

# Lecture Two

## Christians Who Would Be Jews

**Scope:** This lecture begins by considering some of the key terms we will use in the course and the problems their typical definitions pose, such as *orthodoxy* (literally, "right belief") and *heresy* (literally, "choice"-used of those who have "chosen" not to believe the right beliefs). We then move to consider one early group eventually branded heretical, the Ebionites, Christians who maintained their Jewish beliefs, practices, and identities while believing that Jesus was the messiah. These Jewish-Christians had sacred books supporting their points of view, one of which was very much like our Gospel of Matthew. The lecture concludes by considering the irony that Jesus himself was fully Jewish, as were his disciples; yet these Ebionites, who also tried to remain Jewish, were eventually branded as heretics from the true faith.

### Outline

- I. In the last lecture, we discussed the wide range of early Christian belief and practice. In this lecture and the ones that follow, we will look at specific second- and third-century Christian groups that are known.
- II. In this lecture, we will consider one of the very earliest Christian groups we know about, the Ebionites, sometimes called Jewish Christians or Jewish Christian Adoptionists.
  - A. The meaning of their name is obscure, but it possibly derives from the Hebrew word *ebyon*, meaning "the poor."
  - B. We know about them only from the writings of the church fathers, who branded them as one of the "heresies" of the church, opponents of orthodoxy. These church fathers were writers in the early church who later came to be embraced as advocates and theologians of the true understanding of Christianity.
  - C. These are two important terms.
    1. *Orthodoxy* literally means "right belief"; *heresy* literally means "a choice."
    2. Both are problematic terms, given that no one thinks they believe the wrong beliefs (that is, everyone thinks they are orthodox!).

3. Thus, scholars use the terms to refer to the group that came to be dominant (orthodox) and the groups that were eventually excluded because they subscribed to other views (heresies).
  4. These other groups are possibly better called *heterodox* (a synonym of heresy but literally meaning "other belief").
  5. It may also be better, for our period, to refer to the groups who held views that were later recognized as being the right beliefs as the proto-orthodox.
- D. The Ebionites were later branded heretics by the proto-orthodox. This is ironic, because their beliefs may have been closer to those of Jesus' own apostles than those that were eventually embedded in the Nicene and other orthodox creeds.
- III. Our sources of information about the Ebionites are limited.
- A. We have no writings from any Ebionite author.
  - B. We must rely on the words of their opponents, who mentioned their views precisely to attack them – obviously a problematic set of sources!
    1. Irenaeus, a bishop of Gaul (modern-day France), wrote, around 180 AD., a five-volume work, *Against Heresies*.
    2. Epiphanius, a bishop in Salamis, also wrote a book against heresies, around 340 AD.
  - C. Occasionally, some of the Ebionites' own writings are quoted by these authors.
- IV. What did it mean to be Jewish in the ancient world?
- A. Two thousand years ago, virtually everyone was pagan – polytheists – neither Jewish nor Gentile.
  - B. Jews stood out because they were monotheists.
    1. Jews maintained that they were chosen by the one god to be his people.
    2. God gave Jews his laws so that they could live in ways that were appropriate. Through giving this law to Moses, God made a covenant with the Jews, his chosen people.
- V. The Ebionites were a group of Jewish-Christians who either were born Jewish or converted to Judaism, who kept Jewish customs and strictly followed the

Jewish laws (circumcision, sabbath observance, kosher food), but who believed that Jesus was the messiah of God.

- A. More specifically, they thought that Jesus had been the most righteous man on earth and, because of his righteousness, was "adopted" by God to be his son when he was baptized by John the Baptist.
- B. As God's son, Jesus had a specific task: to fulfill the Jewish expectations of the messiah by dying for the sins of the world.
- C. Jesus fulfilled his mission, and as a reward, God raised him from the dead.
- D. The Ebionites believed that because Jesus was the *Jewish* messiah, appointed by the Jewish God as the Jewish savior for the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish law, anyone who wanted to be right with God obviously had to become Jewish.
- E. As a consequence, they tried to convert other Jews to their faith in Jesus, and if they converted Gentiles, they insisted that the Gentiles also convert to Judaism.
- F. The Ebionites differed from other Jews in believing that Jesus was the messiah.
  - 1. For Jews, the messiah was to be a Jewish savior.
  - 2. Some Jews expected the messiah to be a political figure. Others thought that God would send a powerful cosmic savior to overthrow the powers of evil. All Jews expected the messiah to be great and powerful, able to overthrow God's enemies.
  - 3. Jesus did not fit the Jews' expectations of a messiah.
  - 4. Further, because Jesus was, for the Ebionites, the perfect sacrifice for all sins, no more sacrifices needed to be made.
  - 5. In the ancient world, most people ate meat only after it had been sacrificed in a religious ceremony; for this reason, the Ebionites became vegetarian.
- G. The Ebionites also differed from other Christians in that they insisted on remaining Jewish.
  - 1. But they also denied that Jesus was himself divine. Instead, he was fully human, born of the sexual union of Joseph and Mary and only adopted to be God's son at baptism.

2. They did not, therefore, hold to the doctrine of the virgin birth or to Jesus' preexistence or to his divinity.

- VI. To understand the eventual rejection of the Ebionites as heretics, we need to consider a bit more historical background.
  - A. Jesus himself was Jewish in every way, as were his earliest followers. From a historical view, the Ebionite understanding of Jesus as Jewish was probably correct.
  - B. By the second century, most Christian converts were former pagans who converted to believe in one God after worshiping many gods, but who were not interested in becoming Jews.
  - C. Starting at least with the apostle Paul, Christianity started appealing to Gentiles by urging that they did not have to become Jews in order to accept the salvation brought by the Jewish God.
    1. Paul himself went further: A person is made right with God completely by faith in Christ's death and resurrection alone, not by doing the works prescribed by the Jewish law.
    2. Any Gentile who attempted to be right with God by following the law had fallen from grace.
  - D. The Ebionites did not think highly of Paul. They claimed to follow the teachings of James, Jesus' own brother who became the head of the church in Jerusalem after Jesus' death, and had several controversies with Paul--especially over the need to keep the Jewish law.
- VII. How did the Ebionites deal with the fact that Paul's writings were part of the sacred Scriptures, the New Testament? For them, they were *not* part of the New Testament. They had their own sacred writings that they claimed to be derived from the original followers of Jesus.
  - A. One was a gospel that was very much like our Gospel of Matthew--widely considered the most Jewish of the gospels--but possibly lacking the first two chapters (the chapters describing Jesus being born of a virgin).
    1. This lost book is sometimes called the "Gospel of the Nazarenes" (an alternative name of one of the Ebionite groups).
    2. It may have been an Aramaic translation of Matthew.
    3. Matthew was probably appealing to this group because of its insistence that followers of Jesus must keep the Jewish law (see,

for example, Matt. 5: 18-20).

- B. A second gospel was actually called the Gospel of the Ebionites.
    - 1. This appears to have been some kind of conflation of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
    - 2. But it may have had some interesting modifications, including an emphasis on the importance of being vegetarian: John the Baptist, for example, is said to have had a diet not of locusts and wild honey, but pancakes and wild honey.
- VIII. The Ebionites may well have represented one of the earliest forms of Christianity.
- A. How ironic, then, that this form of Christianity, possibly associated originally with James, Jesus' own brother, should fall out of disfavor and be declared a heresy.
  - B. But Christian belief has never been stagnant; it moves on and changes. Anyone who maintained the older view, as a result, was left behind.

**Essential Reading:**

A. F. J. Klijn, *Jewish Christian Gospel Tradition*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 19-21.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*, chapter 4.

J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 3-16.

H.-J. Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Church*.

**Questions to Consider:**

- 1. What are the problems with historians defining the terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy* as “right belief” and “wrong belief?”

2. How could a view of religion that coincided in many ways with the understanding of Jesus and his original followers eventually be declared heretical?

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