When Did Christianity Originate?

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When did Christianity begin? Prof. Wengst pursues this question and finds the answer at the point where Christianity begins to see itself as independent and in delimitation and contradiction to Judaism.

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When posing the question “When did Christianity originate?” one can only be amazed at the matter-of-factness with which people can look at the New Testament and its time and use the terms "Christian," "first Christians," "primitive or early Christianity." On occasion one can hear the statement: "The first Christians were Jews." But that is a very complicated statement. They were all Jews, to be sure. However, were they also "Christians"?

What Christianity did not begin with

Christianity refers to Jesus of Nazareth. But it did not begin with him. Jesus was a Jew. He was born as a Jew, lived as a Jew and died as a Jew. If he is described as the founder of Christianity, then he is a founder who throughout his life belonged to a different religion from the one he is supposed to have founded. His death on the cross with the reason of his execution indicated by the inscription "King of the Jews" shows that the Roman power in the person of the prefect Pontius Pilate had him executed as a Jewish agitator. That is a fact, even if the Romans misunderstood his work. The Gospels represent Jesus as a Jew who lived in the Jewish context and rarely came in contact with non-Jews. They show him sometimes in conflict and at other times in consensus with other Jewish groups. Whoever interprets Jesus as he appears in the Gospels as being outside of Judaism – as having transcended Judaism, having overcome it or even broken with it – can do so only by ignoring or disregarding and misinterpreting the Jewish sources. This much has been widely accepted: Jesus was a Jew.

Easter and Pentecost

If it is true that Christianity did not begin with the historical Jesus, does it then begin with the one witnessed to and believed in as resurrected? Therefore perhaps with Easter? Or at least – according to the description in Acts – with Pentecost? But when Simon Peter was convinced by means of an appearance, whatever its explanation, that God had raised Jesus from the dead, was he actually of the opinion, “So from now on I am no longer a Jew but a Christian”? To ask the question is to deny it. He and the others were Jewish people who not only praised God for creating heaven and earth and for leading Israel out of Egypt, but also for raising Jesus from the dead, and

who therefore believed Jesus to be the Messiah. That "the Twelve" came to be of special importance in this group points to their self-understanding, namely that they represented Israel in the end time, which they believed had now begun. In this regard it is also significant that all this is reported to have happened in Jerusalem, though many of them, most of all the leading personalities, came from Galilee.

This messianic group existed in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Jewish-Roman war as one Jewish group among others. That it was perceived as a Jewish group also by other Jews is revealed in a report by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He describes a situation after Festus, the Roman procurator of the province Judaea, had died and before his successor Albinus had taken up office (in 62, or according to newer calculations two years earlier). There was a three-month power gap. This was taken advantage of by a young, hot-headed Sadducean high priest. He hauled people he didn"t like before the Sanhedrin and had them condemned to death and stoned. Among those who were killed, Josephus mentions only one name: "James, the brother of Jesus, the so-called Messiah." He further reports that those who are most observant of the laws (a way in which he elsewhere repeatedly describes the Pharisees) protested against this behavior of the high priest to King Agrippa II and to the incoming governor. That led to the immediate dismissal of the high priest. Josephus, who writes about 30 years after this event, sets it up as an internal Jewish conflict; and he makes it clear that the group of believers in the Messiah had strong opponents in the Sadducees, but not in the Pharisees.

Stephen

In the church, Stephen is considered to be the first Christian martyr. However, was Stephen a Christian? He belonged to the “Hellenists,” that is, Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem who believed in Jesus as Messiah. Luke presents this in Acts 7 and 8 it is an inner-Jewish quarrel. Jews are not turning against "Christians" but against other Jews, whose specific characteristic was that they considered Jesus to be the Messiah, from which they drew consequences that provoked vehement confrontations. The killing of Stephen is described as tumultuous mob law.

Paul

Also Paul was, as a Jew, not a "persecutor of Christians" and, as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, not a "Christian." Before his calling he carried out intra-synagogal punishment measures on other Jews. His call experience did not lead him, either, to think, “Now I am no longer a Jew but a ‘Christian.’" Paul never uses this word anywhere. Of course, he experienced a change, but that was a change from a Pharisaically-defined Jew to a Messiah-believing Jew. Paul never gave up his Jewishness, at least not in his own consciousness. If other preachers emphasize their Jewishness, he can do likewise: "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I (2 Cor. 11:22). "I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin" (Rom. 11:1). He says of himself and Simon Peter, "We ourselves are Jews by birth, and not Gentile sinners” (Gal. 2:15). He expresses emphatically the bond with those of his own Jewish people who do not believe in Jesus as Messiah (Rom. 9:1-3) and describes them as his brothers and sisters – an expression that he otherwise only uses for those in the Messianic communities.

Does Christianity begin when Gentiles join the community?

In Acts 11:19, Luke reports that those who were scattered after the action against Stephen and the subsequent distress traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. He concludes the verse with the remark, "They spoke the word to none except Jews." However, he then continues in verse 20: "But among them were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the non-Jewish Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus."

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How can the situation best be imagined that Greek-speaking Jews proclaim "Jesus as Lord" to Greek-speaking non-Jews? At this point Luke writes less clearly. The people who had come from Jerusalem would not have stood in the market place in Antioch and begun to speak there. Those who stemmed from Cyprus and Cyrene were Jews, and the contact address, so to speak, for Jews to go to when they came into a strange city, was the synagogue. This was not a closed cultic space, open only on the Sabbath, but the administrative and communication center of the Jewish community at that place. The synagogal complex of buildings also had rooms for the accommodation of traveling Jews. Therefore, to orient oneself about and in a strange city, and in order to find a first accommodation, Jews would naturally first find their way to the synagogue.

This is also shown in the further depiction of Paul in Acts. When entering a new city, he always goes to the synagogue first. This is not Lukan schematism but is self-explanatory on the basis of the indicated social-historical background. The Messiah-believing people coming from Cyprus and Cyrene to Antioch will first have gone to the synagogue. They will also have appeared there on the Sabbath; and, "what filled their hearts made their mouths overflow." They proclaimed Jesus as Messiah already come and as raised by God to be Lord. Thereby the end of time had come, which would soon become apparent; God already fills those who are baptized in the name of Jesus with his Spirit that was promised for the end time. Such proclamation may have been supported by charismatic-miraculous elements.

Their audience did not only consist of Jews. In Jewish communities of the Mediterranean world there were non-Jewish sympathizers who partially – to varying degrees – adopted Jewish customs and participated in Jewish life and above all, as far as possible, showed up at the Sabbath services. In Acts they are described as "God-fearers." They are no fiction of Luke’s; they actually existed, as inscriptions prove.

The “God-fearers” in the milieu of the synagogues

On the one hand, there was a negative attitude towards Judaism in the ancient world, which for the Hellenistic-Roman period can be summarized in the reproach that the Jews demonstrated "an animosity against outsiders and people in general, directed against the whole civilized world.” One can read in Tacitus how an educated, distinguished Roman saw the Jews – a strange jumble of information and disinformation. I will only mention his fundamental appraisal: that the religious customs introduced by Moses “stand in contrast to the otherwise quite commonly accepted ones in the world. With the Jews everything is unholy that is holy with us; on the other hand, things are permitted by them that we consider to be horrible." (Hist. V 2-5). As proof he states that the holy image of a donkey was set up in the Temple"s Holy of Holies (4:1). At the very end he notes, "The life style of the Jews is tasteless and shabby" (5:5).

The same attitude towards Judaism appears in Juvenal. But at the same time, the other side – the attractiveness of Judaism for parts of Hellenistic-Roman society – is expressed in his 14th satire. In a context that depicts the bad influence of corrupt fathers on their sons, who become even worse, he writes:

Some who were given a father who honors the Sabbath worship nothing but the clouds and the deity of heaven, believe that human flesh is no different from the meat of pigs from which their fathers abstained, and soon also have themselves circumcised. Accustomed to having a low opinion of Roman laws, they learn the Jewish law precisely, observe and fear it, exactly as Moses handed it down to them in the holy scroll: to show no one the ways except the followers of the same cult, to lead the circumcised to the sources they searched for. Yet the guilt lies with the father, who was idle every seventh day and took no part in business life.

Here, from the other side, we see a clear difference between God-fearers and proselytes, and how

the one can lead to the other. The father keeps the Sabbath and eats no pork; the sons have themselves circumcised and learn the Jewish commandments.

Thus there was also something else besides enmity against Jews, namely that Judaism was quite attractive to parts of non-Jewish society. And this above all on account of two factors: monotheism and the superior Jewish ethic. Both also appear in Juvenal"s text. "They worship nothing but the clouds and the deity of heaven." "The clouds" is either Juvenal"s polemic or a misunderstanding on account of the Jewish use of “heaven” as a circumlocution for God. With regard to ethics, the study of Jewish law is mentioned. Juvenal makes it appear almost unavoidable that the sons become proselytes, if the father was a God-fearer. This, however, though it surely occurred, was hardly the rule. There were good reasons for God-fearers, even in the second generation, not to convert to Judaism.

One can rightly ask: if Judaism was attractive to these people, why did they not convert? From the Jewish side, this possibility was always open. Conversion to Judaism was more attractive to people of the lower class, who were socially not as integrated and who would gain by conversion and participating in the Jewish community"s benefit system, which in comparison to the ancient context was very well developed. For people who were better off, there were quite a few barriers to this step. At the end of Juvenal"s quotation about the guilty father, a more precise translation would be: “for whom every seventh day was a sluggish one, on which he never touches a single part of life." One might imagine a businesswoman who closes her shop every seventh day. How will her customers react? One might imagine a craftsman who sends his workers home for the Sabbath, who does not participate in annual board meetings of the guild in the temple restaurant. Will he not be avoided? So it was advisable not to take this last step, but to remain in the status of sympathizer and to remain flexible in regards to the demands of non-Jewish society. They therefore remained well-meaning sympathizers towards the Jewish community; they sat, as it were, in the second row, adopting in some respects the Jewish way of life (which could, to be sure, happen with different levels of intensity), participating in synagogal life, especially, as far as possible in the Sabbath meeting, and in some cases supporting the community with money and bringing their influence to bear at the level of the municipal administration or the administration of the Roman province in cases of conflict or whenever it was in the interest of the Jewish community.

Some of these aspects can be found in the description of the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:2. He was "a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the [Jewish] people and prayed constantly to God." According to Luke"s Gospel, Jewish elders ask Jesus to heal the dying servant of a centurion; they say about him: "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people and it is he who built our synagogue for us" (7:4f.).

The "God-fearers" become the addressees of the Messianic proclamation

Such people, therefore, were part of the audience when the men from Cyprus and Cyrene proclaimed the Messianic message with the enthusiasm of the end-time spirit in the synagogue at Antioch. They were successful. Members of the synagogue community and non-Jewish sympathizers were engaged by their proclamation. That will not have happened without arguments.

At this point, where he describes the formation of the first grouping of Jews and non-Jews, Luke is so vague that he doesn"t even mention the place of the proclamation, the synagogue; and so he also doesn"t tell us anything about arguments here – probably because he wants to draw an unclouded picture of harmony at the beginning of this development. In subsequent places, during Paul"s appearances in synagogues, he describes again and again that vehement arguments arose. A part of the congregation, the smaller one, gives credence to the Messianic proclamation; the larger part does not. Luke says nothing about the reasons for the non-acceptance. They would

have mainly consisted in the fact that the coming of the Messiah was of course coupled with his Messianic rule and the building of the Messianic kingdom; however, the transformation of the world as a whole had obviously not become evident. Thus conflict arose in the synagogal community, and the smaller part formed its own grouping alongside the larger.

How could it have been any different in the beginning in Antioch? In this group, a new spirit was blowing, crossing boundaries and uniting people. The non-Jewish members no longer found themselves in the second row as sympathizers but were equal members of the first row. "Here there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female!" writes Paul in Galatians (3:28), taking up an expression handed down to him. It is the experience of the group that first formed in Antioch.

Something new emerges here. A spirit of crossing boundaries grips Jews and non-Jews, people of different nationalities and opposite social classes, men and women, and unites them into a new entity, in which they meet as equals. The self-understanding of the Jewish members was, of course, still that of Jews who had found their Messiah. But what is the self-understanding of the non-Jewish members? They believe in the God of Israel and his Messiah Jesus. But they do not as a result become Jewish, but remain people of the nations (Gentiles). However, they are also no longer just well-liked and most welcome guests of the Jewish community, but live as equals in one group together with Jews. The God-fearers formed a well-prepared group of addressees for the Messianic proclamation in the non-Jewish world. What Judaism made attractive for them – monotheism and ethics – exists here just the same. What kept them from full equal rights no longer applies.

The group of Jews and non-Jews is still not the beginning of Christianity

The establishment of a group of Jews and non-Jews is not yet the beginning of Christianity, but only a precondition for it. That this is not the beginning of Christianity is further shown by the fact that the connection with the synagogue is still maintained as something natural. As evidence, three examples may be cited:

1. As mentioned before, Paul repeatedly visited synagogues. Accordingly, he was also subjected to synagogal punishments and did experience them, according to 2 Cor. 11:24 on five occasions the “forty less one.” That, however, meant that his work was also taken by the representatives of the Jewish communities as an intra-synagogal problem.
2. According to Acts 19:9f., intra-synagogal quarrels occur through Paul"s work and as a result he withdraws from the synagogue and teaches in the "teaching hall of Tyrannus." This withdrawal is not the establishment of a new "association," but it means that Paul gives up preaching the new "way" in the public space of the synagogue. The same people appear as addressees of his work in the teaching hall of Tyrannus as in the synagogue, namely, in first place Jews and in the second, "Greeks," by which, in such contexts, Luke means "God-fearers." Paul therefore is operating a *bet midrash*, a Jewish school, in the teaching hall of Tyrannus.
3. According to Acts 18:2, Paul meets the Jewish couple Priscilla and Aquila, who originated from Pontus but had come from Italy to Corinth immediately before Paul. The reason given for this is that the emperor Claudius had expelled Rome"s Jews. Suetonius also reports on this: "He drove out of Rome those Jews who constantly allowed themselves to be incited by Chrestus to cause unrest" (Kaiserviten, Claudius 25,4). No doubt these disturbances were caused through the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah (*christos*; in Latin transformed to "Chrestus") in Rome"s synagogue. Luke does not say that Priscilla and Aquila had come to belief in Jesus as Messiah only through Paul; they had already been believers in Rome. At least two years later they settle in Ephesus. Here they meet an Alexandrian Jew by the name of Apollos who also believes in the Messiah, but evidences a different influence.

> Where do they meet him? In the synagogue. So in spite of the conflicts they experienced in Corinth they naturally stay in the area of the synagogue again in Ephesus .

The Messiah-believing groups: Judaism for a cheap admission charge?

From the viewpoint of the Jewish majority in the synagogues of the Diaspora the beginning of Messiah-believing groups in their context must have been observed with lack of understanding, but also with worry. Let"s hear how a member of the Jewish community"s leadership in Ephesus speaks – fictitiously but quite probable.

What is happening in our community robs me of my sleep. One has to fear that the Messianic fever – God forbid! – will spread further and further like an infectious disease. This talking about the Messiah, this getting worked up, does not remain hidden from Roman informants; that will make the province"s administration suspicious and only get us in trouble. And think about it: a Jesus hanged by the Romans twenty years ago should be the Messiah! Simply ridiculous. And if so: where is the Messianic kingdom? What has actually changed? What is being brought into our community is simply senseless and harmful. Our Gentile friends, the God-fearers, especially tend to fall for it. And if one attempts to clarify relationships, they distance themselves from us and meet in their private homes with all those that are Messianically infected. There they give their donations that we used to receive. The Messianic preachers offer them Judaism at a cheap admission charge. This is neither fish nor fowl. Something like that can never be pleasing to the Holy One, Blessed be He. If they want to fully belong to us, they should convert to us, as it should be, with all the consequences. And in addition, our people stop being real Jews when they are with them in their homes. They stretch the point and don"t watch where the stuff they eat is coming from.

This view was also shared by Messiah-believing Jews in Israel when they heard what happened in Antioch and elsewhere. In Acts 15:1 Luke recounts, "Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."" These people represented the traditional Jewish concept regarding the relationship between the people of God and the nations (Gentiles), also in view of the Messianic redemption that Jesus had begun and that was expected to soon appear in fulness. Full affiliation with the God of Israel and participation in Israel"s redemption is possible for non-Jews only by integration into Israel. They must therefore become proselytes – men through circumcision and immersion in water, women only through immersion. The result is that they are fully integrated with the people of Israel, with all rights and duties. Correspondingly, Luke, in his presentation of the Apostolic Council, has “some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees” say at the outset, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). This too shows once again that in the consciousness of the participants these were intra-Jewish discussions.

The Apostolic Council in Jerusalem

This conflict leads to the so-called Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, in which mainly James, Simon Peter and John negotiate for the Jerusalem side, Paul and Barnabas for the side of the community in Antioch. Paul mentions two results in the Letter to the Galatians: first, nothing was imposed on him – which means, from the context of the letter, that non-Jews who join the community do not have to be circumcised. It was thereby recognized that through his preaching the non-Jewish world was called to the God of Israel without having to be incorporated into the people of Israel. The Jerusalem authorities accepted that those who joined from among the Gentiles were full-fledged members of the Christ-related community, without having to become Jews. For this recognition to be accorded, it presumably took convincing theological argumentation. In Gal. 2:3, Paul refers only to the Greek Titus, whom he had taken to Jerusalem as a demonstration object, so to speak. Titus must have proved himself as a spirit-filled person. Because it was the common basic conviction of

all Messiah-believers that now, in the end time, God gives his spirit to all those who respond to the proclamation of Christ. And this spirit also claimed Gentiles, as is depicted vividly in the story of the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:45-47); as it had been experienced in the beginnings of the community in Antioch; and as Paul and Barnabas had experienced it in their missionary work. If, however, God acted thus, filling Gentiles with the spirit through the proclamation of Christ and thereby claimed and "sanctified" them, was one allowed to hold God back, so to speak, and declare these people in need of circumcision in order to be fully integrated into Israel, before they could be in full relationship with God? This point of view could be combined with Biblical texts about the coming of the nations to Zion in the end time. They speak of the Gentiles learning from the Tora in mind, not their being circumcised (cf. Is. 2:2-5; Mic. 4:1-5). In Acts 11:17, Luke has Simon Peter say to his critical Jerusalem colleagues: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" That obviously calmed the Jerusalemites down.

According to Gal. 2:10, Paul took on the duty of gathering a collection among the newly emerged Messiah-believing groups for the community in Jerusalem. In this case, it was not a question of pure charity. This collection is a material expression of the fact that the nations are coming to the God of Israel. What the Biblical promises hope for the end time – that the nations will bring their gifts to Jerusalem (Isa. 60:3,5) – is already beginning to come to pass and is manifested in this collection.

However, as it soon turned out, not all problems were solved with the decisions of the Apostolic Council. How should the living together of Jews and non-Jews in the communities be regulated, on Jewish or non-Jewish terms? We have already seen that in these early days the Jews in Antioch and elsewhere drew back from living out their identity as those who are joined with non-Jews. When Simon Peter came to Antioch, he acted, at first, exactly the same way. However, upon an intervention of James, he withdraws, together with all the other Jews. Only Paul does not do this. A vehement quarrel ensues, which is not settled. Let"s hear a fictional, but not at all improbable, conversation that James had in Jerusalem with – let"s say – Jehuda, and that led to his intervention in Antioch:

Jehuda: James, James, since Sukkot rumors have been heard in Jerusalem saying that our people in Antioch preach abandoning the commandments Moses gave us and that they themselves don"t keep them. Here in Jerusalem and in the land of Israel, they would of course keep the commandments, but as soon as they were out of the country, they would forget them. Here it becomes clear what this Messianic hysteria leads to. It is even said that Simon Peter ate pork while in Antioch.

James: Do you believe that?

Jehuda: I don"t know. All this is, of course, greatly exaggerated. Unfortunately, however, there is something to it. I made inquiries with some of our people who travel a lot. According to them, it isn’t true that our sisters and brothers do not keep the commandments Moses gave us. However, when they assemble with our sisters and brothers from among the Gentiles in their houses, they seem to forget their Jewishness. They don’t ask what is served at the table; it’s all the same to them. We were too compliant at the time of the Council. We should have demanded that non-Jews be circumcised. Then things would be clear; we would have lived together in the Jewish way, as it should be. Now, however, a gray area has developed; and one can see what comes of it. Give the Gentiles an inch, and they"ll take a yard. And it doesn’t help our reputation among our compatriots

here in Jerusalem.

James: I don"t think you are right about that. What Paul and Barnabas reported was quite convincing. And remember that Greek, Titus – how he praised God with spirit-filled power? No, we can’t go back on the conference. Still, the question is: how do Jews and Gentiles live together? Why don’t we simply stick to the scriptures? Moses already wrote about this in his third book. There he mentions what strangers who live in the land of Israel must abide by, so that we can live together with them. Why should not also those who come to believe in the Messiah Jesus stick to these rules? Thus our sisters and brothers can also live together with them in the Jewish way. So: they should eat no meat that comes from idol temples, no blood, and no meat of animals that have died.

Jehuda: James, you forgot something. In a subsequent passage, marriage between close relatives and other sexual misconduct is forbidden as well. Only after this is it said: "You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the stranger who resides among you." So they should abide by that as well.

James: Yes, so therefore it should be clear – and we will write this to Antioch – that no further burden should be imposed on our brothers and sisters from the nations than these basic requirements: "to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from whatever has been strangled, from blood, and from sexual relations forbidden by the Torah."

Coexistence on Jewish or non-Jewish terms?

This conversation is fictional. But what was in question in this case is not fiction. The result of this conversation – it is called the "Apostolic Decree" – is found in Acts 15:28f. This is a given fact; and it was applied to a great extent. It is easily conceivable that it caused the quarrel between Paul and Peter in Antioch. The demands set up in it were not "conditions for salvation," but a pragmatic plan to organize the coexistence on Jewish terms, not on the previously accepted non-Jewish terms. This argumentation was so convincing that all Jews in Antioch gave up the previous practice – except for Paul. He resolutely opposed the idea that Gentiles should keep the commandments that are peculiar to Israel; and he turned the discussion about a pragmatic plan for the coexistence of Jews and Gentiles into such a fundamental issue that no consensus was possible. However, by no means did he thereby express opposition to the law, the Torah, in principle. According to Rom. 8:3f. it is the goal of God"s work in the mission of Jesus "that the just requirement of the Torah might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." And like Rabbi Akiva after him and Jesus before him, he can summarize the Torah in the commandment to love.

From then on, at least into the second century, two options were available with regard to the coexistence of Jews and non-Jews in the Messiah-believing communities: to live on either Jewish or non-Jewish terms. The second option represents the fundamental precondition for the separate identity that formed later on vis-a-vis Judaism.

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Does Christianity begin when the believers in Messiah are called "Christians"?

Luke notes in Acts 11:26: "In Antioch the disciples were first called *christianoí* (Christians)." When that happened remains uncertain. It is unlikely that it already happened at the time Luke talks about in this context, when Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch. It is clear that this label was imposed from the outside; their self-designation here is “disciples." According to their own self-understanding, what characterizes the people in the Messiah-believing communities is that they are disciples of Jesus, that they receive their schooling from Jesus, so to speak.

The Greek word formation *christianoí* can be explained on the basis of Latin analogies. In Latin one encounters very frequently the combination of a man’s name with the extension *-iani*, and this always marks a man’s political party affiliation. The designation "Christians," therefore, would probably have been coined by Antioch"s Roman provincial authority. In the background is the Roman desire to keep control of every associational gathering, out of anxiety that unrest and revolts could develop. Now they observed gatherings of Jews and God-fearers outside the synagogue, in private houses, which referred to a "christus." So they were called "Christians." The external definition precedes the internal definition.

In Acts, this external designation appears only once more, here also from the mouth of an outsider and not as a self-imposed label (Acts 26:28). This fact excludes the possibility that it was already a self-designated name in the contexts in which Luke found himself. It also appears only once again in the whole New Testament, in 1 Pet. 4:16. Here it can be seen how the labeling by outsiders becomes a self-designated term. The addressees are admonished in verse 15 that they should not, if accused, be proven to be a murderer, a thief, a criminal or an embezzler. Whoever, however, it continues in verse 16, is accused of being a "Christian," should not be ashamed and should stand by it. On account of their way of life, which deviated from that of others, and the fact that they did not join in much of general life that was taken for granted by the majority of society, the Messiah-believers were assumed to be guilty of all imaginable kinds of evil. However, if it came to a trial, nothing should prove true except that they are "Christians." Thus in a martyrological context, an external designation becomes an internal designation. However, this still does not constitute the beginning of Christianity.

To live as Jews or Christians?

In writings outside of the New Testament stemming from the first third of the 2nd century, it is clear how a separate Christian identity is emerging through the formation of specific rites that stand in contrast to and are exclusive of Judaism.

Fasting

In the oldest surviving church order, the *Didache* or "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," it is stipulated in 8:1 that the fast should not be practiced on the same days on which "the hypocrites" fast. "Your fasting days should not be the same as those of the hypocrites. They fast on Mondays and Thursdays; you, however, must fast on Wednesdays and Fridays." Monday and Thursday are the Jewish fast days. If it is said that one may not fast together with "the hypocrites” on these days, then the Jews as a group are called hypocrites.

Prayer

The *Didache* in the immediately following portion also insists on a consciously distinguished prayer practice. "Do not pray as the hypocrites do, but pray as the Lord has commanded in his gospel" (8:2). Then the Lord"s Prayer is cited and the urgent admonition is given: "Pray in this manner

three times a day." (8:3) Jews pray the Eighteen Benedictions three times a day. It should not be less, just as there should not be fewer fasting days. But the distinction now expresses itself in a different prayer. There is a certain irony in the fact that the Lord"s Prayer, which is also a thoroughly Jewish prayer, is cited as the distinguishing mark over against the Jewish Eighteen Benedictions.

Sunday celebration

The origin of the Sunday celebration lies in obscurity. As the day of Jesus" resurrection, the first weekday was probably already of importance early on. This, however, by no means automatically constituted a competition to the Sabbath. Even in the *Didache*, it is not explicitly set against the Sabbath. In 14:1 it is only said: "On every Lord"s Day, gather together, break the bread and give thanks, while confessing your transgressions, so that your sacrifice be pure!" However, in Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Magnesians (9:1), the celebration of the Sabbath and life according to the Lord's Day are set in contrast to each other. That also happens in the Letter of Barnabas (15:8f.).

Each of these points may not appear to weigh very heavily, but in their sum, they illustrate that there are actions involved which burst Jewish identity apart. As members of a community in which these things were practiced, Jews would have been forced to practice their piety in markedly anti-Jewish ways. This however means that such a community, which gains its identity directly in antithesis to Judaism, can only be a non-Jewish one – regardless of whether it includes Jewish-born members, or how many of them.

Ignatius of Antioch, who has just been mentioned in connection with his contrasting of the "Lord"s Day" against the Sabbath, throughout his work contrasts "living in accordance with Christianity" means standing in contrast to "living Jewishly" (Magnesians 10:1.3). He already connects this with a model of the replacement of Judaism by Christianity. "Christianity," he writes, "has not believed in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity, into which each tongue that has come to believe has been gathered" (ibid).

He expresses the call to do away with what belongs to the old – namely, Judaism – with explicit reference to the Jewish custom of getting rid of the leaven: "So get rid of the bad leaven, the one that has become old and bitter, and turn to the new leaven, that is, Jesus Christ" (10:2; cf., Philadelphians 6:1). In these passages Ignatius presents us with the oldest occurrence of the term "Christianity" that has come down to us. Thus this concept first emerges when the Messiah-believing community defines itself as anti-Jewish, and in such a way becomes the Gentile church. Accordingly, the term "Christianity" here immediately appears as a contrast to "Judaism."

As regards the author of the Barnabas letter, we can perhaps see the driving motive for this demarcation in a passage where he asserts that he does not want Christians to appear as those who "joined in later on" (3:6). To have joined in later on is apparently seen as a flaw.

The letters of Ignatius and Barnabas reveal that in their day there still existed believers in the Messiah – also Messiah-believing non-Jews – who lived in the Jewish way. This they vehemently reject. Their wishes are not yet general practice, but the tendency is pointing that way. The effects of the unresolved question of the 1st century still appear the same as they were expressed in the quarrel at Antioch. However, Paul, who had represented the option of non-Jewish life for the common life of the Messiah-believing Jews and non-Jews in the churches, remained conscious of the bond with Judaism. For him the question, Judaism *or* Christianity, would have been unimaginable. This was different now. Why? I venture to say: simply on account of the success of the Pauline model. The Messiah-believers who were Gentiles increased in number more and more in the communities until they were dominant. Jewish religious practice in daily life was experienced less and less and therefore felt strange. It seems to me that the development of the community's

own religious rites over against those of Judaism was more important than Christology in the formulation of a separate identity. They certainly played a role, especially after the year 70, and to a lesser extent before, as seen in the example of the Messiah-believing group in Jerusalem. In the period after 70, when Judaism reconstituted itself, after the loss of the temple, under Pharisaic-Rabbinic guidance, and sought, for the sake of survival, a broad measure of integration, and could not afford serious deviations, the exclusive tie to the Messiah Jesus was seen as divisive. Thus the Messiah-believers were looked upon and treated more and more as heretics. But even more decisive was the process of identity formation in the practice of certain rites over against those of Judaism.

The birth defect of Christianity

If it was the case – and the observable phenomena support that it is – that "the birth of Christianity" was announced by the first use known to us of the term "Christianity" by Ignatius of Antioch, then Christianity would have a birth defect – namely that of being anti-Jewish. And so it has in fact behaved for centuries. From this perspective it looks like we are dealing with a birth defect which is irreversible, since birth defects can be removed only with difficulty and rarely – if at all.

This birth defect would indeed not be removable if the church had continued in the direction of the Letter of Barnabas, if it had separated the Jewish Bible radically from the Jewish people, even for the time before Christ, or if like Marcion it had totally rejected this Jewish Bible and the God it proclaims. That, however, it did not do. Rather, it kept this Jewish Bible as its own canonical, foundational scripture. And in the second part of its canon, it has the New Testament, a collection of writings most if not all of which were written before the time of separation from Judaism, and in a Jewish context; they are part of the Jewish world. Thus the church that consists only of Gentiles is permanently put in question by the canon it has given itself.

With its fundamental scriptures the church is pointed towards Israel as it visits it root and continues to relate to it. According to the New Testament, the Messiah-believing community is one composed of “Jews and Gentiles." This was self-evident also for Paul. In the long run, his option – to form the coexistence on non-Jewish terms – has caused it not to remain that way. The gain and the loss can be illustrated with the help of a mental game: What would the situation have been if the option of the Apostolic Decree had been successful in the long run? Concerning its quantitative growth, the church would not have been as successful, and we would probably not be sitting here today. On the other hand, there would have been Jewish life in this community, through the presence of Jews who lived their Judaism together with the majority of their people. Such a community would have never become anti-Jewish; it would not have determined its identity in contrast to Judaism. The price of success is anti-Judaism. If, therefore, Jewish life in fact no longer exists in the church, how can its fundamental relationship to Israel be fashioned and expressed? Who are we as the church of Jesus Christ vis-a-vis Israel?

For centuries, the Gentile church has covered up this problem by its power, asserting itself as "the true Israel." This had terrible consequences for the ongoing life of the Jewish people. After Auschwitz, the church no longer wants to live in anti-Jewish excess. But that will only permanently succeed if it is ready to realize and acknowledge its defect: that it is actually only the Gentile church. It cannot fashion its connection to Israel as the root in any other way than seeking a new relationship to the Judaism that exists outside of itself and meeting the physical brothers and sisters of Jesus in a way that does not harm them anymore.

In my opinion we have to accept in all modesty and with great gratitude the role that the author of the Barnabas letter rejected so emphatically: to be those who joined in later on. Gentile Christians can accept and affirm that they have come to the one God, the God of Israel, as those who joined in, and who are urged by Paul: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people!" (Rom. 15:10).

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