

Seeing the Emergence of Christianity Anew in Context

Lenten Studies, March 14, 2007, #3.

Pastor Alan Lai

(1) The Conventional Account of Christian Origins and its Corollaries

God, creator of all life, called the Jewish people to be his people, making a covenant with them that they might be a “light to the nations.” Yet they failed to keep this covenant faithfully, so God promised to send them messiah. Jesus, the long-awaited messiah foretold by the prophets, preached a gospel of love and freedom that transcended the confines of the Law, especially as interpreted by the Pharisees. He was crucified at Jewish hands because they rejected his message and denied his divinity. Thus God “spoke to our ancestors,” as the writer of Hebrews puts it, “in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” (1:1).

So Christianity, the religion of Jesus, not only originated in Judaism but fulfilled it. The divinity of Christ was the defining issue, the basis for the break with the synagogue. By 70 A.D. the two were definable religions, clearly differentiated from each other. Thus, they went their separate ways, with Christianity flourishing in the Roman Empire, while Judaism diminished in importance.

Corollaries:

- The Jews did not correctly understand the prophecies about the messiah. Expecting a royal, glorious messiah, they could not recognize Jesus as messiah.
- Postexilic Judaism in the sixth century B.C. was legalistic, with undue emphasis on laws of purity and with minute regulations about such primitive practices as animal sacrifice.
- The Jews did not take to heart the warnings of their prophets to obey the covenant; their covenant is therefore abrogated.
- The Pharisees, source of so much opposition to Jesus, represented the epitome of legalism.

(2) An Alternative Account of Christian Origins

God reveals the Divine Presence in “many and various ways” (see Hebrews 1) to all peoples. In the distant recess of history – nearly four thousand years ago – the Holy One entered into covenant with the Jewish people, and this covenant endures. The people Israel lives.

At the heart of the covenant is Torah, the way of life that forms a people. How one lives Torah, however, was (and continues to be) vigorously discussed, and diverse interpretations arose, as they would in any community of fifth with authoritative texts. In particular, we now know, thanks to biblical scholarship, that “second Temple” Judaism – from the rebuilding of the Temple after the return from Exile [ca. 520 B.C.E.] to its destruction by the Romans in 70 C.E. – was characterized by disparate and, at times, contentious “schools” of interpretation. Thus, we might appropriately speak of second Temple “Judaisms.”

This diversity suggests the importance of placing the teachings of Jesus and the early church in the matrix of “Judaisms.” We cannot neatly place Jesus within any single “Judaism.” For instance, while the reformist cast of his teaching bears similarities to the Pharisees, some of his teaching shows a semblance to aspects of Essene thought, such as the apocalyptic cast of some of his pronouncements. We simply do not know enough first-century Palestinian Judaism to situate Jesus assuredly vis-à-vis his contemporaries. We can at least point to what seems characteristic: his teaching on love of enemies, a proclivity toward

nonviolence, compassion for the marginal and oppressed, an intimate relation with God, emphasis on foot washing and service. Jesus preached the nearness of God's reign, and thus relativized all human institutions, whether Roman rule of the Temple.

Jesus attracted a number of men and women as disciples, and their commitment to following him took on new power after testified to "seeing" him after his crucifixion. Their testimony that God had raised Jesus from the dead and that God had poured out the spirit of Jesus on their community emboldened them to go on. Having found in Jesus' teaching and in the events of the passion, death, and resurrection a startling and definitive revelation of God, they drew creatively from the wellsprings of Judaism in their teaching and preaching.

The resources of a rich heritage provided various images by which they expressed what they believed God had done in Jesus and was doing among them. Jesus was God's anointed, God's word and wisdom made flesh. A prophet even greater than Moses, he embodied Torah. As one who had preached the reign of the sovereign God, he was the new David.

In their life together, the disciples layered their prayers (the *shema*, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone") and practices (worship in the Temple) with that we've come to call "Christian" prayers, hymns (the Lord's Prayer, the "Magnificat"), and practices (breaking bread, teaching the [Jewish] Scriptures, sharing goods in common). God's covenant was made new among them, and God's Spirit animated them, breathing life into the dead bones of their doubt and fear.

Thus, his Jewish believers added new dimensions to deeply rooted terms, titles, and practices. While their interpretations may have not convinced other Jews, they did not transgress the boundaries of Judaism.

As many Gentiles, however, became followers of Jesus, the religious practices that had maintained the community's boundaries – circumcision, dietary laws, the role of the Temple – were passionately disputed among the believers-in-Jesus. The conflict about what it meant to be "one in Christ Jesus" exacerbated tensions, both within the community of Jesus' followers (e.g., Paul versus Peter [Gal. 2:11-14]) and with other Jews (e.g., the polemical denunciation of the Pharisees [Matt 23: 1-36]).

Moreover, in certain places (such as Rome in the 60s), the early community was at odds with the Empire. Jesus had been crucified as a common criminal by Rome's ruler in Palestine – Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea. Thus his followers needed to legitimize themselves vis-à-vis the imperial power, and to gain respectability for their fledgling movement. Accordingly, Second Testament (New Testament) texts to diminish Roman culpability for the death of Jesus.

The communities that eventually became "Christianity" separated neither rapidly nor painlessly from Judaism and continued to have strained relations with Rome, including periods of persecution. In fact, the "partings of the ways" was quite prolonged, and the boundaries between the two traditions were fluid in some regions until the fourth or fifth centuries – and even later. The separation was characterized by Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions, most notably invective, the fine art of denouncing one's opponents. Early church writers, apologists for their beliefs as a religious minority without licit status in the Roman Empire, continued and intensified the polemics of the Second Testament.

In the late fourth century, Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. Yet the polemics of its formative period left an open wound of anti-Judaism in the telling of its own origins – a wound that has only begun to heal in the late twentieth century.

Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), 77-85.