

The Jesus Movement Part III - The Split.

The preceding essay dealt with some of the principal issues involved in the conflict between Jesus and his opponents. It also examined the rapid deterioration in the relationship between the Jesus Movement and Judaism. In the decades following the first Christian Pentecost, the alienation and estrangement became a total and permanent breakdown.

Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, Israel's National Shrine, the Jewish people were confronted with the pain and confusion of losing the physical reminder of God's presence and the rituals of sacrifice formerly required of them. They were faced with a future without a spiritual centre. (1)

The birth of normative Judaism after the Temple

The highly respected scribal scholar Yohanan ben Zakkai, according to numerous sources, secured Roman permission to set establish a forum of surviving Jewish scholars in the coastal town of *Yavneh*. Vespasian, the Roman Commander, is said to have granted his request. It is uncertain whether this group of scribes and their successors ever described themselves as "the Council of *Yavneh*" (Jamnia). What is certain is that during the decades after 70 CE, Jewish scholars laid the foundations for the establishment of normative Judaism and the re-affirmation of Jewish identity. A major part of that redefinition of Jewish identity involved in establishing clear distinctions between Judaism and the Jesus people. It did so by branding the Christians as heretical and sectarian.

Under ben Zakkai's direction, the *Yavneh Rabbis* continued to develop and codify the Oral Tradition which began to develop a few centuries previously. The body of commentary on the Torah was published eventually in written form as The *Mishnah* in 200 CE. (2)

Among the tracts in the *Mishnah* is the *Pirqe Aboth* or 'source sayings of the Fathers'. It provides a kind of self-description of the identity and mission of the post-70 CE "men of the Great Synagogue." These were the "repeaters," (*Tannaim*) of the oral tradition). The *Pirqe Aboth* 1: 1 states:

'Moses received the *Torah* from Sinai , and handed it down to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets delivered it to the men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things,

"Be deliberate in judgment; recruit many disciples; and make a fence around the *Torah*.'" (3)

Jews and the Jesus Movement: the struggle for legitimacy

New Testament and related sources provide strong indications that during the fifty or so years after the death of Jesus, his followers and the teachers of Israel were engaged in a bitter debate about God, God's plan of Salvation and the legitimacy of their opposed

understandings and interpretations of divine revelation. From the Christian perspective, Paul and later, the authors of the Gospels argued that the person and message of Jesus of Nazareth had signalled the end of the Covenant of Sinai and the revelation which came with the Torah and the Prophets. Christopher Rowland comments:

“The disentanglement of the relationship between the Christians and the rabbis of Jamnia is a task which still awaits completion, though, of course, the paucity of information at our disposal makes the completion of it a very difficult enterprise. The fact remains that, however strained relationships may have been between Christians and certain Jews before the fall of Jerusalem and with the rabbis at Jamnia (*Yavneh*) afterwards, there is little doubt that the early Christians still endeavoured to maintain the belief that their convictions about Jesus made them a legitimate, indeed *the* legitimate continuation the biblical traditions.” (4)

There is abundant textual evidence from the Christian Scriptures which graphically illustrate the intensity of the debate between the Jesus Movement and the Synagogue. There are also clear indications of the suffering involved in distressful estrangement and separation of Christians from their Jewish origins.

Matthew made it abundantly clear that the traumatic experience of separation was modified by the conviction that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the former dispensation had served its purpose in Salvation history and had been fulfilled. Matthew’s genius was to narrate the story of this transition in the most persuasive way possible by arranging the five book Gospel narrative in such a way that it resembled that of the five books of Moses. This then gave Matthew the platform from which to argue in adversarial fashion the superiority of the teachings and moral authority of Jesus over the old Law.

In the Sermon on the Mountain, “Jesus no longer speaks of law and prophets but solely the law. The law is,, the law of Moses. But again, it is the law of Moses but now as it is taught by Jesus. In the final analysis, therefore, what Jesus says about the law applies to it as something being authoritatively reinterpreted by his teaching. It is not the Mosaic law in and of itself which has normative and abiding character for disciples, but the Mosaic law as it has passed through the crucible of Jesus’ teaching.” (5)

More evidence of growing estrangement

Luke-Acts documents the dramatic movement of Christianity outward from the geographical and spiritual boundaries of Judaism to embrace the Gentile world. It is a story which speaks of the transformative effects on a group which moves from the experience of socio-religious symbiosis to rapid and profound osmosis.

In the Fourth Gospel, John elevated and intensified the levels of hostility towards Jesus and his followers; the individuals and groups who oppose Jesus are now almost completely depersonalised by John and conflated into one generic body ‘the Jews.’

The final redaction of John's Gospel (around 100 CE) documents the end stages of the relationship between the Jesus Movement and Judaism. It had become unstainable, even toxic, so that a major, irreversible rupture had become inevitable. That split was hastened by the scribes of *Yavneh* when they contrived to make it near impossible for the followers of Jesus to attend the Synagogue.

The Jesus people expelled from the synagogue

It is likely that an early task of the *Yavneh* scribes was to deal decisively with the *Jesus Movement*. It had become so problematic that urgent action needed to be taken to remove this threat to the integrity and survival of Judaism. A strategy was devised to make it difficult for the Jesus people to attend the customary synagogue prayer gatherings. The plan involved altering one of the Jewish morning prayers in such a way that a stumbling block would be created for the Jesus people. The order of Jewish morning prayer is the *Shemoneh Esreh Berakot* or *Amidah* and it consisted of eighteen benedictions, blessings on God. The sequence of the blessings was changed to include the *Birkath ha Minim*, a blessing (in coded language) imploring God to bring a curse upon the hated Romans, the *minim* (heretics, separatists) and on the *Notzrim* (the Nazarenes)

*For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the **nozerim** and the **minim** be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant" (6)*

John's coined his own word to describe the contrived expulsion of Christian Jews from the Synagogue. It is *aposynagogos*. There are two instances of its use: the story of the healing of the man born blind and the ambivalent response of his parents:

"His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue (*aposynagogos*)." John 9:23. And John writes of whole groups who feared expulsion because of their recognition of Jesus as the Messiah:

"Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue (*aposynagogos*); for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." John 12: 42-43 (See also 16: 2 the plural form, *aposynagogoi*).

Sean Freyne, the late Irish scripture scholar and biblical historian, described the period of intra-national polarization up to and including the Second Jewish Revolt (132-135 C.E.O) as marking "the bitter opposition to the *minim* or Jewish Christians, attested both in Rabbinic and Christian sources, is a clear pointer to the struggle that was going on for the soul of Judaism." (7)

By around 90 CE, the Jesus Movement was probably considered to be unacceptably tainted, contaminated and compromised by reason of its crossing the separation boundaries and its absorption of Gentiles. Its continued existence and mission in even in Galilee of the Gentiles had become unviable.

Following the Jewish Revolt (66-70 CE) and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE Jewish realities change dramatically and decisively so. What remained for Jews were the *Temple of the Heart*, spiritual sacrifice, preservation of the laws of ethnic separation and ritual purity. The new Jewish home became the Synagogue. Under the aegis of the *Yavneh* scribes, Judaism became introspective, withdrawn and very self-critical as it struggled to redefine itself and find its way in a changed and increasingly hostile world. At the same time as Judaism turned in on itself, the Jesus Movement began to expand with enormous energy into the Gentile world. Similarities between the two groups began to blur then largely disappear . Ultimately there would be no place for the Nazarenes in the synagogue.

The end of it all:

The rapid absorption of Gentiles fundamentally and irreversibly changed the makeup and life of the Jesus Movement. The final rupture in the relationship between the Christians and Jews came in Palestine during the Second Jewish Revolt (132-135). Rabbi Akiva, who enjoyed wide respect in the Jewish community, endeavoured to persuade his fellows and even the Christian Jews, to support the uprising. In an effort to provide more moral authority and credibility to his cause Akiva proclaimed Simon bar Kochbar to be the Messiah.

The Christians declined on the basis that the revolt was not their struggle; that Jesus, their Master, was the Messiah of God and that had already come and gone!

Endnotes

- 1) In its place, the Rabbis taught about the Temple of the heart. While spiritual sacrifice became a central feature of post 70 CE Judaism, the surviving members of the Levitical class with the Rabbis of *Yavneh* continued to insist on the ongoing financial obligations to ‘maintain’ the Temple as though it still existed.
- 2) Despite the popular impression that the term *Rabbi* was used in the time of Jesus to describe a Jewish teacher, the title only came into use after the post 70 CE establishment of the Council of scribes and scholars at *Yavneh*. Consequently, the use of the title, as applied to Jesus in the Gospels, is anachronistic. The terms, “master” (*despotes*) and “teacher” (*didaskalos*) are more accurate.
- 3) The *Pirqa Aboth* (Linked [here](#)). The ‘hedge around the Law’ (Torah) is the *Mishnah*. It is a collection of rabbinical rulings on *Halakah* (purity and separation laws) and commentary on the Torah. It consists of 613 minor interpretative laws or *mitzvoth*. Implicit reference to some of these can be found in Matthew 23.

- 4) *Christian Origins. From Messianic Movement to Christian Religion.* Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1985, 301.
- 5) Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1986, 67.
- 6) See the excellent explanation of the *Birkath ha Minim* by Prof Lawrence Schiffman, “The Benediction against the Minim.” (Linked [here](#)) See also Sean Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian 323 B.C.E to 135 C.E. A Study of Second Temple Judaism*, Wilmington, DE, Glazier, 1980. 347-356.
- 7) *Ibid*, 324.

Some more reading:

For those who have the time, interest, stamina and some previous reading in the area of literary criticism and narrative development, Henry Wansbrough offers an extended explanation of how the ‘Matthean tradition’ travelled through time and passed through various redactional or editorial processes and stages. *The Gospels of Matthew*, ox.ac.uk, 1998 (Linked [here](#))

In the July article in this series the role of Paul of Tarsus and his message in the mission to the Gentiles will be examined. Special attention will be paid to Paul’s theological understanding of God’s original intentions for humanity, the breakdown in right relationship between God and humans and the reestablishment of that relationship in Christ.

The article in the August Newsletter will focus on the conflict between Paul and his most vexatious and formidable opponents, his fellow Christians, the ‘James party’ from Jerusalem. That story has some interesting parallels with the ‘conversation’ within Catholicism at present.

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