

Sibling Rivalry: Early Jewish-Christian Relations and Their Legacy Today

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Jesus was a 1st century Jew

There is no good evidence that Jesus was an anti-Jewish Jew. He did not reject worship by sacrifice, which was a central institution of Judaism (as of ancient religion in general), nor the practices required by it, such as purification and support of the Temple and the priesthood. Some of the scholars who think that Jesus opposed ritual, purification, and sacrifice believe that they are thereby setting him against Judaism, whereas in fact they are proposing that he was a modern man who only incidentally lived in the ancient world. The motive ... is not anti-Judaism, but the desire to make Jesus and his message immediately relevant to contemporary society. The evidence from the Gospels, however, indicates that Jesus accepted the Jewish version of ancient religion ... (E. P. Sanders, 'Jesus, Ancient Judaism, and Modern Christianity: The Quest Continues', in Fredriksen & Reinhartz (eds), *Jesus, Judaism and Christian Anti-Judaism* (2002), 54)

Judaism and Christianity Are Now Separate Religions

By the early fourth century, Christianity ... was the dominant religion in the Roman Empire. Why, how, and when did this small Jewish group differentiate itself so thoroughly from other Jewish groups that it could chart an independent course in world history? (Adele Reinhartz, 'How Christianity Parted from Judaism', in Frederick E. Greenspahn (ed.), *Early Judaism* (2018), 97)

An Unbalanced Relationship

From its origins, Christianity related to Judaism, it could not do otherwise. But it is not clear that Judaism related to Christianity, at least before Constantine. For Christians, Judaism could be a reviled Other against which Christian identity had to be defended, or a precious inheritance in terms of which to construct that identity; for most of them, it was both, and thus a perennial obsession ...

By contrast, the Jews of the second and third centuries paid notoriously little attention to Christians or Christianity. ... Under the Christian empire, the Jews eventually had no choice but to relate to Christianity. (Megan Hale Williams, 'No More Clever Titles: Observations on Some Recent Studies of Jewish-Christian Relations in the Roman World', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 99: 1 (2009), 49-50)

Common Core of Second Temple Judaism

By the beginning of the second century BCE ... the common core of all later forms of Judaism ... was in place. Jews worshipped and obeyed the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose actions in the world were recorded in the sacred histories and who was worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jews believed themselves bound to obey the commandments of God, especially as laid down in the first five books of the Bible, through the covenant sealed through Moses on Mount Sinai centuries earlier. These commandments laid down precise rules for the conduct of life from birth to death.

... The majority of Jews saw it as a religious duty to refrain from work on the Sabbath, to circumcise their sons, to avoid forbidden foods and to bring offerings, when they could, to the Jerusalem Temple. (Martin Goodman, *A History of Judaism* (2017), 110-111)

Variety of Second Temple Judaism

The Jews, from the most ancient times, had three philosophies pertaining to their traditions, that of the Essenes, that of the Sadducees, and, thirdly, that of the group called the Pharisees.

... As for the fourth of the philosophies ... they have a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable, since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.11, 23)

Diaspora Judaism

Jews had lived peacefully for many years in many parts of the Roman world, and diaspora communities in Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt and indeed Rome itself had long been permitted by the Roman state to observe their own custom, such as the Sabbath, on the grounds of their venerable antiquity. (Goodman 2017, 108)

The Jews remained a vital social and religious force in the later Roman Empire ... (they) were a lively presence in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean. (Robert Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (1983), xvi)

Paul's 'conversion'?

- *Traditional*: From works righteousness to justification by faith. From being 'under the law' to new life in Christ.
- *New Perspective* (e.g. James Dunn, N.T. Wright): From ethnic nationalism to universal salvation. Christ has broken down the barriers between Jew and Gentile (such as circumcision and food laws).
- *Radical New Perspective* (e.g. Paula Fredriksen, Pamela Eisenbaum, Mark Nanos): To the resurrection of Jesus as having inaugurated the ingathering of the nations. What Torah does for Jews, Jesus does for Gentiles. All will worship the God of Israel, Jews as Jews, Gentiles as Gentiles.

Requirements for Gentiles

Paul preserves the ethnic distinctions between Israel and the nations: no circumcision for gentiles. He holds that gentiles do not need to join Israel (via conversion), only to join with Israel (by eschewing their native gods and disavowing their idols; Rom 15:8-12). (Fredriksen, 'How Later Contexts Affect Pauline Content, or: Retrospect is the Mother of Anachronism', in Tomson & Schwartz (eds), *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History* (2014), 39)

Consequences

Not requiring complete affiliation with Judaism via circumcision, insisting that family and urban cults nonetheless be renounced, the early apostles walked these Christ-fearing pagans into a social and religious no-man's land. These apostles themselves as well as their gentiles may not have been too worried – after all, Christ was on the verge of returning, of gloriously summing up the ages, and of submitting the cosmos and everything in it to his divine father. But the pagan majority in these diaspora cities was worried. The gods' anger would affect everyone. (Fredriksen 2014, 45)

From Jewish sect to Gentile religion

In sheer demographics, the Jesus movement was overwhelmingly non-Jewish in its constituency by the end of the first century, and in that sense was a largely Gentile religion.

... In terms of social identity, Pauline and other congregations of the middle and later decades of the first century were separate from Jewish synagogue communities. Although Jewish and Christian individuals continued to interact with one another for centuries, by the second half of the first century Jews and Christians as social groups were going their separate ways, organizing themselves around distinctive beliefs and practices. (Daniel Harlow, 'Early Judaism and Early Christianity', in Collins & Harlow (eds), *Early Judaism: A Comprehensive Overview* (2012), 416)

A Portable God

Both Judaism and Christianity emerge from the same religious tradition – that of ancient Israel – at the same time. Both claim to be Israel. Indeed, both initially identify themselves as Israel, and not as Jews or Christians. Even today, Christians and Jews consider themselves the descendants of Israel. They do not mean exactly the same thing by the concept of "Israel", however.

... These competing interpretations lead to clashes over authority and to questions about who has the right to interpret the scriptures of Israel. Both traditions, however, extend the presence of God into the life of the

community. No longer mediated by priests in a fixed temple, God's presence is accessible to all ... (Risa Levitt Kohn & Rebecca Moore, *A Portable God: The Origin of Judaism and Christianity* (2007), xiii, xvi)

Replacement Theology / Supersessionism

We have been led to God through this crucified Christ, and we are the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, who, though uncircumcised, was approved and blessed by God because of his faith and was called the father of many nations. (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 11.5)

In this compact statement, Justin challenges the right of Trypho and others to the title 'Israel' and asserts that followers of Christ are the true descendants of those whom Trypho might also claim as his ancestors. (Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (2005), 99)

Violent Rhetoric

- You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)
- You disowned the Lord, and so are not owned by him.
You did not receive the Lord, so you were not pitied by him.
You smashed the Lord to the ground, you were razed to the ground.
And you lie dead, while he rose from the dead, and is raised to the heights of heaven. (Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha* 99, 2nd cent.)
- Praise to the messiah in whom, during this feast, the cursed people drove nails! (Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Unleavened Bread* 20, 4th cent.)

Contact between Jews and Christians?

It is hard to see how for many early Christians – high tension minority groups who lived separately in their own communities as they tried to cope with abundant internal division and unwelcome amounts of external pressure – Jews would have been much of a reality in their day-today existence.

... Consequently, for (Christian) writers the Jews were nothing more than the useful exponents of a long theological and historical tradition that such authors sought to appropriate.

... It was (during the course of the fourth century) that Christianity reencountered Judaism – ... all of a sudden Jews were no longer a textual, but also a very actual reality. Much of the rhetoric of the Church Fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries was fuelled by this realization: their anger is a function of the level of integration enjoyed by the Jews of their own time and of the societal respect such Jews were still able to command among large segments of the population. (Leonard Rutgers, *Making Myths: Jews in Early Christian Identity Formation* (2009), 121-3)

Establishing Boundaries

Again the Jews, the most miserable and wretched of all men, are going to fast, and again we must make secure the flock of Christ. ... The difference between the Jews and us is not a small one, is it? Is the dispute between us over ordinary, everyday matters so that you think the two religions are really one and the same? Why are you mixing what cannot be mixed? They crucified the Christ whom you adore as God. Do you see how great the difference is? How is it, then, that you keep running to those who slew Christ when you say that you worship him whom they crucified? (Chrysostom, *Homilies against the Jews* 4.1.1, 4.3.6)

Jewish anti-Christian Polemic

Let us return, however, to the words put into the mouth of the Jew, where the mother of Jesus is described as having been turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera. (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.32)

The master said, "Jesus the Nazarene practiced magic and deceived and led Israel astray." (*b. San* 107b)

Authority figures and Civil Patterns

While Constantine's patronage eventually empowered orthodox bishops, the conduits and authors of the contra Iudaeos tradition, they had little effect on long-lived civil patterns. Religious and social mixing between different types of Jews and Christians, between Christians of different sorts, and between Christians, Jews and pagans all continued. Indeed, the vitality of this habitual contact accounts in part for the increasing shrillness of anti-Jewish invective. ... By controlling the transmission of earlier texts and traditions, the orthodox ideologues of separation not only (eventually) changed the future; they also changed the past, which we still see, despite ourselves, too much from their vantage point. (Paula Fredriksen, 'What "Parting of the Ways"? Jews, Gentiles, and the Ancient Mediterranean City', in Becker & Reed (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted* (2007), 61–2)

Nostra Aetate

It is true that the church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy scripture. ('Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions', Second Vatican Council, 1965, 4)

Renouncing Supersessionism

We affirm that the church, elected in Jesus Christ, has been engrafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore, Christians have not replaced Jews. (*A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews*, 199th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1987, 2)

We firmly reject any view of Judaism which sees it as a living fossil, simply superseded by Christianity. (*Jews, Christians, and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue*, Lambeth Conference 1988, 16)

The Church of England should neither deny the continuing participation of Jewish people in Israel as God's gift and God's creation, nor limit the grace proclaimed in the gospel of Christ, which is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek'. (*God's Unfailing Word*, 2019, 39)

An Indissoluble Bond?

In expressing the relation, or 'bond', between the Church and the Jewish people, Reformed and Lutheran statements of faith describing this bond have a clear preference for words like 'indissoluble' or 'irrevocable' or 'inseparable'. It sounds as if these churches, against all the evidence of the past, against all historical facts, want to convince themselves with strong wording that there is a very special, indeed unique, bond between the Church and the Jewish people. Christian anti-Judaism is not forgotten or left behind but is regarded more as an incident in the past than as essential Christian teaching. Historical reality shows the opposite of an inseparable bond, but churches seek to establish a new beginning of the relationship that—in their view—revives the original situation of the first century.

... Is the so-called 'indissoluble bond' a historical reality or is it only a theological conviction? Would it not be more honest to speak of a 'definitely broken relationship' than of an 'indissoluble bond'? (Simon Schoon, 'An Indissoluble Bond between the Church and the People of Israel: Historical Fact or Theological Conviction?', in Poorthuis, Schwartz & Turner (eds), *Interaction between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art and Literature* (2009), 400)

Messianic Judaism

For the most part, Evangelical Christians accept and support Messianic Jews. As a rule, Evangelicals do not promote interfaith dialogue, and their acceptance of Messianic Judaism points to an alternative measure of recognition of the Jewish tradition. (Yaakov Ariel, 'Messianic Judaism', in Levine & Brettler (eds), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 758.)

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