

JEWS AND CHRISTIANS: A TANGLED HISTORY

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Session 3: The 'Parting of the Ways', part 1

What happened after Jesus' death?

Acts 1: 6-10

⁶So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' ⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. ¹⁰They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹'Men of Galilee', they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'

Acts 2: 1-13

¹When the day of Pentecost [Shavuot] came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹(both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' ¹²Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine.'

Acts 2: 42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Amy-Jill Levine, *Jesus the Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (2007)

To proclaim the resurrection of an individual is one thing; to proclaim that the messiah was a man crucified by Rome was something else entirely. The Temple establishment may have

feared a public revolt; scribes and teachers of the Law might have worried about this rival school of thought. The followers of Jesus may have contributed to the tension by preaching about the end of the age, the destruction of the Temple, the guilt of all the people for crucifying Jesus, or Jesus' place in the heavenly throne room. To proclaim oneself a follower of Jesus consequently meant to risk ridicule, ostracism, and even persecution.

Matthew 10: 34-36

I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be those of one's own household.

Micah 4: 2-4

¹In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. ²Many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' For the law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ³He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. ⁴Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Lord has spoken.

Matthew 9: 5-6

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

Mark 7: 24-29

²⁴Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷'First let the children eat all they want,' he told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.' ²⁸'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

An early question: how 'Jewish' should followers of Jesus be?

Matthew 5: 17-20

¹⁷[Jesus says]: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'

New Testament, Epistle to the Galatians 3: 23-29

²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be

justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Surveying the many groups of early Jesus followers/Christians

Sources

Christian heresiologists, who describe 'heretical' beliefs and books in order to attack them

- Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in France (c. 130-c. 202 CE): *Against Heresies* (180 CE)
- Tertullian, writer from Carthage (modern Tunisia) (c. 155-240 CE), wrote several books attacking heresies
- Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (Palestine, c. 260-339 CE), *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 324)

Manuscripts discovered in the 20th century

Nag Hammadi manuscripts, discovered in 1945 in Upper Egypt

- Written in Coptic, probably translated from Greek
- 13 volumes containing previously unknown early Christian texts, many showing 'gnostic' ideas
 - *Gospel of Thomas* – 114 sayings of Jesus
 - *The Gospel of Truth*
 - *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*
 - *The Trimorphic Prottennoia*

A sample of three groups

The Ebionites – one of several 'Jewish Christian' groups

- Mentioned by Christian heresiologists
- Saw Jesus as human, the messiah predicted in the Jewish scriptures, who was 'adopted' by God as God's son, and died as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world
- Rejected belief in Jesus' virgin birth, and in his pre-existence with God
- Believed that to be God's people, they had to continue the observance of the divinely-given Torah, including sabbath observance, circumcision, and dietary laws,
- Name may come from the Hebrew *evyon*, 'poor'
- Scriptures: They kept the Jewish scriptures, rejected the writings of Paul, and seem to have had a version of the Gospel of Matthew that omitted the first two chapters; there are mentions of a 'Gospel of the Ebionites' and a 'Gospel of the Nazareans'
- The 'proto-orthodox' group regarded them as heretics, and they died out or disappeared around the 4th century CE

The Marcionites – an extreme rejection of the Jewish roots of Christianity

- Founded by Marcion (born c. 100 CE), who travelled to Rome in 139 CE
- Deeply influenced by the Epistle to the Galatians
- Another influential text for Marcion is from Paul's Epistle to the Romans 8: 3: 'For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son **in the likeness of sinful flesh**, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.'
- Developed this into the theory that the 'evil God' of the Jewish scriptures had created this world with its pain and death, while 'the God of Jesus' had nothing to do with this world, but sent Jesus, his son, to rescue humankind from the 'evil God'
- Saw Jesus as totally divine, only appearing to have a human body and die on the cross
- Marcion returned to Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and founded many churches that lasted well into the 5th century
- He developed the first Christian canon: 11 of Paul's epistles, and a version of the Gospel of Luke edited to remove any Jewish associations

Gnosticism – a way of thinking rather than a closed group

- A varied array of group and thinkers, some Christian, others apparently not
- Shared focus is on the secret knowledge (*gnosis*) of the true nature of the universe and human existence, which enables individuals to achieve salvation
- Common myth of this world as the creation of a lowly divine being (Yaldabaoth, or the Demiurge); humans embody divine elements sent by the one true and unknowable God who is the origin of everything
- For Christian gnostics, Jesus is the messenger sent by the one true God (the Father) to teach humans gnosis so that they can escape this imperfect world and their spirits can return to their heavenly home
- Rather than establish their own churches, gnostic Christians seem to have belonged to non-gnostic churches, seeing themselves as a spiritual elite
- Had their own sacred texts (most are known from the Nag Hammadi library).

Gospel of Truth, 18

Jesus, the Christ, enlightened those who were in darkness through oblivion. He enlightened them; he showed them a way; and the way is the truth which he taught them. For this reason error grew angry at him and persecuted him ... He was nailed to a tree and he became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father.

Further reading

Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Random House, 1979.