THE PHENOMENON OF EARLY JEWISH-CHRISTIANITY: REALITY OR SCHOLARLY INVENTION?

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"Jewish-Christianity" and "Judaean-Christianity" are synonymous terms used in modern scholarship to refer to a supposed religious phenomenon which spans the period from the very beginnings of Christianity to some time in the fifth century, when it is perceived to be extinct. Jewish-Christians are generally understood to have been marginalised, accepted neither by church nor by synagogue, because they intended to be both Jewish and Christian at one and the same time. The multiple facets of Jewish-Christianity render it a broad category, and in recent years many have attempted to define its various subgroups somewhat differently. Despite the resulting terminological chaos, it is still considered a useful umbrella term to cover a variety of groups, from Jews who believed in Christ in the first century to sectarian groups in the fourth century. However, does the generalised use of the term "Jewish-Christianity" obscure historical realities rather than illuminate them?

It is over thirty years since Jean Daniélou published his analysis of the theology of Jewish-Christianity. While his work was based on texts, it was not founded on any writings within the New Testament canon. Moreover, in defining "Jewish-Christianity", Daniélou stressed that it manifested itself in a type of thought which was expressed in forms borrowed from Judaism. The main criteria he used to establish a piece of literature as Jewish-Christian were: a date prior to the middle of the second century; a literary genre popular in Judaism; and the presence of ideas, notably those of apocalyptic literature, which he thought characteristic of Jewish-Christianity. Since it was not necessary to apply all criteria simultaneously, Daniélou was able to classify a text as Jewish-Christian simply on the basis that it showed, for example, liberty in its use of Biblical citations, an allegorical exegesis and an angelomorphic Christology. As R.A. Kraft has pointed out, this approach was
undertaken without consideration of whether any historical groups consciously adhered to such a theology. Daniélou’s argument was circular: the theology became the evidence for positing the existence of historical groups, while the groups’ existence became the rationale for introducing the theology. 7

The idea of a somehow ‘Jewish’ Christianity standing apart from a Gentile Church originated in the concepts of the Tübingen school, a hundred and sixty years ago. F.C. Baur saw a grave conflict between a ‘Jewish’ Christianity, led by Peter, and a Gentile Christianity, led by Paul, standing behind the gloss of Acts. 8 Already in 1886, W.A. Hilgenfeld modified Baur by pointing out the varieties of thought among the Urapostel. 9 Indeed, Baur’s determination of Jewish and Gentile Christianity has long been recognised as being too simplistic a model, but it is still considered useful to hold on to the concept of these two streams. However, as R.E. Brown has argued, Jewish culture and Hellenistic culture were not mutually exclusive milieux, and consequently a distinction between a Jewish and a Gentile Christianity on cultural, or even theological, terms is a false one. 10 The beliefs and practices of Jews within the Church would have varied as much as did Christian Gentiles’ beliefs and practices, and there is no reason to doubt that both ethnic groups participated in the full spectrum of possible attitudes. There is no sure way of dividing the Christian Jews from the Gentiles on theological terms. Simply in regard to the Jewish law, some Jews and their Gentile converts appear to have steadfastly followed Jewish praxis, the dāt mōsheh vihūdī (m. Ket. 7,6): Sabbath observance, customs, festivals, food laws, circumcision of sons (following the ‘circumcision party’); other Jews and their Gentile converts rejected most Jewish praxis as being obsolete under the new covenant (Paul); still more stood somewhere in between the two positions (Peter and James).

It must surely be recognised that if Jewish-Christianity were to be defined as encompassing all Jews who were also Christians, then the term would be meaningless. 11 For it to have any real meaning, the term must refer not only to ethnic Jews but those who, with their Gentile converts, upheld the praxis of Judaism. It is perhaps unnecessary to strain a point arguing a case for a hyphen, but technically the term ‘Jewish-Christianity’, if it is used as a meaningful concept, must imply one, even if at times the hyphen is omitted. It is bi-religious rather than ethnico-religious in application. Judaism and Christianity as two distinct