

JEWISH CHRISTIANITY: FOCUS ON ANTIOCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY *

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Abstract

The first century of the common era was a period in which Judaism and Christianity sought to unify their teachings and positions. In the progressive development of Christianity many Christians attempted to maintain their Jewish roots and continued to express themselves in language, terms and conceptual images that belong to the Jewish or Semitic world. This paper traces the character of the change and development of this Jewish Christianity within early Christianity by focussing attention on the city of Antioch with particular reference to the first century CE. Consideration is also briefly given to the further development of Jewish Christianity over the subsequent three centuries among those groups of Jewish Christians known as Nazarenes and Ebionites.

1. Introduction

Jewish Christianity is an expression which is used to refer to a rather enigmatic religious phenomenon. From the time of Baur in the 1830's up to the late Daniélou somewhat sporadic attempts have been made to identify and describe this phenomenon. Unfortunately, what has resulted are numerous hypotheses with confused terminology which interprets scanty evidence in many and diverse ways.

It is indeed fascinating to observe how the interest in studies on the phenomenon known as Jewish Christianity has fluctuated over the course of time. The attention of scholars has long been influenced by the so-called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, whose interests were focussed predominantly on the world of Greece and Rome. Seen against the background of the world at that time, a notion such as Jewish

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Christianity was judged to refer solely to that period of about 20 years in the development of the Christian church from Jesus to the Hellenistic church.

Recent times have, however, led to a rediscovery of the very Jewishness of Jesus as well as the special Jewish character of much of the Gospels, in particular the Gospels of Matthew and John. This has also led to the conviction that the Jewish character of early Christianity did not appear after two decades, but in fact continued in certain centres of Christianity during the course of the first four centuries of the common era (and even possibly for a further two centuries). This indicates that the final separation between Christianity and Judaism took place over a long period of time - longer than most people realize.

Christianity owes its origin to the world of Judaism of the first century of the common era. Thereafter a progressively developing paradigm occurred, in which the former paradigm of the Jewish world gave way to that of the Gentile world. From a Christian perspective it is interesting to ask what would have occurred if early Christianity had continued to remain faithful to that Jewish paradigm rather than embrace a Greek paradigm. Nevertheless, many aspects of Judaism have survived within Christianity, not least of all the treasure of the very Scriptures that are considered both sacred and authoritative.

2. Different approaches to Jewish Christianity

In any study of Jewish Christianity the work of Baur remains seminal. He was the first to study the phenomenon he termed Jewish Christianity. In a famous article of 1831 Baur (1831:61-206) paid attention to 1 Corinthians 1:11-12, where he argued that one could discover two distinct groups in opposition to each other, which he identified as Pauline and Jewish. To all intents and purposes for Baur the only difference between Jew and Jewish Christians lay in the belief that the Jewish Christian had in Jesus as the promised Messiah (Baur 1873:1,40,43).

The term 'Jewish Christianity' is one that has not received unanimous precision in regard to its specific content and terms of reference. For example, Hort argued that the term should be reserved for those Christians who abided by the stipulations of the Jewish law.

The only Christianity which can properly be called Judaistic, is that which falls back to the Jewish point of view ... it ascribes perpetuity to the Jewish Law (1895:5).

On the other hand, Hoennicke (1908:260) reserved the term for those groups within early Christianity which were influenced by Jewish elements which had the effect of changing radically the very essence of Christianity. Among the more prominent researchers of the phenomenon of Jewish Christianity, Schoeps (1949) argues that the only groups that are deserving of this title are the Ebionites and the Nazarenes, whose thought it reflected in the Clementine Homilies. He describes Jewish Christians as those

... who gradually separated themselves from the majority and had a history of their own ... 'Jewish Christianity' is used not as a designation of origin, but as the designation of the point of view of a party (Schoeps 1969:8-25).

Daniélou (1964:7-10), on the other hand, argues that the expression 'Jewish Christianity' in fact can have three different references:

(i) Those groups whose Christology in fact placed them mid-way between Judaism and Christianity: they acknowledge Jesus to be a prophet, even a Messiah, but in no way did they look upon him as the Son of God. The Ebionites would belong to this group.

(ii) Those groups that would strive to hang on to their Jewish traditions, while at the same time embracing the very essence of Christianity. James and the community of Christians in Jerusalem would be seen to incorporate such a group.

(iii) A form of Christian thought which expresses itself in terms which have been borrowed from Judaism. It is in this latter sense that Daniélou wishes to understand the term:

In this work Jewish Christianity should be understood to refer to the expression of Christianity in the thought forms of Later Judaism (Daniélou 1964:10).

In this way, Daniélou has opened up the discussion to include a much wider perception for the notion of Jewish Christianity. It is in this wider perspective that I shall use the term Jewish Christianity. In this sense it is conceived as referring to Christianity which expresses itself in language, terms and conceptual images that belong to the Jewish or Semitic world.

3. Development of first century Jewish Christianity in Antioch

Antioch was situated on the Orontes River in the Roman Province of Syria, 490 kilometres north of Jerusalem. The population of Antioch was between a quarter and a half a million inhabitants, making it the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Of this population there was an estimated twenty to forty thousand Jews. Christianity moved here in the mid-30's of the common era. For the early Christians it was one of their most important centres. The Christianity that developed here was predominantly Jewish, and it considered itself to be the legitimate heir of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Among the early Christians four main groups developed which can be easily distinguished. This division has been well designated and characterized by Brown (1983:1-9):

(i) Those who insisted upon the full observance of the Jewish Law as well as circumcision: they were referred to as the Judaizers.

(ii) Those who demanded some form of observance of certain Jewish laws, but did not insist upon circumcision: this was the position of James and Peter.

(iii) Those who saw the Christian as free from all dietary laws as well as circumcision: this was the position of Paul.

(iv) Those 'who saw no abiding significance in the Jewish cult and feasts (Brown 1983:6). To this group belonged the Gospel of John and the epistle to the Hebrews.

While all four groups were probably in evidence in Antioch at different times, it was particularly group 2 that triumphed and exercised the most influence. However, the character of Jewish Christianity underwent a change in Antioch during the course of the first century. This change can be observed in three different stages.

3.1 The first generation (prior to the Jewish war: 70 CE)

During this period of time Jewish Christianity endeavoured strenuously to maintain its ascendancy in certain areas of the Christian Church, in particular in centres such as Jerusalem and Antioch. In the mid-forties James, 'the brother of the Lord', assumed the leadership of the Christian community in Jerusalem. It seems that he quickly moved to establish his authority over other centres, particularly those which had already had a connection with the Jerusalem community. Originally Antioch had been founded c 300 BC by Seleucus I Nicator, and shortly afterwards Barnabas had been sent by the Christian leadership in Jerusalem to care for the Christian community there (Acts 11:22-23). It is natural that when James assumed the leadership of the Christian community in Jerusalem, he would endeavour to exert his influence over such a centre as that of Antioch. As Elliot-Binns (1956:34-35) has commented:

That Jerusalem, once it had become the centre of the new movement should seek to discredit any rivals, or at least to assert her own predominance, was only natural. Such an attitude was deeply ingrained in the Holy City of the Jewish people. She had an inveterate jealousy of other religious centres, and the old story of her relations with Shechem and with the Samaritans may well have been repeated on a Christian stage.

With the ascendancy of James, two issues came to the fore which directly concerned the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. These issues were solely of an internal matter to Christianity. The first issue was that of circumcision. With the large number of Gentiles being accepted into the Christian communities, the question of the need for circumcision naturally emerged. Paul strongly argued for the freedom of the Christian from this rite, while a group referred to as the Judaizers argued for the necessity of abiding by this rite. In 49 CE (Acts 15), the position of Paul triumphed and marked a watershed for the relations between Christianity and Judaism. This very decision set the stage for the further independent development of Christianity and Judaism. Entry into Christianity depended upon the rite of baptism, which now replaced that of circumcision.

Despite this decision the question of the full observance of Jewish dietary laws still continued. It was at Antioch in particular that the matter became far more critical. In fact, representatives from James in Jerusalem came to Antioch, insisting on the dietary observance by the Jewish Christians within the community. The implications

of such a move were immediately noted by Paul and vigorously opposed. This meant that within the Christian community there could be no unity, because non-observant Gentile Christians would automatically be excluded from sharing meals as well as sharing the eucharistic celebration with Jewish Christians. Meeks (1983:103) notes that exclusion from 'table-fellowship' was in fact a disciplinary measure involving excommunication. The followers of James in effect were asking for the excommunication of non-observant Gentile Christians. Paul vehemently opposed this position, as is seen in Galatians 2. However, other Christian leaders in Antioch, such as Barnabas and Peter supported the position of James. It seems that Paul actually lost this argument, for he soon leaves Antioch, visits the city only once again (Acts 18:22), and never mentions it again in his correspondence.

After Paul's departure from Antioch it is quite likely that Jewish and Gentile Christians continued to hold meals and in particular their eucharistic celebrations separately. In this way the two groups could continue to exist side by side harmoniously: circumcision would not be demanded of the Gentiles, but they were to keep themselves separate from the Jewish Christians who still upheld the Jewish dietary regulations. Jewish Christians would continue to flourish in centres such as Antioch, which were under the influence of Jerusalem and its leadership, which was favourable to their cause. Elsewhere, Paul's direction and approach gained the upperhand with the vast numbers of Christians coming from the Gentile world.

3.2 The second generation (after the fall of Jerusalem: 70-100 CE)

During the course of the sixties the most influential leaders of the first generation Christians died: James (62), Peter (64), and Paul (67). At the same time historical events were conspiring to move the Christians more away from Judaism and towards a separate identity as a dominantly Gentile Christian Church. In Antioch the Jewish and Jewish-Christian communities were not directly influenced by the events of the war of 66-70 CE. Josephus (*Bellum Judaicum*, ii.457-479) reports how Jews were attacked in cities outside Jerusalem in anticipation that they might join the revolt. One can only presume that with the outbreak of anti-Jewish feeling Christians would endeavour to separate themselves more fully as a religion from Judaism. This would lead naturally to the diminishing of the influence of Jewish Christianity.

The flight of the Christians from Jerusalem in 67 CE, prior to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, also led to a further separation between Jews and Jewish Christians. By this act Jewish Christians deserted their brothers in a time of crisis. Brandon (1951:168) has argued that the accounts of the flight of Christians from Jerusalem to Pella are unhistorical. However, most scholars have rejected his arguments and the tradition still seems to be the most acceptable position (see Elliott-Binns 1956:67 and Schoeps 1969:22). While relations between Jews and Jewish Christians had been more or less harmonious until this point, by turning their backs on their fellow Jews in the hour of need, the Jewish Christians had distanced themselves from Judaism even further. One could say that prior to 70 CE Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Antioch were the most influential and strangest group. However, after the war their position evaporated. The destruction of the Temple

also influenced Jewish Christians negatively. The position that had been advocated by Paul now seemed to be justified and his direction gained more and more credence.

Within a decade of the fall of Jerusalem the gospel of Matthew was written in Antioch. Some interesting information can be gleaned from its pages. In fact, one can view this Gospel as having come to terms with the influence that Pharisaism was having within Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem. In particular the Pharisees were attracting converts from among those same people that the Christians were endeavouring to win over to their views. Matthew's Gospel contains numerous harsh sayings against the Pharisees. These sayings, Neusner (1973:77) argues convincingly, can be seen as a reaction to the success which the Pharisees were experiencing to the detriment of the Jewish Christians. He refers to 'the competition between the Pharisees and the Christian missionaries for the loyalty of the mass of Jews'. The Gospel of Matthew shows how the Christians contrasted themselves more and more from the rising Pharisaism of the period after the war. The picture that Matthew paints of Jesus is no longer that of a wandering charismatic prophet, which is the picture of the earliest Gospel of Mark. Instead, Jesus is a rabbi who has the authority to provide binding interpretations of the Jewish Law (Mt 5:17):

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.

At the same time the leaders of the Christian community are seen to exercise a similar role of authoritative interpretation; just like the Jewish rabbis the Christian community's leaders exercise an authoritative role in interpreting the Scriptures for faith and action (Mt 16:19, 18:18):

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven .

As Meier (1983:66-67) comments on this passage:

Rather, Matthew is presenting Peter as the chief Rabbi of the universal church, with power to make 'halakic' decisions (i.e., decisions on conduct) in the light of the teaching of Jesus.

On forty-four occasions Matthew quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures (most of these quotations do not appear in the other Gospels). In presenting these quotations he is sowing his understanding and interpretation of those Scriptures sacred to Judaism. Quite probably some of the quotations that Matthew employs were used in sharp contrast to the way in which they were being interpreted by Pharisaic Judaism of that period. For example, Hosea 6:5 is quoted and interpreted by Johanan ben Zakkia (Goldin 1955:34) in the following way:

... sacrifice in the Temple is now replaced by the kind of life one leads and the actions that are inspired by a loving and generous heart: Be not grieved. We have another atonement as effective this. And what is it? It is acts of loving kindness, as it is said, 'For I desire mercy, not sacrifice'.

The Gospel of Matthew quotes the same passage of Hosea in reference to the disciples of Jesus being criticized for not obeying the stipulations of the Sabbath Law. In this way Matthew uses this very verse against the Pharisees and in effect he says that the Christians are not the only ones who have a clear understanding of what the meaning of mercy is, and not the Pharisees.

This also points to the way in which the community of Matthew in Antioch has changed. From the strict desire for ritual observance among those who followed James, Matthew is now arguing for a position whereby the Christians are set free from the minute observance of the Jewish law, for an emphasis that is placed on the heart.

The implications of this understanding of Matthew and his community are most important. The disputes with the Pharisees concern the very nature of the relation of the community to the traditions of the past. Both the Pharisees and the community of Matthew believed that they were the true heirs of these traditions.

It is in this light that Matthew's repeated condemnations of the Pharisees must be seen: during the ninth decade of the first century the Christians of Antioch believed that they and not the Pharisees were the true successors to the religion of the Old Testament, and by asserting their claim they necessarily had to deny this status to the Pharisees. But by making their claims, the Jewish Christians did not place themselves outside the orbit of Judaism. Like the Essenes, who also denounced Jews outside their own movement, the Christians of Antioch revered their Jewish heritage and believed that they and not their opponents were that tradition's most authentic representatives (Hann 1987:352).

3.3 The third generation (Ignatius: after 100 CE)

Not much is known about Christianity in Antioch immediately after the Gospel of Matthew. The next information that we have of it comes from the writings of Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch who wrote between 108-110 CE. In contrast to the middle-of-the-road Jewish Christian teachers of the community of Matthew, a new generation emerged in which the leaders were no longer Jewish, but Gentile. In particular the direction of Paul and his thought emerged triumphant. Nothing in Ignatius echoes Matthew's concern for the Christian leadership to parallel that of the scribes and Pharisees. The main reason for this change in direction stems from the continued success that the Christian church was having in bringing ever more Gentiles into its ranks. At the same time the mission to the Jews had been in effect blocked. Neusner (1975:39-40) comments interestingly on the reasons for the virtual cessation of converts from Judaism:

Wherever the rabbis' views of Scripture were propagated the Christian view of the meaning of biblical, especially prophetic, revelation and its fulfilment made relatively little progress ... It was not without good reason that the gospel tradition of Matthew saw in the 'scribes and Pharisees' the chief opponents of Jesus' ministry. Whatever the historical facts of that ministry,

the rabbis proved afterward to be the greatest stumbling block for the Christian mission to the Jews.

4. Further development of Jewish Christianity

By the turn of the first century of our era, Antioch had become a predominantly Gentile Christian Church with Jewish Christians in the minority. Pockets of Jewish Christians continued to be influential in areas in Syria for a couple of centuries to come. However, they were no longer in the mainstream of Christianity, nor were they directing it, as in the past. They were very much on the periphery and were looked upon with suspicion by the mainstream Christianity. A quick glance at two groups of Jewish Christians will illustrate how Jewish Christianity continued to survive in the area of Palestine-Syria and in the vicinity of Antioch.

4.1 The Nazarenes

From studies of early Christian writers it appears that there was a group of Law-abiding Jewish Christians who continued well into the fourth century CE. They were to be seen as directly descended from those first Jewish believers in Jesus and the way in which the traditions on Jesus had been preserved by subsequent generations of Jewish Christians. They were centred mainly along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, in the Galilee region and Jerusalem until 135 CE. They were basically Trinitarian, accepting the deity of Jesus, and their understanding of the Holy Spirit was in conformity with the views of the main church at that time. In particular, the Fathers of the church who wrote about them could find nothing in their doctrines that they could condemn; but, their main criticism revolved around their actions. In particular they continued to observe the Mosaic Law as well as circumcision and the Sabbath. It was this that brought them into conflict with the rest of the Christian church.

This rejection and exclusion was, however, gradual. For this reason - and because Nazarene numbers remained small throughout - Church writers do not mention Nazarenes by name until such a time as the Church was free from persecution, and began to refine its own narrowed orthodoxy (Price 1988:109).

On the side of Judaism the separation was much quicker and more stringent. It was at the end of the first century that the *birkat ha-mînîm* was composed, and it mentioned the Nazarenes specifically by name. Despite this a certain contact did continue between the two groups, owing to the fact that they existed together in predominantly Jewish areas. The Nazarenes kept up their knowledge of Hebrew, in which they read the Hebrew writings as well as a Gospel of the Hebrews. They also produced a commentary on the prophet Isaiah, and in it one observes their rejection of the authority of the Pharisees.

The Nazarenes refused to accept the authority established by the Pharisaic camp after the destruction of Jerusalem, and in so refusing they adjudicated

their own isolation from the converging flow of what we call Judaism. (Pritz 1988:110).

4.2 Ebionism

It is quite likely that a split occurred among the Nazarenes around the beginning of the second century.

This split was either over a matter of christological doctrine or over leadership of the community. Out of this split came the Ebionites, who can scarcely be separated from the Nazarenes on the basis of geography, but who can be easily distinguished from the standpoint of Christology (Pritz 1988:108).

The first reference to the Ebionites as a distinct group is found in Irenaeus *ca* 175 CE, and thereafter there are numerous references to them by the Church Fathers, showing that they flourished during the second, third and early fourth centuries and probably even later. It is also quite likely that they were the ones responsible for the influence upon Mohammed for his ideas on Jesus (Velasco & Sabourin 1976:9-10). The works on which the Ebionites based their thought and beliefs are: a Hebrew form of the Gospel of Matthew, which they termed 'the Gospel according to the Hebrews', and a number of writings referred to as the Pseudo-Clementines.

The most characteristic feature of their thought was that it was anti-Trinitarian. God had established both the Devil and Christ as kings of this world and the world to come, respectively. Jesus is presented as a true prophet, but he is neither God nor Saviour; nor do they consider that he was virginally born. They practised both circumcision and baptism and celebrated a ritual meal using unleavened bread and water (no wine). Fitzmyer (1976c:440-441) has given a very comprehensive chart of their views, drawn from the early Christian Fathers.

5. Conclusion

The first century of the common era was a period in which both Judaism and Christianity sought to unify their teachings and their positions. With Christianity it was a process in which it had to reconcile opposing groups within itself, as well as to define itself with regard to Judaism. In the context of Christianity, apart from the Gospel of Matthew, the centre of consideration focussed upon groups and thought within Christianity itself. The views of James, Peter, Paul and Ignatius all related to the views of groups within early Christianity. At first Jewish Christians, who endeavoured to continue their links with Jewish tradition, were the ones to give the most influential direction. This was finally replaced by the ascendancy of Gentile Christianity. In other words, a new paradigm triumphed, with the paradigm of Jewish Christianity being relegated to the margins of Christianity, and ultimately disappearing after a number of brave centuries in which it strived to survive.

Until the time of Ignatius, those who argued with Judaism and Jewish traditions did so from the perspective of being Jews. Paul and Matthew, for example, each in their own way was convinced that the message that they preached was the real inheritor of

the traditions of Israel. Matthew quoted frequently from the Hebrew Scriptures in order to demonstrate that his understanding and the Jewish Christianity that adhered to this understanding was its true successor. Likewise, Paul presented the Christian faith as the true successor of the faith of Abraham, and right until the end of his life he struggled with the problem of why his fellow Jews were not able to come with him along the path of his understanding of how the Christian faith is the true inheritor of Abraham's faith.

None of the perspectives expressed here can be termed anti-Semitic, despite some of the language that is used here. The criticisms that arose are criticisms either made by people coming from Judaism itself, or by those who are wanting to preserve their understanding of the Christian message. However, it must be acknowledged that such statements as do occur opened the door for an anti-Semitic interpretation by later Christianity. For this Christianity must forever make atonement.

It was one thing for the Jewish Christian Matthew to criticize the Pharisees' interpretation of the Jewish tradition, just as it was for Paul the Jew to condemn the observance of Jewish practices by Gentile converts. It is quite another when a contemporary Christian who knows the words of Matthew and Paul, but does not know Judaism comes to understand the latter solely in terms of the language in which the conflicts of the first century were expressed. (Hann 1987:340)

The most important result emerging from this paper is the fact that the sharp distinction that is generally seen to exist between Judaism and Christianity from the first stages of the Christian church is but a myth. Instead, it was a developing separation which many within the confines of Christianity tried desperately to maintain at their peril. At first in the mother church of Christianity and her daughter churches the links were forged and strongly maintained. However, by the beginning of the second century the separation was complete, and those wishing to maintain links were relegated to the periphery of mainline Christianity (Katz 1984:76).

This study demonstrates how the message of Jesus of Nazareth was transposed from the world of Judaism into the world of the Greeks and Romans. In such a transition one sees a paradigm shift taking place from one cultural world to another. It is interesting to observe in the history of Christianity, when Christian missionaries have endeavoured to transpose Christianity into other cultural worlds such as Africa, China, or South America, very often the attempt has been to try to preserve the Graeco-Roman clothing of the package, instead of following the example of the paradigm shift that occurred in the early Christian church, of moving from the paradigm of Judaism to that of the Graeco-Roman world.

Despite the paradigm change that occurred within Christianity, much is still owed by Christianity to Judaism. Both hold common writings. The very own writings of the Christians themselves can only be understood against the background of the Judaism of the first century. For this reason Christians will always remain indebted to Judaism for the heritage that she has passed onto them, a heritage to which the Christians must remain true if they are to understand and appreciate their own

traditions correctly. This, surely, was what those early Jewish Christians endeavoured to do.

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