country of origin of each child who died in the Holocaust. Each name recalls an individual story of misery, grieving and cruelty, which too easily talk of millions of victims may obscure.

Stories of those who died, or survived, or risked their lives to save the life of another, are so valuable because they help us to look into our own hearts.

It is often the small detail that is so moving. The child on the Kindertransport train, alone, heading to an unknown country and an unknown future, whose memory was that ‘nobody was allowed onto the platform to say goodbye. I don't remember the last words my parents said to me’ – they were behind the barriers.

For those in the camps, it is often the small details that reveal the greater indignities as well as the vile cruelty they endured. Rabbi Hugo Gryn, whose faith was to be confirmed in the camps, described the first ‘breakfast’ in Auschwitz. ‘The soup made me feel quite sick. For one thing, there were not enough dishes, so four or six people had to share each one... The soup itself was thick and reeked to high heaven... The slimy taste of it and the absence of spices was more than I could stand.’

Individual stories may also serve to challenge certain assumptions we may have. For example, there are stories which suggest that to say ‘the German people knew about and acquiesced in the genocide’ may in fact be an over-simplification. Some people did, of course, but as Mimi Schwartz discovered in the German village where her parents had lived, when the synagogue was set on fire, the Torah scroll was rescued by a gentile. Years later, when she went back to the village, she met with a grocer who gave Jews food over the back fence late in the evening. She also learned of a barber who displayed a big sign on the door ‘No Jews allowed here’, whilst inside he cut the hair of local Jews.

Indeed, many perpetrators and rescuers were ‘ordinary people.’ As Dar Bar-On writes, ‘Among the perpetrators


we find educated and well-to-do people, as well as simple and Church-affiliated people... We find people who were loving parents as well as people who were not involved in the Nazi party.' Even Arthur Liebehenschel, one of the Commandants of Auschwitz, is described by author Melissa Müller (who wrote an autobiography of Anne Frank) as someone for whom ‘[t]he simple categories of good and evil do not necessarily apply... Did he (the Commandant) have a choice? Is there a time at which the father of the family could have turned to follow his conscience rather than the desire to provide for his family’s security?'

In the same way, Nechama Tec said, ‘When I compared large numbers of non-Jewish rescuers in terms of social class, education, political involvement, degree of anti-Semitism, [and] extent of religious commitment, they were very heterogeneous.’ She also said, ‘Rescuers seem to have seen in their protection of Jews a natural reaction to human suffering. Many insisted that saving life was not remarkable and was unworthy of special notice.’

Stories of the rescuers and perpetrators—‘people like us’—help us to recognise our own human frailty and moral ambiguity. They highlight the importance both of the ethical example that we set and of the education in moral values offered to young people. To tell these stories is to recognise, as the Bible teaches, that each person is made in the image of God. Moreover, telling these stories is the best safeguard against future genocides. ‘To check and combat religious and racial intolerance’ was the first of the agreed aims of CCJ when it was set up in 1942. In partnership with other world faiths, this must remain a priority for CCJ.

…when the synagogue was set on fire, the Torah scroll was rescued by a Gentile.

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5 Melissa Müller in her Foreword to The Commandant’s Daughter, by Barbara Cherish, the History Press, 2009.


7 Ibid, p. 155.


The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey is sub dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford. Here he explains how a sculpture by a Jewish artist and its story had a profound effect not only on him but a wider audience.

The Thornflower, a sculpture by Charlotte Mayer, was with us at Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford from Advent 2013 until Pentecost 2014. I write 'with us' advisedly, rather than 'exhibited' or 'on display', because these months have been a blessing to many of us who live and work around it. We have learned to appreciate The Thornflower's form and texture in different lights and temperatures; at various times of day; amidst the crowds of weekend visitors or in the stillness of the late evening.

The sculpture was originally conceived as a memorial to the victims of the Shoah and in particular to the artist's grandmother, but it is also intended as a witness to the hope for reconciliation. Charlotte Mayer has written of it: ‘The Thornflower is an attempt in sculptural form to reconcile two diametrically opposed elements. The thorns, sharp and cruel, are cut in stainless steel. The flowers, modelled in wax and cast in bronze, are soft and embracing. The sculpture grows from a circular base that speaks of their fundamental unity’.

Considerable care was taken in the siting of The Thornflower at Christ Church. A number of options were discussed in advance, but on Charlotte's visit to the cathedral the right location soon became evident. The sculpture has been standing on the threshold between two side chapels, the Lady Chapel and the Bell Chapel. Architecturally these two interconnecting chapels resemble one another: they can each seat around twenty people, they enjoy a similar level of light from their east windows and the canopy formed by the gothic arches and the stone vault is identical. There are, however, subtle differences.

The Lady Chapel is a warmer, more intimate space. Under the protection of a discreet statue of the Virgin and Child, the Lady Chapel speaks of God’s nurturing love. In Christian terms we would say that this is a place most powerfully associated with the incarnation. In contrast the atmosphere of the Bell Chapel is firmer: taut and clean-cut. This chapel is dedicated to the memory of G.K.A. Bell, Bishop of Chichester during the Second World War, advocate of peace and friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

It is dominated by a startlingly bold solid oak altar (see picture), carved from a single piece of 17th century oak. From the underside of the altar the artist, Jim Partridge, has chain-sawed the wooden cross which stands nearby. The blocky masses of the altar and cross, with their

Photographs: Ralph Williamson.
rough-hewn surfaces, speak of suffering and the struggle for justice. They point to the urgency of Bell’s words, spoken to the German nation in a radio broadcast after the war, and inscribed on the floor in front of the altar:

No nation, no church  
No individual is guiltless.  
Without repentance and without forgiveness  
There can be no regeneration.  
Amen.

I have been particularly interested in my own responses to The Thornflower when participating in the Eucharist held early each morning. The liturgical day opens with Morning Prayer said in another part of the cathedral at 7.15am, after which a small number of us gather for the Eucharist. Twice a week we celebrate at the altars on either side of The Thornflower, and whenever we do so, I have the strong sense that it is a participant in our worship: quietly attentive to all that we do and say. It is also clear that the sculpture is a powerful presence for visitors to Christ Church. Our stewards and tour guides have commented on the reactions it has evoked. Approachably human sized, it stands as a testimony, priestly and prophetic, both to the mystery of human suffering and to the greater mystery of divine mercy. Like Geoffrey Hill’s poem in memory of a child victim of the Shoah, it bears witness to the actuality of a horror that, to those of us who did not encounter it directly, threatens to become blurred by distance; and yet, at the same time, its mode is not just one of lament, but of gratitude and hope, circumscribed but no less real for that.

Standing on the threshold of these two contrasting spaces, The Thornflower has re-configured them both and brought into focus the specific callings of the two chapels, distinct but complementary as they are. More importantly perhaps, it has begun to play a part in our worship. People often talk of works of art ‘speaking’ and I think there are senses in which The Thornflower does this, but I am more strongly aware of this sculpture’s power to listen and bear silent witness.

Approachably human sized, it stands as a testimony, priestly and prophetic, both to the mystery of human suffering and to the greater mystery of divine mercy.

Approachably human sized, it stands as a testimony, priestly and prophetic, both to the mystery of human suffering and to the greater mystery of divine mercy.

September Song

born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable  
you were not. Not forgotten  
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,  
sufficient, to that end.  
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented  
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made an elegy for myself it is true)

September fattens on vines. Roses  
flake from the wall. The smoke  
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough.

Making Sense of Jesus in his Jewish Background

In an extended review of two books CCJ Programme Manager The Reverend Patrick Morrow examines two Jewish approaches to the Gospel Narratives of Jesus of Nazareth.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth must be the best known in the world, or the one most people think they know in outline. But any person’s story – even if theirs is also divine(!) – fits into a wider context, a whole network of other stories. How, then, to make sense of this Jesus in his Jewish background? To say this is still a live question is an understatement. One of the most fascinating aspects of the way the story of Jesus is being told and reflected upon in our days is that many of the voices are Jewish. The gospels (and indeed the whole New Testament) are being reclaimed as the Jewish literature they always were.

How, in the light of this, are we to see Jesus? Another live question! Two contributions from observant Jews which make very different cases are Rabbi Shmuley Boteach’s Kosher Jesus and Professor Daniel Boyarin’s The Jewish Gospels.

Shmuley Boteach, a Chabad rabbi who is also an interfaith entrepreneur, has never noticeably been plagued by self-doubt. True to form, he tells us, ‘In these pages…you will discover the authentic story of Jesus of Nazareth’. By this he means Jesus the observant Pharisee-Rabbi, keeping all the commandments, who is also a ‘patriot’, opposing Roman oppression, at least at times intending physical force. This original story gets more and more eroded, as the gospel texts are written and redacted for political purposes. Jesus becomes not a Jewish enemy of Rome, but a natural dialogue-partner for the Romans, over against the Jews. Subsequent Christians then add layers of paganism to this message, and Jesus becomes a non-Jewish demigod. But hints of the original Jewish Chassid remain.

It is not a new argument, and its prima facie plausibility remains. But this version of it is unlikely to convince any who do not start with sympathy with it. Time and again, the author tells us that gospel-writers obscured and distorted the patriot’s message, without even alluding to evidence. So his argument is simply circular. Sadly, his portrayal of Christianity is beneath caricature, and he makes mistakes too many to mention. One example (91): he says that John’s Gospel places Jesus’ trial on the second night of Passover; in fact, in John, Jesus’ crucifixion itself is before Passover. Anachronisms abound. Thus the Talmud, it is claimed, is the main text of the Pharisees (18), and a work Jesus would have known (24).

The third part of the book is however suggestive, outlining how a rediscovery of the Jewish Jesus can help our contemporary world (by helping America rediscover American values!), and with an appendix on Jewish sources on the death of Jesus (none of those so named was Jesus of Nazareth). This book is a useful, bracing read for people who have never thought about Jesus as Jewish, and is entertaining.

This reviewer would love to be in a room where Shmuley Boteach was challenged by Daniel Boyarin. The latter is as clear as the former about his aim:

‘I wish us to see that Christ, too – the divine Messiah – is a Jew. Christology, or the early ideas about Christ, is also a Jewish discourse and not – until much later – an anti-Jewish discourse at all. Many Israelites at the time of Jesus were expecting a Messiah who would be divine and come to earth in the form of a human. Thus the basic underlying thoughts from which both the Trinity and the incarnation grew are there in the very world into which Jesus was born and in which he was first written about in the Gospels of Mark and John.’

...his portrayal of Christianity is beneath caricature, and he makes mistakes too many to mention.
This is not a bracing but a slow read, which means the reader is left in no doubt what the argument is. Boyarin first points out that (though it is counterintuitive), ‘Son of God’ language refers to a human being (Davidic king), whereas ‘Son of Man’ language can refer to the enigmatic character alongside the Ancient of Days of Daniel’s vision. Already before Jesus, some Jews were looking for a heavenly Redeemer, indeed a form of divinity sent down to earth. First Enoch and Fourth Ezra are brought in evidence that incarnation and ‘binitarianness’ (99) were around and plausible outside any Jesus-community.

Fourth Ezra are brought in evidence that incarnation and ‘binitarianness’ (99) were around and plausible outside any Jesus-community.

There is also nothing intrinsically un-Jewish about linking the Messiah with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. After all, both the Jerusalem Talmud (Sukkah 5:2 55b) and the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 98b) do this (153). The great innovation of the gospel writers was thus not to import alien, pagan ideas, but to link up existing Jewish ones, and say the person so longed-for had come, as Jesus. This was still controversial, and did not convince most Jews. But it was viable as an option for (pre-rabbinic) Jewish faith. This would of course not work if Jesus denigrated, ignored or broke Torah. But Boyarin reads the gospel texts carefully to show that Jesus kept Shabbat and kept kosher by the controverted standards of his day.

Will either Jewish version of the telling of the story of Jesus come to convince? We cannot know. Of the two, Boyarin’s will be the one which cannot be evaded. His is the serious attempt to locate Jesus in Second Temple Judaism, which was a much more variegated world than Boteach seems capable of allowing for, and which had, as options, at least in embryo, ideas of incarnation and divine interrelationship.

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Boyarin reads the gospel texts carefully to show that Jesus kept Shabbat and kept kosher

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The two books reviewed in this article are:

**Kosher Jesus**

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, Gefen Publishing House 2012
ISBN 978-965-229-578-1

**The Jewish Gospels**

The Story of the Jewish Christ


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Tell us what you think of Common Ground

cjrelations@ccj.org.uk
or
Editor,
21 Godliman St.,
London EC4V 5BD
A Wondering Jew
John Fieldsend
Radec Press. 2014.
ISBN978-0-9929094-0-6
Paperback. £8.99 Post & Package, free from Radec Press, 58 Cedar Crescent, Thame. Oxon OX9 2AU

It is a harrowing experience, as one walks through the Children’s Memorial at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, to listen to the name of each child who was murdered by the Nazis. This must be even more so if, as one listens to the names, knowing that had he not been on a kindertransport leaving the day that it did, then his name would have been read out too. This book by a CCJ member is a deeply personal memoir of a man’s journey and his struggle with identity and faith. In this short book, which will not be everyone’s literary genre, the touch of the Eternal One features strongly through the author’s life. Some will find this strange, some challenging and some exciting. Through the pages the concept of change and transformation emerge, be it, people, institutions or society. But what also emerges is the imperative of all to be open, listen and talk. The book finishes with the hugely moving author’s parents’ last letter to him before they perished at Auschwitz.

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This is a welcome resource from the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine. A DVD comes in an attractive set with two brief booklets, ‘Walking the tightrope’, which outlines the DVD contents, and ‘Planning your Pilgrimage’, which contains not only practical advice and a list of tour organisers, but an impressively succinct (3-page) history of pilgrimages to the Holy Land. The DVD itself is a plea for pilgrims to move beyond a pattern of bus-walk-pray-shop-walk-bus. But, as importantly, they are helped to avoid the opposite temptation, to become advocates for one polarised position. The filming is beautiful and this will be an attractive ‘primer’ to one new to leading Christian pilgrimage, or another in need of a refresher.

PMorrow

A Beacon of Light:
The History of the West London Synagogue
Philippa Bernard
WLS Publications
ISBN: 978-0-9576672-0-4
£27 +P&P

This history details the West London Synagogue of British Jews from its origin on 15th April 1840. It is of course the mother synagogue of the reform synagogues of Great Britain but it did not originate as such. The founding fathers were then living to the west of the city and were anxious to have a place of worship close to their homes whilst the leaders of Bevis Marks and the Great Synagogue in the City were flatly opposed as they were concerned at the potential loss of membership and revenue. The founders wanted a Sabbath service at a slightly later hour, a regular sermon in English and the abolition of certain prayers called Mi’Sheberach. In fact the only radical departure that they made was the abolition of the second day of festivals.

The book details the original buildings in Burton Street, later in Margaret Street and the origins of the
Synagogue in Upper Berkeley Street in 1870. There is also full reference to the original senior ministers, Prof David Marks, Revd Morris Joseph, and Rabbi Harold Reinhart. Full reference is made to the difficulties encountered by the synagogue in obtaining representation at the Board of Deputies, due to the fervent opposition of Sir Moses Montefiore.

All the contemporary events are fully detailed and the book particularly explains the formation of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain in 1942 and the establishment of a Reform Beth Din. The latter was the real reason for the difficulties which the movement encountered with the Orthodox establishment.

The most important chapter is entitled the second schism chapter 11. No other book has so clearly analysed that situation which led to the resignation of Rabbi Reinhart, due to a clash of personalities with the Revd Alan Miller. The book continues to record the activities of subsequent Rabbis and particularly the leadership of Rabbi Hugo Gryn.

It is a matter of regret that there are some significant errors of fact. The reference to the conjoint foreign committee on page 88. The author says this was established in 1888 when in fact it was established in 1878 prior to the Congress of Berlin.

On page 111 Harold Laski is mentioned as President of the Board of Deputies. This is a major error as the President was NEVILLE Laski.

On page 147 reference is made to Mr A S Diamond when he was appointed Chairman of the Council. The paragraph states that he was a deputy representing West London – He had been 20 years previously when he was then Chairman of the Law Parliamentary and General Purposes committee. These should be corrected in the subsequent edition.

There is one glaring omission. There is no mention whatsoever of Mark Raphael. He ran a brilliant choir and his contribution to the music of the synagogue was something unique and should have been recorded.

Overall it is a masterly production and reflects in great detail an important part of Anglo-Jewish history. LKopelowitz

Dr Elkhanan Elkes and the Kovno Ghetto: A memoir by Joel Elkes
ISBN 9781557252319

Hitler invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. Within two days the Wehrmacht was in Kovno, and was welcomed and actively supported by the Lithuanians. Roaming bands were killing Jews wherever they found them.

The German administration moved rapidly, and the Kovno ghetto was established by 15 August 1941 in the Slobodka region of Kovno across the River Neris. The Jews were ordered to appoint a head Jew, Oberjude, who would be the spokesman to the civil administration. Dr Elkes, after much persuasion from the rabbi and from his colleagues accepted this onerous office, and did his utmost in the next three years to curb the sufferings of the Jews.

This book details the persecutions and the deceptive ways of the Gestapo. Five hundred educated men were asked in August 1941 to volunteer to put the city archives in order. They were deceived, taken from the ghetto and shot and to make matters worse in October 1941 more than ten thousand were taken to the ninth fort where they were massacred.

In 1942 life was somewhat easier as workshops were set up in the ghetto to repair the military uniforms of the German army.

Following the German defeat at Stalingrad in 1943 the Soviet army hurled the Nazis back and Lithuania was preparing for the German evacuation in July 1944. The ghetto was liquidated and the Jewish remnant transferred to the concentration camp, Stutthof near Danzig. At Stutthof the women and children were separated from the men and the latter transferred to Dachau in Bavaria where Dr Elkes died. The book explains that many women were taken from Stutthof on a ship to be drowned in the North Sea. An RAF fighter patrol spotted the boat, set it on fire and forced it back to Kiel. The lives of those Jews were spared.

The book is riveting. It provides much evidence not previously made available and particularly the slaughter carried out by Lithuanians which resulted in 95% of the Jewish population being annihilated. It is essential reading for those with a special interest in the fate of the Kovno ghetto and of Lithuanian Jewry. It is an absolutely unique publication. LKopelowitz

Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict within the Jewish community
Kahn-Harris, Keith
David Paul, 2014
ISBN 9780992667306
Paperback

This book arises from the author’s concern at increasingly fierce and ‘uncivil’ disagreement about Israel
and Palestine within the UK Jewish community. Kahn-Harris urges that this conflict must be better managed if irreparable damage to British Jews’ sense of shared peoplehood is to be avoided. He describes his own creative experiments in encouraging civil dialogue, through structured discussion groups and hosting dinners bringing people with opposing views together. Knowing from experience the transformative potential of interfaith dialogue, he seeks to use similar models for intrafaith dialogue, which as many readers will know can be even more challenging.

Kahn-Harris provides a helpful guide to the sometimes bewildering variety of organisations within British Jewry and the range of views held. The debates on Israel are keenly observed, recognisable, and depressing; classic dialogues of the deaf, a wearying cycle of arguments going nowhere as entrenched positions are exchanged, people with opposing views mirroring one another in their language and aggression.

This book is not a comfortable read, but is recommended to all who share the author’s concerns. It is a passionate appeal from a Jewish sociologist and writer who refuses to give up on dialogue, and as such can inspire us all - whatever our views.

FHulbert

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**Literature and The Bible.**
*A Reader*
Jo Carruthers et al (Editors).

Routledge. 2014
ISBN 978 0 415 69853 5
Paperback

This very readable collection has been well selected by its British and Canadian editorial team. The book is divided into three parts: the Relationship between Literature and the Bible; Literary Reading; and Theological Interpretation. With essays from names like Erich Auerbach, Emmanuel Levinas, Stanley Fish, Paul Fiddes and Paul Ricoeur, one was ready for a feast – and a challenging one at that.

I was looking for more theological content than I found but that was a misconception on my part, for the emphasis is Literature not the Bible and if one approaches this book with that mind-set one will be well rewarded.

Some of the essays, such as that by Yvonne Sherwood I found needed perseverance! She seemed at times to wallow in extravagant self-expression and, though fun it was, I became frustrated and thought she strayed from the thrust of her meaning and intent.

Overall this is a substantial book and probably not for the general reader. But without doubt it contains elements which are thoughtful and provide insight and reflection. The editors are to be congratulated in bringing such a selection together.

DCGifford

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**Old Testament Theology:**
*Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture*
R.W.L. Moberly

Baker Academic. 2013
Hardback

Professor Moberly combines the rigours of biblical scholarship with spiritual, ‘attuned’ readings of eight key passages in the Hebrew Bible. Old Testament Theology is both a sequel and complements his reading of the Book of Genesis in *Theology of the Book of Genesis* (2009) and covers eight texts from the rest of the Bible – Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Psalms and Job.

This is a book about language and performance. How can we understand that the Bible should not be read through a single frame of reference, but in multiple contexts - Jewish and Christian, but also others. In the chapter ‘Isaiah and Jesus’, lying at the heart of the book, Moberly alludes to the performance of the punk band Pussy Riot in Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow in 2012 as a challenge to the misuse of power.

Moberly liberates the text theologically to allow his readers to see that it is possible to read the Hebrew Bible simultaneously in multiple contexts. The important thing is not necessarily what it might have meant to its authors, but what texts can mean morally and theologically for those who wish to maintain a mindful, faithful relationship with the living God in today’s world.

AWright
**Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields**  
**Wendy Lower**  
Chatto & Windus. 2013  
ISBN 9780701187217  
Hardback

This is a very readable and extremely well researched book and useful contribution to research and comment on the Holocaust. Lower investigates why so many ordinary German women became part of the Nazi genocidal machine and the extent of that involvement. She identifies that thousands of women went eastwards towards Ukraine, Belarus etc and were an intricate part of the killing fields; as secretaries, administrators, nurses, lovers and wives. They too became perpetrators of the Holocaust. Some more directly than others.

Lower documents horrific examples of direct cruelty – especially to children - but also complicity in drawing up names for selection for the gas chambers. She examines later why these women got involved in these atrocities and draws a number of conclusions using psychology and social psychology sources for explanation.

Some of the book is harrowing; and I found myself quite quickly drawn to ask what happened to these women – whose heartless cruelty at times appears beyond belief. The final chapter asks, ‘What happened to them?’ Sadly, it must be said a goodly number were never brought to justice.

**Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich**  
**Stroud. Dean G (editor)**  
Eerdmans 2013  
ISBN 9780802869029  
Paperback

German theologians like Barth and Bonhoeffer are often studied apart from their context. Stroud began to wonder how they had preached ‘in Hitler’s shadow’ after his own experience preaching on civil rights in the 1970s southern United States. The result is this collection of ‘sermons of opposition’, many from members of the ‘Confessing Church’. Some subverted Nazi ideology by emphasising Jesus’ Jewishness, when the Nazis presented him as an ‘Aryan’ hero. Some resisted by emphasising Christian values of compassion and care for the vulnerable, dismissed by the Nazis as weakness. Some spoke directly against persecution of Jews, some were more concerned with preserving the church’s integrity. The strongest words are reserved for the T4 programme in which disabled people and psychiatric patients were murdered.

In the book there is the sermon Julian von Jan preached the Sunday after Kristallnacht, for which he was beaten up and arrested, the words of Bultmann the day Germany attacked the Soviet Union, and the last sermon of Paul Schneider, the first evangelical pastor murdered by the Nazis.

We hear often that the German churches did not do enough to oppose Hitler. It is heartening to read the words of some clergy who risked their lives to speak out.

**Redeeming our Sacred Story: The death of Jesus and relations between Jews and Christians**  
**Boys, Mary C**  
Paulist Press 2013  
ISBN 9780809148172  
Paperback

In this book American Catholic scholar Mary Boys adds to her already impressive collection of writings on Christian-Jewish relations for Christians who preach or otherwise seek to tell Christianity’s ‘sacred story’. Her focus here is on ‘a dimension of life we have long overlooked: the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth as mirrored in Jewish experience’.

To this end she reviews troubling texts in the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers, and the ways they have been used to buttress the accusation that the Jews were and are guilty of the death of Jesus. Looking at these raw materials for historic Christian hostility to Jews and their impact into the Nazi era she seeks to honour the commandment ‘you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour’, and find ways of changing ‘troubling tellings’ into ‘transformed tellings’.

‘Redeeming our sacred story requires a willingness to be attentive to disturbing truths about one’s own tradition’, she says, as she considers how difficult texts may and must be reinterpreted in the light of Biblical scholarship. I found particularly helpful her insistence on appreciating the dynamics of life under Roman occupation as essential background for understanding the gospels.

This book deserves a place on the bookshelf of every Christian preacher.
The Restless Quest for Identity

In this article, Board of Deputies Communications Officer, James Martin tackles the notion that one’s story is bound up in one’s identity - or rather one’s search for it. He exemplifies his case from American Jewish authors and the dissonance between the old world wisdom and post-war US life.

American Jewish popular authors in the post-World War II era had a particular propensity to invoke Jewish scriptural rhetoric in their fictional and semi-fictional works, helping them to bridge the chasm between the ‘old world’ and their sometimes confusing interaction with the ‘new country’ (or Golden Medina).

It was precisely the irreverence with which they viewed their position in America’s rapidly evolving consumer and rights based society of the 1950s and 60s that lent the likes of Chaim Potok, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Saul Bellow such distinctive voices.

Their restless quest for a recognisable identity seemed to chime with the overall immigrant wave of the first half of the Twentieth Century and the discovery to find exactly where ethnic and religious groups fitted into the drive away from conservatism and towards greater social freedom and racial equality.

The interesting counter point to the Jewish ‘liberal’ instinct was always the shtetl: a world that Potok and Singer understood from first hand. Singer in particular invokes the teachings from his yeshiva (seminary) education as mantras concerning what a Jewish person is and is not expected to do; often in contrast to the free-wheeling America of the big city that emerged in the mid-60s.

What marked Singer out was being a throwback to the era of story-telling which undoubtedly related back to the close relationships that one formed in the parochial old country. The Talmud, the interpretation of the Mishnah (oral law) is in itself a 500 year long commentary that produced halachot which make up the practical Jewish laws. Singer may not have believed in Halacha by the end of his life, but he was still wrestling with Judaism, and could certainly never wrestle free of it, even if his personal expression was much more rationalistic.

His final output, The Image and Other Stories, published in his 82nd year, was a prolific collection of 22 stories which come from the mid-Sixties, to the mid-Eighties. In it he recounts the conversations that he overheard as a child. As the son of a rabbi in Warsaw he learnt that men are not infallible, and that Judaism does not expect them to be: the laws passed by rabbis are designed to allow for as secure a passage through life as possible. When his characters stray from this it’s the voice of the rabbi (or, in his case, his father) that he hears most strongly.

Potok had the most ‘orthodox’ (Jewish) American experience of all the popular authors. An ordained rabbi from a shtetl-like community in Brooklyn, he had a somewhat fraught relationship with religion. His breakthrough work, The Chosen—unlike the work of the novelists Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, which dealt largely with the neuroses of assimilated secular Jews—was the first American novel to make the fervent, insular Hasidic world visible to a wide audience. It tells the story of a brilliant young man struggling to reconcile his obligation to become a rabbi with his desire for a more secular life. References to the heim (home or close-knit community) are sometimes warm and well regarding (Potok himself saw the insularity of strictly orthodox life strangely comforting) and infused with old world Jewish wisdom based on the Talmud and the European Jewish halachic code (the Shulchan Aruch).

Despite the acknowledgement in the book that being a Tzaddik (righteous man) is an elevated state of living, it is also a polemic about how the ‘average’ Jew has to embrace modern, secular wisdom, like Freud. For Potok, strict orthodoxy was unbending in its view of the newer, more rational methods of studying Jewish texts, based on modernity and accommodation. Potok was not a reform Jew but neither was he at home with orthodoxy. Conservatism (traditional but progressive Judaism) was his intellectual heim. In doing this he resonated with many Americans in the 1970s who themselves switched codes from orthodox to conservative Judaism.

1 Kowalska was born in 1904 in Wlockawek, Poland. Joining the French Resistance in World War II she was arrested by the Gestapo, imprisoned with her husband, then deported and shot by the Nazis in 1941.
Local & Global:  
A CCJ Branch in a Global Centre of Learning Excellence

CCJ Oxford has many links with its University. With such an important global centre of learning in the City, the CCJ branch is proactive in its contact with the colleges both at Oxford University and Oxford Brookes. This report is taken from Harris Manchester College Chapel Society.

A memorable service on Holocaust Memorial Day, was led for us by the Revd. Peter Hewis, a retired Minister and former Chair of the Oxford branch of the Council of Christians and Jews. The guest preacher was Alexander Massey, an international musician and composer and member of the Oxford Jewish community.

The mood of the first half of the service was sombre and self-questioning. Peter chose a reading from the autobiography of a German woman who was a child at the time of the Shoah, recalling how the congregation of her church used to sing loudly to muffle the sound of the trains on the nearby track, transporting Jews to the death camps.

From the back of our chapel Alexander sang his own haunting setting of Psalm 121: I will lift up my eyes to the hills, turning the usual confident claim from whence cometh my help into a forlorn question: Where will my help come from? and adding the cry Help! Help!

A simplistic (and popular) reading of the Psalm appears to suggest that God looks after everyone, especially the faithful. Experience of the Holocaust, other human atrocities, and the natural dangers of the world, suggests that the picture is much more complex.

After a time of silent reflection, and the singing of one of our favourite hymns (This is my song, O God of all the nations), the mood changed. Alexander’s sermon took the form of a creative decoding of Psalm 87, which he described as an interfaith affirmation of divine goodness:

This is quintessentially a universal Psalm embracing the equality of all humanity – each nation and person comes from the same source, and is loved equally. (AM)

After a scholarly explication of the content of the Psalm, Alexander took his place at the grand piano in the chapel and launched into his own composition, Holy Mountain, setting his translation of the Psalm to music sounding like a Christian gospel song, with jazzy blue notes, but was actually based on an ancient Jewish prayer mode called Adonai Malach. It was a call–response piece, and the congregation joined in, echoing the main themes:

1. Holy mountain, home of the Holy One  
   / each of us was born there.
2. Glorious city, Rock of Zion  
   / welcomes all from everywhere.
3. No place on earth, but God’s the centre  
   / each of us was born there.
4. God loves best where all can enter,  
   / welcomes all from everywhere.
5. Written in the Book of Life  
   / each of us was born there.
6. City of peace that ends all strife  
   / welcomes all from everywhere.
7. The faithless, the faithful, the greatest and least  
   / each of us was born there.
8. Lover of the North, South, West, and East  
   / welcomes all from everywhere.
9. Every soul and all that breaths sings:  
   / each of us was born there.
10. Holy Source of all Life’s springs  
    / welcomes all from everywhere

BBC Radio Oxford broadcast the service live from the chapel, featuring a 20-minute interview with Peter Hewis and a recording of Alexander’s midrash on Psalm 87.

Alexander Massey’s midrash can be heard on his website: http://www.lashon-hakodesh.co.uk/music.html – scroll down to track number 11

Detail: Chapel Window, HMC, Oxford.
Why not visit us online?

www.ccj.org.uk
Congratulations

*Common Ground* congratulates Vice Chairman (Jewish) of the CCJ Trustees, **Maurice Ostro** on his recognition in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List. Maurice is admitted to OBE for his services to Interfaith Relations.

The Partner and the Archbishop

John Lewis Partner **Stephen Rosenberg** pauses for a picture with the Archbishop of Canterbury, **Justin Welby** while at a reception at Lambeth Palace. Stephen attended the reception after being invited for his voluntary work with the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ). 'It was very good,' says Stephen, 'The Archbishop opened the reception with a thank you to the CCJ volunteers and went on to stress the importance of interaction between people of different religious and political persuasions, and the need to engage with each other in society.'

Tributes

**Judith Kramer**
It is with great sadness we record the passing of Judith Kramer Chair of the CCJ Hillingdon Branch and Honorary Secretary of the CCJ. Only recently admitted to the CCJ Trustees, Judith within a short time had shown huge commitment and the same dedication to her national role as she had to her local branch. She will be fondly remembered for her boundless energy, cheerful disposition and desire to promote the work of the CCJ.

**Mark D’Alton – Eldridge**
Long-time member of CCJ and committed to improving Jewish – Christian relations, Mark and his wife Charlotte had been leading lights in the Finchley branch of the CCJ for many years. Often battling against personal challenges Mark showed a resoluteness and determination to do all he could to bring our two communities together. A very unassuming and humble man, always ready with a smile and a word of welcome, Mark will be missed by many of us.

Please visit our website:
www.ccj.org.uk
Creating Accepting, Just and Caring Young People: CCJ Linking with Schools

CCJ has a proud history of working with schools at many levels. Over the last 5-7 years CCJ Leeds has linked up with schools to enable visits to the UK Holocaust Museum in Laxton. The latest visit was in January this year. Here Kelly Allchin, Head of PSHE/Citizenship at City of Leeds School tells us more.

City of Leeds School Academy is in a deprived area. 80% of our pupils speak English as a 2nd language and have come to us from many countries. A number of our children are in the UK as refugees, having witnessed and experienced many sad things in their short lives. Our British-born students typically come from quite disadvantaged families and we have an above average number of pupils on free school meals. We are proud of our multicultural identity and as a whole pupils mix well here and while we do not have incidents of racism, we do however think the trip was even more valuable for our students as it allowed the pupils to witness what can happen when relationships are not harmonious.

The visit of 20 pupils and 2 teachers took a whole day and we took along our year 10 pupils from GCSE Citizenship and History. They had spent the term looking at Hitler and what he tried to achieve and used this to examine human rights and the work of the UN in more detail. They also had been learning about identity, multiculturalism, racism and discrimination, so there were many clear links to be made on this trip.

Pupils study Holocaust as part of their syllabus, including the rise of Nazism, the removal of human rights, the persecution of minorities and what it was like to be a victim (e.g. Anne Frank) and then the Final Solution. An English teacher at our school has visited many concentration camps across the world and brought in his photos to show the pupils.

We were a fairly small group with plenty of chance to reflect throughout the day and on return. Pupils were fascinated by the survivor and found his story quite empowering and positive (from the point of view of the successful man he became) so pupils were not as ‘hurt’ by this part as I imagined. Some pupils did however find The Journey exhibition quite upsetting, especially the images of children who were very malnourished and clearly heartbroken. It allowed us to engage in very mature discussions about what we can do as humans to try and ensure this does not happen again.

The Journey was especially interesting to our pupils as we have so many refugees at our school from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. I was able to remind pupils that some of the people they pass shoulders with daily at school have actually had to go through a journey like the young Jewish children in the exhibition. This really made our pupils think about their peers with a level of empathy they perhaps had not before.

The pupils who attended the visit were given time to write a personal reflection and a display was created that other pupils read and reflected upon as well.

For their Citizenship coursework pupils have to take part in a project to ‘change the world for the better’ and some have spoken to me about doing something on raising the awareness of refugees and their struggle using what they learnt on The Journey and their personal experience to assist them.

Tim Friedman of CCJ Leeds organised the visit and I hope we may be able to arrange for another speaker to come into class and perhaps even for some of our pupils to speak on radio about their experiences.

May I say THANK YOU for this opportunity? Our school does struggle with budget due to such small numbers of pupils on roll and our children themselves come from situations where money to pay for trips does not always exist. We all do truly appreciate what CCJ Leeds and other funding has allowed us to do and hope we can keep this link open in the future.

As a teacher I think CCJ Leeds’ outreach into schools to help them gain from such a thought provoking experience is admiral, generous and very kind. I believe the memories from the day will last for a long time and play a part in their development as accepting, just and caring adults.
The Last Word
Exodus: A New Chronology

Scholars still discuss the dating and reliability of records of events described in the Hebrew Scriptures especially the life of Moses and the details of the Exodus. We asked John Franks to help us out.

The Bible can be seen as providing information that is sound historically now that science has begun to confirm the occurrence of events. The Santorini volcanic explosion, dated to 1628 BCE, fixed for the first time when the great crops and famines prognosticated by Joseph actually took place. It also demolished theories based on arguments that the explosion was 100 years later and the vehicle for the 10 plagues of Moses.

Similarly the date for Exodus from Egypt has been the subject of debate. This was said to have occurred 430 years from the sojourn of Abraham in Egyptian territory, i.e. the land of the Philistines, where Isaac was born. This date is about 1845 BCE. This implies that the Exodus took place about 1415 BCE. After the return of Moses, at the age of 80 years, he led the Exodus which took place about 1415 BCE. After about 40 years in the desert he died in 1375 BCE at the age of 120 years, in sight of the Promised Land.

Joshua began his campaigns and went on to capture Jericho and areas of Canaan. Dame Katherine Kenyon with her excavations went on to prove that Jericho was uninhabited in the latter part of the 14th and 13th centuries BCE, which was regarded as proof that the Exodus had not taken place. This can now be seen as supporting the new chronology. Reports have been uncovered of an Egyptian campaign against the land of the Israelis in 1220 BCE.

Moses, then aged 40, fled, having lost his status as a protected protégé of the deceased female. Pharaoh, who was the Egyptian Princess who earlier had rescued the baby Moses from the Nile rushes, so that he could not, with impunity, slay an Egyptian for oppressing fellow Jews. With testing from ancient DNA and forensic research, in 2010 Dr Zahi Hawass was able to confirm Amenhotep III (1390-53 BCE) was the father of Amenhotep IV/Akhenaton (1353-36). The latter changed his name, renounced Egyptian polytheism in favour of a single sun deity, establishing a new capital and religion at Amarna in about 1350 BCE.

Moses, who taught the Jews there was only one deity, and lead them through desert, died in 1738, when Joshua began his Canaan settlement campaign.

It has been proved that Akhenaton was the father of Tutenkhamun (132-22 BCE) but he deserted Amarna for Memphis and restored the old Egyptian polytheism.

The Chronology, with its biblical references, set out below, has brief event details to aid critical consideration of the above.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BCE Dates</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1628</td>
<td>Santorini eruption.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1556</td>
<td>Death of Joseph.</td>
<td>Genesis</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>20-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1540</td>
<td>Pharaoh Ahmose expels Hyksos Ahmose was the Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.</td>
<td>Exodus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1495</td>
<td>Moses born. Rescued from bull rushes by Egyptian princess Hatshepsut, daughter of Pharaoh Amenhotep I.</td>
<td>Exodus</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1493</td>
<td>Amentop I died and Hatshepsut becomes regent for her infant nephews.</td>
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<td>1473</td>
<td>Hatshepsut becomes co-pharaoh with surviving nephew Thutmose III.</td>
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<td>1458</td>
<td>Hatshepsut dies. Thutmose III purges her records. Moses flees Egypt aged 40</td>
<td>Ex</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1425</td>
<td>Thutmose III dies. Amenhotep II becomes Pharaoh.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1415</td>
<td>Moses returns, aged 80. Exodus, 430 years after birth of Isaac.</td>
<td>Exodus</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>27 &amp; 29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exodus</td>
<td>XII</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1400</td>
<td>Amenhotep II dies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1378</td>
<td>Moses dies aged 120.</td>
<td>Deuteronomy</td>
<td>XXXIV</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1378</td>
<td>Joshua leads Israel across Jordan and commences campaign.</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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