

"Jewish Christianity" Session entitled, "Rethinking the Category Jewish Christianity" (SBL Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, Nov. 19, 2005)

How The Label "Jewish Christianity" Limits Investigation of the Category We Seek to Understand: A Response to Papers by Jerry Sumney, Anders Runesson, and Magnus Zetterholm

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I am grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this program unit and respond to these three papers. I have learned from them, even where I disagree. The insights they offer are many, and my brief response cannot begin to do them justice. As they make plain, there is much more at stake for Christian identity than might be expected of an historical discussion of an ancient religious group (or groups) of Jews who believed in Jesus Christ. There is much at stake not only for Christian views of Judaism, in which these matters play a role. There are implications for Jewish conceptions of early Christianity, and thus, of its core ideals and foundational relationship with the Jewishness it is so often characterized as seeking to escape. For Jewish Christianity as usually constructed has been understood to represent the perpetuation of Jewishness within the earliest groups of Christ-believers because of their Jewish background and ideology and thus, from the later Christian interpreters' different ideological mindset as a result of inertia, of lack of insight, of irrational clinging to enslaving laws and customs of a former age. However, it would inevitably become de-Judaized with maturity into the ideals of Christian freedom from these laws and customs, because that is where proper Christian theology ineluctably led, even if that outcome was not recognized initially by its Jewish founders, or the one who was the object of its adoration, because of their native parochialism.

1. Jerry Sumney offers a very sophisticated methodological paper, which is to be expected. I want to be picky with Jerry's argument in order to try to show that there are perspectives shaping his approach that may remain undetected, or if recognized, that have not perhaps been as plainly articulated as they should be for the role they play in

the conclusions he reaches, and how some of them could be undermined by his own methodological insights along the way.

Jerry writes: "In [2 Cor] 11:21b-23, Paul recites a list of qualifications that his rivals claim. They claim to be 'Hebrews,' 'Israelites,' 'descendants of Abraham,' and 'servants of Christ.' Paul asserts that he can match or better each claim. Whatever differences in nuance these first three somewhat synonymous terms may have, their basic point is that they emphasize these teachers' Jewish identity...."

Jerry's language implies a Jewish/not-Jewish line around which the *emphasis* turns. But is it not the case that each of these labels instead *assumes* Jewish identity, and highlights certain aspects of it? Paul claims each of these labels for himself. So is the competition between groups identified primarily in some way other than by their Jewishness or by how each claims to be Jewish, or is it between Jewish groups about which one is more entitled to claim proper expression of these particular Jewish identity traits?

If Paul's supposed rivals in Corinth are standing on their Jewish authority and this is supposed by them and Paul to be in itself influential among the Corinthians, then does this not presuppose that they are regarded as and regarded themselves to be a part of Judaism, or of a Judaism, if you prefer? In other words, rather than an appeal to Jewish versus something else, their appeal (based on mirror-reading of Paul's assertions, with Jerry) is to specific aspects of Jewishness that Paul wishes to dispute, perhaps that they disputed first. It is not to Jewishness as the difference per se, as if Paul or they could represent something besides aspects of Jewishness, as if standing outside of Judaism. Does the conflict turn around inter-Christian dynamics, with the difference being whether one or the other is entitled to claim Jewishness? Or is the issue at dispute being approached in rhetoric that betrays inter- or (better) intra-Jewish dynamics, with the conflict between and among Christ-believers and perhaps including non-Christ-believing Jews as well, about the faithfulness of their expressions of Jewishness at work in ways that are esteemed by them to be fundamental to the authority they thereby claim?

In keeping with his approach to the above matter, Jerry concludes that Paul "subsumes identity as Jews or Gentiles under the category of Christ-believer" (p. 3). In my view, Paul instead subsumes identity as Christ-believer under identity as Jews/Judeans or members of the other nations. The identity issue is not posed in terms

of Jewish versus Gentile Christ-believers, but in the reversal of the modifiers and the modified, that is, between Christ-believing Jews or Gentiles (preferably, Christ-believing non-Jews, and more properly if cumbersome, members of the nations other than Israel, the *ethnoi*). At the same time I agree with his next clause, but because I see in it something different than Jerry seeks to express when he says: "Believing in Christ has become the primary identity marker for the church." The focus here, for Paul, is on an active identity that is salient alongside Jewish or non-Jewish identity among Christ-believers, when they define the reason they meet together as "church," "ekklesia," or better, concerning their own communal identity as an assembled Jewish group vis-à-vis the assembling of other Jewish groups around other defining purposes besides faith in Jesus Christ.

Their Jewish groups differ from other Jewish groups in two ways. First, by Christ-faith; second, by the way their Christ-faith has led them to identify each other fictively as equal members, whether Jewish or not. Albeit remaining different from each other in that they are Jews or non-Jews, together they seek to overcome the discrimination that would be expected to accompany such identity differences, depending upon whether they are operating in communal space that is otherwise defined as (primarily) Jewish or non-Jewish in population and in terms of social norms. But that is inside the "church," that is, within the assemblies of Christ-believers as distinguished from *other* Jewish assemblies of the time and place. It assumes the purpose of their shared "assemblyness" is nevertheless an expression of their *Jewishness*, even if expressing different views than other Jewish assemblies on some points.

Why does Jerry write of a "predominantly non-Jewish church" (p. 4) in Corinth? I believe he means a congregation composed predominantly of non-Jewish members. But that is not what he has written; does the difference betray the conviction that what Paul has been developing is something that is not Jewish? Should not the description leave open the possibility or even emphasize that it is nevertheless a Jewish congregation, an expression of a Judaism, if you will, and thus that these other claimants speak with authority based on Jewish norms, and expect to have influence (or so Paul's rhetoric implies that he expects it to; hence, his effort to undermine it). Has Jerry in this phraseology not concluded that the church in Corinth is not Jewish, is not an expression of Judaism, but of some other religious institution, even if some Jews may still visit it and emphasize their Jewishness?

When Jerry turns to Galatians, besides writing of "Christian identity" at issue (using language his own prior statement that there was no such thing should censure), he follows the consensus view that because Paul writes of "another good news" that it must be another message of good in Christ, and its proponents thus identified as Christ-believers. The results of that specific interpretation of Paul's language are clear in the way that Jerry proceeds to use the evidence, but that interpretation, and thus the implications of it, are not self-evident. I have written at length why this should not be so in *The Irony of Galatians*, of which he does not indicate awareness.¹ His assessment depends upon a methodologically flawed mirror reading of language Paul introduces in ironic style, in other words, to shock his addressees, perhaps precisely because they have not considered the other message an alternative to the message of good in Christ in which they have believed. Paul labels the alternative message of inclusion by way of proselyte conversion another good news, which Paul immediately claims that it is not. Moreover, use of *euangelion* was not yet indicative of Christian identity, but of Jewish as well as Roman proclamations of a message of good measured alternately in Jewish or Roman terms.

Further, I cannot agree with Jerry's statement that "Paul's account of the Antioch Incident chronicles the dispute that followed in the wake of the decision in Jerusalem not to require Gentiles to observe the Torah as Jews observe it" (p. 6) Torah observance does not define what Paul describes at issue in the Jerusalem meeting.² At issue is not Torah observance for Gentiles as if Jews. It is not about the category of behavior per se, although there are related implications, to be sure. It is about a different category, circumcision, that is, the attaining of Jewish identity for non-Jews who are members of Christ-believing Judaism. If they become Jews, then the issue of the level of Torah-observance would arise, and Paul apparently upholds that rigorous Torah-observance follows (Gal 5:3). This suggests that Torah applies to himself and other Jewish Christ-

¹ Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

² Cf. Mark D. Nanos, "Intruding 'Spies' and 'Pseudo-brethren': The Jewish Intra-Group Politics of Paul's Jerusalem Meeting (Gal 2:1-10)," pages 59-97 in *Paul and His Opponents* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Pauline Studies 2; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005); for the Antioch Incident see Mark D. Nanos, "What Was at Stake in Peter's 'Eating with Gentiles' at Antioch?," pages 282-318 in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation* (ed. Mark D. Nanos; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002).

believing men who were circumcised. These category differences should not be blurred in our investigation.

I cannot agree with Jerry's argument that, "As Paul will argue, it *must not* mean that Gentiles simply join the Jewish community" (p. 5; emphasis mine). The issue is not whether they join the Jewish community, for that they have already done in the social action accompanying the choice of Christ-faith, faith in the Jewish people's understanding of the meaning of this world and human history. At issue is whether these non-Jews have joined as mere guests or have become full members, apart from proselyte conversion, thus defying a convention that Jewish communities employ for non-Jews seeking to gain full membership instead of remaining mere guests, however welcome, except for the Jewish coalitions of Christ-believing Jews (or at least some of them, such as Paul's). When Jerry writes, "It is subordinating belief in Christ or membership 'in Christ' to membership in the Mosaic covenant that Paul will not accept" (p. 6), I would add the clause, for "non-Jews," since they are not under the Mosaic covenant beforehand. I don't believe the observation is correct for Jews in Christ. By the logic of Paul's own argument in Gal 3, you cannot disregard a covenant previously made.

I also disagree with the assessment of Paul's identification against Judaism in Jerry's reading of Philippians 3, but there is simply not time to comment.

I have been emphasizing the first point in Jerry's summary comments, that Paul does not leave Judaism,³ and trying to show where Jerry's approach does not help to make this point, but undermines it instead, so that even when stated it has no force. Also, I do not see the difference between Paul and James where Jerry does. Both are reoriented by faith in Christ, although their different locations and thus different local political realities give rise to different emphases and choices. No doubt, their different personalities play some role too. Nevertheless, those differences do not alter their similar self-conceptualization as faithful, Torah-observant Jews doing Judaism, as they believe it should be done after the dawning of the age to come in Christ. According to

³ "The change in Paul does not take him out of Judaism, but it makes faith in Christ the more definitive element of his religious identity. Within the eschatological community 'in Christ,' he remains a faithful Jew. The difference between Paul and 'those from James' is that for the latter, faith in Christ does not reorient their identity to the extent that this faith reoriented Paul's" (p. 9).

Paul himself, as I read his description of the Jerusalem meeting in Gal 2:5, they both uphold the inclusion of non-Jews who believe in Christ as full and equal members.

If the Christ-believing community does not remain within the orbit of the Mosaic covenant communities,⁴ then how can it claim to be a Judaism, or be described as such? In my view, the "Gentiles must convert to Judaism to be full members of the [Mosaic] covenant community" according to Paul, or is there already something other than Judaism to which they convert? I thought Jerry disallowed Christianity at this point. What option but the joining of Judaism under Paul's watch does that observation permit? In my view, the joining of Judaism was what Paul was making available to non-Jews by his message of good in Christ, because his communities were expressions of Judaism. The issue was "how" these non-Jews were to become "full members." If Jerry's argument is altered in that direction, then his next sentence has teeth. Their Jewish versus non-Jewish identities within the Christ-believing Jewish groups are relativized so that they do not lead to status discrimination, but they remain nonetheless identities that carry implications that arise in the different lives they lead as Jews and non-Jews living together within Judaism. I believe that this change of focus as well as language brings deeper insight to Jerry's claim that, "They [the differences] are not eradicated because whether one is Jewish or Gentile continues to define in important ways how one embodies the gospel in the conduct of one's life" (p. 11).

2. As you will hear in my few comments on the papers by Anders Runesson and Magnus Zetterholm, I am in substantial agreement with what they wish to communicate. My comments are more along the line of what I would adjust to put my name on these papers as my own. And there is not much. I hope they will not feel slighted by the comparative brevity. I recognize in this a rather unique moment, for there are not, to my knowledge, more than a handful of people on this globe that share my sensibilities about these matters. I hope that our common voice will contribute to changing that. But at least this admission both advises you of my self-group-awareness, and warns you that I/we do not intend to be dismissed without a chance to play.

⁴ "If it remains the Mosaic covenant, renewed as promised in the prophets of Israel, then Gentiles must convert to Judaism to be full members of the covenant community. If the primary identity of members of the covenant community is that of believing in Christ, then Gentiles remain Gentiles and Jews remain Jews with these identities relativized, but not eradicated" (p. 11).

Anders successfully makes his case that "the evidence shows that what evolved as Judaism and Christianity never belonged together, and that, therefore, the metaphor [parting/s of the ways from a common origin] is inappropriate." This observation is important and very helpful for defining that which we seek to find, because that is always influenced by what we expect to find, and the ways that we go about the enterprise of finding it. If we begin from the assumption that Christianity is and always was something other than Judaism, with origins in a particular manifestation of Judaism, albeit in reaction against that particular Judaism (the Judaism with which this section is concerned), and thus very different from it, then we will no doubt become aware of different things in the language we investigate. We will explore new tools with which to dig, make new observations along the way, and draw different conclusions. Change will result. That can be evaluated differently, as progress or regression, depending upon what is at stake for the investigator and the community from which they speak, or to which they wish to speak. From my perspective, it is welcome, and likely to lead in directions that I believe are more historically probable and thus responsible to pursue, and more helpful for group and inter-group relations going forward. Ways of seeing the other can be altered, not least by the evaluation of the other in terms not predetermined by our own self-interested way of limiting the possibilities for their voice to be heard, but open to what they wish to say, and the way they wish to frame it.

Anders concludes: "what was in the Middle Ages and still is today Judaism and Christianity never 'parted ways' because they never belonged together in any of the three aspects discussed earlier." I think this is correct, and a terrific point to make so plainly. Then he continues: "However, we may take the investigation one step further: was there any point in time when the precursors of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism had anything in common?" This he investigates.

Two quibbles. I would change "did the Christ-centered non-Jewish religious system begin within the Jewish religious system?" to "did the Christ-centered religious system (including the elements developed for the non-Jewish members to participate fully) begin within the Jewish religious system?" It is not a *non-Jewish* religious system, but a Jewish religious system, yet with elements developed to accommodate a new identification of the *non-Jewish members* in terms not shared by other Jewish religious

systems of the time, or since, although within the conceptual world of many of them for what is to be expected in the age to come.

I don't like Ander's use of Palestine to refer to first century developments—we are challenging terminology after all, and this is anachronistic too, with implications today as well.

Finally, since I join Anders in proposing the use of "apostolic" to define the kind of Judaism we seek to discuss, hence, "Apostolic Judaism," I ask those of you in attendance to comment on how the term and argument for it strikes you, the pros and cons upon your first hearing of the terminology, and if you wish and are willing, what you might think of it after some reflection (via e-mail).

3. I don't think Magnus Zetterholm's observation can be overemphasized at the start of this new SBL program unit: "one common, and almost undisputable assumption in treatments of 'early Christianity' is that one major dividing line between the form of religion advocated by Paul and that of other Jews who also believed Jesus to be the Messiah, was connected to Torah observance. 'Pauline Christians,' regardless of ethnicity, are often considered to have moved towards a common religious ideology because of Paul's attitude to his religious heritage, while other groups, sometimes referred to as 'Jewish-Christians' maintained their observance of the Torah, and in some cases also that non-Jewish adherents to the movement should also become Jews in order to be saved" (p. 5). Indeed, the way that Jewish Christianity is defined should be broad enough to include Pauline Christianity under its umbrella, even if found to be in dispute with some "other" forms of Jewish Christianity. But this should not be only in the sense that Jewish Christianity is defined to include non-Torah faith and disregard for Torah behavior as a matter of faith, such as is usually attributed to Paul. The very notion that Paul upheld a Torah-free faith and proclaimed such a message must itself be questioned; I believe, with some of my fellow panelists, it should be changed. Nevertheless, even if one upholds that viewpoint, the definition has to be changed to include Paul, because that is historically the movement within which Paul moved, what he was converted into (if you so believe him to be converted, and moreover, converted into some form of Christianity), even if later an interpreter may want to move him out of it.

I love Magnus's point when stating, "From a purely historical point of view, the early Jesus movement must be understood as one of many ways of realizing a Jewish life in antiquity" (12-13).

4. As for my own contribution to the discussion, although I appreciate the logic of the name for the program unit, I can't help but observe that it will impede making historical changes in our taxonomy and perhaps more importantly, in the thinking that has been central to the enterprise. That is, that there is something that can be named "Christianity" in the early to mid-first century; moreover, that it is definable enough to engage in further classification within it between "Jewish" and other forms of expression that are presumably not Jewish and thus not to be included within this category. For one does not have a category without the not-category category or categories from which the category is by definition differentiated and hence named. To have Christianity we must have a conceptualization of "not-Christianity." To have then, a subcategory of Christianity, "Jewish" Christianity, we must have a corresponding subcategory of Christianity that is characterized by being other than Jewish Christianity, however named, or not. What is "not-Jewish-Christianity"? Well, it must be "Gentile," by definition.

More specifically, it has to date begun with reference to the character Paul, and thus the category "Pauline." Jewish Christianity must be defined in tension with the alternative of Pauline Christianity, and vice versa, and this continues at the level of taxonomy, confining the challengers who deal with the subject to employ the category of "not what others mean by Jewish Christianity," instead of being free to explore the topic more open-endedly. By definition, Paul is not a part of the topic of our seminar; more importantly, of the field of study, except to measure what it is not. For that, Paul is essential to the task. Already, then, we have a major decision a priori that frames the subject for investigation in a direction that defies our objective; namely, to investigate anew the origins of the movement among Jewish people who believed in Jesus Christ without the presuppositions that have limited investigations in the past.

Are we not destined by proceeding under this label, if we continue to use it in our papers, to what this label reveals about our working assumptions about the matter, as well as to the continuation of this label's power to limit our listeners and our own thinking to the social constructions that have shaped the mental maps with which we

begin and proceed? I witness this dynamic in virtually every new book on Paul or one of his letters or topics that arise in relation to him. Authors acknowledge boldly that there was as yet no Christianity, and that Paul did not refer to Christians but to Jews and non-Jews/Gentiles, whether in-Christ or not, but they proceed with a conceptualization of Paul that is through and through about a Christian and his Christian addressees. He represents one wing of Christianity in tension with another wing, namely, Jewish Christianity, meeting in churches, that is, assemblies already separated from Jewish communal life and especially its meeting places. At stake is much more than the continued usage of "Christian" for Paul and his "converts" to "Christianity" rather than Judaism or even Jewish Christianity. At stake is the conceptual map that this language betrays at work and perpetuates, continuing to limit the possibilities for historical investigation, not to mention potential spiritual developments that might result from new insights, along with prospects for improved inter-faith understanding and relations.

It makes no sense to me to speak of Judaism or Jewish identity apart from people bound by the Mosaic covenant, by Torah-identity. They may disagree about what that means, but if they do not identify themselves in terms of Torah, however relativized, they are not dealing with each other from Judaism or as Jews. A "Torah-free message of good in Christ," usually just "Paul's Law-free Gospel," makes no sense to me. A proselyte conversion free message of good in Christ is a wholly different matter, and I think a meaningful starting place for describing what is different about this Judaism, for Paul, and for James and the rest.

Since most if not all of our pre-70 information about the Christ-believers comes from Paul, our construction of Paul's world-view is integral to our interpretation of his language about the Jerusalem and other manifestations of the Christ-believing movement among Jews and non-Jews. Should we begin that investigation knowing that Paul stood outside of Judaism, including Christ-believing Judaism, as is betrayed in the employment of the term "Jewish Christianity," at least as it has been used to date, and seemingly, would continue to be signified in the choice of terms, and thereafter, by that which is the modifier and the modified?

I trust the discussion will help to bring out many of the other rich contributions of these papers I have not had the time to address. Thank you.