Since Late Antiquity the major Christian churches and the Synagogue have acknowledged the same corpus of texts—the Tanakh/Old Testament—as the Word of God. Since Jerome, many Christian authorities have conceded that inspiration inhere primarily in the *Hebraica veritas*, providentially preserved by the Synagogue, and turned gratefully to Jewish scholarship to help them understand it. This shared Scripture is often seen as a force for unity, as the bedrock of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There is obvious truth in this claim, but it should not obscure the fact that the common Bible is also a source of division and controversy. Each religion has interpreted the same Scripture in very different ways. Indeed—and this is a major claim of the present paper—each religion has tended to interpret the shared Bible in a way aimed precisely at excluding the other’s interpretation and thus destroying the biblical foundations of its faith. What this often means is that Christian readings of key Old Testament passages are forged with explicit or implicit reference to Jewish readings of the same passages, and are designed to validate Christianity and to deny any advantage that Jewish opponents might seek to derive from them. And vice versa. In other words there is a powerful intertextuality between the two exegetical traditions, which students of each should always bear in mind. Broadly speaking, the history of Christian Bible-exegesis cannot be properly understood without taking into account the history of Jewish Bible-exegesis, and vice versa: only when one is read against the other do many of the exegetical moves that each makes begin to make sense. This comparative reading has been practised surprisingly little. Few experts in the one tradition have competence in the other, and when comparisons are made they are usually in terms of influences and borrowings (normally from Judaism to Christianity), rather than in terms of a radically dialectical hermeneutic.

The debates between the two faiths around their shared Bible may seem, on the face of it, a positive exercise. At least the disputing parties acknowledge a common point of reference, a common court of appeal,
and by the very act of debating appear to concede that their differences can be settled by reasoned argument aimed at discerning the mind of God in Scripture. Whichever side can prove its case from Scripture wins, and the other is obliged to bow to the truth. Of course it never actually works like this. Quite apart from the problem of deciding the meaning of any text, a problem made critical by post-modernism, it is hard to find many on either side of this particular controversy who have been convinced by the exegesis of the other. The exegetical arguments appear to be designed to win over opponents, but in fact they serve other purposes—assuring those already committed that their faith is grounded in revelation, or using Scripture as a theological resource.

Both traditions are clear-sighted on this point, and have constructed fall-back positions which allow them to assert the correctness of their exegeses a priori, irrespective of the strength of the exegetical arguments. On the Jewish side the doctrine of the Oral Torah serves this purpose. Though recognized as a fundamental article of faith, this dogma is seldom mentioned explicitly in Rabbinic literature and remains annoyingly hard to define. It tends to emerge only in polemical contexts, and it amounts to little more than an assertion that only those within the Rabbinic tradition, who have studied with the right masters in an allegedly unbroken chain of tradition going back to Moses, can have the right interpretation. Everyone else lacks authority, and is simply wrong if he fails to agree with the Rabbis. Similar doctrines exist on the Christian side, where the Church or some ‘inner light’ (depending on one’s ecclesiastical adherence) gets to decide in the end what Scripture means. For a time, in the wake of the Enlightenment, liberal Christianity thought it had found a way out of this impasse through the historical, critical and philological study of the Bible, but the faith of the critical scholars in their own neutrality and objectivity, and in the self-evident priority of the historical, and even authorial sense, now looks naïve, and has long ago vanished into the fog of post-modernism.

I want to explore the intertextuality between the two exegetical traditions with regard to a particular period and a particular biblical text. The period is the first few centuries of the current era when the ways were parting between the two faiths, and when exegetical debates were particularly sharp as each jockeyed to define and defend itself against the other. The biblical text which will claim our attention will be the opening verse of the account of creation in Genesis 1. This text does not immediately present itself as potentially disputed ground between the two faiths, at least not in the way that texts that appear to imply the existence of two Powers in heaven, or suggest that the Torah of Moses