At the Crossroads: The Jewish-Christian Schism

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Lawrence H. Schiffman, chairman of the department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, discusses the manner in which Judaism and Christianity separated from each other and came to conceive of each other as 'the other.'

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The rise of Christianity has occupied such a prominent place in the study of the history of religions that it has dwarfed an interrelated and perhaps more important question: the manner in which Judaism and Christianity separated from each other and came to conceive of each other as "the other". How did it come to be that Christians saw the Jews and Judaism as alien and different, and then as a religion to be superseded and a people to be blamed for the sin of deicide? How did it happen that Judaism came to see Christianity, which had originated as a Jewish sectarian movement, as another religion and its adherents as non-Jews – members of another ethos? To be sure, this process was closely connected to historical developments and evolutions in both Judaism and Christianity. But it was fateful in setting the stage for Christian anti-Judaism and our understanding of it as crucial for Jewish-Christian relations in the modern world. This complex process can only be properly understood by beginning to sketch aspects of the background of the Jewish-Christian schism, examining the evidence we have for the separation and then observing its results in Late Antiquity.

We approach this topic with considerable hesitation, as we intend to summarize so much and to make such wide generalizations. Each of us, in our own field of expertise and with our own perspectives, could no doubt improve or deepen any aspect of the discussion here. But only by casting a wide net can we hope to reach an understanding of so complex and crucial a subject. There simply is no other alternative.

Historical Background

The religious developments of the first century C.E. can only be understood against the background of the turbulent political history of Judea in the period spanning the Maccabean Revolt (168-164 B.C.E.), the Great Revolt of the Jews against Rome (66-73 C.E.) and the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (132-5 C.E.). This period began with a crisis, both religious and political. The Maccabean Revolt was an internal Jewish dispute over the extent to Hellenise and a war for Jewish independence within the Seleucid Syrian empire. The results of this revolt seemed to augur well for the Jewish people. The Maccabean dynasty, which finally gained control in 152 B.C.E. appeared to be dedicated to the practice of Israelite religion in an independent and, only moderately Hellenised environment. It was only a short time before these same priestly rulers began to travel down a path of Hellenism leading to the internecine warfare so common in the Hellenistic world. It was the dispute of two brothers, Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II, that in 63 B.C.E. led the Romans to take direct control of Judea.

The direct Roman control, in turn, led to the rise of a variety of opponents – effectively rebel groups – that sought a return to the spirit of the early Maccabean period. They claimed that only true Jewish independence would make possible the fully unfettered practice of Judaism; a claim

severely challenged by the status of Judaism as a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire but justified by the inability of almost all Roman procurators to respect the particular needs of the people and the land they ruled. For some of the protesters and rebels, apocalyptic messianism was certainly a motivation. Some even identified their leaders as messianic figures. This was an era in which many Jews were convinced that messianic redemption was to dawn immediately. Ironically, the same issues led the Romans to appoint Herod the Great as what they considered a King of the Jews. His rule from 38 B.C.E. to 4 B.C.E. turned out to be the most turbulent of all; his pagan activities, murderous antics, and repressive rule led to greater and greater revolutionary activity despite his rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple as a wonder of the ancient world. His demise led in turn to even more revolutionary turmoil, and, with the exception of the brief rule of Agrippa I, the internal divisions of pro- and anti-Roman forces in the Jewish community, as well as the general chaos of incompetent, direct Roman rule, soon plunged Judea into the unsuccessful Great Revolt which led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

It was in this atmosphere that Jesus came to be seen as messiah by his followers. It was an era in which messianic redemption appeared to be an avenue of escape from the vicissitudes of Roman and Herodian tyranny, but the existence of so much rebellious and insurrectionist activity most probably led the Romans to see Jesus as a dangerous force and to execute him. This does not mean that he was indeed a revolutionary. On the contrary, his Kingdom of God was a way of life and a state of being like that of the Pharisaic sages; but to the Romans there was no difference.

When the dust settled after the Revolt, and the forces of compromise were proven correct by the failure of the Revolt, and when the Jewish infighting had effectively been brought to an end by the Roman armies, Judea entered into a period of recovery in which direct Roman rule was coupled with a form of internal Pharisaic-Rabbinic government of the Jewish people. Once again, Roman rulers were not able to quench the thirst of the Jews now fuelled, as it probably had also been in 66-73, by messianic fervour. So by 132-55 the Jews entered another revolt in which there was again internal disagreement. In the face of overwhelming Roman military power the result was again destruction followed by a period of restoration, and the rise again of the Rabbinic class as the internal rulers of the Jews in Judea spreading quietistic submission to the Romans.

Several generalizations can be made from the foregoing which will help us as we proceed. First, each of those revolts entailed serious internal divisions between the Jewish sects along religious and political fault-lines of great significance. Second, in each revolt the revolutionary group was helped greatly by the ruling practices – often the persecutions – of the Seleucids and Romans. Finally, each revolt showed that Jews were divided between those willing to accommodate the ruling powers and those who desired Jewish independence.

Perhaps most importantly for our purpose, the combination of aggressive foreign rule and Jewish resistance took shape against a background of apocalyptic expectation, a factor contributing to the rise of Christianity.

The Judaism of the Two Centuries B.C.E.

It was against this background that the sectarianism of Second Temple Judaism became prominent. Religious ferment was not new to the Jewish people. Previous to the Maccabean Revolt the issue under debate, which eventually led to the full-scale revolt, was the extent to Hellenise. Extreme Hellenisers sought an identification of Judaism with Hellenistic religious ideas and practices, so great that most Jews balked strongly. But even the Maccabees were willing to accommodate to Hellenism in some degree. It was after the successful revolt, when the Hasmonean rulers went down the path of Hellenism, that the well-known sectarian divisions became so prominent. This era in the history of Judaism can be seen as a time of debate and confusion whereby differing Jewish ideologies sought to lay claim to legitimacy as the continuators

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of the tradition of the Hebrew Bible in an era in which the historical and cultural trends of Hellenism and the political instability posed a formidable challenge.

It is worth sketching the various approaches to Judaism known from this period in order to show the complexity of the Jewish religious landscape in this period and this will provide the backdrop for the rise of Christianity.

At the outset, it is important to remember that the largest number of Jews in the second and first centuries B.C.E. were part of an amorphous group usually termed the "am ha-aretz, "the people of the land". This group constituted the traditional Jewish peasantry that practiced what has been termed the "common Judaism" of the late Second Temple Period. They observed the Sabbath and festivals and basic purity regulations, worshipping on festival days in the Temple. But these Jews were not so strict in following the laws of tithing agricultural produce or in maintaining the Temple purity of non-sacral food. These Jews were uninvolved in the disputes of the elites, yet most seemed to have supported and followed the Pharisaic leaders and a small number entered the nascent Jesus movement in the mid-first century.

Most prominent among the Jewish sects were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees represented the priestly group which, for much of the Second Temple Period, controlled the high priesthood. By the Herodian period, Sadducean priests represented those who were willing to accommodate the Roman rule and often compromised religious strictures for reasons of personal appetite or political advantage. But originally the Sadducees had been pious priests who had sought to serve God in His Temple in accord with their traditions and legal rulings. Remnants of the pious Sadducees existed up until the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and other elements of this group may have constituted the core of what became the Qumran sect.

The Pharisees, who Josephus reports were the most popular among the common people, were lay teachers of the Torah and were the forerunners of the Rabbinic sages. They specialized in biblical interpretation and Jewish law and, we know from the Qumran text, that already in the early Hasmonean period their basic approaches to the law and their attachment to the "traditions of the fathers" later termed the oral Law - were considerably advanced. New Testament reports indicate that their social and ethical vision was that adopted by earliest Christianity although Jesus and his followers appear to have taken a more lenient view of certain aspects of Jewish law such as the Sabbath.

Josephus and Philo and other ancient sources had mentioned a third major group termed the Essenes. Numerous theories exist to explain the etymology and meaning of this term, and we must admit that none is convincing. Further, it does not appear in Hebrew until the Renaissance. Because of a report by Pliny and Elder, most scholars have concluded that the Qumran, or the Dead Sea Sect, is to be identified with this sect. Such a view may be correct but must be supplemented by realizing that the Essenes were, most likely, a loose conglomeration of sectarian groups that have been grouped together by ancient writers. Among these groups were certainly apocalyptic sects – by which we mean to emphasize their belief in immediate and often catastrophic messianism – and the Dead Sea Scrolls offer us a glimpse into this kind of eschatological thinking. It is clear that such ideology with its imminent expectation of the dawn of the eschaton influenced the entry of large numbers of Jews into revolts against Rome in 66-73 and 132-134 C.E. The ideological and religious landscape of Jewish Palestine in Late Antiquity was dotted with a variety of such groups as is evident from the Scrolls and Pseudepigrapha (known from before the Qumran discoveries). Their direct and indirect influence on the great events of the first century C.E. cannot be underestimated.

The Rise of Christianity

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It is against this historical and religious background that the rise of Christianity must be seen. It is of course beyond this presentation to try to unravel the complex events that make up the career and death of Jesus. Their analysis – or better, the analysis of what later scholars have done in trying to clarify these issues – would constitute a book, yet still leave the most fundamental issues unresolved. I will however discuss that part of those events relevant to this article.

As mentioned above, Jewish sectarian groups of apocalyptic nature existed in that period. Some of these groups, as we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Josephus, were centred around charismatic or pietistic teachers, and some of these figures were seen as prophetic or messianic. To a certain extent, the Jesus movement fits such a general characterization and can be regarded as part of the wider spiritual landscape.

The claim that Jesus was messiah fits this apocalyptic scheme especially well. Apocalyptic groups often cast their teachers and leaders as messiahs, and Gospel traditions certainly indicate that this was the case with Jesus. Some maintain that Jesus saw himself in eschatological terms. Without entering into this complex matter in detail, we should note that the attribution to Jesus of not only Davidic status but also of priestly characteristics goes hand in hand with the two-messiah concept known at Qumran.

But certain specific aspects of what we can reconstruct from the sources of the Gospels (that is, the earliest materials embodied in their present redactions) indicate some substantial differences between Christianity and the earlier apocalyptic Jewish sects. The greatest of these lies in the social message of early Christianity. Far from the sectarian mentality, such as is found in the Qumran sectarian literature, which is typical of apocalyptic sects for the most part, is the adoption of what we might call hyper-Pharisaic ethics by Jesus and his followers. The attempts to contrast Jesus" formulation of the Golden Rule with that of Hillel obscures the fact that for both Pharisees and early Christians the biblical command of "love thy neighbor as thyself" was the fundamental ethical imperative. The ethical approaches of early Christianity and Pharisaism are virtually the same, and the extensive literature parallelling statements of extreme ethics, attributed by the Gospel writers to Jesus, with Rabbinic quotations is truly on target. These approaches need to be strongly contrasted with that of the Qumran group and other such closed societies in which the status of "neighbor" is limited to sect members rather than fellow Jews or fellow humans. This is only one of the reasons why attempts to place Jesus as a member of the Qumran sect and to claim that he was motivated by their teachings are misguided.

It is worth pausing to emphasize that approaches which seek to place Jesus within the world of "social banditry" of the first century C.E. cannot be accepted. These theories ignore historical sources to the contrary and substitute bold assertions that the true nature of the early Christian movement included violent revolutionary tactics against the Roman rulers, who, in turn, saw these politically and socially motivated acts as those of a criminal element. While such groups no doubt existed in the first century Jewish population, and were in some respects connected with the eventual rise of the zealots and sicarii as full-scale revolutionaries, Jesus and his followers seem to have been quite different. They preached a Kingdom of God to be created by ethical and religious behaviour, not by political violence.

The Halakhic (legal) traditions of the early Gospel reports also need to be considered here, since, as opposed to the ethical sphere, they do indeed point toward disagreement and schism. The Gospels attribute several Halakhic teachings to Jesus, most notably in the area of Sabbath law. When comparison is made between the views in these traditions, those of the Mishnah and those of Qumran sect, the result is a spectrum over which the New Testament views are the most lenient, the Mishnaic view the middle ground, and the Qumran texts the strictest. Such comparisons call into question attempts to suggest a linear relationship between early Christianity and the Dead Sea Sect.

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This is the point where I indicate my total rejection of unfounded theories that seek to place John the Baptist or Jesus at Qumran. The geographic closeness of John"s baptismal activity to the Qumran settlement cannot be allowed to substitute for a safer assessment of the differences between John"s example of the life of a religious hermit (like Banus, the teacher of Josephus) and the communal – indeed collective – existence of the Qumranites. The shared practice of immersions says little beyond the derivation of these practices from biblical and post-biblical Jewish traditions. Claims that Jesus was a member of the Essene/Qumran sect are pure speculation and of no academic value. Further, the valid parallel cited between early Christian teaching and Qumran materials are for the most part related to certain motifs of expression in later layers of New Testament tradition (mostly in the Epistles) and do not relate to the early materials generated by Jesus and his immediate followers, or attributed to them in the Gospels.

What then is the place of Qumranic and pseudopigraphical texts in developing and understanding of the rise of Christianity? These texts need to play a central role in our reconstruction of the Judaism which existed before Christianity and upon which, to be sure, Christianity, in its earliest states, was grounded. Such an approach will allow us an understanding of the variegated texture of the approaches to Judaism in this period and also of the manner in which the Jesus sect can be contextualized. Second, Christianity can be seen as debating issues and dealing with religious questions which were indeed on the agenda of the Jews of the times. In a few areas, as in the area of contemporizing biblical exegesis, important parallels can be evinced between the earliest Christians and forms of sectarian Judaism. Finally, the Church of Acts can be shown to reflect certain communal norms drawn from groups like the Qumran sect but which may have been more widespread than we thought in late Second Temple Judaism.

All in all, this approach will show Christianity to be more Jewish than was thought before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Yet we must not allow this conclusion to obscure our realization that Christianity diverged greatly from Judaism even in its early centuries, and that, as we will note below, the distinction between the two faiths, especially in messianic doctrine, led to a cleavage soon after the death of Jesus that went beyond the disputes and disagreements which our sources project on to Jesus himself.

Evidence of Jewish and Christian Self-definition

It is not long before the two groups began to define each other as "the other". In the case of Judaism, this process is easy to trace. By the time the Pharisaic/Rabbinic teachers had regrouped after the destruction of the Temple, it was clear to them that Christianity posed an ideological and religious threat. Accordingly, the benediction against the minim, Jewish heretics, was adapted soon to prevent Jewish Christians from serving as preceptor in the synagogue, a practice mentioned in the New Testament and early Christian sources. Further, a variety of laws were adapted to separate Jews from their Jewish Christian neighbors and from the emerging scriptures of nascent Christianity. These actions were meant to make crystal clear that the early Rabbis regarded Christianity as heresy, and that its practice was, in their view, prohibited to Jews.

We should remember that, at this time, the sages in Yavneh were seeking to standardize aspects of Judaism in order to create a consensus that would replace the anarchy which, in the view of many, had helped to bring about the destruction of the nation, its land and Temple as a result of the revolt against Rome.

In particular, however, Jewish sages found the claims of messiahship on behalf of Jesus, and the entire messianic doctrine developed after Jesus" death to be unacceptable to Jewish theology. Needless to say, later views attributing divinity to Jesus further reinforced the Jewish view rejecting Christian beliefs as a great departure from Jewish belief. As Christianity became more and more gentile, after the formal decisions of the Jerusalem Church and the practical results of Paul"s

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missionizing in the Greek-speaking world, the Rabbis began to see Christians clearly as non-Jews, no longer as heretical Jews. After all, Christianity was now the religion of uncircumcized former pagans, who were not of Jewish descent and had not converted to Judaism as required by Jewish law. The benediction against minim was now widened to include noserim, gentile Christians, and Christianity was clearly understood as a separate religion whose adherents were not to be considered Jews. With the Bar Kokhba Revolt this process was completed for two reasons. First, the Christians, believing that Jesus was Messiah, could not support a messianic revolt which was led by the pseudo messiah Simeon Bar Kokhba. Second, in the aftermath of the revolt, the Romans prohibited even Jewish Christians from entering Jerusalem. The bishop of the Jerusalem Church was now gentile, a fact that drove home to the Jews that Christianity was a separate religion.

A process of separation also can be traced in the Christian evidence, but here, it was accompanied by a much higher level of animosity. A careful reading of the Gospels allows us to trace the rising tide of this animosity as a result of Jewish rejection of the Christian message. We see the evolution in the Gospels of disputes with the Pharisees or Sadducees to disputes with some Jews then to disputes with the Jews, and a rising crescendo of blame until at the final stage they blame the Jewish people as a whole – for all generations – for the death not only of the messiah, and hence the abortion of the redemption he was to bring, not only for the death of his begotten son, but even for the death of God Himself - the infamous charge of deicide. Such teachings were evolving in an atmosphere in which Paul was engrossed in a fateful debate with his own Judaism. This debate yielded simultaneously, it is fair to say, an intellectual and religious critique of Judaism which at times includes sympathetic understandings of the Jewish teachings and a scathing critique which was understood to mean that Judaism had been permanently superseded by Christianity, that Jewish tradition and observance were obstacles to spiritual fulfilment and that Jews, by virtue of their refusal to believe in Jesus" redemptive power, could not attain salvation.

It is certainly the case, therefore, that both Jews and Christians evolved separate identities, but while Judaism did so with limited antagonism for its erstwhile sectarian offshoot. Christianity expressed its identity though the delegitimization of Judaism, the teaching of contempt, and the ultimate charge of deicide. While the Jewish-Christian schism is a two-way street, the unbalanced perceptions we have outlined cast a tragic shadow of Jewish-Christian relations for two millennia.

Conclusion

We have traced a strange contradiction here even though Judaism and Christianity share common traditions and origins, a fact made even clearer the more we know about the complex texture of approaches to Judaism in Second Temple times.

Such concepts as apocalyptic messianism, two messiahs, the pesher-contemporizing exegesis, help us greatly to place early Christianity in the Jewish context. Despite Halakhic disputes with the Pharisees – which were of an intramural character – early Christians shared ethical principles with the pharisaic sages. On the other hand, the historical events we have chronicled show us a process of evolution on the part of Christianity from being a sect within the Jewish community to being a distinct religious group with it own peculiar beliefs and practices. Whereas Jews were left to accept the departure of what was once a part of their family for distant shores and to emphasize their disagreement with the new course taken by Christianity, Christians preferred to make negative judgements of Jews and Judaism a basic part of their self-definition. Later periods saw this material used as the basis for much stronger anti-Jewish and anti-Judaic assertions, and these, in turn, set the stage for acts of religious persecution and violence. Let us hope that a return to concentration on common origins, even while we recognize fully the disagreements we have, will serve to pay the way for future centuries of mutual respect and the obliteration of religious prejudice and persecution.

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