

Christian Origins as Jewish History

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Some readers might be surprised to find an entry on Christian Origins in an encyclopedia on Jewish history. Half a century ago, this might have seemed unthinkable within scholarly circles as well. In past research on Christianity, it was once common to treat Jesus and/or Paul as founders of a new “religion” that was, by definition and from its very origins, distinct from Judaism. Consistent with the Christian theological training and institutional settings of most early scholars of the New Testament (NT), their studies often took for granted a supersessionist model of history: the rise of Christianity was read as the restoration of biblical religion, which allegedly had been corrupted by post-biblical Judaism. Confessional, apologetic, and historical concerns were similarly mingled on the other side of the religious and disciplinary divide. Echoing traditional Rabbinic depictions of Jesus as magician, Jewish apostate, and failed Sage, Jewish historians often dismissed Christianity as a wayward Jewish messianism led further astray by Gentile meddling.

Recent trends in research, however, have opened the way for a new understanding of Christian Origins as an integrated (and even integral) part of the history of the Jews. Whether Jesus himself should be termed a Jewish wisdom teacher, political revolutionary, or apocalyptic prophet, there is a growing scholarly consensus that the Jesus Movement was one of many revitalization movements within first-century Judaism. Studies have even addressed the Jewish identity of Paul, who is traditionally considered the founder of Gentile Christianity and the author of Christian antinomianism. Likewise, historians have shed new light on the rest of the NT by reading these texts in terms of the Jesus Movement’s continuities, contacts, and conflicts with other Jewish groups. In the process, research on Christian Origins has enriched our understanding of ancient Jewish history.

1. Scholarship on Christian Origins since World War II

The emergence of these new approaches has been predicated, first and foremost, on the paradigm shift in NT research since World War II. A number of Christian scholars responded to the horrors of the Holocaust by grappling with the images of Jews and Judaism in the NT and by addressing the possible place of these texts in the prehistory of modern anti-Semitism. The same decades saw the establishment of new institutional settings for the secular study of Religion and the growing participation of non-Christian scholars in NT research. Together, these developments have helped to foster a scholarly discourse which is more attuned to the biases of the past and which seeks further to situate the NT in its original historical and cultural contexts, as distinct from its current status as Christian Scripture.

At the same time, experimentation with new models and approaches from other disciplines, ranging from Classics to Sociology, has offered fresh perspectives on Christian Origins. NT statements about Jews and Judaism have been increasingly read in terms of the ambivalent rhetorics of communal identity-formation and the complex socio-cultural dynamics of religious self-definition. Ironically, the result has been a new recognition of

the *inner*-Jewish orientation of some of its seemingly *anti*-Jewish statements about Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and others.

The past fifty years have also been marked by the emergence of a new awareness and appreciation of the diversity of Judaism in the Second Temple period (536 BCE–70 CE), catalyzed in large part by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The recovery of these long-lost texts helped to highlight the rich multiplicity of pre-Rabbinic Judaism. As a result, research on Second Temple Judaism has shed doubt on the traditional image of the Pharisees as the *de facto* leaders of the Jewish people prior to the destruction of the Temple. Far from being proto-Rabbis with authority ratified by popular support, the Pharisees are now seen as one of many sects. Together with the adoption of more critical approaches for studying the classical Rabbinic literature, this new emphasis on the diversity in Second Temple Judaism has largely undermined the notion of a single, “mainstream” Judaism that led directly to the religion of the Rabbis. At present, our picture of pre-Rabbinic Judaism is more like a tapestry made up of many different, intersecting strands. Likewise, the story of the Rabbis’ rise to power is now told in terms of a prolonged process, shaped by inner-Jewish competition no less than external crisis.

The ramifications of such insights ripple through the study of Judaism, but the effects on the study of Christianity are no less marked. In the past, scholars of Jewish History and Christian Origins could be complicit in asserting a monolithic Judaism from which Christianity sprung and with which it could make a clean break. This is no longer the case. The recovery of a multiform Second Temple Judaism has opened our eyes to the broad continuum of biblically-based belief and practice of which Jesus and his followers were a part. Accordingly, historical inquiries into the Jewish “background” of Christianity have gradually led to the recognition that, in fact, the Jesus Movement fits surprisingly well *within* the Judaism of its time. Now, evidence for Christian Origins is even being mined by Jewish historians and archaeologists for information about religion, politics, and culture in the Land of Israel in the first century.

2. *Jesus and Judaism*

The task has been easiest and most productive in the case of Jesus himself. Jewish thinkers since Abraham Geiger have been interested in Jesus from a specifically Jewish perspective. Geiger, Claude Montefiore, and others even appealed to Jesus as a precedent for their own efforts to reform Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

These Jewish approaches to Jesus were founded on a sharp distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The former is a Galilean Jew whose actions and teachings during life shed light on the history and culture of the Jews, while the latter is a Savior whose significance is tied to faith-claims about his resurrection and divine status. The two tend to be inextricable in older writings about Jesus penned from a confessional Christian perspective. With the maturation of the secular study of Religion, however, the distinction between the two has come to shape historical scholarship by Christians and Jews alike. Jewish scholars, such as David Flusser, have written celebrated studies of the historical Jesus in his Jewish context. And, especially in recent years, Christian scholars have been surprisingly open to the idea of a Jewish Jesus. In fact, popular and scholarly books increasingly echo the views of Geiger, Montefiore, and Flusser with regard to the Jewishness of Christianity’s messiah.

For Jesus' Jewishness, there is a wealth of evidence in our ancient sources. In the earliest accounts of his life in the NT Gospels, we find no hint that Jesus saw himself as anything other than a Jew. The Gospels themselves were written decades after Jesus' death, at a time when some members of the Jesus Movement were attempting to distinguish themselves from their Jewish contemporaries. Nevertheless, these texts preserve traditions about Jesus as preaching in synagogues, visiting the Temple, celebrating Passover, interpreting the Hebrew Bible, and debating halakhic issues with Pharisees. Moreover, Jesus teaches by means of parables that recall in form and content the *meshalim* of the Jewish Wisdom literature and Rabbinic Midrash. Even his apocalyptic and messianic pronouncements fit well within the Judaism of his time, an age of uncertainty and upheaval when many charismatics warned of impending End. We also find hints that he may have understood his message as oriented towards Jews in particular; according to the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, he instructs his followers to preach only to "the lost sheep of Israel" (10:6).

Jesus' Jewishness is evident even in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), a set of teachings traditionally seen by Christians as exemplifying his break from Judaism. Yet, here too, we find exhortations to observe the whole of the Torah (5:17-20). Such statements shed an interesting perspective on his fierce polemics against the Pharisees, raising the possibility that he and his followers saw themselves as engaged in inner-Jewish debates, akin to the arguments between other sects in Second Temple times. We also find parallels between his teachings and later Rabbinic traditions. Most famously, the Gospels attribute to Jesus a version of the "Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12) which parallels a saying that the Talmud (*b. Shabbat* 31a) attributes to Hillel. In Rabbinic tradition, Hillel's version is celebrated as the very core of Judaism. Whereas earlier Christian scholars had read Jesus' version as a rejection of the allegedly legalistic Judaism of his time, the Rabbinic parallel suggests that the situation may have been more complex, and the two groups may have been more similar than either like to claim.

3. Paul and the New Testament

By separating the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith, a surprising number of Jewish thinkers have been able to embrace Jesus as a part of Judaism's history and heritage. Martin Buber could call him a brother; Joseph Klausner could term him the "most Jewish of Jews." For modern Jewish thought as well as contemporary secular scholarship, it has proved more challenging to integrate Paul into Jewish history. Paul's own letters tell us of the vision of the resurrected Christ that prompted this Pharisee to change his name from Saul to Paul and to proclaim himself the "apostle to the Gentiles." Although possibly a student of Rabban Gamaliel the Elder (Acts 22:3), it was he who first argued that Gentiles can be saved through faith in Christ apart from observance of the Torah (e.g., Romans 1-9; Galatians 1-3), thereby inaugurating the Christian negation of the requirements of Jewish law and the Church's rejection of the chosenness of the Jewish people.

Accordingly, those who accept a Jewish Jesus often do so with appeal to Paul's alleged apostasy, which is touted as the catalyst for Christianity's break with Judaism. One line of recent scholarship, however, has proposed that Paul's relationship to Judaism was more positive. Even after his so-called "conversion," the apostle still considers himself a Jew and a Pharisee (Galatians 2:15; Philippians 3:5; Acts 22:3; 26:4-5). According to scholars like

Lloyd Gaston and John G. Gager, he may maintain the chosenness of the Jews and the efficacy of Torah-observance for them, even as charts a separate path for Gentiles.

Scholarly debates about Paul's attitudes towards the Torah have helped to open the way for the study of later NT texts in terms of a continuing relationship with Judaism—or even an on-going place within it. To be sure, much of the NT focuses on the issue of Gentile salvation. It also contains fiercely polemical statements about Jews that served to fuel later forms of anti-Semitism. The medieval demonization of Jews was buttressed, for instance, by the Gospel of John's statement that the Devil is their father (8:44) and by Revelation's references to the "synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9). Likewise, the notion of Jewish collective guilt for the death of Jesus found precedent in the account of the crucifixion in the Gospel of Matthew, at which the crowd cries out: "His blood be upon us and our children!" (27:25; also 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

Recent literary studies of the NT, however, have suggested that many of these statements refer only to specific groups of Jews at the time, hold different meanings when read in context, and/or make sense when framed as inner-Jewish debate. Likewise, comparative and historical studies have shown how the views of some of Jesus' followers continue to resonate with internal debates among Jews in Second Temple times and even beyond. Commonalities can be found on topics ranging from purity to eschatology, halakhic observance to biblical interpretation. Some followers of Jesus, it seems, even retained a sense of Jewish identity, approaching Christ-devotion and Torah-observance as mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive.

Among the Gospels, Matthew exhibits the strongest connections with Judaism; Jesus is here defended as the Jewish messiah, and there is a persistent interest in the Torah and the Jewish people. The other Gospels also contain clues about the Jesus Movement's complex relationship to Judaism; Mark can be profitably read against the background of Jewish reactions to the destruction of the Second Temple, while Luke exhibits striking parallels with Hellenistic Jewish literature. John is infamous for its virulent anti-Jewish statements, but even these may reflect a break with a Jewish community of which its own group was originally a part. As for the rest of the NT, a nascent (non-Jewish) Christian identity is apparent in some texts, such as the Epistle to the Hebrews. In others, we still find marks of Jewish self-definition, as suggested, for instance, by Revelation's preoccupation with ritual purity.

Whatever their precise relationship with Judaism, NT texts remain rich sources for Jewish history. Paul's letters provide interesting clues about the cultural assumptions of first-century Jews. In the course of telling the story of Jesus' life, the Gospels offer a wealth of information about the Land of Israel in the first century. Likewise, the Book of Acts tells us much about the Diaspora communities whose synagogues were visited by the earliest Christian missionaries. Moreover, in each case, comparison with contemporaneous Jewish sources has proved illuminating, both for Christian Origins and for ancient Judaism.

In the decades after Jesus' death, the Jesus Movement became displaced from its original Galilean and Judean settings. Nevertheless, the beliefs and practices of his followers (whether ethnic Jews or Gentile converts) continued to be influenced by the diverse forms of Judaism that flourished in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. In the NT and early Christian literature, we can discern the first traces of a long process by which some of Jesus' followers distinguished themselves first from other Jewish groups and progressively from "Judaism" more broadly. Nevertheless, a profound continuity with

Judaism often served as the very ground for these innovations and thus, ironically, left open lines for contact, conflict, and competition for centuries to come.

Many scholars continue to study Judaism and Christianity in isolation, even in the early period. Others read their relationship largely through the lens of contemporary polemics and apologetics. Nevertheless, as a growing number of historians expand on earlier insights into Jesus' Jewishness and explore the value of the NT for our knowledge of ancient Judaism, comparative efforts are yielding a richer picture both of Christian Origins and of the cultural and religious history of the Jews.

Lexicon of Names:

Hillel the Elder (1st c. BCE/1st c. CE): Jewish Sage who lived at the turn of the Common Era; he is celebrated as a precursor to the Rabbis, and many of his teachings are preserved in the classical Rabbinic literature.

Jesus of Nazareth (d. ca. 30): First-century Galilean Jew believed by Christians to be the messiah and Son of God; during life, he preached to his fellow Jews, and after his execution by Roman authorities, his followers believed that he was resurrected.

Paul of Tarsus (d. ca. 65): First-century Pharisee who came to believe in Jesus as the messiah; he founded Christian communities across the Roman Empire and wrote letters to these communities, which are now collected in the NT.

Rabban Gamaliel the Elder (1st c. CE): Grandson of Hillel and influential leader in the early Rabbinic movement; the NT Book of Acts claims that he was also a teacher of Paul.

Abraham Geiger (1810–1874): A leader of the Reform movement in nineteenth-century Germany as well as a prominent scholar of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*; his scholarly works included ground-breaking treatments of Jesus in his Jewish context.

Claude Montefiore (1858–1938): Modern Jewish theologian and biblical scholar, who was one of the founders of Liberal Judaism in England; his many writings include works on Jesus and Paul.

Martin Buber (1878–1965): German Jewish philosopher, theologian, and ethicist, as well as a prominent Zionist thinker.

Joseph Klausner (1874–1958): A literary critic, historian, and Zionist, whose many works include the first comprehensive studies of Christian Origins written in Hebrew by a modern Jewish scholar.

David Flusser (1917-2000): Jewish scholar of early Christianity, who was Professor of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and wrote a number of influential books on Jesus and Christian Origins.

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