

**Part I**  
**THE MOTHER OF ALL SCHISMS**



## 1

BROKEN  
THREADFACTIONS IN THE  
EARLY CHURCH

**I**N THE BEGINNING, JESUS AND ALL HIS FOLLOWERS WERE Jews; in the end, the church condemned the Jewish Christians as heretics. Until we resolve this paradox, we cannot hope to understand Jesus. The first and greatest division in the early church concerned the relationship of the followers of Jesus to Judaism; it shaped everything that was to follow.

Jewish Christianity consisted of those early Christians *who followed the teachings of Jesus, as they understood him, and also remained loyal to the Jewish law of Moses as they understood it*. The qualifications are important, because the Jewish Christians were eventually rejected both by orthodox Judaism and by orthodox Christianity.<sup>1</sup> *Their* understanding of Jesus was not that of orthodox Christianity (as it came to be), and *their* understanding of the law of Moses was not that of orthodox Judaism (as it came to be). Jerome's celebrated comment in the fourth century summarizes this dual rejection: "As long as they seek to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither Jews nor Christians" (*Letter* 112).

The Jewish Christians considered Jesus to be the "true prophet" who would lead the people *back* to the eternal law that commanded simple living and nonviolence. The law had been given to Moses; indeed, it had existed from the beginning of the world. In sharp contrast with the gentile Christian movement, which emerged in the wake of Paul's

teaching, Jewish Christianity strove to make the Jewish law *stricter* than the Jewish tradition seemed to teach.

Jewish Christianity is the blind spot in virtually all accounts of Jesus. Everyone agrees that Jesus was a Jew and that his initial followers were Jews. Yet of the thousands of books written about Jesus, almost none acknowledge the central importance of Jewish Christianity. There are many who are eager to focus specifically on the Jewishness of Jesus, until they get to the point of examining those of his followers who, like their teacher, were also Jewish.

The “Jewishness” of these early Christians does not refer to their ethnic group or nationality, but rather to their *beliefs*. Paul was at one time a Jew, but he also preaches freedom from the law and therefore explicitly rejects Jewish beliefs. Paul, and some of the other Jews who became Christians, renounced the law of Moses and, therefore, were *not* part of Jewish Christianity.

When we turn the pages of history to the second, third, and fourth centuries, however, we find several groups that fit this definition of Jewish Christianity. They shared Jesus’ approach to the law; they dissented from some of the teachings of Judaism, but attempted to remain within what they regarded as the highest ideals of that path, as articulated by Jesus. There were also during this period a large and growing number of gentile Christians who did not think of themselves as Jews, who believed that God had condemned the Jews, who did not see themselves bound by the law given to Moses, and who viewed Jesus himself—as the incarnation, according to them, of God—as a higher authority than anything given to Moses. It is certainly *possible* that these later gentile followers of Jesus had a better understanding of Jesus than the later Jewish followers of Jesus; but it is very unlikely. One has only to ask this question to see that there is a significant problem here. Without understanding Jewish Christianity, we cannot claim to have understood the history of the primitive church; without understanding Jewish Christianity, we cannot claim to have understood Jesus.

## Factionalism in the Early Church

Factionalism was an important aspect of the history of the early church. The traditional Christian understanding of its own history—and the implicit understanding of most scholars—is that Christianity was a gradual or incremental evolution from its starting point. It may be that the later church modified or added to the tradition, runs the argument, but it started with the teachings of Jesus as the basic structure. Most modern “historical Jesus” researchers, whether liberal or conservative, begin with this (unstated) view of history and the assumption that, if we can just identify what was added later and strip it away, we will see the “historical Jesus.”

The history of Christianity that this book presents, by contrast, is *not* one of incremental development. It is of a succession of crises that confronted Jesus’ followers—*crises that caused fundamental alterations in Christian doctrine and perspective*. Coming to grips with these crises is essential to understanding the teachings of Jesus, because *it is through these crises that the church filtered its awareness of Jesus*. The source of the murkiness and contradiction of early Christian history lies neither in our lack of information nor in our own inability to understand this history—as if the teachings of Jesus are irretrievably lost to history or concealed in manuscripts hidden deep in the Vatican. Early Christian history seems so contradictory because it *was* “contradictory”—so many people were saying so many different things at such an early stage of Christian history.

The evidence for diversity in early Christianity is widespread and comes from the writings of early church leaders, from historical accounts, and the New Testament itself. The literature of early Christianity is often strongly polemical, and the bitterness of the attacks on other followers of Jesus who are “misrepresenting” Christianity is quickly apparent.

- Paul describes an angry confrontation he had with Peter in Galatians 2. Accounts of other bitter disputes can be found throughout Paul’s letters.

- Irenaeus (second century) wrote a lengthy work *Against Heresies*.
- Hippolytus (third century) wrote *The Refutation of All Heresies*.
- Origen (third century) comments that “many” Christians had differences of opinion with each other on “subjects of the highest importance” (*De Principiis*, Preface, section 2).
- Tertullian (third century) wrote five books *Against Marcion*, in addition to less lengthy polemical works such as *Prescription Against Heretics*, *Against Hermogenes*, *Against the Valentinians*, and *Against Praxeus*. He describes heresy as widespread (*Prescription Against Heretics* 1); however, he himself joined the Montanists, who were themselves declared heretics.
- Epiphanius (fourth century) wrote the *Panarion*, a lengthy work directed against heresy in which he outlines the views of eighty groups and denounces each one.
- Theodoret (fifth century) wrote the *Compendium of Heretical Fables* in which he describes and attacks sixty heretical groups.

Early Christianity was not at all stable. “Stability” is in fact a characteristic of *later* Christianity, beginning about the time of Constantine and the council of Nicaea (in the year 325). After Constantine and the controversies raised at the council of Nicaea, there were still serious disputes, but they had a much narrower focus and did not occur nearly as frequently. In fact, there were only three truly great heresies after this point. The first was the monophysite controversy, which concerned whether or not Christ had one or two natures; later there was the split between Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox over the authority of the pope; finally, there was the greatest heresy of all, that of Martin Luther and others, which launched the Protestant reformation.

For over 1600 years following Constantine, controversy over doctrinal matters—while it did occur—was the exception rather than the rule. But during the first four centuries after Jesus, Christianity was even more doctrinally divided than it is today. Moreover, these disputes did not involve political questions of church authority, nor obscure

theological points that most ordinary Christians had difficulty understanding; they involved the very nature of God, Jesus, and salvation.

In Christian history, these early crises were both admitted and denied. Eusebius' fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History* portrayed the schisms the church faced as just bumps on the road of history, due to the sorts of misunderstandings that were bound to arise as any message was carried forward. For Eusebius, the followers of Jesus established a church and wrote down the teachings of the Christ. They faced opposition, persecution, and even setbacks. But in general the gospel gained increasing numbers of adherents as time progressed. Three hundred years after the death of Jesus the Roman Empire embraced the faith. Eusebius portrays Christian history as the record of revelation gaining increasing acceptance over time.

This idea has a powerful hold even among “liberal” scholars who are otherwise skeptical. If we are committed to this “incrementalist” view of history, early Christian diversity becomes an insoluble puzzle; for the earliest period of Christian history should be the period with the least amount of later elaboration and revision. Yet as we go further back in time in Christian history, the dissension and diversity actually *increases*. It is no wonder that some scholars, seeing this vast diversity, conclude with Albert Schweitzer that the historical Jesus is an enigma hidden from us—better an object of faith than a subject of historical inquiry.

Christianity did *not* emerge as a gradual development from the teachings of its founder. Rather, this book will argue, a series of severe crises shook the primitive Christian church, permitting broad schisms to develop, and fatally weakening the leadership of the early church. The thread connecting modern Christianity to Jesus was decisively broken by these crises.

## **The Controversy Over Gnosticism**

By the second century, Jewish Christianity was not even the most important heresy. Another and even greater heresy arose to oppose what was to become orthodox belief. It was known as gnosticism, and it

engaged the church in a desperate life-and-death struggle for the soul of Christianity. Scholars disagree on what exactly “gnosticism” is, but in this book we will define it very broadly as any Christian view that rejects the creator God of Judaism and despises the physical world he created.

In the year 140, a man named Marcion appeared in Rome, putting forward a dramatic view of Christianity: that the God of the Christians and the God of the Jews *were two different Gods altogether*. The God of the Jews was the God who actually created the world; but he had botched the job, with the result that we have a universe of pain, suffering, and death. The God of Jesus, by contrast, stood above the world and would save us from it if we would only *know* him. The God of Jesus was a *stranger* God, a stranger to this world of woe. Those who knew Jesus and the true Father God of Jesus would, like Jesus, escape from this world at death and be saved eternally.

Since Marcion (and other gnostics) maintained that the religion of Jesus had *nothing* to do with Judaism, gnosticism was in many ways the polar opposite of Jewish Christianity. The attractiveness of gnosticism was due in part to its straightforward answer to the perplexing question of the relationship of Jesus to Judaism. The gnostics cut this Gordian knot by severing the relationship completely.

Marcion's belief in two gods instead of one was rejected by orthodox Christianity. Marcion was thrown out of the church at Rome and a bitter struggle ensued. *Nevertheless*, Marcion's view had wide appeal in early Christianity. He quickly attracted a large following and his views were only suppressed after several centuries of struggle. The writings of the church fathers from the second and third centuries reflect a strong preoccupation with Marcion and other gnostics. The church fathers wrote literally volumes about heretics generally, and the gnostics in particular. It is clear from just the volume of writing and the desperate viciousness of the diatribes against heresy that they felt there was a real possibility that some version of gnosticism might triumph in the struggle with what we now know as orthodox Christianity.

While Marcion lost his struggle, the influence of gnosticism on Christianity was nevertheless very significant. To begin with, one of the

themes of gnosticism was that the creation of the world was less than perfect, a product of an evil—or perhaps merely incompetent—creator God. This belief was indirectly reflected in the tendency toward asceticism among many early Christians, in an effort to “escape” from the world. Some Christian ascetics engaged in bizarre and self-punishing behaviors, such as self-flagellation and spending years sitting on a pillar. The whole idea that this present world is a world of woe, rather than (as in Judaism) the very good creation of a loving, all-powerful God, is a “gnostic” view. How, after all, could it be that the loving, merciful God of Jesus would also have been the creator of this world of suffering?

Marcion also had a strong influence on the New Testament. Indeed, when Marcion preached his gospel, there *was* no New Testament canon. Individual gospels existed, of course, as well as the letters of Paul and letters of various revered figures in Christianity; but no one had identified a collection of sacred writings as definitive for any of the followers of Jesus. Marcion *did* have such a collection: his canon contained a version of the gospel of Luke plus ten of the letters of Paul. Marcion was also the *first* to use the term “gospel” to refer to writings about Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Gerd Lüdemann states, “Without Marcion there would have been no New Testament; without this heretic, no letters of Paul.”<sup>3</sup>

It is certain that Marcion could not have had such an impact unless early Christianity was highly diverse and lacking in stable leadership. It is as if, a century after the death of the Buddha, a strong heretical form of Buddhism arose that denied one or more of the four noble truths. It is as if, a century after the death of Mohammed, a strong heretical form of Islam arose that maintained that a secret and superior version of the Qur’an existed of which this sect alone possessed a copy. Such serious heresy at such an early stage in the history of *any* religion could not have been the result of a stable and strong central religious authority; rather, it would be convincing evidence that something had gone awry at an early stage.

“Heresy” was not a single point of view by any means. The Jewish Christians differed sharply from Marcion and other gnostics. While Marcion presented Paul as a hero, perhaps as the only apostle who truly

understood Jesus, the Jewish Christians detested Paul, whom they regarded as an apostate. They believed that the God of Jesus was the God of the Jews; they also believed that Jesus was a prophet who came to reform the Mosaic law—to return the people to the original law of God, which had been given to Moses but then distorted by those who followed after Moses.

The controversy over gnosticism shows how deep the divisions in Christianity were in the second century and how fragmented Christianity was at this early stage. If Christians just a century after Jesus had this much trouble in understanding the basic teachings of Jesus, then how can we, standing two millennia after Jesus, hope to do any better?

### **The New Testament**

The problem of the divisions in early Christianity raises a further question: why can't we just turn to the New Testament to resolve outstanding issues which were confusing in early Christianity? This is the instinctive reaction of many Christians, especially Protestants. Isn't the New Testament precisely such a guide for anyone needing clarification?

There are several reasons why doing this does not work. First of all, the New Testament itself displays a wide variety of contradictory viewpoints and agendas; the writings themselves are not historical records as much as advocacies for different audiences within the early Christian communities. Secondly, it leaves out a number of viewpoints and ancient gospels. Thirdly, it was subject to extensive editing and modification. All this could be overlooked, perhaps, if early Christianity were otherwise a unified, coherent movement; but early Christianity was anything but unified and coherent, as we have already seen.

The New Testament can easily be invoked for support of countless mutually contradictory explanations of Jesus. As a result, even those seeking to interpret the Bible literally often come to a completely different understanding of what that literal interpretation is. On the basis of the Bible, some Christians are pacifist, while others support war; some

support capital punishment, others oppose it; some accept alcohol, while others do not; some allow divorce, some allow divorce only in cases of adultery, and some do not allow divorce at all; and so on. Each viewpoint can cite its favorite verses or interpretations. Fundamentalists may object that the New Testament is complete and consistent and provides a reliable guide for life and religion; but if this is the case, it is hard to explain all the contradictions among the fundamentalists themselves.

There are numerous discrepancies, both major and minor, in the New Testament accounts: the names of the twelve apostles, the location of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, the completely different genealogies in Matthew and Luke, for example. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), called "synoptic" because their pictures of Jesus are similar to each other, are sharply different from the gospel of John. The letters of Paul, in turn, present a very different picture of Jesus than that found in the synoptic gospels. Sometimes there are even contradictions: for example, Jesus affirms that he has come to fulfill the law and condemns those who violate even the least of the law's commands (Matthew 5:17–19); but in his letters Paul says that Jesus annulled the law and says that his (Paul's) own adherence to the law was "so much garbage" (Ephesians 2:14–15, Philippians 3:8).

To the impartial reader it is obvious that many different ideas are at play; centuries of exegesis designed to harmonize the New Testament writings cannot overturn the problems that lurk there. John Dominic Crossan, author of several books about Jesus, points out that we can construct almost any picture of Jesus we want to by selecting the "right" texts. Jesus can be shown "to be for or against legal observance, for or against apocalyptic expectation, for or against Gentile mission, for or against Temple worship, for or against titular claim, for or against political revolt, and so on."<sup>4</sup>

But even putting this aside, the New Testament would be a poor guide to historical reality. The New Testament is highly selective; gospels that did not meet with the approval of the early church were eliminated. Due to the twentieth-century discoveries at Nag Hammadi, we now

know what the New Testament might have looked like if history had turned out a bit differently. As diverse as the New Testament is, it pales in comparison with the diversity of the range of views held by significant numbers of the followers of Jesus just within the first century after Jesus. It should not be necessary to repeat the statement of Hans-Joachim Schoeps that the New Testament “must surely be regarded as a tendentious, contrived product of the second century,”<sup>5</sup> or Robert Funk’s conclusion that the New Testament is “a highly uneven and biased record of various early attempts to invent Christianity.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, it may be next to impossible to fully reconstruct what the original texts of even the “approved” New Testament books said. Helmut Koester reminds us that the oldest known manuscripts of parts of the New Testament are over a century later than the presumed original versions; and it is precisely in the first century when the most serious corruptions of the texts (changes, additions, and deletions) are likely to have occurred. Koester concludes that “textual critics of the New Testament writings have been surprisingly naive in this respect.”<sup>7</sup>

Even within the sphere of the orthodox there was disagreement as to which books should be included. The Muratorian canon, based on a manuscript thought to originate as early as the third century, fails to include Hebrews, I Peter, II Peter, one of the letters of John, and James, all of which are in the modern New Testament; it does include, however, the Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon, which ultimately were not included. Some writers even attacked the Gospel of John in reaction to the Montanist heresy, a heresy with strong apocalyptic and pentecostal elements.<sup>8</sup> It was not until the fourth century, with Athanasius, that someone mentions the exact twenty-seven books that now constitute the New Testament. But Eusebius, who lived about the same time, describes the books of James, Jude, II Peter, II John, and III John as disputed<sup>9</sup>, indicating that even at this late date there is still some considerable debate going on. Even as late as the Reformation, Martin Luther objected to the inclusion of the letter of James in the New Testament; and Catholics and Protestants disagree to this day over the Apocrypha.

This book is *not* a detailed attempt to determine either what the canon should have been, or to determine which of the sayings of Jesus from the canonical or other gospels are “authentic.” Our task is both more humble and more fundamental. It is more humble, because evaluation of all New Testament and other texts for authenticity is completely beyond the scope of this book. But it is more fundamental, because it establishes the framework within which any discussion of the historical Jesus must take place: the history of Christianity. For if we do not understand the basic context and history of his teaching, how can we hope to ever understand the exact words?

The New Testament provides important evidence about the historical Jesus and the history of early Christianity. However, it cannot be taken simply at face value: it is a highly edited, inconsistent document put together to support the viewpoint of a single party in early Christianity, namely the victorious party. It is the *outcome* of early Christian history, not just a record of it. The starting point of historical Jesus research is history; we must first establish the historical context of Jesus’ mission and message. We believe that this book can establish this historical context: it is Jewish Christianity.

## History and Revelation

“But how do you know?”

It might seem from the foregoing discussion that we are trapped in relativism: we are faced with equally plausible but contradictory interpretations of Christian records. Jesus as gnostic teacher, Jesus as military revolutionary, Jesus as social critic, Jesus as dying savior—with countless equally possible interpretations, how can we decide for or against any of them?

We propose a simple criterion for evaluating any theory about Jesus: *Does it make sense of Christian history?* “Christian history” means, of course, the life of Jesus (most Jesus theories do a pretty good job with this); but it also includes later events as well. The mission of Paul, the destruction of Jerusalem, the controversies over gnosticism in the

second century, and the council of Nicaea in the fourth century—all of these need to be included.

Pick up any book on the historical Jesus, whether written two hundred years ago or yesterday, and you will most likely find no substantial discussion of Marcion and his role in second-century Christianity, no mention of the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 and its effect on Christianity, no mention of Jewish Christianity, no discussion of the other countless schisms in early Christianity,<sup>10</sup> and no discussion of the council of Nicaea. With a few exceptions, most books on the historical Jesus pass all of this by. A few pages, a few paragraphs, or even a few footnotes are all that you will see on key historical issues. “Let’s concentrate on the New Testament texts relating to Jesus,” they seem to be saying, “and let the later history of Christianity take care of itself.” The texts “float in the air,” outside of time, space, and history.

We cannot understand Jesus without *first* understanding early Christian history. The very records that we invoke for the understanding of Jesus were themselves decisively shaped by later events. We must, therefore, turn to these later events to understand the earlier records. The history of early Christianity is exactly what shaped the text of the New Testament—and any criterion of what the “good” and “bad” texts are must rely on *some* idea of that history. Most scholars, if they are tempted at all to go down the path of Christian history to understand Jesus, quickly turn back after encountering the demons of schism. But it is precisely these demons we must confront.

In this chapter we have sought to establish a very rough outline of a “road map” for the history of early Christianity. We have also proposed a framework for understanding who Jesus was: the history of early Christianity. Early Christianity was highly schismatic, and this fact complicates our knowledge of Jesus. We do not yet want to take sides, or say that someone was right or wrong; we simply want to see the problem and work our way back to the original question that led to the confusion: Did the followers of Jesus see the Jewish law as a guide for their lives?

## Conclusions

The idea that Christianity developed gradually from its beginnings, based on the teachings of Jesus but perhaps making certain additions or changes as the tradition developed, has a powerful hold even among the most liberal of scholars. Christianity did not develop this way, however. Rather, there was wide discord in early Christianity—something that was actually to Christianity's advantage, since in the rapid growth of Christianity, those features that had more appeal to the people of the Roman Empire would spread more rapidly and ultimately define what Christianity was. Had the followers of Jesus uniformly remained a Jewish sect, Christianity very likely would *not* have become the religion of the Roman Empire.

These schisms in early Christianity were not concerned with matters of detail of the Christian message nor with obscure questions of theology. They cut to the very heart of what Christianity was and is. They were the material of the repeated crises that dotted the landscape of early Christian history.

It is against this backdrop that we consider the history of Jewish Christianity. Were followers of Jesus those who followed a new path, a new religion, transmitted directly from God through Jesus, and that superseded everything in Judaism that was not in consonance with it? Or were the followers of Jesus simply Jews following the prophet who sought to return to the true and original law of God, revealed to Moses? Or was the relationship even more complicated than this, or something else altogether? This was the issue that continually faced Christians in the first four centuries. The final resolution of this by orthodox Christianity was that Christians had no allegiance to the law of Moses as such, but rather first to Jesus and the church he founded, which replaced the law of Moses. This resolution created a paradox: in the beginning, Jesus and all his followers were Jews; in the end, the church condemned the Jewish Christians as heretics.

