

# The communion of Christians and Jews

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Research shows that, even after the separation of the Synagogue from the Church, the two religions maintained bilateral relations

**I**n spite of being Christian, the proverb “tell me with whom you walk, and I’ll tell you who you are” cannot be applied to the first years of Christianity. Research developed by the Methodist University of São Paulo (Unesp) shows that, contrary to what many historians indicate, the steps of the Jews and Christians continued to follow common paths even after the separation of the Church from the Synagogue. The project, financed by FAPESP, reveals that the two religions promoted an interchange of symbols, narratives and religious traditions, at least until the second century. Or that is to say: they continued to walk together, but coming from distinct convictions. “Our question is to know if the continuous elements between Judaism and early Christianity were a determinant factor only during the first outbursts and Christian movements or if there was an interchange even after Christianity conquered its autonomy and its own identity, motivated by standards of experience and a common religious language”, says Paulo Augusto de Souza Nogueira, the coordinator of the thematic project *Convergent Religious Structures in Judaism and Christianity of the First Century*.

Made up by seven researchers who worked around three different axes, the study is going to be published in a book to be edited next year. The starting point was the understanding that the birth of Christianity was not the fruit of a radical breakaway from Judaism, a version spread throughout the ages. Based on literary documents, especially the apocalyptic traditions, the researchers identified intense bilateral relationships between Christianity and Judaism. In the opinion of Nogueira, the religion of Jesus, his followers and the following generations of Christians has to be understood starting from the practices and beliefs of religious Judaism.

“A good part of the analyses of history presupposes that the use of the Jewish traditions would have occurred during the stages of the formation of early Christian religious tradition in a single manner. Or that is, the possibility that the Christians and the Jews were mutually influencing each other for a longer period of time is discarded”, he attested. The research moved in the opposite direction to this hegemonic vision that there were no more mutual influences after their separation.

“We asked ourselves if the institutional differentiation would have implied a break in the exchanges of religious traditions”, he adds. “Coul-



*The Epic of American Civilization*, an illustration by José Clemente Orozco: for the researcher Paulo Nogueira, one needs to understand the texts of the past in order to understand the present



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dn't these have co-existed even after the separation of the Christians from the Synagogue?" To answer the question, the researchers carried out a comparative study of the apocalyptic texts in the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, of Jewish pseudepigraphy literature (produced until 70 A.D.), and in the literature of early Christianity (both in the *New Testament* and in the apocryphal). The period studied goes from the second century BC until the second century AD. The choice of these texts happened because there were indications that the early Christians were apocalyptic Jews. "We went to work with a differentiated apocalyptic understanding, more so than the idea that the end of the world would arrive accompanied by cosmic cataclysms and of the redemption of the just", he observes.

The researchers consider that the essential element of the apocalypse is the visionary religious experience, probably of ecstatic origin, which has as its principal content visions about the heavens, structures of power, the angels and the mystic cult therein developed. Access to these revelations is possible through celestial voyages. "Instead of saying that Jesus was apocalyptic only because he had believed in the end of the world, we present the religious tendency of Jesus and his followers as a reflex of a complex religious visionary tendency, in which

Jesus himself starts to be understood as someone who reveals the secrets and the mysteries of God."

**F**or Paulo Nogueira, this perception allows one to reconstruct the cultural and religious portrait that makes it possible to understand the religious parameters of the early Christians and their relations with Judaism, as well as the syncretism with the religions of the Mediterranean. It was through visionary experiences that the Jews and the Christians had access to cosmic structures, to angelic powers and to the labyrinth like world in which God was imagined. "The apocalypse is here interpreted as a form of Jewish mysticism, much more that its traditional understanding as an expectation of the end of the world and of a critique of history and power", emphasized the professor. "The highlight given to the ecstatic-visionary aspect permits an understanding of the apocalypse in relation to popular and illiterate traditions of Judaism, representing the apocalyptic texts only as the final product of a much wider current."

The interpretation of the apocalypse as the literature of visionary revelation can be found, for example, in the elaborate descriptions of the hierarchies of

the celestial powers, both in Jewish texts such as the *Book of the Awakening*, the *Apocalypse of the Enoch* (Ethiopic Enoch), in the *Canticles of the Sabbatical Sacrifice of Qumran*, as well as in the Letter to the Ephesians, in the disputes with angels and their cult in *Hebrew*, and in the search to ascend to the celestial dwelling places and in the preoccupation with the contemplation of the glory of God in *John's Gospel*, without taking into account its reception in *John's Apocalypse* and in the *Ascension of Isaac*. Nogueira emphasizes that it is less important to know if these experiences occurred in fact with Jesus or with Paul of Tarsus than to understand how these groups would have lived through this model of visionary religion in their ecstatic cults.

"It is very possible that some of the narratives attributed to Jesus might have been posterior experiences that his followers attributed to him or even that had been narrated in the early Christian communities in a paradigmatic form, to be imitated on other occasions", says the research coordinator. "This does not diminish the importance of the theme; on the contrary, it demonstrates a certain linkage between the religious presuppositions of Jesus with his posterior followers, as they proceed from a common environment: the Jewish apocalypse."

*Golgota*, by Edward Munch (left), and *Christ in the Desert*, by Ivan Kramskoy: study allows for the reconstruction of the cultural and religious depiction



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The researcher Luigi Schiavo, who developed his doctorate thesis in the thematic project, has dedicated himself to the study of the Temptation of Jesus written by Luke, considered to be one of the most important texts of the Q document, also called the *Source of Sayings*, since it presents a narrative in which Jesus fights against Satan for cosmic domination. “The themes of judgment, of dualistic opposition, of messianic hope, of the Kingdom of God and of the presentation of his ethics, lead us to think of a document of strong eschatological character, with apocalyptic elements of vision and revelation”, says the researcher. “In this context, the testimony of the temptations of Jesus is here interpreted as a relating of a celestial journey, a literary form well known in apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical literature starting from the second century B.C., whose objective was to describe the ecstatic experience of the visionary.”

This interpretation is based on various aspects, such as the technical term of vision “taken in spirit”, the transportation outside of the body and the journey into the sky, the angel that accompanies the visionary, the deserted place which, with fasting, represents the condition so that such an experience can occur, etc. The research adopts as a model for the understanding of Jesus in his collision with

Satan in this account, the myth of combat between the archangel Michael and Satan both as it is pictured, for example, in *Rules of War of Qumran* and reflected in the *New Testament* in *Apocalypse 12*. Schiavo’s research is being inserted into a part of the project that analyzes messianic figures of Jewish apocalypse that could have influenced the first dealings with Christ’s godliness, or that is to say, the first affirmations about the divinity of Jesus and his celestial origin.

Another angle to the research intends to relate these early Christian apocalyptic texts with the celestial cult as it was idealized within mystical Jewish circles of that period. The hypothesis, in this case, is that this mystic

world inserted itself into the cult of the cases of the early Christians, permitting the formation of religious identity and social organization surrounding the religious experience.

Besides this discussion on the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, the project looked at a further direction of research that also analyzed the reception of the apocalyptic themes in the popular religion of the Mediterranean, more specifically towards the magic papyri, the fetishes and ancient talismans. In the end, the Jews and the Christians were inserted into a Greek-Roman religious world.

For the coordinator, the texts selected for the research also established connections with modern times, since one refers to a new millennium, to the desire for libertarian change, for the realization of utopias and dreams. “Biblical studies are of relevance in Brazil, since we’re dealing with a country with an outpouring of its popular culture and of a large number of religious groups that feed off biblical symbols”, he explains. “In a pluralistic, cultural society, religiously involved such as ours, waterproof analyses that don’t also take into consideration the complexity of the founding texts, run the risk of not understanding the past, and much less the present”, he concludes.

### THE PROJECT

*Convergent Religious Structures in Judaism and Christianity during the First Century*

#### MODALITY

Thematic project

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#### INVESTMENT

R\$ 83,871.00