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From Jewish Movement to Gentile Church

Exploring the formative and definitive developments

By James McLaren

There is a rapid spread of the story about Jesus, with followers being located in many parts of the Roman empire by the end of the first century CE: Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Balkans, Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Egypt, Ethiopia. At what point in time can we appropriately speak of these followers as part of a religion that was Gentile as opposed to it being a movement within the umbrella of Judaism?

I'd like to suggest we can safely put it into the middle part of the second century CE, probably by the time of Hadrian's reign as emperor (117-138). There are two main reasons for this date:

- a. The imperial policy of Hadrian indicated a distinction was being drawn between Jews and Christians: his policy regarding the protection of Christians from prosecution; his decision to ban Jews from Jerusalem in the aftermath of the 132-135 revolt; the possible ban on circumcision and the plan to rebuild Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina.¹
- b. Justin Martyr: a pagan convert to Christianity sought to engage in discussion between pagans and Jews regarding the truth of Christianity from a philosophical perspective. Hence, in his *Dialogue with Trypho* he spoke of "we" and "you" - the former being the Christians and the latter the Jews.² Even allowing for the clear polemical nature of the text it is apparent that Justin did not consider himself to have become part of a group that regarded itself as Jewish. We are now in the era of the Gentile church.

The 'lateness' of this change may appear, at first, to be puzzling. Let me explain the jarring element. Within the literature of early Christianity, and, therefore, within the received tradition regarding the origins of the movement we have a picture in which the Gentile dimension of the religion exists from the very beginning.

The canonical framework

In the New Testament missionary activity, centred on spreading the good news to Gentiles, was controlled by a centralised leadership that was divinely directed - the work of the Spirit. The key players were Peter, the Apostles and Paul.³

The picture can be misconstrued if viewed as an indication that after some initial uncertainty in terms of Jew or Gentile the movement quickly became a Gentile religion. It is not nearly as neat as implied in the canonical literature. Although we may identify themes regarding the inclusion of Gentiles in the texts, it is likely that almost all the texts of the New Testament were written by Jews, mainly of the Diaspora. The presence of Jewish Christians is not a heresy that came later. They were present from the start and endured to at least the fourth century.

The situation at the time of Paul and Justin, however, is substantially different. For Paul and the various gospel writers the issue was whether, and how, Gentiles could be included in the movement where all the key figures were Jewish. With Justin, however, it is a matter of showing why the Gentile

church was the true follower of God's way and why Judaism had been condemned to punishment by God. There was a fundamental shift in self-perception.

Therefore, it is vital that we put the sanitised, canonical framework to one side. We need to understand that it is part of an internal debate regarding the identity of the movement, not in terms of Jew versus Gentile but Christian Jew versus Christian Jew.

We need to work within a framework that recognises Jesus was a Galilean Jew, that his followers were also, first and foremost Galilean Jews, and that the focus of the ministry was on working with fellow Judaeans and Galilean Jews. Furthermore, we should not regard the dramatic transformation into a distinct religion known as Christianity – whose adherents were mainly Gentile and resided outside Judaea – as being part of an original co-ordinated plan.

How and why the shift occurred

The formative and definitive moments to being a Gentile church were in terms of perception/ self-definition and, most importantly, in terms of the ethnic origin of the members whose desire, like Justin, was no longer to see themselves as Gentiles who joined a Jewish movement but as a religion that is stridently non-Jewish.

What do I mean by formative and definitive?

“Formative”: are events and/or issues that are contributing factors to change, the full impact of these factors is not always at first apparent. “Definitive”: are events and/or issues for which boundaries are drawn, they are occasions where a clear choice exists and decisions need to be made, they are often the result of actions initiated by people/groups outside the movement. In a sense, events that are definitive are also formative.

There are three broad categories to consider:

- a. The socio-political environment (all external factors)
- b. Roman imperial policy (all external factors)
- c. The community experience (internal and external factors)

A. The Socio-Political Environment

1. The existence of the Roman empire

Whenever I talk about the Romans and their influence on the situation in the Levant I can not help but think of the scene from Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. John Cleese and the People's Front of Judaea – or whatever they are called at that stage of the movie – asks his followers what have the Romans done for us. There is no doubt that the Romans asserted their claim to rule over people around the Mediterranean and did so by force when it was necessary. It was an empire that relied heavily on the power of its army. The other side to this military presence was the establishment of an empire that brought many advantages for those wanting to move around or trade within its thriving urban centres, aided by holding Roman citizenship.

First century CE common Greek was used throughout the empire. A century later we begin to see a split, Latin in the West and Greek in the East.

Religion was part of the culture. There was an openness to new religions (eg mystery cults, problems with the Isis cult in Rome but Mithras worship clearly expands). Although later to prove a problem, especially in terms of the exclusive claims of Christianity, in the first century Judaism was generally given the green light within the imperial establishment. At the outset, people like Paul could present

themselves as Jews with a particular line of teaching and be classified under that general label by Roman officials.

2. Presence of Jewish communities within the Diaspora

The followers of Jesus who decided to travel outside Judaea had a place to stay when they set foot in a foreign town. Like many back packers today, they use contacts because they are from the same home country/community. Whether it be in terms of letters of introduction, accommodation, jobs or whatever, these Diaspora communities provided a natural point of contact. Indeed, it is no surprise that the main centres of the movement were also important Diaspora settlements.

Two very practical expressions of the importance to be associated with the Diaspora communities are the existence of Greek versions of the sacred writings (the *Septuagint*) and the interpretation of Scripture from a philosophical allegorical approach undertaken by Philo of Alexandria. At the very least, it meant that Jesus' followers were not having to translate without any point of reference nor were they having to invent the wheel when it came to expressing their ideas in order to dialogue with contemporary Graeco-Roman ways of thinking.

3. The existence of sympathisers to Judaism

Often coined by the term 'God-fearers'; these sympathisers were Gentiles who were learned in the teachings of Judaism, thanks largely to the activity of Diaspora Jews within their synagogues. They had not necessarily converted to Judaism, it appears, in part because of some of the social costs associated with actual conversion - eg. circumcision, loyalty to one God. These sympathisers are known from various levels of Roman society, including within the imperial household (eg Poppaea Sabina, wife of Nero *Ant.* 20.195). There was, therefore, a ready made audience who may have been willing to hear what Jesus' followers taught when they travelled around the empire. (Do not assume that they all, or most, automatically found the different teaching attractive because they were referred to in the beginning of the second century CE).

B. Roman Imperial Policy

Strange as it may seem the imperial policy, such as it was, indicated that it was better not to be a Jew. We know of Nero's famous scapegoat abuse of the Christians in Rome in 64 in relation to the fire. We also have Pliny the Younger writing to Trajan for clarification of what to do regarding the Christians while he was governor in Bithynia. Yet these do not reflect a policy of persecution of Christians; if anything, Trajan's advice to Pliny is to avoid searching out the Christians.

It is in relation to Jews that we find imperial initiatives to discourage anyone choosing to become a Jew, or to be known as one. Under Vespasian the *fiscus Iudaicus* was used to restore the Temple of Jupiter. Domitian, late in his reign, c.90, began exacting the tax with much more vigour and then tried people for their association with Judaism. Seutonius (*Dom.* 12.2) states: "Domitian's agents collected the tax on Jews with a peculiar lack of mercy, and took proceedings not only against those who kept their Jewish origins a secret in order to pay the tax but against those who lived as Jews without professing Judaism."⁴

The key phrase is "those who lived as Jews without professing Judaism". The most likely understanding is that Domitian wanted anyone associated with Judaism to pay this tax. Clearly he ordered a more rigorous and harsh exaction of the tax from all Jews on the *fiscus Iudaicus* register but now sought a further way of increasing revenue. Domitian's activities had a more sinister aspect. He used association with Judaism as a basis for trial for treason.⁵

This was a political activity, concerned with power and money. To be wealthy and associated with Judaism under Domitian was a risky business. The extent of the problem is evident from the actions

of Nerva almost immediately after the murder of Domitian. He banned the charge of treason on the basis of “adopting the Jewish mode of Life”, he issued coins announcing that the “wickedness of the Jewish tax ended”. He also defined those who were required to pay as people practicing Judaism.

Hadrian, as mentioned earlier, extended protection to Christians from false accusation and placed the responsibility on the accuser (the ban on circumcision, plans for Aelia Capitolina, both involve ongoing debate, are they pre or post the revolt?). In effect, Roman rule provided a context in which Jews and sympathisers had to make important decisions about their association with ‘Judaism’.

C. Community Experience

Absence of Jesus

An eschatological dimension to the earliest stages of the movement incorporated an expectation of Jesus’ return within the immediate future. When this return did not occur within ten, then twenty and then thirty years, questions were beginning to be asked, especially as many of the people associated with the start of the movement were dying.

Why was Jesus’ return delayed? The search for possible explanations included speculation regarding the purpose of the community’s existence. It is here that much of the canonical framework, outlined at the beginning of this paper, has its origins. The concept of a mission to take the message of Jesus as Messiah beyond the Jewish community and into the pagan world at large became a legitimation and justification for the continued absence of Jesus.

Failure to persuade other Jews of Jesus as Messiah

Whatever the target figures or grand hopes of Jesus’ followers as to how their teaching would be received by fellow Jews, they were not achieved. On performance basis they would not have received a bonus! This led to self reflection and required a reassessment of what to do – should they adopt a sectarian approach, remove themselves from mainstream activity or do they need to make a complete u-turn in terms of their centre of activity?

The other side to this failure/rejection was how other Jews looked upon this movement. Here much has been said regarding the benediction against the heretics – *birkat ha-minim* – “And for apostates let there be no hope; and may the insolent kingdom be uprooted quickly, in our days. And may the *nosrim* and the *minim* perish quickly; and may they be erased from the Book of Life; and may they not be inscribed with the righteous.” This probably dates from the time of Gamaliel II. Although important, it was by no means definitive.

On a practical level, the inability to win over many Jews to the movement meant that their own structures needed to be put in place, eg house churches – *ekklesia*. Some of this may be because of active rejection of the synagogue, active rejection by the synagogue or simply as a matter of convenience.

Responses to the revolts

This is generally overstated as being a factor.

The Jewish revolt of CE 66-70 – is a Judaeen affair of Christian attitude, the Pella story should not be given credence. I argue that Christians behaved more like what the remainder of the Jewish community did: they were against the revolt, in favour of it, uncertain, and/or carried on with life. The aftermath was something for them to work through, as with the remainder of the Jewish community. It was not a ground breaking moment.

The revolt of CE 115-117 – The fate of Alexandrian Jews, their mass slaughter, would have been

reason for reflection about identity.

The Bar Kochba revolt of CE 132-135 – There is a possible reference to Christians in a letter, being subject to attack by the rebels. This was a very localised revolt, where the consequences made being Jewish very unfavourable, as indicated in the literature of Justin.

Christian awareness of the revolt and its consequences, in fact, may have provided ‘a’ Christianity that could claim to be Gentile rather than Jewish; an opportunity to assert legitimacy and even claim control of Judaea, especially Jerusalem. This revolt probably helped confirm that the future of the movement lay in its Gentile associations and may have given them a sense of vindication from the policy of the imperial power.

The expectations placed on pagan converts

Acts 15 and Gal 2 provide a glimpse of what appears to have been a very significant issue for the movement, not from the very outset but after several years of activity that witnessed an increasing number of pagans displaying a desire to participate in the movement. It is sometimes referred to as the Apostolic council – a rather grand title to present the spread of Christianity in a co-ordinated, controlled manner. I am very suspicious of the Acts account.

I do think it is clear from Paul’s writings that a debate was taking place in the movement. If a pagan wishes to convert, what are they required to do? (Not unique to the movement, as evident in discussion of Josephus. This is the story of King Izates of Adiabene (Mesopotamia), *Ant.* 20.34-46, views of Ananias (no need for circumcision) and Eleazar (yes you do!)), it is also part of a broader dialogue about ethical circumcision and ritual circumcision or just the former. Paul spoke of ethical, turning from pagan ways (Gal 2.3, 6.12) but others argued that the ethical is intimately associated with the physical circumcision (eg. Philo, *Mig. of Abraham* 92, IQS 5.5-6)

I am not so sure that Paul won a concession or achieved a general ruling, especially given the account in Gal. 2 where people travel to Galatia to impose/encourage circumcision. It may be more a case of there being no clearly defined central leadership and policy that gave a definitive ‘ruling’ and that a practice developed in some areas, especially among Paul’s communities, that pagans were not required to adopt all the ritual and physical practices of being a Jew.

Conclusion

All of the above are formative factors. There are many pieces and it is a result of the mixing together of some independent circumstances that the shift toward a Gentile church occurred. The socio-political environment provides the conduit by which a Galilean based movement could spread across the empire. The absence of the Roman empire or Diaspora communities or the sympathisers; would have altered and delayed the way the movement developed.

Out of all of these factors two warrant the label “definitive”:

One is an external factor, the imperial policy of Domitian, Nerva and to a lesser extent Hadrian. It is not so much that these emperors were interested in Jewish-Christian debates or that they were concerned to defend or attack the very existence of Jews or Christians. Rather, as a by-product of their decisions they put Jews, Christian Jews and sympathisers into the position where they found it necessary to make a choice about their identity. The political climate made the choice of being Christian as distinct from Jewish an expedient one.

The other is an internal factor, the decision, or more likely the lack of a decision, regarding what was required of a pagan who wished to convert to the movement. There was no inevitability regarding this move – far from it, in fact. The full implications of the indecision of the early community about

the expectations placed on pagan converts which allowed Paul and his associates to exclude the physical ritual aspects of conversion to Judaism were not to be encountered until the actions initiated by Domitian, Nerva and Hadrian. In a real sense, therefore, two quite independent factors lie at the heart of the transition from Jewish movement to a Gentile church.

Notes

1. *Historia Augusta, Had.* 14.2 re circumcision; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 69.12-15 re Aelia Capitolina.
2. *Dialogue* 19.3-5, 46.6-7, 69.4, 110.3, 116.1, 122.5, 130.4).
3. Other eggs. include
 - Mk - two feeding stories (Mk 6 for Jews, Mk 8 for Gentiles) with the crucial story in Mk 7 re the Syro-Phoenician woman, outsiders being open to the message.
 - Lk/Acts - infancy narrative, speech of Simeon (Lk. 2.32) Acts 1:8 "witnesses for me in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth", commission of Paul. Lk 9, 22, 26 (Gal 2)
 - Mt. - infancy narrative, Magi, foreign acceptance. 28.19 "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples";
eg of Paul's activity (self-claimed title, apostle of the Gentiles)
4. "As a boy I remember once attending a crowded court where the Procurator had a ninety-year old man stripped to establish whether or not he had been circumcised."
5. Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 67.14.1-2 "And in the same year [95 CE] Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned." Some of these were put to death, and the rest were at least deprived of their property!

Editorial remarks

This is an edited transcript of the oral presentation Dr. McLaren gave to CCJ in Victoria, Australia. The Rev. Dr. James McLaren is a lecturer in the School of Theology, Australian Catholic University.
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