



DISCOVERING OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

*Our beliefs must be large enough to include all of the FACTS;
open enough to be examined and tested; flexible enough to change
when new facts are discovered or error is found.*

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The Evidence of the Ebionites

*Comments and
Questions for your
Consideration*

(1) How would the presence of members who continued to participate in Temple sacrificial activities & other Jewish rituals affect your understanding of Christian history?

(2) Could the presence of different Gospels be evidence of the variety of beliefs that existed in the first few centuries of Christian history?

(3) How do you feel that New Testament authors presented the Jewish people? Do you think they were cast in a negative light?

[**INTRODUCTION:** I recently came across an article, *The Evidence of the Ebionites*, abridged from *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*, Hyam Maccoby. New York: Harper & Row, 1987. It contains a great deal of information which I think you will find very interesting. Jim Myers]

Scholars have not been able to deny that the Jerusalem Church, under the leadership of James, consisted of practicing Jews, loyal to the Torah, but they have attempted to explain this fact by the concept of 're-Judaization', i.e. a tendency to slip back into Judaism, despite the contrary teaching of Jesus. We have seen that attempts to by-pass the Jerusalem Nazarenes by constructing a different tradition linking Jesus to Paul (through the 'Hellenists' and Stephen) fail under examination. Similarly, scholars have attempted to explain away all the evidence in the Gospels that Jesus himself was a loyal adherent of the Torah by the same concept of 're-Judaization': when, for example, Jesus is represented in Matthew as saying, 'If any man therefore sets aside even the least of the Law's demands, and teaches others to do the same, he will have the lowest place in the kingdom of Heaven, whereas anyone who keeps the Law and teaches others so, will stand high in the kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 5:19), this is explained as not something that Jesus said, but something that was inserted into the text of Matthew by a 're-Judaizer'. Since the Gospel of Matthew contains quite a number of such sayings, the Gospel as a whole has been characterized as a re-Judaizing Gospel, written specifically for a Jewish Christian community.

Several scholars, however, in recent years, have come to see that this position is untenable. For the main tendency and standpoint of the Gospel of Matthew is far from supporting the continuing validity of Judaism or of the Jews as the chosen people of God. Passages such as the parable of the vineyard (Matthew 21: 33-43) preach the incorrigible sinfulness of the Jews and their supersession by the Gentiles. It is Matthew that stresses, perhaps more than any other Gospel, the alleged curse that has come upon the Jews because of their crime of deicide: e.g. Matthew 23: 33-6, 'on you will fall the guilt of all the innocent blood spilt on the ground', and Matthew 27: 26, "His blood be on us, and on our children." 'Such anathematization of the Jews is hardly consistent with loyalty to the Torah, which declares the Jews to be God's priestly nation for ever. No Jewish Christian community would assent to the statements quoted.

Consequently, if the Gospel of Matthew contains assertions by Jesus about the validity of the Torah, this is strong evidence that Jesus actually made these assertions, for only a persistent and unquenchable tradition that Jesus said these things would have induced the author of the Gospel to include such recalcitrant material, going against the grain of his own narrative and standpoint.

(4) How would the understanding that Jesus was an adherent of the Torah affect the creation of a New Testament?

If Jesus himself was an adherent of the Torah, there was no need for re-Judaization on the part of the Nazarenes in Jerusalem, who were simply continuing the attitudes of Jesus. But, in any case, several scholars have now come to think that the loyalty of the Jerusalem movement to the Torah is itself strong evidence that Jesus was similarly loyal. It is, after all, implausible, to say the least, that the close followers of Jesus, his companions during his lifetime, led by his brother, should have so misunderstood him that they reversed his views immediately after his death. The 'stupidity' motif characterizing the disciples in the Gospels is best understood as a Pauline attempt to explain away the attachment of the 'Jerusalem Church' to Judaism, rather than as historical obtuseness. . . .

(5) What was Paul's relationship with the men that Jesus hand picked during his lifetime and appointed as leaders of his Movement? Read Galatians 1 & 2 and Acts 10 - 15.

We know of a number of Jewish Christian groups or sects which existed in the first four centuries of the Christian era, the best known being the Ebionites. The evidence about these groups is scanty and sometimes contradictory; but our understanding of Jewish Christianity may be furthered by a willingness to criticize the assumption that they were essentially and invariably re-Judaizing sects, falling away from Pauline Christianity and 'relapsing' into Judaism. It may well be that some, at least, of these groups were genuine historical continuations of the Nazarene community led by James and Peter, and were thus closer in spirit to Jesus than the official Catholic Church based on the teachings of Paul. If so, we may be inclined to listen to what they had to say about the background and life of Paul with more attention, since they may have had access, through their unbroken tradition, with the origins of the Christian religion and its earliest conflicts.

(6) What is Paul's claim of authority based on? How does it compare to that of James, Peter & John?

(7) Does the traditional history of the early years of Christianity line-up with the accounts presented in the New Testament?

The 'Jerusalem Church' itself has a sad history. This has been obscured by the Church legend . . . When the Jews were broken by the Romans and their Temple destroyed in AD 70, the Jewish Christians shared in the horrors of the defeat, and the Jerusalem Nazarenes were dispersed to Caesarea and other cities, even as far as Alexandria in Egypt. Its power and influence as the Mother Church and centre of the Jesus movement was ended; and the Pauline Christian movement, which up to AD 66 had been struggling to survive against the strong disapproval of Jerusalem, now began to make great headway. It was not until nearly seventy years later that a Christian Church was reconstituted in Jerusalem, after the city had been devastated by the Romans for the second time (after the Bar Kokhba revolt) and rebuilt as a Gentile city called Aelia Capitolina. This new Christian Church had no continuity with the early 'Jerusalem Church' ed by James. Its members were Gentiles, as Eusebius testifies, and its doctrines were those of Pauline Christianity. It attempted, however, to claim continuity with the early 'Jerusalem Church', in accordance with the Pauline policy (evinced in the New Testament book of Acts) of denying the rift between Paul and the Jerusalem elders. (SOURCE: <http://ebionite.tripod.com/mac15.htm>)

(8) Have you read other ancient accounts from this period that were not included in the Christian Bible?

(9) Why is it important for Pauline Christianity to find a connection to the historical Jesus and his movement?

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