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Expulsion from the Synagogue: Inclusion and Exclusion in 2nd Century Judaism

The cradle of Christianity is in 1st century Judaism, in the land of Israel. This is common knowledge. Yet no-one can tell with confidence when the singular point in time was when the first group of Jews became Christians.

The Scriptures tell us that the gospel of Jesus' emissary and his divinity, that had been concealed in the prophecies of the Old Testament, was hidden throughout his life time in order to be revealed only to his disciples at the end of his mission on earth and to be given to the entire human race at the time of his death on the cross and his resurrection after 3 days in the grave.

Fifty days later, the Acts of the Apostles tells us, the Holy Ghost descended on Peter and the disciples, and the days of the Christian Church began.

The 1st Century of the Common Era was a disastrous period in Judea. Continuous clashes between Jewish zealots and the Roman authorities ended in the Great Rebellion against Rome and the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Messianic expectations evolved based on prophetic ideas, and charismatic figures appeared and attracted many desperate followers. For the Romans it was a dangerous phenomenon that needed to be suppressed. We know from the evidence of Josephus Flavius that many of these figures were caught and executed. Jesus might very well have been one of them.

Christianity evolved, in stages, from within Judaism. We can confidently assume that the first stage occurred at a time immediate following the crucifixion. The loyal followers of Jesus, who witnessed his death on the cross, were perhaps divided into 2 groups after his execution. One group might have been expecting a glorious and vindicting appearance after the crucifixion. They would have despaired when this heavenly scene never came to pass and the realization dawned on them that their charismatic leader was dead on the cross. The other group, the more hard-core kernel of his followers was, from that point in history, seeking a meaning for this death. From this moment on, this, the nucleus of Christianity, had become a Jewish movement concerned with exegesis and the commentary of events in order to explain the divine meaning of Jesus' death; the true gospel and Christ's mission. His death, instead of being seen as a failure, was turned into a success by his followers and spreading the word of Christ became their calling.

From a scholarly point of view there is a black hole from the time of the crucifixion until the composition of the first Christian writings, the earliest letters of Paul. We have no idea how this little sect of messianic Jews evolved within 1st century Judaism. We can assume that at the beginning this group had as its base the following characteristics: it was voluntary – after conversion (conversion in those days meaning simply the turning of the heart). It was an elitistic, group with members enjoying equality once within. Only much later would this sect transform itself into the Church – an organized religious body, with a hierarchy, whose membership was heterogenous and open to all. The link missing is how this little sect evolved into the overall concept and practice, known as The Church.

The primitive church, which was almost totally rejected by the Jews of that time, had an alluring appeal to those who were nicknamed "God Fearers". These

were Hellenistic proselytes that converted to Judaism. The Judaism of that time offered attractive beliefs – monotheism, antiquity (which was a great virtue), social justice and one day of rest after six days of work. On the other hand, Judaism came with repulsive ideas like: commandments, ethnical and tribal responsibilities, and a history of slavery as recorded in the Bible.

The dilemma of the disciples of Jesus back then was: if detachment from Judaism and its problems was the right path. That path would mean the loss of the claim to be part of an antique religion. In addition, the Biblical based narrative would lose its significance. So, the primitive church offered the Hellenistic proselytes a new Judaism – one which allowed them to maintain its antiquity but without its inappropriate and unattractive counter history.

The great master of this plan was Paul. Paul's theology was based on the Old Testament - for the New Testament could have no right to existence without its being anchored in the Old. Grace was substituted for Law, and the holy spirit replaced the flesh of the traditional Jewish approach. An example of this new theology is Paul's exegesis to the commandment of the circumcision: On one hand he could not ignore the rule of the Torah regarding circumcision; On the other hand circumcision was rejected by the Gentiles (pagan castration was forbidden by the Roman law). His solution was genius: "circumcision [is that] of the heart". The result: Paul's mission to convert the God fearers first, and later the Gentiles, succeeded beyond what was imaginable

Yet the apostolic mission to bring the Jews into the fold had failed. The solution to this contradictory situation was that years later Christianity defined itself as "verus Israel" – meaning the True Israel.

Now what about the other side, the parent religion – Judaism? What was happening to Judaism during this period and how it confronted this deviation which was developing within.

The first Christians were Jews. We don't know how and where the first consolidated messianic group acted or what they named themselves. There are a few assumptions: Galileans – because they gathered in the Galilee; Nazarenes – after Jesus of Nazareth. The Biblical evidence tells us about a community of 3000 believers who lived in Jerusalem but left it for Damascus after the Great Rebellion against Rome. Historians, however, are doubtful about this information. Research has proven that during the 1st century the vast majority of Christians were Jews, both in Palestine and in the Jewish Diaspora. These Christianized Jews remained Jewish in their way of life. They observed the laws, kept the custom of circumcision, used ritual slaughtering for their food and went to the synagogue like the rest of the Jews.

However, Judaism was also in the midst of a climactic reformation. It was a time when the country was forging a new identity out of the ruins of the Great Revolt. In the aftermath of that disastrous rebellion, the trauma of failure and the Temple's destruction could have caused the imminent collapse of Judaic values. The Sages were able to avert further disaster by channeling the changing values of their time and maneuvered Judaism so it would be able to work within this new reality. This new reality included the heightened challenge presented by the new Christianity as well.

The Jewish struggle to adapt itself and form a new identity is repeated historically: for example, 700 years earlier, Zerubabel and Joshua, both headed the returned Jews towards Judea after their Exile from Babylon. They faced the challenge of rebuilding Judaism after God's punishment of exile. Recorded information tells us which measures were taken by the leaders of the returning Jews to their homeland. One of these decisions regarded the question of whether to include the 'Samaritans' who had

remained in the country from the time of the Assirian exile and had formed a renewed Jewish community. This question arose when these Samaritans asked the Jewish leaders if they could take part in the rebuilding of the Temple. Sharing this task with them, the Jewish leaders knew, would be equal to a silent acceptance of the 'Samaritans' as a part of the Jewish people. The Bible describes this episode as follows: "When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of the king of Assyria, who brought us here. But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us."

Their successor, Ezra the Scribe, went even further. Ezra says: "[After these things had been done,] the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the **holy (seed) race** with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness." (Ezra 9:2) The result of this was that Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful; you have married foreign women, adding to Israel's guilt. Now make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives" (Ezra 10:10).

Ezra's rulings and acts should be understood in the Biblical conceptual context, that the exiles and other disasters were God's reaction to the sinful way of life of the Jews in the First Temple period. Thus the [ethnic] purity of the people in that time was measured in how much they avoided mingling not only with the foreign peoples, but also with others' gods and idols.

No doubt that this Biblical example stood in the fore thoughts of the Jewish leaders at the end of the first century CE. Their objective, re-creating a people without a temple, led them to some fateful decisions which were aimed not only at striving for a new identity, but also – with Ezra's inspiration – to erect this new identity held high atop pillars of purity. People would obey the Torah's commandments according to their new exegesis and it would be adapted to life under the Roman Empire's rule.

As mentioned earlier, the road to consolidating the new identity had to be paved through the Christian challenge – and to be more exact in this context, it meant the Jewish-Christian way of life. Pagan-Hellenistic proselytes, were less of a concern at that point.

One of the steps of building a new identity in a Temple-less Jewish community was to transfer the focus of the Jewish rituals to liturgy. The synagogue became the center of Jewish life. The basic and most urgent need was to construct a set of prayers which would function as the leading liturgy in the synagogues, and as such, should contain not only apply to God for personal needs, but also reflect the the contemporary national hopes. This first organized set of prayers still exists today, and is called "The Eighteen Benedictions".

The twelfth benediction is called "the Blessing for the Heretics, and it says:

"For the heretics let there be no hope, and the kingdom of arrogance shall perish in a moment, bless are thou, God who humbles the arrogant".

The Babylonian Talmud, the source which brings us the story of the construction of this prayer raises the question of: "Why a blessing for the heretics was constructed", and it is answered in a sophisticated way: " If a reader [who recites the prayer on the stand] makes a mistake in any of the other benedictions, they do not remove him [from the stand], but if in the benediction for the heretics, he is removed, because we suspect him of being a heretic. In this case, a heretic means a Jew who has converted to Christianity. This heretic, according to the writers of this Talmudic episode, would not want to curse himself, so he would not recite the blessing for the heretics, or he would try to corrupt the exact version by reciting it with deliberate mistakes.

This shows us that those assembled in the service needed to be extremely attentive. If a reader made a mistake in reciting this specific blessing, he would repeat it more carefully. If he erred again, his religious identity was clear.

From this episode we learn that these Christianized Jews never ceased their participation in the daily service in the synagogue for they considered themselves Jews. Expulsion from the synagogue was the most incisive way of excluding them from the Jewish rabbinical society.

Another explicit piece of evidence comes from the Christian scriptures. In Matthew 10: 16-17, Jesus warns his disciples: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues". The synagogue, according to Jesus himself, is the center of the stage in the struggle between Jews and Christians in the early period of Christianity. Furthermore, in the Gospel according to John (16:2), Jesus speaks even more clearly on this point: "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yes, the time comes, that whoever kills you will think that he does God service". And the gospel goes even further: "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess [him], lest they should be put out of the synagogue". The evidence from Christian writings then, closes the circle. Expulsion from the synagogue was the poignant means of excluding the Jews who believed in Jesus as messiah from the main stream society, whilst this kind of Jew preferred to play an influential part in this community.

I will conclude this presentation by reiterating the following points:

1. The first Christians were Jews, and it was the decision of the early Church not to cut their roots in the Old Testament but to present themselves as the true Israel.
2. As such, they didn't see themselves as founders of a new religion, but as having a new (or true) interpretation of the Old Testament.
3. Their wish was not only to be an integral part of the Jewish society, but also to take a leading part in it.
4. The mainstream Jewish approach was that of rejection. This attitude was clearly visible by various methods leading to bans and restrictions. The most important of them was the recital of the blessing for the Heretics as an important means of expelling them from the synagogues, which meant ostracizing them totally from the Jewish community and its people.