ON TREES, WAVES, AND CYTOKINESIS:
SHifting PARAdIGMS IN EARLY (AND MODERN)
JEWISH–CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

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The emergence of Christianity as a new religion and Jewish–Christian relations in late antiquity have been a particularly active field of research in recent years with many innovative contributions of major scholars. According to the traditional view, Christianity evolved from a Jewish sect to an independent religion quite quickly, at the latest around the Bar Kokhba revolt, a point after which all relations between the two entities were almost exclusively hostile. Intermediate groups such as Jewish Christians quickly decreased numerically and became marginalized as sectarian, leaving two mutually opposed entities, Judaism vs. Christianity (for an excellent review of the history of research, see Reed and Becker 2003).

The challenge to the old pattern posed by scholars such as Daniel Boyarin (1999, 2004), John Gager (1992, 2000), Seth Schwartz (2001), Marcel Simon (1948, ET: 1986), Israel Yuval (2000, ET: 2006), and many contributors to the volume The Ways That Never Parted (Becker and Reed, eds. 2003) is slowly but steadily causing a major shift in the scholarly perspective on this crucial period, yet a new consensus has still to emerge. Doubtless the future picture will have more colors as the variegation among the early forms of Judaism and Christianity is considered more seriously. Several attempts have been launched to see not only Jesus but also Paul as completely embedded in ancient Judaism without the vision of a new religion on its way (e.g. Gager 2000). Jewish Christianity is seen as an influential player in periods much later than the second century. Many favor the view of a Jewish–Christian continuum. The parting of the ways and the establishment of Christianity as an entity separate from Judaism are removed from the first and the second generation, in the most extreme visions by up to two centuries to the Constantinian period when the alliance of Christianity and imperial power is forged (Boyarin 1999, 2004).
Marcel Simon’s classic work has to be credited for having laid much of the foundations of the current changes by showing the attraction of Judaism in the second to fourth centuries (1948, ET: 1986). His conception of Judaism, however, was still somewhat that of a fossilized unchanging religion (Baumgarten 1999). Fresh perspectives are proposed e.g. by Seth Schwartz (2001), who sees the success of rabbinic Judaism as the result of a re Judaizing reaction imposed by Christianity, and by Israel Yuval (2000), who argues for comprehensive Christian influence on the formulation of ancient Jewish ritual identity. While all these approaches have been met with varying degrees of critique and support, it is clear that the old paradigm is on its way to being replaced by a new one whose contours are currently in the making.

Gerard Rouwhorst (2002) has distinguished three successive phases in the history of the comparative study of Christian and Jewish liturgy that roughly fit the phases in the study of Jewish–Christian relations in late antiquity, too. In the first stage, scholars emphasized the dissimilarities and perceived the relationship between the two liturgical traditions mainly as antithesis. In the second stage, the common elements were underscored and the relation was depicted as mother and daughter. In the current third stage, both are seen as twins, simultaneous offshoots from the common ancestor Second Temple Judaism.

The changing relations between Jews and Christians in the modern Western world may play a role in this paradigm shift. That our contemporary society and the way we want it to be influences our vision and revision of the history of the ancient world becomes at least explicit in Boyarin’s words: ‘The newly developing perspective on Judaism and Christianity as intertwining cultures is thus dependent on a developing climate of opinion or even Zeitgeist’ (1999, 8). It seems to me that this zeitgeist blows particularly strong in the United States of America where such a (re)vision of the history of ancient Judaism and Christianity corroborates the ideology and self-perception of a society that understands itself (at least partially) as Judeo-Christian. A statement by Robert Kraft equally reminds us of present issues behind our reconstruction of this issue in the past: ‘If Judaism and Christianity were not always mutually exclusive by definition, perhaps some sort of contemporary rapprochement can be recreated with reference to the historical developments; history provides basic justification for trying to reset the clock to a more favorable time and situation’ (2003, 93). It is important to be aware of the possibility of such ideological motivations in order to double-check one’s own bias.