

The Making of a Tradition: Jewish Christianity

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Some say it cannot exist, but it does. Jewish Christianity exists. The movement of Jews who accept the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and assert their right to live as Jews even seems to be growing. Richard Harvey, one of the leading figures of British Jewish Christian tradition, tells his reader an anecdote in his autobiography. When he went to visit a synagogue, the rabbi asked him his religious background, and when he said that he was a Jewish Christian, he was most amused to be told "I'm sorry, you don't exist."

Any study about contemporary Jewish Christianity should not be intended as an addition to the already existing battery of theories concerning the rise or emergence of new religious movements. In other words what is important in studying a religious movement, in our case Jewish Christianity, is not what is typical or atypical about contemporary Jewish Christianity vis-à-vis other religious movements. On the other hand, one can admit that it can be typical of the lot. If there is any one shortcoming in works on the "new" religious movements, it is their tendency to treat the members of these groups as one homogeneous lump of frustrated humanity. All of these criticisms have been levelled by Jewish sociologists and historians about Jewish Christians.¹ One needs to take the movement in its own universe, and try to see what it creates and responds to for its members or followers. Our concern therefore has been with the "insides" of this religious group/movement: how religious ideas and behavior patterns become established in members' lives, how people change as a result of their participation in the movement, and how social and religious criteria determine status within the group. Since our research is about a living movement rather than just about doctrine or theology, the overall aim has been to explore one

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¹ Bernard Zevi Sobel, *Hebrew Christianity-The Thirteenth Tribe*, (Wiley-Interscience, New York; London, 1974), p. 315.

Supporting material

century of the Jewish Christian movement which has emerged in the British socio-religious scene through "small group formation" in order to re-figure the past (early Jewish Christianity) and re-construct it as a tradition to suit their current purposes. Therefore it attempts to see their effort to establish themselves as "a continuing tradition from the past" in the light of *concept of tradition*.

Modern Study of Early Jewish Christianity

One can say that modern study of Jewish Christianity began with F.C. Baur in 1830. We know little of the history of the purely Jewish-Christian Church of the first decade, save that it grew rapidly in Syria and that all its members were devoted Jews. But for all its obscurity to us, this seems to be the vital creative period of Christian history. As C. Rowland points out in his *Christian Origins*,² we know from other early Christian sources that Jewish Christianity had a significant life of its own for a considerable period.

Despite the obscure beginning, Harnack, for example, said that the original Church of Jerusalem was Jewish Christian and that in Palestine it was a majority group. If we compare Harnack with Baur, we see that both apply the name "Jewish Christian" to the same group of Christians. Harnack, however, accepted more than one Jewish-Christian community (Ebionites, Nazarenes, Elchasaite). Jewish Christianity is, to be sure, a complex thing. It is found both in a Palestinian as well as a Hellenistic environment and was subject to various influences. According to D.G. Dix, the Jewish-Christian church formulated neither the doctrine of the Trinity, nor that of the Incarnation. In another direction, too,

that purely Jewish Christian first decade made all the difference to the future. Christianity emerged upon the world not as a Clergy administering rites without doctrine to any man they could attract, like the oriental cults; nor as a bundle of intellectual opinions for discussion, like Greek philosophy.³

It presented itself primarily as a life ("The Way") — a life which was divinely "ordered" in all aspects, religious, moral, and social, a life which could only be lived in its reality in "Covenant" with God. This was what the early Christians, namely Jewish Christians, believed in. The "New Covenant" was "in the Messiah." What distinguished Jewish Christians from and amid their fellows was that "in the Messiah Jesus" they were now in his "New Covenant" with God, and the old Israel was not. Despite the historical fact that early Jewish Christians were the followers of the disciples of Jesus, they were marginalized as heretics by the later Pauline churches. According to historical sources, a continuing anti-Pauline

² C. Rowland, *Christian Origins: An Account of the Setting and Character of the Most Important Messianic Sect of Judaism*, (1985), p. 199.

³ Dom Gregory Dix, *Jew and Greek*, (1953), p. 28.

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