The Parting of the Ways

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By Anne Amos

Introduction

The split between Judaism and Christianity was gradual and happened at different rates in different places. There is remarkably little agreement among scholars as to what precisely caused the rift and estimates vary about the date, from the middle of the first century CE to the middle of the fourth CE.

Professor Alan Crown from Sydney goes beyond the reserve of most scholars and dates "the parting of the ways" to the Council of Nicaea 325 CE, a date which I accept. The Council of Nicaea was called by the Emperor

Constantine to settle some theological differences that were dividing his Christian Empire. The first act of the three hundred bishops assembled was to set a date for Easter distinct from the Jewish Passover thereby effectively separating Jews and Christians.

The First Stage

"The parting of the ways" has two distinct stages. The first, in the first century, was a pre-occupation with determining who was Christian and who was not. The second stage was longer, more tortuous, painful and destructive to Jewish sensibilities. It was marked by a move from concern with purely Christian self-definition to formulating the Church as a distinct entity from Judaism, a move heretical to Jews.

In the first stage the early Church was part of the body politic of Judaism and it is becoming common to add Jewish Christians to Josephus" list of four first-Century sects which were

the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots. The first century was pluralistic but Jewishly pluralistic.

The early Jewish church was Jewish in leadership and membership. It functioned in synagogues and had Pharisaic traditions and it never lost its traces of Rabbinic *Halakha* [religious law]. It was natural that Christians would be anxious about their self-definition and about who would define their status. Graeco-Roman observers who saw them going to the Temple defined them as Jews which meant they enjoyed the benefits of *religio licitus* [legal religion]. For different reasons the Rabbis at Yavneh also did not give them distinctive status. To the Rabbis Jewish Christians were heretics.

At Yavneh the traditional twelfth benediction of the Amidah [the Jewish 18-Prayer], a formal excommunication of sectaries, was directed against those who had been Jewish but who now identified as Christians. It had

been invoked earlier against Sadducees and was later invoked against gnostic Jews. This evidence would suggest that at Yavneh the twelfth benediction was directed against deviant Jews and Christians were perceived as deviant Jews.

Along with the ambiguity of the status of Christians went the familiarity of their teachings. These were known elsewhere in Judaism among one or other of its so-called philosophies. Let two examples suffice:

1. Paul makes a statement on circumcision which is mis understood by both cont emporary Christians and Jews as a dismissal of its significance. "Circumcisio n is nothing and uncircu mcision is nothing; but obeying the commandm ents of God is everything". (1 Cor. 11:19). However,

Paul"s teaching is congruent with an attitude to the Law that can be found in Judaism of the first century - that if Gentiles strive to keep the Law which cannot be embedded in their identity they may not be inclined to give their minds to G-d, and it is better that their minds and spirits are given to G-d than that they observe what to them might be a formality.

2. In Galatians Paul teaches that the Temple can be set aside and the people itself can become the spiritual temple. (1 Cor.6:19) This teaching is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls whose writers had

turned their backs on the Jerusalem Temple. It is also found in mainstream Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. From Torah the Rabbis teach that the people is a holy people dedicated to God.

Paul was a radical Jewish convert to Jewish Christianity. He left the Pharisaic movement behind but not Judaism or Torah. But he did live in tension with Jewish particularism and he had to rethink some values of his past in a way consonant with his interest in gentile mission. I am indebted to Alan Segal for his careful analysis of Paul"s arguments to demonstrate that Paul"s method of inverting the values of his past is Pharisaic.

Paul"s reflection on the Torah is the most problematic for Jews. Paul still respects Torah but subtly changes its place in his life so that it has ultimate authority as

prophecy but not as a communal norm for salvation. Torah"s primary new importance is as a prophecy forecasting the crucified messiah and the conversion of the Gentiles. "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it" (Rom. 3:21-31).

Paul does not, however, retreat to the position that the Torah is an ethnic characteristic of Jews. Paul understands that the Torah provides a universal standard of righteousness in ethical matters for Jew and Gentile alike. This understanding of the value of Torah is in keeping with later Jewish views that the Torah"s general moral precepts, the Nohahide Commandments, are incumbent on Gentiles as well as Jews. Only the special laws are incumbent on Jews.

This argument of Paul can, according to Alan Segal, be interpreted two ways. Paul may be offering the convert two equal choices:

the choice between becoming a Jewish Christian, with all the rules operant, or of adopting a new principal of salvation - conversion through baptism in Christ which, by definition, would be easier for Gentiles.

Or, as the Church has advocated, Paul may not be giving Judaism such a continuing positive place in God"s plan (Rom. 11: 17-22). He may in fact be advocating faith as the alternate principle to keeping the Torah. This represents the distinction between Jewish and Christian religious self-understanding. The Jewish concern is for right practice, the Christian concern is for right belief.

My own opinion is that Paul never resolved this conundrum for himself and, in this, he was representative of his time. Torah, circumcision and the purity laws threatened the theology of conversion and the unity of the infant Christian sect. This was for Paul, in his own words, "a great sorrow and an unceasing agony".

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(Rom. 9:2) It was the Church of the early centuries, with its need to make the Christian scriptures congruent with its own teachings which obscured Paul"s Pharisaic origins and concerns and reinterpreted his teaching for its own polemical purposes.

That notwithstanding there was fierce division between the Rabbinic community and the nascent Christian theologians. Both were designing a response to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. This major turning point in the history of Judaism ended the institution of animal sacrifice and the cultic service to G-d. The Temple had also been part of the complex of government and the whole machinery of state had to be reconstituted. This task fell to the Pharisees who transcended diverse apocalyptic answers which were extant to develop a system of Jewish thought which has preserved the Jewish people to the present day.

Some of the Christian responses

were to see the destruction of the Temple as a sign of the parousia [appearance of Christ] and an actual punishment for Jews. They spoke no words of comfort and turned the Jew"s lament: "on account of our sins we were exiled from our land", into words of accusation: "on account of your sins you were exiled from your land".

The Jews had become the "other". What we do not know is whether this creation of the "other" was ethnic - Jew separated from Gentile, or religious Jew separated from Christian. Whichever, their ways had started to diverge as Christians struggled to establish a distinct identity.

The Second Stage

The second stage, the constitution of the Church as a distinct institution from Judaism, was a struggle for legitimacy against the antiquity and attractiveness of Judaism. By the end of the first century the influence of Jewish practices in

the liturgy, beliefs and morals of the infant Church was evident. There was an authority given to Jewish practice and belief that became a threat to the Church in particularly the Christian East which had the greatest concentration of Jewish communities. There, Christians frequented both church and synagogue, observed both the Jewish and Christian festivals, and some of Judaism''s foundations were enshrined in Christian liturgy.

A) Christians in the Talmud

In Jewish eyes the Church was an upstart but it is difficult to determine the actual extent to which the Church bothered Jewish intellectuals. We know that they were absorbed by the elaboration of the Rabbinic writings but that is not the sole reason for the scarcity of references to Christianity particularly in the Talmud. There was both a self-imposed and an externally imposed censorship on references to Christianity in

Rabbinic writings which can now only be fished for in "the sea of the Talmud", to quote Marcel Simon.

The word *Christian* does not appear and if it ever did it has been removed by later editing. However there are a number of texts that do have polemical overtones and are directed at those called the *minim.* The definition of *minim* is elastic but it is thought to sometimes refer to Christians.

There are texts in the Talmud that deal with the antiquity of Judaism over the *minim,* the continuing authority of the Rabbinic writings as G-d"s Law also revealed at Mount Sinai, and the continuing validity of the Law.

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahum was undoubtedly thinking of the Christians when he said, "According to the strict law one ought to recite the ten commandments every day. And why do we not recite them? Because of the claims of the *minim;* lest they should say, "these alone were given to

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Moses on Sinai".

The intention of Rabbi Samuel ben Nahum seems to be to emphasize the unity of the Sinai revelation and to meet the Christian objection that sought to disassociate the moral law, i.e. the decalogue, from the second covenantal code, mainly the ritualistic.

Likewise, when the Rabbis deny emphatically that G-d had any son, this must be an allusion to Christian dogma even though the *minim* are not identified in the relevant texts. The accumulated evidence in the Talmud, on balance, points to real controversies which transcended academic speculation because they are directed against an opposing community, the Church.

The struggle between Judaism and Christianity was antagonistic; a struggle for the blessing of Abraham and a struggle to win converts from the same clientele, their pagan neighbours and the G-d-fearers

of the Synagogue. In this the church aimed to dislodge Israel as the eternal covenant partner of G-d and to install the Church as the sole repository of revelation.

B) Antisemitic Christian Literature

There is a significant body of Christian antisemitic literature that is evidence that Judaism represented a real threat to the Church:

I must pause here to define the way antisemitism describes the anti-Judaism of the ancient world. There was a hostility by the pagan world to the separatism of Judaism which was not necessarily racial hostility. Christianity inherited such pagan attitudes and there were populist complaints against Jews. However, by the fourth century, there was also an ecclesiastical and learned condemnation that was nourished by a particular reading of the scriptures to support such assertions as deicide and supersessionism.

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Antisemitic literature was uneven in its invective and ranged from a polemical style consistent with the literary forms of the day to outright abuse which can only be described as deliberate vendetta.

I will take but three examples from this literary corpus, that of Justin Martyr, St. John Chrysostom and Aphraates to demonstrate the range of antisemitic sentiment. The issues canvassed were consistent: circumcision, Sabbath, dietary laws, call of the Gentiles, the Jewish hope.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr (100-165) was writing in the period just before Jewish Christianity as a sect was separated from the Church. The ex-communication of Jewish Christians by the Jerusalem Council was another milestone in "the parting of the ways". Justin Martyr issued a "Dialogue with Trypho" (the Jew). Trypho is modelled on an actual Pharisaic Jew and fairly represents Pharisaic attitudes.

Justin Martyr both addresses and hears out Trypho in a respectful intellectual dialogue.

Addressing Trypho he accuses the Jews of "cursing in your synagogues those who believe in Christ" referring to the twelfth benediction of the Amidah. Similarly Trypho has his say about one of the basic causes of the Jew"s rejection of Christianity. "You set your hopes on a man that was crucified," says Trypho in astonishment.

The context was the re-establishment of the twin faiths of Judaism and Christianity after the destruction of the Temple. The issues of cult practice, the locus of Divine Favour and the identity of the true Israel were the subject of lively but respectful debate in a time when Jews and Christians still had meaningful concourse. In fact Justin Martyr learned Hebrew from a Rabbi to better interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. The recourse to Scripture was the basis of anti-Jewish argument. In order to have any effect

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on Jews the proof had to be grounded on the scriptural text.

There are three themes that run consistently through the literature regardless of the date of writing or the geographical context:

1. the person of Jesus Christ and the rejection or acceptance of his divinity.
2. the observance or abnegation of Jewish Law, especially ritual Law.
3. the rival claims of Israel and the Church to inherit the blessing of Abraham.

St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom writing from Antioch 386-398 CE was the master of anti-Jewish invective without question. He fuses the prejudices of popular antisemitism to the theological grievances against Jews, particularly about the attraction

of Jewish ritual to Christians. He also denounces the claim of Jews to the continuing blessing of Abraham.

Chrysostom, Bishop of Antioch, delivered *"Eight Homilies* against the Jews" for the instruction and moral reformation of the nominally Christian city of Antioch. He was a great orator and his real audience was his Sunday congregation which was also attracted to the Synagogue. There was a syncretism at work that disturbed Chrysostom. His Christians observed the Jewish festivals kept the Sabbath, and even went to the Synagogue to make oaths.

Antioch in Syria was the third city of the Roman Empire and the city where the disciples of Christ were first called Christians. (Acts 11:26). There was also a large Jewish community in Antioch and the Synagogue was a lively influence. The strength of Chrysostom"s antisemitism was proportional to the numerical strength of the Jewish community.

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The Jews are overwhelmed by the benefits of G-d and reject them all. They were the sons of G-d, by adoption, and they have become dogs. Their Day of Atonement is misused as an opportunity for indecent festivities. They are guilty of the murder of Christ.

There are abrupt pauses in the documentation of these invectives as if Chrysostom"s own congregation was shocked and protested.

In the "Eight Homilies" there is theological discussion about, among other things, the date and meaning of Passover which Chrysostom calls the *Christiana Pasch*. "Passover," directs Chrysostom, "must not be celebrated but replaced by the sacrament of Holy Communion celebrated several times a week." "Furthermore," says Chrysostom, "it is offensive to establish the date of Christ"s death by referring the question to his executioners."

Chrysostom did not

practice the restraint of earlier works such as the *Didascali,* a third century Church order. The *Didascalia* accepted that the Jewish Passover was popular and could not be done away with, so it changed its character by transforming it from a joyful festival celebrating the flight from Egypt to a day of vicarious penance for the sin of the blind Israelites. However the tone of the *Didascalia* is courteous and its concern for Jews sincere if misguided. Chrysostom saw it differently. He attacked the attraction Jewish Christians had to the Passover head-on.

No-one should celebrate the Passover. The Passover ought not to be celebrated except in one place, Jerusalem. Now that the city has been destroyed, the rite is no longer valid, and G-d, by authorising the destruction, intended to detach the Jews, in spite of themselves, from their ancestral usage. To persist in maintaining it is to

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violate the law.

Chrysostom uses Biblical allusion against the Jews with skill if not justice or accuracy. His legacy was a theology of deicide and supersessionism that has influenced the Church to the present day.

Aphraates

Aphraates lived outside the Empire amidst a strong Jewish community. He was bypassed by the great controversies of the Empire. He was the first of the Syriac Church fathers and he lived through the persecutions of Shapur II (310-379) in Persia. Our knowledge of him comes from "23 Demonstrations" (337-345) which are his survey of the Christian faith.

His Christology is archaic and retains the simplicity of the first generation of Christians. He is quite indifferent to the subtleties of Greek theological speculation but his views on religion and worship are orthodox. Christ is the object of faith and worship. However his speculation is

through and through Semitic, untainted by the influence of Hellenism.

Aphraates replies to the Jewish objection that the Christians distort Monotheism by quoting precedents about "sonship" from the Hebrew Scriptures. Aphraates says that when Christians call Christ "God" and "Son of G-d" this is not extraordinary. G-d said of Israel that Israel was His son. G-d uses the same appellation of Solomon. Adam, engendered by the thought of G-d, is His son, in the proper sense of the word. Aphraates sees no problem for Jews in naming Christ as G-d"s Son as the prototype is in the Hebrew Scriptures and for Aphraates not superseded.

Aphraates codified Christian observances, distinguishing them from those of Israel, but modelling his work closely on them. In doing so Aphraates shows himself to be deeply imbued with the Jewish spirit. He appealed for moderation consistently, "let us not seek difficulties and quarrels about

words. They will not profit us. What is important is a pure heart which observes the commandments and keeps the feasts, the seasons of worship and the daily offices."

The American Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner is appreciative of Aphraates. He sees his work as a genuine inquiry, respectful of Judaism and properly congruent with Semitic thought and study of the Hebrew Scriptures. Others have asked wistfully whether and how differently the ways may have parted had the Aphraates of the early Church been given the authoritative position. Their connection to primitive Christianity and Semitic thought and their appreciation of their opponent gives their polemics an entirely different tenor.

C) The Popular Appeal of Judaism

Judaism"s appeal was a threat not only to the formulation of Christian doctrine but also to the popular practices of the Church. The

people who advocated the retention of Jewish customs in the Church were known as Judaisers. Theirs was a popular movement. It laid the elements taken from Judaism and Christianity side by side, a form of syncretism.

The Christian writers who insist most strongly on the lapse of Israel"s call are the ones who are most occupied with combating the Judaiser"s pressure and that was true of Justin Martyr, Chrysostom and Aphraates.

The Councils of the early Church were also preoccupied with prohibiting Jewish practices. They forbade marriage with Jews of either sex, the making of the Sabbath into a festival and the blessing of harvests by them. It is harder to determine what the practicaD cosponse of Jews was to the influence of Christianity for reasons stated above. It would be hard to credit that there was none particularly as there was continuous concourse between Jews and Christians who met daily in the

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market place.

Christians and Jews were not alone influenced by syncretism. The popular superstition of the masses was part of a universal experience. The celebration of the new moon, Sabbath observance, Christian Baptism, the celebration of the Emperor"s birthday according to pagan rites and *ornithomancy* were all played out in a world shaped by paganism. In the entangled minds of the faithful, logic played little part. Anything could be invoked to stave off the effects of the evil eye. Superstition and magic were fundamental to the ancient way of thinking.

Again it is wistful to speculate. Had the citizenry had more influence on theology - an impossible thought for the ancient world! - what might have been different?

Conclusion

In my introduction I nominated the Council of Nicaea as the event that marked "the parting

of the ways". It was a significant doctrinal decision for the Church to officially separate from Judaism. The theological *impramata* given to "the parting of the ways" was reinforced politically by the Christian Emperors of Rome and Byzantium who eventually legislated to separate Jews from Christians and to determine the subordinate status of Jews.

The Council of Necaea was summoned by the Emperor Constantine in 325 CE to settle the Arian dispute about the person of Christ. The Emperor himself, though unbaptised, presided and the orthodox party had the victory. Christ was declared co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. The Arian heresy that declared that Christ was neither true G-d nor a true man was defeated. Constantine had achieved his aim: to weld the Empire into a Christian spiritual block for political reasons.

One of Constantine"s first official acts had

been to ban Jewish proselytism as dangerous competition to the Church. This was flagrant inequality. Christians were free to evangelise but Jews were forbidden to increase their membership. The context in which the prohibition appears is significant. It constitutes the second part of a law which aimed to protect Jews who converted to Christianity from reprisals inflicted by their coreligionists.

This ban on proselytism altered the status of the Jews who allegedly enjoyed equality with Pagans and Christians under the Edict of Miln passed soon after Constantine"s initial victory over the whole Empire. The Edict proclaimed equal rights for Pagans, Jews and Christians and allowed Jews to take public office. Their Patriarch was absolved from military duty, a privilege also enjoyed by all religious leaders.

The equal status granted to Jews under the Edict of Miln was eroded little by little until the

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Emperor Theodosius (379-395) founded an orthodox Christian state and banned the practice of any other religion. In the intervening period between Constantine and Theodosius the civil rights of Jews had been more than compromised.

In 388 the Christian population set fire to the Synagogue in Callinicum, a small town in Mesopotamia. The civil authorities informed Theodosius who instructed the bishop to rebuild the Synagogue at his own expense and to punish the arsonists. St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, on hearing of this made representation to Theodosius along the lines that burning Synagogues was pleasing to G-d and a Christian Prince had no right to intervene. The story is a complex one and to make it short suffice it to say Theodosius was forced to submit to Ambrose and recall his instructions for the reinstatement of the Synagogue.

This episode is significant because

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it exemplifies the movement from pluralistic Empire to Christian State. Theodosius began his response to the burning of the Synagogue at Callinicum by behaving as a pagan emperor would have done, anxious to maintain law and order and to respect the accepted rights of Jews. Ambrose challenged Theodosius''s self-understanding of Emperorship and charged him to behave as a Christian Emperor who should not show goodwill toward the Jews, or even simple equity. This was, according to Ambrose, inconsistent with Christianity. A Christian Emperor''s business was to ensure the triumph of (Christian) truth over (Jewish) error. Theodosius capitulated and the Church had the last word. The separation of the Church from Judaism effected theologically at the Council of Nicaea was now law under the Christian Emperors who took their advice from the Church. The incident at Callicium is the symbol of the conquest of

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ecclesiastical antisemitism. The Church could and did manage to influence imperial legislation in a way detrimental to Jews.

For further recommended reading:

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Source: Gesher