

INTRODUCTION

MOST SCHOLARS, WHETHER LIBERAL OR CONSERVATIVE, assume without argument that modern Christianity began with Jesus and moved outward to become a world religion on that basis—perhaps elaborating on or modifying the teachings somewhat, but retaining this basic structure. I believe that this view of history, and consequently most historical Jesus scholarship, is fundamentally flawed.

Even a cursory analysis of the historical evidence shows that Christianity was filled from the very start with internal controversy over basic issues. The differences between those claiming to be Christian in the first four hundred years after Jesus' birth were *greater* than at any other time in history—greater even than that today. Regardless of what view we take about Jesus, we must acknowledge and come to grips with these schisms—trying to understand all sides as best we can—before we can understand Jesus. These early Christians may not have understood Jesus, but they were closer to him than we are.

At the basis of all these schisms is the first and most divisive question in the first centuries of Christianity: What is the relationship between the followers of Jesus and Judaism? Early Christians answered this question in different ways. In broad terms, there were three schools of thought in early Christianity as to what this relationship should be:

- Jewish Christians, who wanted to retain a full link between followers of Jesus and Judaism. For the Jewish Christians, Jesus was the prophet predicted by Moses who had led the people back to the true law revealed to Moses but forgotten by the tradition.
- Gnostics who wanted a complete break between the followers of Jesus and Judaism. Many gnostics thought that the God of Jesus and the Jewish God who created the world were two different gods altogether. This led the gnostics to reject the world, because it was a botched creation of a lesser god. They believed that knowledge (“gnosis”) of the highest God, the father of Jesus, led to salvation after death in a spiritual realm independent of this world of suffering and death.
- The orthodox, who wanted a smooth transition from Judaism to Christianity. Like the gnostics, they wanted Christianity to have a fundamentally different basis from Judaism. The orthodox considered the basis of Christianity not to be the revelation of God’s law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but rather the revelation of God himself through Jesus—a revelation that superseded that law. But like the Jewish Christians, the orthodox worshiped the same God the Jews did and saw in Jewish history the prophecy of Jesus’ revelation.

All these views were differing ways of coming to grips with a fundamental problem: that Jesus was born a Jew, lived a Jew, and died a Jew. Yet in the years after Jesus, the number of gentile Christians came to far surpass the number of Jewish Christians. Christianity came to consist less and less of those who continued to acknowledge their Jewish roots by remaining loyal to the Jewish law, and more and more of those who believed they had no allegiance to the law of Moses but only to the revelation of Jesus and the church he founded. Eventually, Christianity came to regard *any* allegiance to the Jewish law, unless subsequently validated by Jesus or the church established in his name, as a heresy. This

book is a re-examination of the history of Jewish Christianity and its implications for understanding the historical Jesus.

For the Jewish Christians, Jesus was a loyal Jew who preached the law given to Moses; but upon examining this law, Jesus reached radical conclusions. To the Jewish Christians, it was Jesus' ethics of simple living and nonviolence, rather than a new theology, that distinguished him and his followers from other Jews. They believed that Jesus' preaching was first and foremost about simple living, pacifism, and vegetarianism and that he never intended to create a new religion separate from Judaism. I believe that the Jewish Christians understood Jesus better than any of the gentile Christian groups that are the spiritual ancestors of modern Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches.

History has given the Jewish Christians an unusually bad press. Paul portrayed them as narrow-minded, the later church condemned them as heretics, and modern scholars have ignored them. These assessments, however, are not justified. Jesus lived and died a Jew; most of those who heard his message were Jewish; the initial leadership of the church was Jewish; Jewish Christianity is of the highest importance in understanding Jesus. When the larger gentile Christian church drove out Jewish Christianity, I will argue, it also lost the core of Jesus' teachings. The values of simple living and nonviolence became increasingly marginalized in a church that came to accept the very materialism and violence against which Jesus had protested.

Modern Christianity, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, has thus misunderstood the message of Jesus. By the fourth century, the Nicene Creed had stripped simple living and nonviolence from the center of the message of Jesus altogether. In the place of Jesus' new way of living was a complex and convoluted Trinitarian theology that spoke of the virgin birth, of rising from the dead, and of the final judgment, but nowhere of the message of Jesus. Instead of a call to change our lives and our relationship to God and the world we have an all-powerful Messiah without a cause.

Understanding Jesus' message is as important for the modern world as for the historian. Many today are concerned about the environmental

crisis and the pillaging of the earth's resources by rampant consumerism, the spiral of escalating violence, the victimization of the world's poor, and the slaughter of animals for food. Perhaps Jesus' message of simple living and nonviolence is relevant for today's world—even though it has been lost from most of modern Christianity.