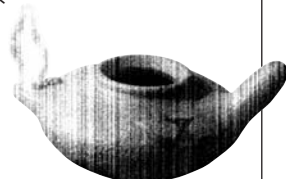


Jewish Believers in Jesus in Antiquity

– *Some Lessons from a History Project*

EVANGELISM – HERE AND NOW
MISHKAN



By **Oskar Skarsaune**

This essay is a “report on findings” from the international project *A History of Jewish Believers in Jesus—The First Five Centuries* (edited by myself and Reidar Hvalvik, henceforward abbreviated *HJB* 1, forthcoming, we hope, in 2005). I am not going to present the narrative story on Jewish Believers that resulted from the project; that story will be told in a later issue of *Mishkan*. I am rather going to present my personal reflections on some of the main questions raised by the phenomenon of “Jewish Christianity” in Antiquity, and some tentative conclusions to these reflections. I emphasize the words *personal* and *tentative*; given the nature and extent of the available evidence, any claim at full objectivity or final certitude would be very immature. We were 16 contributors to the *HJB* 1 project, and tried as best we could to profit from each other’s contributions and the feedback given to our own. But there are not many points on which there would be full agreement even among us, and I see this as a strength rather than a weakness of this project. The following reflections represent my own way of looking at things, and cannot claim the full agreement of any other scholar within the project.¹

On the Definition of Terms

This point is – strictly speaking – not about findings, but about the main heuristic tool to make findings: how do we define the people we are looking for? It is not by accident that most histories and many studies on Jewish Believers in Antiquity have preferred another main term for the object of investigation: Jewish Christianity, Judaeo-Christianity, *Judenchristentum*, and the like. Common to these terms is a basically *ideological* definition of the people we are talking about. The term *Jewish* is given an ideological-theological meaning. Sometimes, and in recent times very often, the main element in Jewishness is seen to be *continued*

¹ Here and in the following, I refrain from giving references to primary sources and relevant secondary literature. Once and for all I refer the reader to the forthcoming *HJB—The First Five Centuries*, in which full references and extensive argument for the points of view presented in this essay are given.

observance of the Law, or to be more precise, observance of those elements in the Law that were considered obligatory for Israel alone, and not for gentiles. Sometimes, in recent times more seldom, a theological criterion is added: since the “high” Christology of the predominantly gentile church was thought to be essentially non-Jewish, a “low” Christology was thought to be typical of Jewish Christianity.² Some scholars would like to make one or both of these criteria the only ones, so that a Jew by birth who as a believer in Jesus abandoned his or her observance of the Law, should be regarded a gentile Christian. Born gentiles who adopted the theology and practice of Jewish Christianity should then be regarded Jewish Christians. Other scholars would prefer to include the criterion of ethnicity, so that “Jewish Christian” designates a believer in Jesus who (1) is a Jew by birth, *and* who (2) maintains a Jewish identity by continuing to observe the Law in a Jewish way. According to this way of thinking, born Jews who – as Christians – abandoned observance of the Law, should no longer be characterized as “Jewish Christians,” but only as “Christian Jews.” Gentiles who adopted a Jewish way of life should then be regarded as “Judaizers,” not Jewish Christians.

The latter way of defining the terms has gained some following in recent years, and has been adopted also in our project. But we decided very early in the process that to us “Christian Jews” were as interesting and relevant as “Jewish Christians,” and that we needed a term which covered both groups. This term would make ethnicity the one and only decisive criterion: the people we were interested in were *all those Jews (by birth or conversion) who in one way or other believed in Jesus as their savior*. We decided to call these people “Jewish Believers in Jesus.” This term has the advantage not only of being inclusive of different types of Jewish Believers, but also of being free of the ideological difficulties in terms like “Jewish Christian.”

As is well known, many modern Jewish Believers consider “Christian” a term indicating a non-Jewish way of life, and perhaps also a non-Jewish (if not to say anti-Jewish) way of formulating faith in Jesus. “Jewish Christian” therefore sounds very much like “square circle” to many modern readers, especially within the community of Messianic Jews. That was also one reason to avoid it as much as possible in our project, and to prefer “Jewish Believers in Jesus.” Even so, “Jewish Christian” is such a well-established term for a specific type of Jewish Believer in Jesus that we could not discard it completely. Besides, there is no adjective corresponding to Jewish Believers in Jesus. Here, “Jewish Christian” as an adjective is as good as indispensable.

One could also add another consideration. Using “Jewish Christian” as a modern scholarly term could be seen as an effective strategy in reclaiming the original meaning of “Christian.” In Antiquity “Christian” simply

2 Since this Christological criterion has been accorded little if any weight in the most recent definitions of Jewish Christianity – in my view rightly so – I will disregard it in the following discussion.

meant “follower of (the) Christ,” regardless of the ethnic origin of the believer. It was the common name in Greek of all believers in Jesus, just as *nozrim* or *nazoraye*, “followers of the Nazorean,” was the common name of believers in Jesus in Hebrew and Aramaic/Syriac – regardless of ethnic origin. (More on this below.)

Not “Gentile Christianity” and “Jewish Christianity”

In defining a Jewish Believer who adheres to a Jewish way of life as the more authentic *Jewish* Believer, one assumes a clear criterion of Jewishness: *observance of the Law*. One also easily conjures up a total picture of early Christianity along the following lines: in the beginning, there was Jewish Christianity, and Jewish Christianity only. The only difference between Jewish Believers in Jesus and other Jews was that Jewish Believers believed Jesus to be the Messiah. Then came Paul, and with him gentile Christianity began. Paul taught gentile believers that they should not become Jews; they did not need to get circumcised and observe the commandments peculiar to Israel. Thus arose a new type of Christianity that had little in common with Jewish Christianity, but which soon eclipsed it numerically. When this happened, Jewish Christianity faced a dilemma not foreseen by Paul, who himself had remained a Law-obedient Jew throughout his life: (1) either to remain Law-observant, but become isolated and marginalized; or (2) to assimilate into the dominant non-Jewish church by abandoning a Jewish lifestyle, and hence to disappear as *Jewish* Believers. According to current wisdom, both processes took place simultaneously, but the latter option was the most common and the one that prevailed after the fifth century C.E., when Jewish Christianity, defined by the first option, more or less became extinct.

If this picture were correct, one implication necessarily would follow: assimilation of Jewish Believers into predominantly gentile communities was something that was *forced upon* these believers by the triumphant gentile church. It was rarely if ever the result of their own free choice. And if they made this choice voluntarily, many modern Jewish Believers deem it a wrong choice, a choice they would never have made, had the gentile church allowed them to remain Jewish.

I have no intention of contradicting this picture on all points and establishing its stark opposite as the historical truth. As I see it, this picture is in need of nuance rather than outright contradiction. But on the last point mentioned above, the one concerning forced assimilation, I come very close to a direct contradiction. Let me elaborate this point by saying a few words about Paul.

I sympathize with the recent trend in Pauline studies which makes Paul more Jewish than he has been painted traditionally. I agree that Paul himself – normally – continued a Jewish way of life after he had come to faith in Jesus, and that he did *not* encourage other Jewish Believers to break with this lifestyle. The accusation that Paul did in fact discourage Jewish Believers from a Jewish lifestyle, reported in Acts 21:21, is obvi-



ously thought by Luke to be a *false* accusation. But this is not the whole story. In the good interest of making Paul a good, Law-observant Jew, one should not suppress the clear implications of what Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians 9:20–21:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the Law I became as one under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law) so that I might win those under the Law. To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law (though I am not free from God's Law but am under Christ's Law) so that I might win those outside the Law.

Paul obviously took great pride in being a strictly Law-obedient Jew – before his calling outside Damascus and after. But after the encounter outside Damascus, this was not his ultimate and final standard of behavior. It had been subordinated to an even greater and more final standard: to obey in all cases the Law of God as it had been incarnated anew in the person of Jesus. In certain circumstances that meant to become like a gentile to the gentiles. There is an undeniable element of “assimilation” here, in the original sense of this term: becoming like, *similar*, to someone. And notice carefully that this was not something peculiar to Paul. According to what he says in Galatians 2:14, when Peter came to Antioch (and before “certain people came from James”), Peter, “though being a Jew, lived like a Gentile and not like a Jew.” In other words, when living in a mixed community of Jewish and gentile believers, *Peter*, like Paul, abandoned Jewish practices – presumably those which made full table fellowship and full social integration between Jews and non-Jews difficult.

I find it extremely difficult to avoid this conclusion, unless one resorts to strained exegesis of these and other similar passages. And this is my first point here: assimilation, becoming a “Gentile to Gentiles,” was not something forced upon Jewish Believers by a triumphant gentile church. It was a missionary strategy followed by the early Jewish Believers themselves, be they Peter, Barnabas, Paul, or other envoys from the Mother Church at Jerusalem.

My second point is this: this strategy did not make them un-Jewish. There was nothing un-Jewish about it. Did Peter or Paul – in acting like this – have any consciousness of *abandoning Judaism* or becoming un-Jewish? I would say certainly not – rather the contrary.

There are traces in rabbinic literature of a doctrine that has mostly been suppressed in this literature (because it is contrary to its dominant tendency): *in the Messianic age there will be changes to the role as well as to the contents of the Torah*. One midrash explicitly refers to the abolishment of dietary laws. This doctrine was by no means un-Jewish. It was not un-Jewish to think that the Messianic age would mean radical changes to many things. When Peter and Paul made compromises with those commandments in the Law that prohibited full table fellowship be-



tween Jews and gentiles, they did *not* thereby abandon Judaism. On the contrary, they took the full consequences of the eschatological dimension of their Judaism. Acting like they did, was something deeply Jewish. The most profound difference between them and their non-believing Jewish compatriots was not the question of the Law's interpretation, but the question of in which time period they were living – the Days of the Law or the Days of the Messiah.

For Jewish Believers thinking along these lines, observance of the Law, and the degree of observance, would be *a question of circumstances much more than a question of theology*. In areas where local communities were mainly made up of Jewish Believers one has to imagine that customs and lifestyle remained Jewish, not only on an individual level, but also on the communal level. This would be the case regardless of which school of theology the community in question adhered to: Pauline, Petrine, Matthean, Johannine, or otherwise. We observe evidence of such communities in the Land of Israel until and beyond the Bar Kokhba war, but gradually declining during the latter half of the second century and through the third.

We seem to have evidence of a more vigorous presence of such communities in the Transjordan and Syria from the second through the fifth century C.E. Epiphanius in the 370s, and Jerome a few decades later, call them *Nazoreans*, probably using the common Syriac name for Christians (in general) as the name of these groups which were known by no specific sect-name, because they were not sectarian. Jerome, who is best informed concerning these people, and knows and quotes some of their literature, knows nothing that is wrong with their theology. They apparently have a normally “high” Christology, and seem to recognize the apostleship of Paul. Jerome seems genuinely puzzled that this could be so, considering that they still practiced an entirely Jewish lifestyle. To Jerome this was a contradiction, but we need not go any further than to his contemporary Augustine to find a theologian who accepted that this – under certain circumstances – was possible and even theologically defensible. We have every reason to believe that acceptance of this was even greater on the grass-root level within the gentile church than it was among its leaders. In the second century we find the layman Justin saying that as long as Jewish Believers did not force gentile believers to keep the Law, it was quite okay for the Jewish Believers themselves to keep the Law like other Jews. Justin adds that there are some Christians who agree with him on this, while others take a stricter view.

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In mixed communities of Jewish and gentile believers – and such communities would be the norm rather than the exception throughout the Mediterranean diaspora – the practical compromises necessary for full table fellowship between Jewish and non-Jewish Believers would be the

overruling concern. As Jewish Believers increasingly became the minority, and often a small minority at that, it was probably more often the case that *they* had to make the greatest concessions in this compromise situation. Practicing a fully Jewish lifestyle would be a near practical impossibility under these circumstances. Let me emphasize once again: this did *not* necessarily imply that these people had a different theology with regard to the Law than had the Nazoreans of Transjordan and Syria. It needs not imply more than that their circumstances were different. The Nazoreans had every reason to be "Jews to Jews"; the Jewish Believers of the Greek diaspora had very often every reason to be "Gentiles to Gentiles."

This is not to say that each and every Jewish Christian community in the East, and each and every mixed community in the Greek diaspora, shared the same Pauline theology. The available evidence rather points in the direction of a quite wide range of different theologies and different profiles in different areas, and even in the same areas at different times. But the *practical conclusions* that followed from Pauline theology with regard to Jewish practice in a Jewish environment, and accommodation and assimilation in a gentile environment, were probably shared by other communities with other theological profiles than Paul's.

The net result of these considerations is that the traditional theological construct of a Pauline "Gentile Christianity" versus a partly anti-Pauline "Jewish Christianity" more or less evaporates as inadequate. Instead of one big fault line between these two segments of the early church, one should probably envisage many, but lesser, criss-crossing fault lines that followed other formations in the varied terrain of early Christianity.

What has been argued in general terms in this paragraph, will perhaps become more concrete by the examples given in the following.

The Jerusalem Network and Paul's Network Were Extensive and Interlocking

In *HJB* 1 Richard Bauckham presented a review of the persons we know by name (from the New Testament and early Patristic writers) who belonged to the Mother Church in Jerusalem before 70 C.E. In addition to the twelve apostles, they were at least the following. (1) Hebrew or Aramaic speakers: Mary, the mother of Jesus; James, Joses, Simon and Judas, brothers of Jesus; Clopas and Mary and their son Simon, Jesus' relatives; others were Addai, Ananias and Sapphira, Joseph Barsabbas Justus, Joseph of Arimathea, Matthias, Nicodemus, Thebouthis; (2) Greek speakers (or bilingual): (a) the Seven: Stephen, Philip (the Evangelist and his four daughters), Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolaus; (b) others: Andronicus and Junia, John Mark and his mother Mary, Simon of Cyrene and his family, Barnabas, Judas Barsabbas, Manson, Rhoda, Silas. That is about 50 names, and if we include their families as believers, we get a group of people associated with these names only of about 200 people. The Greek-speakers were mostly diaspora Jews resident in Jerusalem; in the above list they make out a third of the total group. This

could well be typical of the ratio between “Hebrews” and “Hellenists” (diaspora Jews) in Jerusalem as a whole in those days. This at once corrects one popular notion about the Mother Church in Jerusalem: it did *not* keep apart in isolation from the vibrant communities of diaspora Jews all around the Mediterranean and also in the East. On the contrary, Jerusalem was the natural center of diaspora Judaism. There was much traveling and much migration in both directions between Jerusalem and the different diaspora communities. This was true for Jews in general, and also for the community of believers in Jesus, as testified extensively in the Book of Acts. To portray the Mother Church in Jerusalem as some kind of isolated backwater, living its own life completely isolated from the Christian communities in the diaspora, betrays lack of historical insight.

The same point is illustrated from the other side if we make a corresponding list of persons named either as co-workers or as acquaintances of Paul (in his letters and in Acts). One is struck by the significant *overlap* between this list and the list above. Of the 17 diaspora Jews named as members of the Mother Church in Jerusalem, we find five (one third) mentioned as co-workers of Paul: *Andronicus and Junia, John Mark, Barnabas, and Silas*. In addition we can add the names of some 20 persons among Paul’s co-workers that were also Jewish Believers, but from a diaspora background. Whether any of these at some period were members of the Jerusalem community, is unknown. This brings the total number of Jewish Believers who were acquaintances and co-workers of Paul to 25; the total number of individuals named as acquaintances and co-workers in the Pauline letters and Acts is about 88. In other words, among the great number of persons in Paul’s network, supporting and assisting him in his mission, close to a third were Jewish Believers, and among these at least five were members of the Jerusalem community and network.

The point I am making here corresponds to and supports the point made above. Not only was the Mother Church in Jerusalem not isolated from the diaspora; the mission of Paul and associates in the diaspora was by no means isolated and separate from the greater community of Jewish Believers, in the diaspora as well as in Jerusalem. This in itself may seem trivial, and the kind of evidence listed above may seem strikingly “untheological.” But that is, historically speaking, the strength of this evidence. The map of the “Jerusalem network” and the “Pauline network” that we extract from the sources, and the overlap between the two networks, is evidence uninfluenced by any theological tendency in the sources. The tendency of Paul himself in his letters, and of Luke in Acts, is to some extent to isolate Paul and put him in a category all by himself, as if he were the one and only missionary to the gentiles. When modern scholars construe a “Pauline Christianity” that is the dominating antithesis to the “Jewish Christianity” of the Jerusalem community (and its daughter communities then and later), they fall prey to this ten-

among the great number of persons in Paul’s network, supporting and assisting him in his mission, close to a third were Jewish Believers



dency, and even exaggerate it beyond what the sources say. The existence of the two interlocking networks within which Paul operated, is sufficient to question in a fundamental way the isolation into which Paul and his "Law-free Gospel" are often set. When read carefully, and with attention to this problem, the Pauline letters and Acts tell basically the same story as the name-lists presented above.

A Regional Case Study: Jewish and Gentile Believers in Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia

If the picture indicated above – mixed communities of gentile and Jewish Believers being quite "normal" in the diaspora – is accurate, we would expect some evidence of the continued influence of Jewish Believers in many diaspora communities, especially in those areas where they made up a substantial element. It seems that this was the case in Asia Minor, Syria and Mesopotamia (Babylonia) more than anywhere else, and I shall comment briefly on possible evidence of this influence in these areas.

It is a well known fact that in the late second century there was a heated discussion between the leading bishops in Asia Minor and the leading bishop of the West, the bishop of Rome, concerning the right term for celebrating Passover. The believers in Asia Minor celebrated Passover on the same date as the local Jews, though probably extending their celebration throughout the night until early next morning. The believers in Rome celebrated Passover the evening and night before the first Sunday after the Jewish Passover eve, and had their main celebration during the regular worship Sunday morning. The traditional way of interpreting this has been to think that both ways of celebrating Passover among Christians were early, and that they had been competing for quite some time when this debate erupted. In recent years, scholars have re-evaluated the whole question, and many have come to the conclusion that the Roman practice was quite new in the last two decades of the second century, and that prior to this date, the practice in Asia Minor was the only existing one. You either celebrated Passover on the same date as other Jews, or not at all. In areas where Passover was not celebrated, the common understanding among believers would probably have been that they celebrated Passover on a weekly basis, each Sunday, and that this supplanted the Jewish custom of Passover once a year. Since there seems to have been a tendency among gentile believers of thinking that Jewish festivals in general were no longer obligatory for them, this should be considered a typical gentile Christian practice.

In other words: the "quartodeciman" (celebrating Passover on the eve of 14th Nisan) practice of Asia Minor is very likely the result of the strong influence of Jewish Believers in this area. And in one of the documents from the debate between Asia Minor and Rome, ca. 195 C.E., which Eusebius has preserved for us, there seems to be direct evidence that this was in fact the case. The document in question is a letter from bishop Polycrates of Ephesus to the bishop of Rome. In this letter, Polycrates

points to the fact that he is by no means alone in celebrating Passover on the 14th. He is himself the eighth bishop in an illustrious succession of seven predecessors, whom he enumerates as follows: the Apostle *Philip*; *John* (the author of the Fourth Gospel); *Polycarp* of Smyrna; *Thraseas* of Eumonia; *Sagaris* of Laodicea, *Papirius*; and *Melito* of Sardis. Polycrates calls these seven his *syngeneis*. This could either mean they were all his relatives; or, more probably, his *countrymen* (this is the meaning in which Paul applies this term in Rom 9:3). In any case, the inclusion of Philip and John in this list clearly indicates that *all of the seven were Jewish*, as was Polycrates himself.

When this implication of Polycrates' letter was first pointed out to me, I felt an almost instinctive disinclination to accept it. Was the well-known bishop Polycarp of Smyrna really a Jewish Believer? And the (in)famously anti-Jewish Melito of Sardis – was he himself Jewish? But then, when I approached the literature connected with these two figures with this new question on my mind, there were in fact some features in Polycarp's martyrdom; and in Melito's *On the Pasch*, which made excellent sense on the assumption that the conflict with the Jews in these writings was *intra-mural*; that is, a conflict between Jews believing in Jesus and Jews who rejected this faith. This seems to me to be especially clear in Melito. The whole question of which polemic against Jews and Judaism is intramural, and which is external, is extremely interesting in itself, and of great consequence in assessing the problem of early Christian "anti-Jewish" polemic; but I cannot go further into that here.

Another interesting aspect of the quartodeciman practice of Asia Minor, is the fact that – apart from Rome – other churches with another practice seem, by and large, to have considered the problem of how and when to celebrate Passover as a question where differences of practice were no major problem. This is the position of Irenaeus of Lyons, and he was probably more representative of the Western communities than the stricter bishop of Rome. In other words, a "Jewish" practice concerning Passover was widely tolerated by other churches with another practice.

It is interesting to notice that something similar is attested for Asia Minor at a much later period, in the latter part of the fourth century, the 370s. At that time, some of the bishops of the Novatian church in Phrygia, Asia Minor, decided that (presumably) local tradition of celebrating the Christian Easter (Saturday/Sunday) within the Jewish Week of Unleavened Bread should be kept, in spite of the ordinary practice of the Novatian church elsewhere (which followed the Nicene calculation of Easter, designed to separate Christian Easter from Jewish Passover). This resulted in a synod of Novatian bishops. They pronounced that the question of date for Passover was "indifferent"; each community was free to follow the practice they saw most opportune. One of the Novatian church leaders to defend the more "Jewish" practice was Sabatius, himself a Jewish Believer. Nobody found fault with his practice, only with the fact that he did not himself tolerate others who acted differently.

In Syria and Mesopotamia quartodeciman Passover seems to have been



even more universal than in Asia Minor, and during a longer period of time. In the normative and "orthodox" Church Order called *The Didascalia of the Apostles* (preserved in Syriac, mid-third century) it is said to the gentile Christians that they should observe Passover at the same time "as your brethren from the People," that is, the Jewish Believers, who celebrated at the same time as their non-believing fellow Jews. Towards the end of the fourth century we hear Christians from Mesopotamia saying to their fellow believers (presumably in the West): "You abandoned the fathers' Paschal rite in Constantine's time from deference to the emperor, and changed the day to suit the emperor."

This is not the only evidence of a strong and continuous influence of Jewish Believers on church life in general in the regions of Syria and Mesopotamia. For further details and argument I refer the reader to the forthcoming *HJB* 1 volume.

How Sectarian Were Jewish Believers?

The net result of the evidence and argument presented above is no doubt this: most Jewish Believers were not sectarian at all, but surprisingly well integrated into local communities of mixed composition. In areas where they were numerically significant, they were even allowed a greater amount of "Jewish" practice than elsewhere, and gentile believers were often encouraged to follow suit. Viewed from this angle, how are the reports on Jewish Christian sects contained in the writings of the Church Fathers to be evaluated?

I said in the introductory paragraph of this essay that the views expressed here are my personal ones, and not anything like a consensus position. This applies particularly to what I say in the following.

Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius and Epiphanius all speak of a Jewish Christian sect they call *Ebionaioi*, Ebionites. This Greek word is partly a rendering, partly a misunderstanding, of the Hebrew term *Ebionim*, "The Poor Ones." If this term had been fully understood, it should have been translated into Greek *Hoi Ptochoi*. The way *Ebionaioi* is constructed, its normal meaning would be "followers of Ebion," and this was how the term was understood by Tertullian, possibly also by Irenaeus himself, who is the first to use it. In this way the "father" of this sect, the man "Ebion," came into being. Among later fathers, it is only Origen and Epiphanius (who both spent many years in the Land of Israel) who knew that *ebion* really meant poor. The following points seem to have been typical of the *ebionim* described by Irenaeus: (1) exclusive use of Matthew (not of the other gospels, especially not of John); (2) the claim that Jesus, in order to be David's royal son, was the biological son of Joseph, who, according to Matthew's genealogy, was David's royal son; (3) the claim that Jesus had been elected and anointed to be the Messiah because of righteousness; and (4) the doctrine that all Jesus' disciples (Jewish or gentile) should follow their Master's example in obeying the whole Torah fully. There is hardly any doubt that a group of Jewish Believers holding

these views really existed, because there is evidence in Justin Martyr (ca. 150–60) to corroborate it. But interestingly, Justin does not name these Jewish Believers by a sect-name. He does not call them *Ebionites*, nor anything else. On the other hand, in the usually well-informed Origen, a hundred years later than Justin, there are clear indications that Origen could use *Ebionites* as a general term for *all* Jewish Believers, adding that some of them did *not* hold the doctrines of the group usually called *Ebionites* (that is, called *Ebionites* by Irenaeus and those dependent of him). This all makes sense based on the following assumption: *Ebionim* was originally a self-designation that was common among many, perhaps all Jewish Believers in Semitic-speaking areas (the Land of Israel and Transjordan/Syria). They took it from the many passages of the Hebrew Bible in which “the poor” are that part of the people of Israel who are persecuted and downtrodden by the rich and mighty and the leaders of the people, but are also those to whom God promises his salvation. They may also have been inspired by the first of the Matthean beatitudes: blessed are the poor...

Irenaeus had some knowledge of the same type or group of Jewish Believers that Justin had described before him, but in Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses* a sect-name (and preferably a sect-founder) was needed for them, in line with the scheme of the book. Since Irenaeus knew no such name (none existed), he chose to call them by the only name he knew to be specific for Jewish Believers: *ebionim*, rendered *ebionaioi*, “followers of Ebion,” in Greek. Once invented as sect-name for this specific type of Jewish Believers by Irenaeus, the “sect” of the Ebionites was to have a long literary after-life, reaching its peak in Epiphanius. He heaps upon the poor Ebionites each and every document he suspects of being Jewish Christian in character and origin, resulting in a confused and contradictory picture of their practice and doctrines. Epiphanius is aware of this, but puts the blame for the contradictions, not on himself for poor scholarship, but on the *Ebionites*. They contradict themselves all the time! Surprisingly often, modern scholars take Epiphanius’ construction of Ebionite history, practice and doctrine more or less at face value. But if anything in the ancient sources is in need of deconstruction, it is Epiphanius’ picture of the Ebionites. In the *HJB* 1 and elsewhere I have argued that neither the Pseudo-Clementine writings, nor the Elchesaite writings, nor the so-called Ebionite Gospel – all of which Epiphanius used as primary sources to Ebionite teaching – have anything at all to do with the Ebionites (as defined by Irenaeus). When the necessary source criticism is done, Epiphanius’ Ebionites evaporate and stand forth as his own fanciful construction. By implication, there is also a modern monograph which becomes exposed as without sufficient basis in careful source analysis: Hans Joachim Schoeps’ *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*. Following Epiphanius, Schoeps made the Pseudo-Clementines his main source of evidence on the “Ebionites” whom Schoeps thought were the most immediate successors of the *Urgemeinde* of Jerusalem of the first century. My personal opinion is that the so-called “Jewish Christianity” of



the Pseudo-Clementines is, for the greatest part, entirely artificial (except for the passage *Rec.* 1.27–71). These writings appear “Jewish Christian” because of the following factors: (1) According to the literary fiction of these writings, the spokesmen for the author’s point of view are Jesus’ disciples, led by Peter and are made to speak as Jewish Believers. (2) The great opponent addressed in these writings is often Marcion, whose spokesman in the literary fiction had to be a contemporary of Peter, hence Simon Magus of Samaria. In attacking Marcion, Marcion’s great authority Paul is unavoidably part of the package attacked, and in defending the Twelve Jewish “Ur-Apostles” and James, the author often comes out as very “Jewish” and anti-Paul. In reality, he is often more anti-Marcion than anti-Paul. (3) The author’s own position is so close to the known position of the Syrian teacher Bardaisan, that he could well be one of the latter’s disciples. Bardaisan was violently anti-Marcion, but himself had some gnostic leanings, which would explain the gnostic flavor of some of the doctrines in the Pseudo-Clementines. Bardaisan was not a Jewish Believer, and the echo of his views in the Pseudo-Clementines does by no means mark them out as Jewish Christian.

By what I have said already it has become clear that I do not regard the Book of Elxai and the Elchesaite movement as Jewish Christian. With regard to the second Jewish Christian sect named and discussed at some length by Epiphanius and Jerome, the Nazoreans, I have already indicated my view early in this essay. Epiphanius knew that in the Transjordan and Syria there existed Jewish Believers who were not Ebionites dogmatically speaking and they probably had an entirely orthodox Christology. Since Epiphanius could not call them Ebionites, he called them by the common name for Christians in this area: *nazoraye* in Syriac, which he rendered *nazoraioi* in Greek. Jerome accepted this as the name of Jewish Believers in this area, and had such regard for the doctrinal and exegetical value of some of their gospel versions and other writings that he quoted from them in his own commentaries. Thus arose the “sect” of the Nazoreans. In reality, they may well have been entirely “orthodox” Christians in their theology, but living in circumstances which made maintenance of an entirely Jewish way of life the only natural option.

With this I have to conclude these very selective remarks on some of the findings I personally found interesting and often surprising during our work with the *HJB* 1. One other area that would have been rewarding to go into, is the surprisingly rich literary legacy left behind by the Jewish Believers of Antiquity. But once again I must refer the reader to the forthcoming *HJB* 1. (If remarks like this serve as appetizers for the forthcoming volume, I am, of course, not inclined to complain.)

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