



The Synagogue and the Separation of the Christians

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Judith Lieu, Professor of New Testament at King's College, London, explores the variety of relations between Jews and Christians in the first centuries of the Common Era that makes "the parting of the ways" a more complex development than is commonly assumed.

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[Judith Lieu](#)

A question that continues to fascinate, and to defy any easy answer, is how does Judaism become Judaism, and Christianity, Christianity? The more we recognise that Jesus was but a Jew of his time, the more not just how but also when "Christianity" emerged invites explanation: the question of "the parting of the ways". Whereas an older scholarship saw "Christianity" as replacing a "legalistic" Judaism which had reached the end of the road, this more recent view sees there emerging out of the varied ways of being Jewish in the late second Temple period one "way" that becomes Judaism, particularly as shaped by the "rabbis", and another that becomes Christianity, moulded around the conviction that that Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, was not only the Messiah promised to the Jews, but God's son, offering access to God, and God's blessing to non-Jew as much as, and perhaps eventually more than, to Jew.

To speak of "the parting of the ways" has, then, offered new opportunities for dialogue between the heirs of those two routes, something that claims to replacement or charges of apostasy never allowed. Yet there are still problems. The parting of the ways may imply more-or-less cohesive systems, -isms, Judaism and "Christianism", but without organising authorities and agreed patterns of allegiance and control, there can be no systems to seamlessly draw apart – and these did not exist in the early period. And so we have to speak of partings of the ways, or to take particular texts or situations and plot them on a bigger map. John's Gospel belongs somewhere different from the Letter to the Hebrews, 1 Clement from Revelation, just to take four early Christian texts of the late first century, perhaps more or less contemporary with each other. If these differences are not of time, are they differences of place, or of people involved, of personal inclination, of the pressure of external circumstances? Moreover, what do we mean by "parting"? Is it when groups expressed beliefs that others found unacceptable, or when people no longer met together, or were no longer willing to eat together, or used different languages or patterns of ideas, or refused to allow their sons and daughters to marry one another? Yet such separations happen within as well as between groups. Was "the parting" in effect when people thought that they themselves were somehow different, did not belong, or was it when they thought that someone else did not belong? – which may not be the same thing at all.

A focus on the local rather than the global may offer a way forward – hence the specifics of the title, "the synagogue". For some, the term "the synagogue" might prompt a picture of the local community or congregation, whether or not associated with a particular building; for others, it signifies "Judaism", not local but encompassing distinctions of time, distance and, perhaps, individual preference. How often is "Church and Synagogue" used to mean "Christianity" and "Judaism"? Here, however, we shall ask what role the synagogue as local institution played in the emergence of what was to become early Christianity. This is less straightforward a question than it may first seem. First, "synagogue" is, in the earliest centuries of the present era, far from

straightforward. We may leave aside the question whether "synagogue" means building or community since, like "church", in our early sources it can mean both and most of the time it is clear which it means. More contentious is whether the ancient synagogue is to be defined in terms of its "worship" life – congregating on the sabbath but also at other times for the reading of Torah, for prayers – or as a broader centre for communal life, including education, disputes and negotiation. Did it represent one aspect of the community's life, of greater or lesser significance for different individuals, or was it the central organ of the continuing functioning of the community, especially in the cities of the Diaspora where Jews lived as minority groups among their "pagan" neighbours? While some will argue that "the synagogue" was the central and essential institution of Judaism, locally and, therefore, generally, others will point to the unevenness of our evidence, archaeological and literary, in order to contend that Jewish life continued in places without synagogues or in ways other than that centred on what was called "synagogue"; that the local was not the primary focus of "belonging".

Secondly, Christian sources are less helpful than we might hope, although often they are all we have. Christian sources are very graphic and detailed in their debates with, and most often polemic against, Judaism, but the Judaism they describe is invariably drawn not from contemporary experience but from the pages of the Old Testament, coloured by the language, often the denunciation, of the prophets, and later of the Gospels: these provide a lens that is as likely to distort as to reveal. Nonetheless, here we shall begin from early Christian sources and examine five ways in which the synagogue has been seen as the primary context for the emergence of Christianity, or for the separation of the Christians.

Christians as Excluded from the Synagogue

John 9.29 describes how *"the Jews had agreed that if anyone confessed Jesus as the Christ or messiah they were to be excluded from the synagogue"*. Most scholars would now agree that this assertion probably reflects the time not of Jesus but of the writing of the Gospel, perhaps in the 90s of the first century. The verse implies that then those who confessed Jesus would find themselves excluded from membership of or participation in the life of the synagogue – however we understand that – and that it was the Jewish authorities who orchestrated this, thus, some would say, creating the split between Judaism and Christianity.

Here we shall leave aside the attempt by some to relate this exclusion to the 12th of the 18 Benedictions or Shemoneh Esreh, the so-called birkat hamminim: it is now widely agreed that this benediction did not effect the exclusion of Christians from the synagogue or of Christianity from Judaism as once thought. However, there are other questions to be asked: if we are not sure what the synagogue represented in Jewish communal life, what would exclusion from it mean? The inability to share in worship or exclusion from any communal activities? How would that be carried out and policed? What would happen if there was more than one "synagogue" as a place of worship in a town? Could one move somewhere else? Early Christian communities did develop formal excommunication in order to exclude from their fellowship those whom they considered heretics; in time they treated such exclusion as universal, transferable between communities, and believed that it ensured exclusion not just from religious participation on earth but also from divine salvation. Yet it would be wrong to transfer such a way of thinking to Judaism and suppose that exclusion from a synagogue, if intended here, had the same totalitarian implications. More important, although a few early Christian writers repeat the charges that the Jews curse Christ or Christians in their synagogues (possibly the birkat hamminim), as we shall see they also complain that Christians attend synagogue services. There is little evidence of a unilateral ban.

John's Gospel may suggest that, not surprisingly, toleration of different views or the refusal to accept them was often a matter of the local situation. But if you are driven out of your local community all sorts of options are available to you – going elsewhere more welcoming, setting up

an alternative community.

Synagogue as Bridge

In the Acts of the Apostles Paul's evangelistic activity follows a regular pattern: he starts his ministry in each new town he visits by preaching in the synagogue; there he encounters not only Jews but also people described as "those who feared God" who generally support him; however, he is opposed by the Jews, and then turns to the Gentiles (e.g. 13.14-49). Some scholars have seen this pattern as typical of the spread of early Christianity. In many cities of the Roman Empire we do know, from inscriptions and literature, of Gentiles "on the fringes" of the Jewish community; some were attracted by the "virtues" of Judaism, its monotheism, its high moral tone, its scriptures, but were unwilling to convert fully, perhaps because of the physical danger and social stigma of male adult circumcision (Others may have been as much fascinated by the esoteric of an "eastern religion" as by its reasonableness and morality!) As a place of worship the synagogue was sufficiently open to allow them to attend, to listen and to learn, even if they could not be full members of the community. For such Gentiles Paul's message, without the demand of full Torah-observance, answered their needs; for Christian preachers their acknowledgement of the one God and familiarity with the scriptures would make them a more attractive and fertile market than "pagans" for whom even an image-less monotheism was a problem and whom it is difficult to imagine making sense of the way early Christian writers quote and interpreted all the Scriptures. Here, then, the synagogue appears as a seed-bed or preliminary school, preparing Gentiles who could not be fully accepted there, and providing the early followers of Jesus with a bridge into the Gentile world. Christianity emerges out of the synagogue, going a step further than it was prepared to do so, but building on what it had done.

Yet this picture also invites us to think about how we envisage the ancient synagogue, and indeed, how people experienced and expressed their religious interests in antiquity. In the modern world someone who is religiously curious may attend a religious service, pick up fairly painlessly a smattering of knowledge, and proceed to find a comfortable way into full religious adherence whether or not at their first port of call. But was this true in the ancient world? Would a Gentile curious about Judaism have gone to a synagogue? Would the synagogue have provided them with a preliminary understanding of the Scriptures – was that what went on there? Was the synagogue "the same sort of thing" as the church so one would move easily from one to the other? Or were there other ways of being interested in Judaism than by attending synagogue? These are questions inviting answers.

Synagogue and the Scriptures

Certainly the Scriptures that Christians shared with Jews presented a particular problem. Justin Martyr, a second century Christian, wrote an "account" of his debate with a Jew named Trypho, perhaps in Ephesus. Much of his argument endeavours to demonstrate that the Scriptures clearly point to Jesus. Claiming that Jer. 11.19, "I was like a lamb led to the slaughter", was prophecy of Jesus, he asserts that that verse "is still inscribed in some copies of the Jews in synagogues"; in explanation he continues with the claim that recently such verses had been cut out by the Jews (Dialogue 72.3). Similarly, citing Psalm 96.10 as, "Tell among the nations! the Lord has reigned from the tree", he asserts that the Jews have cut out the words "from the tree". Unfortunately for Justin and for Christian apologetics there is no evidence that "from the tree" was ever part of the scriptural text, but the charge of mutilation survived centuries after Justin.

Behind Justin's complaint we can hear his problem. Early Christians believed that these Scriptures referred to Jesus as the promised Messiah and, whether teaching their own people or defending themselves to the Roman authorities, they referred to the Scriptures as evidence on their side and as *their* Scriptures. Yet the social reality must often have been that they did not have copies of the

Scriptures: how could they have afforded, where would they have acquired, and where would they have kept, bulky and expensive Scrolls of Torah or prophets? Since early Christian writers repeatedly quote the same passages or the same parts of books, perhaps what they had were collections of much cited passages to use in teaching and debate, passages which deliberately or through usage had been "edited" to suit the Christian purpose even better than they already did. If they wanted to check their references, to get to know the Scriptures better, or to engage in debate, then where else could they go but to the copies held presumably in synagogues, as evidenced by the niche for the Torah scrolls in many later archeological remains of synagogues. It is noteworthy that however much Justin complains about the Jews' misrepresentation of their own Scriptures, he knows that he is vulnerable, and ends up starting from their text.

We can imagine that Christians needed the help of the synagogue in other ways. The Scriptures need interpretation, and who better from whom to learn the principles and some ready made solutions than the synagogue? We do find in Justin and later Christian writers interpretations of the Scriptures similar to some in rabbinic sources or in the targumim; some Christian prayers contain little that is distinctively Christian and use phrases and language common in later Jewish liturgy. Was the synagogue the place in which Jews and Christians continued to share their common heritage; did Christians learn more than they gave here?

Synagogue as a Second Home.

In the middle of the 3rd century the Christian teacher-cum-philosopher Origen complains about those who repeat on Sunday what they heard the day before. When we read some of Origen's allegorical interpretation of the scriptures, we might not be surprised that some wondered whether the text really meant that, and compared alternative interpretations – particularly if most people did think of synagogues as places where Scriptures really belonged. Not much later Pionius, bishop of the Church at Smyrna in Asia Minor, wrote from prison as he awaited martyrdom, "I have heard that the Jews are inviting some of you into the synagogues", and denounced the enormity of any collusion "with those who killed Christ". Was it that, since Jews had exemption from participation in the imperial cult, they may have been offering Christians temporary protection; or was Pionius right to be suspicious of this as an exploitation of Christian vulnerability? Yet evidence for Jews actively seeking converts is very sparse, making it unlikely that synagogue and church were rivals for converts. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the persecution, but was simply part of regular dialogue. More than a century later in Syrian Antioch a fiery preacher, John Chrysostom, tirades against those Christians who frequent the synagogue, think of it as holy, share in its processions and rituals, or even go there to settle disputes. He denounces the synagogue as not much better than a brothel or a theatre, the home of demons. A long tradition of scholarship has described what Chrysostom is combating as "Judaising", a regrettable and recurring tendency among some Christians to deviate from the orthodox norm and find aspects of Jewish practice attractive; such labels are misleading, creating groups and minorities out of varieties of practice, and suggesting people act only according to prior theological views. We cannot know whether people were attracted to the synagogue because it was more theatrical, more lively than listening to Chrysostom's sermons, or whether it seemed to be much the same sort of thing, and Chrysostom is trying to demonstrate that appearances are misleading. Again we ask whether, within the context of the ancient city, the synagogue as place of worship looked rather like the church, so that opponents had to create difference out of similarity? Did the synagogue continue to offer a recognisable second home in a predominantly pagan society?

Synagogue as a Threat

These pictures of the synagogue as bridge, as source of Scriptures, and as second home are not the popular picture. Many have preferred the third century Christian writer, Tertullian, in describing the synagogues of the Jews as the sources of persecution, assuming the normal relationship as

one of hostility and violence. Yet there is very little evidence either that Jewish communities practised their own persecution of Christians or that they instigated the Romans to do so. Still, the synagogue could be seen as a threat in other ways. We have already seen how Christians' finding a welcome in synagogues could be interpreted as an insidious threat – the ancient religious equivalent of religious sabotage.

Yet some scholars have pictured literally how the synagogue might seem to pose a threat to early Christian communities. Visitors to the site of Capernaum on the NW coast of the Sea of Galilee will see the remains of a magnificent synagogue but "a stone's throw" from the ruins of the Christian church of St Peter, with the synagogue at a striking visual disadvantage: it remains in ruins while the Christian ruins are topped by a huge modern glass construction – perhaps a visual representation of that older view of the triumph of Christianity and the decease of Judaism. Yet if we try to envisage when both buildings stood in the fourth century or perhaps earlier, did the wealth and grandeur of the synagogue seem to threaten the Christian community? Or there is the magnificent synagogue in Sardis in Asia Minor/Turkey, a clear statement of the wealth and confidence of the Jewish community; it stands in a plot to one side of the public areas of the city of Sardis, suggesting a community that was accepted by and accepted its place within the city. When Christian writers in the region engage in bitter polemic against the Jews, some scholars have explained this as the response of a small minority group to those they experienced not just as a social threat but as an ideological threat; how could Christians claim that they and not the Jews were the true heirs to God's promises and to God's blessing in the face of such a magnificent synagogue building?

Conclusion

We have explored five possible and overlapping ways in which the synagogue played a role in the emergence of what was to become Christianity. We hear only Christian voices making it easy to think of the traffic as one-way: Christians sometimes visiting the synagogue, learning there the language of prayer and study, consulting the Scriptures, perhaps borrowing or copying them, recognising the ground they held in common, particularly in the context of the very different cultural and social patterns of civic life; and as always where there is closeness, also experiencing hostility and rejection. What we have seen is that the local is always much more complex than the simplistic universal patterns we try to impose on history.

Yet we should also raise questions about this picture: does it all sound too much like a modern context of ecumenical dialogue, transposing the Council of Christians and Jews into antiquity? As we try to understand the emergence of Judaism and Christianity as we come to know them, we have to struggle with the issue of sameness and difference: when does difference outweigh sameness; would the samenesses and the differences that we see also be seen by those whom we are trying to understand? Older accounts of the separation between Judaism and Christianity tended to emphasise difference; now we pay more attention to sameness – common sacred writings, a shared language and vocabulary drawn from those writings, a shared set of moral principles, a shared understanding of God and of how God should be approached and known. Perhaps as part of all this the patterns we have explored have also tended to see synagogue and church in terms of sameness: a meeting of minds is possible between those who see themselves and their task in similar terms. That works in the modern world: a Christian can visit a synagogue and feel reasonably at home; recognisable things are happening. Yet, in part that is a consequence of the parallel historical development and interaction between synagogue and church in subsequent centuries.

Were synagogue and church parallel sorts of things in the early centuries? It is intriguing how quickly the Christians come to use the term "church"/*ecclesia*, almost exclusively of themselves, and "synagogue" of the Jews. Christians not only use "church" of the local community but also of

the universal community, transcending the barriers of time and space. In Matthew Jesus says to Peter "On this rock I shall build my church", and it is unlikely that Matthew envisages a particular community in a particular place (16.18); Ephesians speaks of Christ loving the church, presenting it to himself without spot or wrinkle (5.25-33); Colossians describes Jesus's place in the cosmic order as "head of the body the church" (1.18). These are all already from the first century; in time Christians will affirm, "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church", generating "ecclesiology" as a department of the systematic study of Christian theology: *"ecclesia", the church*, has significance as concept, idea. There is, as far as I can see, no equivalence to this in Jewish thought about "the synagogue". It is Christians who behave as if there were: Christians who, *because they oppose*, also implicitly equate "Church" and "synagogue". So, we may close with a problem and a caution, a problem as to quite what "synagogue" and "church" were in the ancient world; a caution against assuming that they were "the same sort of thing".

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