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THE FOLLOWERS OF THE TRUE PROPHET

WHO WERE THE JEWISH CHRISTIANS?

WHO WERE THE JEWISH CHRISTIANS, WHAT DID THEY believe, and how do we know anything about them at all? Jewish Christians in the broadest sense of the term—those following the law of Moses and following Jesus as well—existed from the very beginning of Christianity. They appear in both favorable and unfavorable contexts in the New Testament. However, the most striking evidence for Jewish Christianity is found outside of the Bible: from the descriptions of church writers who knew about Jewish Christianity and attacked it, and from two early church documents written predominantly from a Jewish Christian point of view—the *Recognitions of Clement* and the *Clementine Homilies*.

These writings give a clear picture of Jewish Christianity. There were a number of Jewish Christian groups, all largely similar to each other, the most important of which was known as the *Ebionites*. The Ebionites thought of Jesus as a prophet—in fact, the true prophet predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15–18. In Deuteronomy, the people tell Moses they are so afraid of God that they don't want to hear the voice of God again, and God agrees not to speak to them—but with the proviso that a future prophet of truth, a prophet like Moses, will someday be sent to them. The Ebionites got their name from the Hebrew term *ebionim* meaning “the poor”; they believed in simple living, were pacifists, and were vegetarians. The Ebionites, therefore, had both similarities and

differences with what we know of other Christians living in the first four centuries after Jesus.

Because the Ebionites represent an *independent* tradition of what Jesus said and did outside of the New Testament and the orthodox churches, and because of their practice of following the Jewish law, they have a special claim for our attention—just as much, or more, than the claims of the faction that formulated the New Testament. Wasn't Jesus a Jew himself? Even in the New Testament, doesn't he follow the law and teach others to do the same? Wouldn't the Ebionite tradition, in this case, have a better claim to represent the views of Jesus than the tradition of those who rejected the necessity of keeping the law?

Jewish Christianity in the New Testament

The New Testament is not as helpful as one would like on the subject of Jewish Christianity. There are numerous references, both pro and con, to ideas that the Ebionites held—for example, on the question of keeping the Jewish law, on vegetarianism, on pacifism, on baptism, and on the temple. These passages will be dealt with at length during the course of this book. There are only a few passages that refer directly to Jewish Christians, in Acts and in the letters of Paul. They are not particularly flattering to Jewish Christianity and they are confusing and sketchy.

- In Acts 11:2, Peter is criticized by “the circumcision party” (presumably, Jewish Christians) for meeting and eating with gentiles. Peter explains that he had a vision in which it was revealed that there must be a mission to the gentiles as well as the Jews.
- In Acts 15, there is a lengthy account concerning a controversy started by some followers of Jesus who are Pharisees. These Christian Pharisees insist that gentile converts be circumcised. After lengthy discussion, the views of these Christian Pharisees is rejected; gentile converts, it is ruled, need only adhere to four points relating to the law.
- Acts 21:20 portrays James as telling Paul that there are many thousands of Jews who have converted to Jesus and that they are

“zealous for the law.” Paul agrees to go to the temple to make a sacrifice to appease their feelings.

- Galatians 1–2 relates several disputes that Paul had with the early leaders of the church. The church leaders agree that circumcision is not necessary; however, they do not agree over some food issues (which Galatians does not elaborate on). This brings Paul into an angry face-to-face confrontation with Peter—a dispute in which James, John, Peter, and Barnabas all oppose Paul.

In these passages, which will be explored in more detail later, we see important evidence for factionalism in the early church. The accounts in Acts give a distorted view of Jewish Christianity: they imply that the Jewish Christians are only concerned about highly legalistic matters such as circumcision and making sacrifices in the temple. The view expressed by the so-called “Christian Pharisees” in Acts 15:1—that only those males who are circumcised can be saved—was a view held by only a minority of Jews in the first century. Thus, these Christian Pharisees would have been considered reactionary even by most other non-Christian Jews. This is certainly how the later church wanted to portray Jewish Christianity—as a reactionary Jewish group that for some reason claimed to follow Jesus.

There are more reasons for being suspicious of the descriptions of Jewish Christianity in Acts; most importantly, Paul’s letters conflict with Acts on several key points. In Acts, Paul compliantly circumcises Timothy (16:3); in Galatians, he indignantly refuses even for a moment to make a concession to the “false brethren” by circumcising Titus (2:3–5). In Acts, Paul is appointed by the church to meet the apostles (15:2); in Galatians, he goes not from any human directive but “by revelation” (2:2). In all his letters, Paul indignantly rejects the idea that it is necessary to follow the law of Moses in order to be saved; but in Acts, he goes to the temple to make a sacrifice! It is not absolutely impossible to reconcile these accounts, but the character of Paul is so strikingly different in them that it must be deeply troubling to any objective reader.

From Paul's letters, we know he had opponents. They are loyal to the law, deny Paul's right to be called an apostle, and are ethical vegetarians. The later Ebionites were loyal to the law, despised Paul, and were ethical vegetarians. It is indisputable, therefore, that the germ of Ebionite ideas—even though the "Ebionites" as such did not yet exist—already existed in the first century, among the very first followers of Jesus. It is also indisputable from Galatians that Paul's opponents at one time included not just a reactionary faction of conservative Jews in the early church, but the leadership of the church itself—liberal leaders who acknowledged that circumcision was not necessary for salvation: James, Peter, and John.

The New Testament gives us only one side of the story, the side given by the faction that assembled the New Testament. The Jewish Christians gave a very different account. They described Paul as a traitor to Christian principles—most likely because Paul watered down the original radical principles of Jesus, which had nothing to do with "legalism" surrounding circumcision but rather with the principles of simplicity and nonviolence.

Jewish Christian Literature

Much of our knowledge about Jewish Christianity comes from three early Christian writings: the *Recognitions of Clement*, the *Clementine Homilies*, and the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis.

The *Homilies* and *Recognitions* are the only surviving documents of any size containing Jewish Christian writings. These third-century documents were purportedly composed by Clement of Rome, an early church leader. It's conceivable that (in some earlier version) they really were written by Clement, though most scholars believe they were not; thus they are often referred to as the "pseudo-Clementine" literature. For our purposes it is not important whether or not Clement wrote them, just that they contain a lot of Jewish Christian ideas. Both the *Homilies* and *Recognitions* share a lot of material, seeming to be different versions of one original work. About one quarter of each document is undoubtedly of Jewish Christian origin and refers to Jesus as the "true

prophet” predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy, a characteristically Jewish Christian theme. The rest of these books contain a religious romance telling how Clement was miraculously reunited with some of his lost family members and how they all converted to Christianity. The passages of most interest to students of Jewish Christian origins include the account of James in the temple (unique to the *Recognitions*) and the debates between Peter and Simon Magus.

We know that the *Homilies* and *Recognitions* contain Jewish Christian ideas because of the remarkable and extensive description of the Jewish Christians by Epiphanius. He is the fulcrum upon which much of our knowledge of Jewish Christianity rests. Epiphanius wrote his most famous work, the *Panarion* or “Medicine Chest” (medicines, that is, to be used against the “disease” of heresy), in about 380 CE, over a half century after the Council of Nicaea.

Epiphanius is an excellent source for several reasons. First, he is an eyewitness to history. He has talked to individual Jewish Christians and has copies of their literature—which he quotes from—in front of him. Second, he is a hostile source: he despised Jewish Christianity, thus he cannot be accused of manufacturing evidence favorable to Jewish Christians. If there was any “dirt” on Jewish Christianity, Epiphanius would have it. Epiphanius describes a number of broadly similar Jewish Christian groups; he gives the best and most vivid description of the Ebionites, the most important of the later Jewish Christian groups. He also describes Ossaeans, Elchasaites, and Nazoraeans, as well as a Jewish group called the Nasaraeans, all of which are very similar in their beliefs.

There are remarkable parallels between the Ebionite beliefs that Epiphanius attacks in the *Panarion* and the ideas in the *Recognitions* and *Homilies*, summarized in the Appendix (see page 233): the description of Jesus as the “true prophet”; support for vegetarianism; attack on animal sacrifice; simple living (or poverty) as a virtue; the conflict with Paul; and the rejection of “false texts” in the Old Testament. Even though the *Recognitions* and *Homilies* have been known since ancient times, for our understanding of early Christianity they are as significant as the Dead

Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, or any of the other early church writings we have.

Many of the Jewish Christian themes in these documents are *also* described in the New Testament—such as attacks on animal sacrifice, the virtue of simple living, hostility toward Paul, vegetarianism, and allegiance to the law. In all these various ancient texts, we see reflections of a dissident Jewish Christianity—a Christianity that, as I have suggested, has a stronger claim to understand Jesus than the gentile Christianity which was the ancestor of the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches of today.

Ebionite Beliefs

The Ebionites saw in Jesus the “true prophet” predicted by Moses who would restore the now-forgotten laws that Moses received on Mt. Sinai. In basic theology, therefore, they were no different from other Jews; unlike the trinitarian gentile Christians, they did not seek to put Jesus on an equal footing with God the Father. However, their views on the content and nature of the law was different from that of orthodox Judaism. It was a transformation in lifestyle, not a new theology, that for them set Jesus and his early followers apart from other Jews.

Ebionites had the following characteristic beliefs:

- **Jesus is the true prophet.** The Ebionites based their belief in Jesus on Deuteronomy 18:15–18, when Moses predicts a future prophet due to the people’s reluctance to hear the voice of God. For the Ebionites, Jesus is this prophet, the prophet of truth.
- **A simple lifestyle is desired by God.** If anything, “simple living” is insufficiently radical to describe what the Ebionites had in mind. The name *ebionim* means “the poor” in Hebrew; the Ebionites traced their “poverty” back to the time when all the followers of Jesus held all their possessions in common (Acts 4:32–35).
- **Jesus condemns animal sacrifice.** “I came to abolish sacrifices,” says Jesus in the Ebionite gospel, “and unless you cease sacrificing, my anger will not cease from you” (*Panarion*

30.16.5). One of the chief purposes of the true prophet in the *Recognitions* and the *Homilies* is to show the Jewish people that the practice of animal sacrifice must be ended.

- **Jesus teaches vegetarianism.** Epiphanius describes the Ebionites as vegetarians, and in the *Recognitions* and *Homilies* vegetarianism is strongly connected to the rejection of animal sacrifice and is required of all the followers of Jesus. When Epiphanius questions a Jewish Christian as to why he was a vegetarian, the Jewish Christian responds simply: “Christ revealed it to me” (*Panarion* 30.18.9).
- **Alcohol should be avoided.** The Ebionites used water instead of wine in celebrating the Eucharist. The *Homilies* has Peter attacking alcohol and attacking paganism because of its drunken worship (*Homilies* 11.15).
- **God has one law for everyone.** The distinction between Jew and gentile is abolished for the Jewish Christians just as it was for Paul (Galatians 3:28), but with a different result altogether—everyone should follow the universal and eternal law (*Homilies* 8.10) revealed to Moses (*Recognitions* 1.35). In this respect the Ebionites were traditional Jews who sought to convert the world to their version of Judaism.
- **The law has been distorted with false texts.** This is a highly unusual doctrine, heretical both to orthodox Jews and orthodox Christians: that the Jewish scriptures have been distorted, with the result that not everything in the scriptures can be trusted. Specifically, the Ebionites thought that laws relating to animal sacrifice were later corruptions, though there were a number of other distortions as well.
- **Warfare is condemned.** Epiphanius does not mention pacifism, but several passages in the *Recognitions*, undoubtedly of Jewish Christian origin, espouse pacifist principles. In *Recognitions* 1, when Paul before his conversion tries to murder James, the Christians offer no violence in return because of their pacifist

principles. Later, Peter announces opposition to war (*Recognitions* 3.42).

- **Christ has already appeared many times.** The Ebionites felt that Jesus' life was neither the first nor last appearance of the Christ. According to Epiphanius, the Ebionites thought that Christ was "in Adam" and appeared, as Adam, to the patriarchs. "Christ" usually refers to Jesus, but is sometimes used by the Ebionites as a title meaning "the anointed one": the *Recognitions* implies that all believers are anointed as "Christs" (1.45).¹
- **Baptism is important for salvation.** The Ebionites believed that baptism was important—it replaced animal sacrifice (*Recognitions* 1.39). However, baptism is described in contradictory ways, sometimes as a one-time ritual conferring salvation, sometimes as a daily ritual—like prayer.
- **There is only one God.** The Ebionites were not only monotheists but also strict unitarians who denied the orthodox doctrine of the trinity. For the Ebionites, God does not appear in three persons; Jesus is the prophet of God and the Messiah, but is not the same as God.
- **Paul was an apostate from the law.** The Ebionites didn't like Paul at all, considering him "an apostate" from the law. In the *Recognitions* and *Homilies* there is no direct attack on Paul, but when Peter debates his opponent, Simon Magus, he attacks ideas that are often similar to Paul's views—for instance, that one can become an apostle on the basis of a vision of Jesus.

The most striking thing about the Jewish Christian version of Jesus in comparison with gentile beliefs about Jesus is his attitude toward the law. Jesus was a prophet wanting to *increase* the strictness of the Jewish law, in contrast with Paul, who insists that allegiance to the law is now unnecessary or perhaps even harmful. For the Jewish Christians, it was not enough to help the poor; they had to become poor. It was not enough to abstain from murder; they had to abstain from killing even in wartime, from killing animals, and from anger. It should also be clear, incidentally,

that they have almost nothing in common with the modern “Jews for Jesus,” who are essentially Jewish converts to *gentile* Christian doctrine. The “Jews for Jesus” and “Messianic Jews” accept the trinity, the virgin birth, the literal truth of the Old Testament, and so forth—all of which were rejected by the Ebionites.

It is generally understood that Paul’s message broadened Jesus’ audience, spreading the message to the gentiles. The common view is that Paul’s “conservative” Jewish Christian opponents wanted the message restricted to Jews and insisted that those accepting the message of Jesus also be born or converted Jews. The Jewish Christians, however, may have seen the issue very differently. They probably thought that Paul broadened the appeal of Christianity by watering down Jesus’ message—by diluting the radical lifestyle that Jesus called his followers to in the Sermon on the Mount. The Jewish Christians were “Jewish” because they took Jewish theology for granted, assuming that God had revealed an eternal, indestructible law to the people of Israel through Moses. Upon examining this law, however, they reached radical conclusions.

Other Jewish Christian Groups

The Ebionites are not the only Jewish Christian group in the first centuries of Christianity, but were the most important. The Ebionites are mentioned by more of the church fathers than any other such group; they are also mentioned in the earliest material and are mentioned more often. Up to the fourth century, there are almost twice as many mentions of the Ebionites as there are of all the other Jewish Christian sects combined.² The earliest, best, and most voluminous information we have on Jewish Christianity is that concerning the Ebionites.

There are other groups usually classified as “Jewish Christian”—namely the Elchasaites, the Nazoraeans, and the Ossaeans. The evidence concerning these groups is fragmentary and complex and will be considered in more detail later; but, to summarize, all these groups were similar to the Ebionites on at least these three points: they adhered to the Jewish law, they were vegetarian, and they rejected animal sacrifice. Epiphanius goes to some lengths to describe the cozy relationship

between the Ebionites and the Elchasaites, Nazoraeans, and Ossaeans; he also explicitly states that the Ebionites, Elchasaites, and Ossaeans were vegetarian and rejected animal sacrifices.

What about the Nazoraeans? Based on statements by Jerome and Theodoret, the Ebionites and the Nazoraeans are actually the same group—using two different names. The story of the name “Nazorean” is interesting because of its relationship to the term “Nazarene” (as in “Jesus the Nazarene”) and the existence of another similarly named Jewish group, the Nasaraeans, who are also very similar to the Ebionites: vegetarian, rejecting animal sacrifices, and rejecting false texts in the scriptures. However, for now we can simply say that what we know about these other Jewish Christian groups reinforces what we know about the Ebionites and our conclusion that the Ebionites are the best and most important representatives of early Jewish Christianity.

Earlier and Later Jewish Christians

What is the relationship between these later Jewish Christians—who were around in the second, third, and fourth centuries—and the very first Jewish followers of Jesus, namely Jesus himself and his disciples? Why should we believe the later Jewish Christian version of Jesus, rather than the later orthodox, gnostic, or any other versions of Jesus?

While many people will readily admit that Jesus and his immediate followers were Jewish, they will hotly deny there was any significant relationship between these early Jewish Christians (Jesus and his first disciples) and the later Jewish Christians (the Ebionites). It’s purely a coincidence, in their view, that they shared the same religion.

No one has a problem with identifying Jesus and his followers as Jews in the first century; but, by the fourth century, those Ebionites and other Jewish Christians who *still* claim allegiance to the Jewish law, in however Christianized a form, find themselves condemned as heretics by the church and condemned to oblivion by scholars. Both Christians and scholars see a tremendous difficulty in getting from Jewish followers of Jesus in the *first* century to Jewish followers of Jesus in the *fourth* century.

This difficulty is essentially a prejudice. This is not to say there are no valid questions to be raised or that the case cannot be argued both pro and con. However, the difficulty that both scholars and ordinary Christians see in getting from early Jewish Christianity to later, fourth-century Jewish Christian Ebionites far exceeds the evidence. Curiously, no one sees problems in getting from the first century Jewish followers of Jesus to the fourth century *gentile* followers of Jesus. This is seen as something inevitable, a natural outgrowth of Jesus' teachings. In this way, the Jewishness of Jesus, universally acknowledged, is in the telling of Christian history then implicitly denied.

The reason this denial of the Jewishness of Jesus seems natural is because this is the version of Christianity that has been taught for 1900 years. The prevailing myth that Christianity has perpetuated is that Judaism rejected Jesus at the very outset. "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25), cries an angry Jewish mob, demanding Jesus' crucifixion. This myth, repeated and elaborated and embedded in Christian scripture for nearly two millennia, is also the basis for all Christian anti-Semitism: "the Jews" killed Jesus, the son of God, and therefore persecution or even (in the extreme case) a blood vendetta against Jews is justified.

Such a line of thinking of course does not exculpate the Nazis for the Holocaust by any means, as if the entire blame for the Holocaust can be put on Christian theology. But the point is, that what seems to us moderns like an easy or natural separation between Judaism and Christianity was not so easy or natural at all. This separation only occurred after "the Jews" had been demonized. The Nazis did not have to invent anti-Semitism; they found a tool ready at hand to use in oppressing and killing Jews. The separation between Judaism and Christianity is of utmost importance, not only for the understanding of the historical Jesus, but for understanding what precisely it means to be a follower of Jesus in the first place. This separation between Christianity and Judaism often seems natural to Jews as well as Christians. The very term "Jewish Christianity," even when used in a historical context, sometimes meets with resistance from Jews. "Either you are a Jew or you

are not,” is the natural response of some Jews; there is no such thing as “Jewish Christianity.” For these Jews the term is (and always was) an oxymoron.

Not only was this separation problematic in early Christianity; at the very beginning, it was unthinkable. Most scholars, when they think about the subject at all, hold some version of the view that later Ebionite Jewish Christianity was fundamentally different from “early” Jewish Christianity (when Jewish Christianity consisted of the Jewish Jesus and a few of his Jewish followers). Jesus and the apostles were Jews because, well, in those days everyone in the Jesus movement was Jewish. But then the Jews rejected Jesus and the movement he founded, while the message was successfully preached to the gentiles. Followers of Jesus, therefore, had no choice but to separate themselves from Judaism. Unfortunately, by the fourth century some of the later followers of Jesus (the Ebionites) still hadn’t gotten this message, and retreated into a reactionary form of Christianity that still held to the Jewish law.

Anyone who thinks about this for a moment can see that there are a number of problems with this view. First of all, it is apparent that Jesus in the gospels *did* hold to the Jewish law himself, in a manner quite different from that of Paul. Paul eliminated the necessity to follow the Jewish law at all, saying that “the law was our custodian until Christ came” (Galatians 3:24), and that Jesus was “abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances” (Ephesians 2:15). In contrast, Jesus declares, “think not that I have come to abolish the law,” and condemns those who deviate from even the least of the law’s demands (Matthew 5:17–19). We do not have to decide whether Jesus actually made these sweeping statements to see that there is a significant problem here; Jesus in the gospels frequently invokes the authority of the law to support his own positions.

Secondly, the views presented by the fourth-century Jewish Christian Ebionites do not at all conform to the idea of a reactionary group clinging to Jewish legalism while still trying to embrace Jesus. The Ebionites unequivocally condemned one of the central aspects of Judaism, namely the practice of animal sacrifice; and they kept this

grievance against animal sacrifice alive in their traditions long after the practice of animal sacrifice had ended when the temple in Jerusalem, the site of the sacrifices, was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. They also condemned some of the Jewish scriptures as being false texts—not part of the law of God but the creation of human scribes. These are hardly the actions of a group whose defining characteristic was Jewish legalism. Loyalty to the law of Moses did not mean blindness to everything being broadcast as part of the Jewish tradition in the first century.

I argue in this book that Jewish Christianity in the first century (Jesus and his first followers) was the direct spiritual ancestor of Jewish Christianity in the fourth century (the Ebionites). Jewish Christianity cannot be divided into a “good” phase (when it was Jesus and his followers in the first century) and a “bad” phase (when it was the supposedly conservative Ebionites in the fourth century). Jewish Christianity is a *single* continuous entity, defined by two characteristics: loyalty to the Jewish law and acceptance of Jesus as the prophet of this law. Perhaps the Jewish Christians distorted or elaborated on the tradition in some ways; but in the end it was the Jewish Christian Ebionites, and not the gentile Christians, who most faithfully preserved the traditions handed down to them by Jesus.

Conclusions

Christianity was highly fragmented in the first centuries of its existence. A central issue among the various factions was disagreement over the relationship between the followers of Jesus and Judaism. We know what the beliefs of the later Jewish Christian Ebionites were with some degree of accuracy. They believed in simple living, nonviolence, were loyal to the Jewish law once the scriptures were purged of falsifications made by those coming after Moses, and thought of Jesus as the “true prophet” predicted by Moses. Their focus was on the *content* of the law, not on rewriting Jewish theology to include Jesus as part of the trinity. Their view that the sacrificial system did not originate with Moses and was falsely attributed to Moses was unorthodox but, it should be noted,

hardly without justification—many modern scholars believe the same thing.³

The Ebionite explanation of Jesus makes the most sense in the context of history. It explains numerous things that virtually everyone agrees are part of the historical Jesus: his Jewishness, his baptism, his opposition to violence and materialism, and his death. It also explains the subsequent development of Christianity: the development of schisms in the early church, the opposition between Paul and the Jewish Christians, the impact of the Jewish revolts on Jewish Christianity, the development of gnosticism, the successes of Marcion, and the broad diversity among New Testament texts.

Jewish Christianity continued to exist for over 400 years, but was eventually condemned by other Jews and other Christians and ceased to exist. This much is a historical fact. The view of the Christian churches, that Jesus was understood better by his gentile followers than by those who actually shared his religion, is highly questionable. A new but devastatingly simple hypothesis—that Jesus was a Jew and that the Jewish followers of Jesus were his spiritual heirs—now commands our attention.