

# Early Christianity in a Jewish Context

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## The Background: First-Century Messianism

Judaism held an ambivalent place in the Roman world of the first century CE. Jews made up a substantial percentage of the population (at least 5 percent by most estimates), at all levels of Roman society. All the same, the conditions experienced by specific Jewish communities varied dramatically; local bias and imperial wariness could quickly turn into anti-Jewish riots or oppressive imperial policies. Since the time of Julius Caesar (47 BCE), Jews had enjoyed exemption from serving in the military and, later, from making sacrifices on behalf of the Roman state – precisely the sort of freedoms that left them open to charges of *amixia* (unwillingness to participate in communal life and values) and *atheism* (contempt for the gods). The Jewish community was thus always balanced between official tolerance and the possibility of local resentment and hostility.

The potential for conflict was especially high in the province of Judea, the home of the Jerusalem Temple. Judea was the site of the annual Jewish pilgrimage festivals, bringing Jews from all over the Roman world. The presence of Roman rule was felt differently here, in the land that Jews considered holy not only to themselves, but to God. Thus, for example, Caligula's 40 CE decision to place his own image in the Jerusalem Temple caused riots not only throughout Israel, but as far away as Alexandria, where Philo was commissioned to lead a delegation in protest to Rome. Ultimately, Caligula was persuaded to abandon his project.

The religious beliefs of first-century Jews were diverse, ranging from the serenely philosophical Neoplatonism of Philo to the dramatic apocalypticism of the Dead

Sea Scrolls community. Many beliefs common among first-century Jews would have been foreign to their Israelite ancestors. In particular, messianic expectation, belief in the eventual resurrection of the dead, and in the role played by martyrs in redeeming the community, had come to play important roles in the worldview of many Jews. In Israel particularly, given the constant friction between Roman rule and Jewish sensibilities, the belief that God would soon send his agent, the Messiah, to intervene decisively and finally on the Jews' behalf, constantly simmered in the background. The details of such expectations varied as whether the Messiah would be a human or divine figure, a king or a priest, and whether the "last days," or *eschaton*, would mark a time of universal peace or the end of the world itself. In all cases, however, the last days, as prophesied in the Scriptures, would be a time of vindication for the Jewish people and their beliefs.

Such messianic hopes were, of course, anathema to Rome. The messiah would free the world from injustice, but on the most practical level this meant freeing the Jews from the ever-present burden of Roman rule. Thus, from a Roman perspective, messianic beliefs were tantamount to insurrection. We have only a few records of actual messianic pretenders from the first century, but in all cases they were put to death for insurrection.

In this context, Jesus, an itinerant preacher and miracle-worker, lived and taught in early first-century Galilee, where at least some of his followers came to consider him the Messiah. Whether he considered himself the savior of the Jews is not known. He ended up being exactly successful enough to come to Rome's attention, and so, in approximately 30 CE, he was sentenced to death by crucifixion as an insurrectionist.

## Jesus and His Followers

A miracle-worker hailed as the Messiah, Jesus was clearly remarkable, but by no means unique, in the first-century Jewish world. Other miracle-workers are known to have lived and other messiahs to have died in Roman-controlled Judea. More remarkable than the few facts we can piece together about Jesus are the actions of his followers after his death. A crucified messiah was by definition a failed messiah – indeed, a dangerous messiah, as Rome had an interest in shutting down any lingering support for his cause. But, according to the Gospel accounts, soon after Jesus' death some of his followers had experiences convincing them that he had been raised from the dead – resurrected.

It is futile to speculate as to the nature of Jesus' followers' religious experience; they seem to have been deeply convinced that Jesus was alive and present as a transformed, spiritual power. In fact, they said, having been exalted by God, he was now seated at the right hand of God in heaven. Moreover, Jesus' resurrection proved that he had been the Messiah after all; his resurrection marked the

beginning of the promised last days. The Messianic age had begun. The trajectory of Jesus' life and death did not, however, fit messianic expectations; Jesus had not redeemed the Jews, but had suffered the fate of failed messiahs before him. Impelled by their belief in his resurrection, however, Jesus' followers began to search the Bible for hints as to how they might make sense of a crucified-but-resurrected messiah. Texts such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 that described God's chosen one as "despised and rejected" and a "man of sorrows" who was mocked by all, seemed to prophesy Jesus' ignominious death. Hosea 6:2, a prophecy that "after two days [God] will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up" became a linchpin in understanding Jesus as Messiah, raised on the third day. Such texts would have reassured those Jews who already believed Jesus had been resurrected; for most, he was simply another failed messiah.

In fact, even Jesus' resurrection did not correspond precisely with any known first-century messianic beliefs. Resurrection was generally assumed to be a communal affair, in which either the righteous alone would be resurrected, or all people would be resurrected and then judged, with reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. Jesus' followers' belief that the Messiah had lived and died without freeing the Jews from Roman oppression, and that he alone had been resurrected, would have seemed highly implausible to most Jews. For Jesus' followers, however, the incomplete nature of Jesus' work was interpreted as a sign that he was the "one like a son of man," or human being, foretold in Daniel 7, who would return on "the clouds of heaven" to rule on behalf of God, the "Ancient of Days." Jews following Jesus as Messiah began to spread the word that the last days had begun.

## **The Gentiles**

According to the New Testament book of Acts, Jesus-following Jews spread their message primarily by preaching in synagogues, first in Israel and then in the Diaspora. According to Acts, some Jews were attracted to the messianists' message while others took umbrage; paradoxically, it was Gentiles who were most likely to join the new sect. Gentiles loosely affiliated with synagogues (often as donors) are typically called "Godfearers," a term attested in third-century CE synagogue inscriptions from Asia Minor. These Gentiles would have been attracted to the antiquity and ethical teachings of the synagogues, and perhaps also to the idea of monotheism. They were not, however, prepared to abandon the familial and business ties that required sacrifice to pagan gods, nor (in the case of men) to undergo circumcision.

Such Gentiles, already attracted to Jewish life, may have found the messianic message especially appealing. While clearly a form of Judaism, this new sect included additional benefits: access to arcane knowledge of the end times and the

promise of a glorious afterlife, guaranteed by a heavenly patron. Belief in Jesus as Messiah thus combined Judaism with features resembling those of popular mystery religions. For Jesus' Jewish followers, however, the interest of Gentiles constituted a crisis; ultimately, it led to the first schism in the fledgling movement.

The Gentiles' eagerness to affiliate with the Jesus-followers would have provided a powerful confirmation of the group's messianic beliefs. Biblical prophecies of the end-times routinely announced that in the last days "the Gentiles [*goyim*] will come" to the light of Israel and the mountain of the Lord (see, for example, Isaiah 60:3; 2:2–4; Zechariah 14:16). If the Gentiles were arriving, then the last days must be here. Unfortunately, however, texts prophesying the Gentiles' arrival said little about what would follow. Specifically, the prophecies failed to indicate whether the Gentiles would continue to live as Gentiles, or would convert and become Jews. Opinion within the messianic community was divided, with some eager to "complete" the conversion of the Godfearers and others convinced that converting such Gentiles to Judaism would effectively deny the gift God had offered in extending his salvation to "all nations."

The course of the early conflict over Gentile conversion is difficult to trace, as the primary source of information is the New Testament, written entirely by those who favored including Gentiles without formal conversion. Acts, a history of the Jesus-movement written around 85 CE, reports that God intervened directly in the dispute, commanding that Gentiles should be required only to keep the so-called Noahide laws against adultery, idolatry, and the eating of blood (Acts 10–11; 15). The account in Acts claims that the community agreed unanimously to God's decree. A careful reading of the New Testament, however, reveals a bitter conflict ending in schism sometime before 50 CE. Thus, the apostle Paul, writing in the late 40s to a group of Gentile converts in Galatia, is horrified that other missionaries have been convincing the Galatians that they must become circumcised in order to "be saved." On the contrary, says Paul, those who want to circumcise them want only to "enslave" them. "I wish," he concludes "those who wish to unsettle you would castrate themselves" (Galatians 5:12).

The conflict over the status of Gentile converts resulted in two strands within the sect, both of which still understood themselves as essentially Jewish communities. The strand of early Christianity that required Gentiles to convert to Judaism, however, was rapidly eclipsed by the more liberal strand, and our knowledge of "the circumcisers" comes almost exclusively from the liberal group, who portray them as having been heretical from the outset. Torah-observant forms of Christianity (Christian groups in which both Jewish and converted Gentile members observed Jewish law), specifically groups called Ebionites and Nazoreans, did not simply disappear; they are mentioned in texts as late as the early fifth century (St Jerome), but descriptions of their beliefs are incomplete and often inconsistent (Cohen, 2007: 32).

The decision on the part of some Jesus-followers to include unconverted Gentiles as full members, however, proved crucial to the group's future. Those messianists

who did not require full conversion were especially attractive to Gentiles, and within twenty years of Jesus' death they had established communities in Israel, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. The New Testament describes the larger Jewish community as hostile to these messianists on the grounds that they blaspheme God and change the law of Moses (Acts 6:11, 14).

While theological disagreement surely existed, the wide diversity of first-century Jewish belief makes it unlikely that differences in belief caused significant hostility. The inclusion of unconverted Gentiles, however, had far more than simply theological implications. Judaism was a protected religion under Roman law, and the duties from which Jews were exempted were hardly insubstantial. The Jews' exemption from worshiping the patron gods of Rome meant that they alone were excused from the shared duty to support the welfare of the *oikumene*, the fictive household comprising the Roman world. While these exemptions sometimes led to resentment, pagans were generally aware that the Jewish ancestral god was "a jealous god," who did not permit them to acknowledge the gods of the city of the empire. Newly Christian Gentiles, however, were another matter. These were people who had clear obligations to the gods of Rome, of their cities, and of their families. The Jesus-following Jews who accepted Gentiles without conversion to Judaism were not only taking these Gentiles away from their ancestral and civic duties; they were enticing Gentiles away from their communal duties *without* subjecting them to the obligations of Judaism. These Christian Gentiles had no apparent duty, whether ancestral or adopted, to worship only the jealous god of the Jews; they had simply turned their backs on their families, their cities, and the empire.

The decision by some of Jesus' followers not to circumcise Gentile converts was momentous in several regards: it created a permanent schism within the messianic group (between those who did and those who did not circumcise Gentile converts); it gave the non-circumcising group tremendous appeal among those Gentiles who found Judaism attractive but who had stopped short of full conversion; and, finally, it turned an otherwise insignificant sect into a serious liability for the larger Jewish community. Whereas theological disagreements over whether Jesus had been the Messiah and whether unconverted Gentiles could become members of a Jewish community would not have provoked action against the sect, the social problems caused by these stances could not be ignored. The Jesus-followers had always been unique among messianists in that they continued to follow their founder even after Rome had put him to death. This in itself made the group potentially dangerous, as their very existence perpetuated the "sedition" for which Jesus had been killed. The new practice of recruiting, but not converting, Gentiles would have compounded the problem. Historically, the Gentile population had resented any attempts to convert Gentiles to Judaism. The messianists, however, were not turning pagans into Jews; they were simply turning good pagans into bad pagans – that is, into non-Jews who had abandoned their civic and familial duties. Such neglect of religious duties was understood to have serious consequences. Gods neglected by their

worshippers were likely to respond by sending disasters affecting the entire community; individual disregard for communal gods was thus a serious public offense in the Roman world. Moreover, if Jews were the ones persuading such individuals to abandon the gods, the entire Jewish community risked reprisals, not by pagan gods, but by the pagan populace. By deciding not to circumcise Gentile converts the Jesus-followers had made themselves a danger to the Jewish community as a whole. Fellow Jews may well have sought, as the New Testament claims, to shut down the new messianic sect. But Jewish animosity, explained in the New Testament as rage over Christians' proclamation of Jesus as Messiah or resentment over their inclusion of Gentiles, was far more likely to reflect the social reality that, in venerating an executed seditionist and luring Gentiles away from their civic duties, the new sect formed a significant liability to the larger Jewish community.

### **The New Testament: Jewish or Anti-Jewish?**

The documents collected and preserved as the Christian New Testament were written between approximately 50 and 100 CE. All or most of the texts were composed by Jews who followed Jesus as risen Messiah. Some addressed their works to Gentile congregations, some to groups with a mixed Jewish–Gentile membership, and a few to groups composed of ethnic Jews. The earliest texts, written in the 50s, are the letters of Paul.

Paul is an ambiguous figure. Sometimes considered the first real Christian because he advocated a “Torah-free” religion, Paul did not endorse a new and different religion. It seems unlikely that *any* Jew who believed that the Messiah had arrived would respond by founding a new and different religion. Paul taught an eschatological form of Judaism in which, as part of God’s design for the last days, faithful Gentiles were included among the people of Israel. The book of Acts describes Paul continuing to live as an observant Jew (see, for example, 18:18), though his own letters suggest he was willing to adapt his observance to the needs of a mixed community (1 Corinthians 9:20). Both Acts and Paul agree that as a young man he belonged to a Pharisaic group and actively persecuted the sect of Jesus’ followers (Acts 9; Galatians 1:13). Neither text specifies the grounds on which he did so. Following a direct revelation of the risen Jesus, however, Paul soon became an active missionary for the messianic movement, establishing Jesus-following communities, primarily among Gentiles, in Asia Minor and Greece.

Paul’s letters to his Gentile and mixed Jewish-Gentile communities provide an example of how a devoutly Jewish messianist could reimagine Jewish history in ways that can seem profoundly anti-Jewish in a modern context. The figure of Abraham provides a vivid illustration: Paul notes that God’s promise to Abraham included the prophecy that Abraham would become “the father of many nations

[Hebrew: *goyim*]” (Genesis 17:4–6; cf. Romans 4:18) and that in Abraham “all the nations [*goyim*] would be blessed” (Genesis 18:18; 22:18; Galatians 3:8). For Paul, this prophecy had been fulfilled in the spread of the Christian message to the pagan world and the establishment of Gentile congregations, metaphorical “descendants” of Abraham. One can readily imagine, however, that Paul’s use of Abraham to validate his mission would have met with strong resistance from those who favored formally converting Gentile members to Judaism. Abraham, after all, had sealed his acceptance of God’s promise by entering the covenant of circumcision, which was incumbent upon *all* of his male descendents (see Genesis 17:12–14).

Paul’s letters do not actually record this objection, but twice he goes out of his way to explain why circumcision is unnecessary for Gentiles who have become “descendants of Abraham.” In his letter to the Roman congregation, a mixed Jewish–Gentile group, Paul creates an argument by means of prooftexts, a technique that would have been recognizable to his Pharisaic peers. Abraham, says Paul, was counted as righteous for believing in God’s promise. Moreover, he believed and was credited with righteousness before becoming circumcised. God counts Abraham’s belief as righteousness in Genesis 15 but does not command him to be circumcised until Genesis 17. Thus, says Paul, the Scripture shows that Abraham is the father of those who are righteous without circumcision as well as of those who believe and are circumcised. The argument is elegant, even if it convinces only those who wish to be convinced.

Paul develops a far more anti-Judaic defense in his letter to the Galatians. In Galatians he addresses a Gentile congregation. In Paul’s absence they have been convinced by competing missionaries that they must become circumcised. Paul rips into his adversaries, claiming that they are trying to “enslave” the Gentile believers by placing them under the “curse” of the Torah (3:13). How can Paul, who tells the Roman congregation that the commandments are “holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12) here call the Torah a curse? The difference is that, while Paul honors the Torah as God’s law for the Jews, he is convinced that if Gentiles submit to the requirements of Torah, they thereby reject God’s generosity in accepting them without the strictures of the covenant. As an embattled member of the non-circumcising faction, Paul fiercely denies that Gentiles are in any way incomplete members of the messianic community.

Polemic like Paul’s, directed against Jewish members of other Jesus-following groups, permeates the New Testament and accounts for much of its apparent anti-Jewish character. Thus, in John’s Gospel, Jesus taunts Jews who had once followed him but later turned away, calling them children of “your father the devil” (John 8:31–44). Similarly, the author of Revelation condemns a competing messianic synagogue as “a synagogue of Satan,” filled with those “who say they are Jews, but are not” (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The New Testament authors were a tiny minority in the Roman as indeed in the Jewish world, fighting to defend their legitimacy as Jews. Their bitterness against other Jewish Christians whom they felt had betrayed their cause was extreme.

The four canonical Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were written in different settings, originally for use by different communities. All were written in the wake of the first revolt against Rome (66–70 CE). The revolt, a cataclysm for the Jewish people, may have seemed literally apocalyptic to Jesus-following groups. Jesus had, after all, died without accomplishing the task of rescuing the Jewish people. If he was to return again in his glory, saving the Jews from their enemies, this would seem to be an appropriate time. Indeed, even the historian Josephus believed that the destruction of the Temple was a sign of God's anger against the people, a parallel to the destruction of Solomon's Temple six hundred years earlier (Josephus, *The Jewish War*: 4.5.2 323; 5.1.4 19–20). It would not be surprising if the messianists had taken a similar view.

The destruction of the Temple, of course, brought only an increase in Roman oppression, and an urgent need for Jews to rethink their understanding of God. The Gospels form one strand of this global rethinking of the status and destiny of the Jewish people. Written for different communities facing different pressures, the Gospels can be read as mirrors that show the various strategies used by this sect as they attempted to strengthen their identity even as the Jewish people were decimated and their own messiah failed to return. In the case of Matthew, written around 85 CE, the community addressed is predominantly Jewish, probably located in Galilee. Clearly an observant Jew, the author seeks to counter the influence of the Pharisees, asserting Jesus the Messiah as a teacher whose authority surpassed that of any rabbi. In fact, Matthew persistently (if anachronistically) portrays Jesus arguing points of law with local Pharisees, always besting them at their own game. Matthew's Jesus warns his hearers, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law," clearly countering accusations Matthew's community *had* in fact abandoned Jewish law (Matthew 5:17). Matthew's author had no sense of himself as anything but a pious and observant Jew. In a striking example of Matthew's Jewish self-identity, Jesus gives his disciples instructions on how to deal with disagreements within the community: first, approach your brother in private, then in the presence of two or three witnesses. If needed, bring the person before the entire community. If, however, anyone will not listen to the entire community, "Let them be to you as a Gentile" (Matthew 18:17). For Matthew a Gentile was by definition an outsider: it seemed self-evident that Jesus-followers were Jews. Unlike the letters of Paul, Matthew's Gospel addresses a distinctly Jewish messianic community.

The Gospel of Luke is written at about the same time as Matthew's Gospel, but probably by a Jewish author for a Gentile community. The Gospel, along with its companion volume, Acts, is addressed to a convert whom the author calls Theophilus (God-lover). Claiming that he writes to allay the concerns of this convert, Luke writes a gospel that stresses the legitimacy of both the Jesus sect and their practice of accepting uncircumcised Gentiles as members. Luke's Gospel presents the birth of Jesus as a literal continuation of the biblical narrative, explaining how God first allowed an aged but pious couple (modeled on Abraham

and Sarah) to have a son (John the Baptist), and then sent the divine spirit to impregnate a virgin (cf. Isaiah 7:14). Throughout his narrative, Luke stresses that Jesus, his family, and his followers did everything “as it is written in the law of the Lord” (2:23; cf. 2:22, 24, 27, 39; 23:56). Not only is the infant Jesus circumcised, but his parents go to Jerusalem to perform *pidyon ha-ben* (the redemption of the firstborn son; 2:23).

After Luke finishes the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, he continues (in the book of Acts) with the story of Jesus’ followers. Here he explains that although the community assiduously observed Jewish law, God commanded them that they must allow Gentiles to join without becoming circumcised (Acts 10–11; 15). Luke then describes Paul’s missions, in which Gentiles accept his message in droves, while Jews become enraged, driving him out of the towns where he has been preaching. In effect, Luke explains for his Gentile reader that although the sect represents the true fulfillment of God’s earlier prophecies to Israel, the Jewish people have “rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (cf. Luke 7:39). God has therefore sent the gospel “to the Gentiles” instead (Acts 28:28).

Although Jesus was put to death by the Romans, the Gospels uniformly suggest that the Romans killed Jesus only because of pressure from the Jews. In the book of Acts, Peter actually tells the Jewish crowds that it was they who “killed the Author of life” (3:15). The Gospels’ authors, writing in the period after Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem, needed to be careful not to anger the Roman authorities. In fact, they needed to convince the Romans that the Jesus-followers were not a dangerous group, despite the fact that they venerated a convicted criminal. This would have made it easy to say that, even though the Romans carried out the actual crucifixion, it was the Jews who did not follow Jesus who were really to blame for his death. This idea – that the Jews had killed Jesus – came to be widely believed in Christian communities, especially after the Jesus-followers had stopped being a Jewish sect.

In the New Testament as a whole, one can trace the young sect’s struggles as it sought to define itself and its relationship to the world, both Jewish and Gentile. Nearly every page reflects both the authors’ joy at their newfound hope and their shock that (as they understood it) the Messiah had arrived without the majority of Jews even noticing. Ultimately, like any sectarians, they could only affirm that they were right by believing that all others were wrong. This deeply felt sense of the “wrongness” of the larger Jewish community is understandable in its context; only later would the New Testament’s latent anti-Judaism be used to justify persecution.

## Christian and Jew in the Second and Third Centuries

In the early decades following Jesus’ death, his followers, whether ethnic Jews or Gentiles, would have considered themselves members of a Jewish community. The Gospels of Matthew and John, written in the 80s and 90s, say that the messianists

have been beaten in synagogues, an indication that they continued to attend synagogue services and were subject to discipline as members. As indicated above, the messianists' habit of encouraging pagans to abandon their gods would have made this sect highly problematic for the Jewish community as a whole. On the other hand, several factors would have encouraged the sectarians to consider thinking of themselves as Jews: First, ethnically Jewish sect members would have had no interest in abandoning their Jewish identity; such a move would have been especially unlikely among Jews who believed that the Messiah had at long last arrived. Godfearers, Gentiles who had been loosely affiliated with synagogues for years, saw the sect as a new development in the history of the Jews. For them, the messianic movement allowed full participation in the Jewish community at the crucial moment of God's redemption. And on a more practical level, all members of the sect would have benefited from the fact that Judaism was a "licit" religion, a recognized group granted the right of assembly by Rome.

Within the first hundred years of the sect's existence, however, its Jewish identity weakened dramatically, and in some quarters, disappeared. The revolt of 66–70 clearly left a mark on the Jesus-following community, though we know nothing about the messianists' participation (or lack of participation) in the revolt. Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, says that the leaders in Jerusalem fled to Pella in the Trans-Jordan before the city was burned. The story may be apocryphal, but as late as the fourth century ethnically Jewish sects of Christians continued to thrive in the Trans-Jordan.

In Rome, the new Flavian dynasty made the most of their victory over the Jews. As Martin Goodman has argued, the Flavians consolidated their own power by means of a propaganda campaign portraying the Jews as an especially despicable, and now vanquished, people. As an added insult, rather than rebuilding the Temple according to Roman custom, the Romans left it in ruins and required the Jews to pay into a fund (the *fiscus Judaicus*) for the rebuilding of the temple of Jupiter in Rome (Goodman, 2007: 431–442). For ethnically Jewish messianists, the humiliations of the first revolt were inescapable. For Gentile members, particularly those whose communities had always been majority or even exclusively Gentile, there was little to be gained from association with the "failed" cause of the Jews. On the contrary, the destruction of the Temple would have been easy to interpret as a sign of God's displeasure with the Jewish people who, as a whole, had (as they saw it) rejected the Messiah. Scholars estimate that by the end of the first century a majority of the Jesus-following sect were Gentiles; even more significant, the sect was now adding more new members by birth than by conversion. Gentile Christians whose parents and grandparents had belonged to the sect might see little reason to consider themselves Jews.

The Christian community of the second to third centuries was extremely diverse. Having spread across Asia Minor as far as Rome within two decades, the movement had developed without any central governing body or uniform policies. Messianists in isolated locations might not have even known of the existence of most other

communities, much less shared beliefs and practice with them. The diversity of earliest Christianity makes it impossible to isolate a date at which “Christianity” became a separate religion from “Judaism.” Torah-observant communities, made up of ethnic Jews and a few converted and observant Gentiles, probably continued to live as Jews in communities with other Jews. Christians who lived in isolated Gentile communities might go a lifetime without ever seeing a Jew. All were “Christians,” that is, “messiah followers” (*christianoī*, from *christos*, the Greek word for anointed one or “messiah”). Still, the passage of time and changes in the status of the Jewish community led to an increasing distinction between Jew and Christian over the second and third century.

The first such change may have come under the emperor Nerva (96–98), who, in 96 declared that the tax for the *fiscus Judaicus* would no longer be applied “stringently,” but would be levied only on Jews who chose to observe their ancestral customs. As Martin Goodman has argued, by making a legal distinction between observant and nonobservant Jews Nerva took a significant (if unwitting) step toward defining Judaism as a religion rather than an ethnicity (Goodman, 1989). This step would also have had implications for Christians. Ethnically Jewish Christians would now have to make a public declaration as to whether they considered their religious practice to be “Jewish” or something else.

The Romans seem never to have treated Gentile Christians as Jews. Thus, when the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 CE, Jewish followers of Jesus were expelled while Gentile followers remained in the city. Gentile Christians, on the other hand, were understood as criminals: people who neglected their duty to the gods. Roman persecution of Christians was not widespread or systematic in this period, but when Christians were brought to the attention of the state, they were punished. In 112, Pliny, a Roman governor in northern Asia Minor, writes to the emperor, asking what to do about the local *christianoī*. Pliny points out that these people are in most respects good citizens, but refuse to worship either the gods or a statue of the emperor. As a result, Pliny has them put to death. Neither Pliny nor the accused Christians seem to consider the possibility that Christians, as a subset of the Jews, might be exempt from pagan worship.

In 135 the community would have undergone further redefinition, as Jews were expelled from the region of Jerusalem following the Bar Kochba revolt. The expulsion of the Jews meant that the “mother church” in Jerusalem now became an exclusively Gentile congregation. By the middle of the second century many Christians had come to understand Christianity as not only separate from, but actually opposed to Judaism. Justin Martyr, for example, writing the *Dialogue with Trypho* around the year 160, argues that by rejecting Christ the Jews have also rejected God; Gentiles who have accepted Jesus as Lord have now taken the place of the Jews as the “true Israel” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 135–136). A few decades later, Melito, the bishop of Sardis in Asia Minor, accuses the Jews of murdering *God* – that is, God incarnate in Jesus. For centuries, scholars have assumed that this intense

anti-Jewish rhetoric indicated that by the mid-second century Christianity and Judaism had become entirely separate (and hostile) religions. More recently, however, scholars have focused on the number of times Christian leaders condemned their followers for “Judaizing,” that is, for including Jewish practices – keeping the Jewish Sabbath, attending synagogue worship, or celebrating Jewish festivals – as part of their Christian lifestyle. As late as the fourth century, John Chrysostom condemned members of his congregation who insisted on worshipping in a synagogue as well as in a church: “If you admire the Jewish way of life, what do you have in common with us?” (*Against the Jews*: 1.6). The fact that these “Judaizers” were seen as a problem, however, is also evidence of their importance in early Christianity: Christians seem not to have been willing to make a firm distinction between their own beliefs and those of the Jews. Bishops, at least in some areas, might declare that Christianity and Judaism were opposites; everyday Christians seem to have been less eager to abandon the people and the religion of Jesus.

## Constantine

At the beginning of the fourth century Christianity, though widespread in the Roman world, was an illegal sect, brutally persecuted by Rome. In 312, however, the young Constantine (according to his biographer, Eusebius) had a vision of Christ, who told him to ride forth to his upcoming battle under the standard of the cross. Constantine won the battle, thereby becoming the head of the Western Roman Empire. The following year, Constantine and Licinius, head of the Eastern Empire, issued a joint decree mandating official toleration of Christianity. By 380 Christianity had become the official religion of the entire Empire. The fourth century thus transformed Christianity from a persecuted sect, still struggling to clarify its boundaries, to the privileged and increasingly normative belief system of the Roman world.

Constantine, intent on consolidating his power as emperor, wanted his favored religious sect to mirror and further the unity of his reign. Christianity, however, was multiform: ethnically Jewish Ebionites and Egyptian Gnostic Christians might not have even considered themselves members of the same religion. Constantine therefore called a council of all the Christian bishops (regional leaders of affiliated congregations) in 325, to reach consensus on Christian beliefs and authority structures. Contrary to his official biography, Constantine did not in fact include all bishops, but primarily bishops of what is now called “orthodox” Christianity. This was the largest and most widely spread version of the Jesus-following groups, and would thus have best served Constantine’s purpose of consolidating unity within the sect. (Ironically, Constantine himself was later baptized into a competing version of Christianity called Arianism.) The bishops developed a statement that is

now called the Nicene Creed, which formalized (among other things) the belief that Jesus is God. Those bishops who disagreed were banished. This newly recognized version of Christianity also (at a somewhat later time) defined which Christian writings were authoritative and which were not. Ultimately, the writings favored by the orthodox bishops became the Christian New Testament. Books such as the widely attested “Gospel of the Hebrews,” used in ethnically Jewish Christian communities, were suppressed, surviving only in fragments and in the descriptions of orthodox Christians.

## **Conclusions**

During the second, third, and fourth centuries both orthodox Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism defined themselves as the sole true expression of Jewish tradition. Just as Justin Martyr, a Gentile Christian, claimed in 160 that Christians had become the “true Israel,” so the authors of the Mishnah (c. 200) claimed that Israelites whose beliefs did not correspond with their own had “no place in the world to come” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.2). For a variety of reasons orthodox (Catholic) Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism succeeded in becoming normative for Gentiles and Jews respectively. Eventually, the Empire outlawed both pagan worship and conversion to Judaism, making Christianity the *de facto* religion of all non-Jews, and defining Judaism as both limited to ethnic Jews and, in effect, wrong.

The question of “how Jewish” Christians had continued to be in the second, third, and even fourth centuries (or, conversely, of when Christianity ceased to be a form of Judaism) points to a critical problem in reconstructing early Christianity: most of our information comes from the group that eventually gained political, as well as religious power. Orthodox Christians, whose version of Christianity had been spread by imperial patronage, naturally understood their own beliefs as having always been normative; if their position was correct (as it obviously was), then it had been correct from the beginning. Thus, in the emerging orthodox narrative, Jesus’ followers had unanimously agreed not to circumcise Gentile converts (Acts 15), and Torah-observant Christianity had simply disappeared. Christians had “always” believed that Jesus was God; Jews had “always” objected to Christianity on theological grounds; Jews had “always” known that Jesus was the Messiah, but had stubbornly refused God’s offer of salvation. The rabbis likewise had an interest in portraying Christians as having always, already been different from Jews. Once Judaism and Christianity had become established as “opposite” religions, the leaders of both communities defined the differences between the groups as original and absolute. The fact that Christianity had begun as a form of Judaism and, in some circles, had remained one for centuries, was largely forgotten.

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