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THE PARTING OF THE WAYS?

A BRIEF HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL
REFLECTION ON THE DEVELOPMENT
OF RABBINIC JUDAISM AND 'MESSIANIC
JUDAISM/CHRISTIANITY' FROM
THE MINISTRY OF JESUS TO THE
DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE



BY
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INTRODUCTION

How one understands and describes the so called 'parting of the ways' between 'Rabbinic Judaism' and 'Messianic Judaism/ Christianity' is one of the most complex and important issues both in regard to interpreting the New Testament and in applying the message of the Gospel within the purposes of God. Therefore the stakes are high and we all need to walk gently, reflect deeply, speak carefully and pray faithfully.

In this context I am very encouraged to see that within both contemporary academic research (including both Jewish and Christian scholars) and many theological and ministerial training courses, a greater emphasis is now being placed upon the study of this early period of the 'Church' and the so-called 'parting of the ways' and its theological and missional implications for today.

It is therefore clear that the serious study of the 'parting of the ways' between 'Rabbinic Judaism' and 'Messianic Judaism/Christianity' is growing in importance, and will hopefully become for many Church and Synagogue leaders an essential, non-marginal part of their ministry formation. In addition to the study of the 'parting of the ways', I would also hope that there would be space made within any significant ordination/ministry syllabus for two other closely related topics to be included. Firstly, for the study of Judaism as a living faith today, and secondly, for the study of shared Scriptural traditions and spirituality, with a special awareness of the

significance of the Land of Israel and associated ideas of pilgrimage, sacred space, and sacred time.

Throughout Church and Jewish history much has been written about this ‘parting of the ways’ and I warmly recommend the following historical and contemporary writers who have helped shape my understanding over many years: John Atkinson, Robert Badenas, James Charlesworth, Jean Danielou, W D Davies, James Dunn, Albert Edersheim, Jakob Jocz, David Pawson, Ray Pritz, E P Sanders, Samuel Sandmel, Adolph Saphir, Marcel Simon, Oskar Skarsaune, R Kendall Soulen, David Stern, Geza Vermes, M R Wilson, N T Wright and Brad Young. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but I hope it is a helpful starting place for some.

SETTING THE SCENE OR MARKING YOUR CARD

Early ‘Messianic Judaism/Christianity’ along with other varieties of Judaism of the late Second Temple period was far from uniform; in fact it can be argued that what existed was confusingly diverse. In most cases attempting to present a systematic scrutiny of the phenomena general known as the ‘parting of the ways’ opens one up to the charge of over-simplification. However, while aware of this concern, I think it is helpful initially to state that there are three main historical and theological explanations of how this ‘parting of the ways’ took place.

Firstly, what one may call the traditional and in most contexts the established explanation. In this explanation Biblical Judaism is understood as the mother religion and Christianity as the daughter, in many Jewish eyes as an errant daughter, and in many Christian eyes as the triumphant daughter. There is a clear divide between the mother and the daughter, yet there is also some common ground, which at times is acknowledged and celebrated by some who hold to this traditional explanation.

This common ground is found in the mutual sharing of what is broadly understood as the three revelatory events. Firstly, the creation; secondly, the call of and covenant with Abraham and thirdly, the Exodus with the giving of the Torah through Moses. This common ground often leads to speaking about a shared Jewish-Christian worldview and shared Jewish-Christian ethics, albeit within two separate religious structures, namely post-Temple ‘Rabbinic Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’.

The clear divide or the ‘parting of the ways’ is seen within this traditional explanation as a result of the Jewish ‘No’ largely triumphing over the Jewish ‘Yes’ in regard to what ‘Messianic Jews/Christians’ proclaimed as a fourth (and decisive) revelatory event, namely the person and work of Jesus.

Within this fourth revelatory event ‘Messianic Jews/Christians’ declared that God has acted and spoken decisively, uniquely, and completely through His Son (see John 1:18, Acts 4:12, Romans 1:9 and Hebrews 1:1-4). In regard to this speaking and acting, emphasis is placed upon His incarnation, His teaching, His atoning death, His resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and His promised return to rule in His full Kingdom power.

This decisive fourth revelatory event was embraced and interpreted by many Jews and non-Jews in the decades following the ministry of Jesus. Those who did embrace this fourth revelatory event became known primarily as ‘Messianic Jews/Christians.’ These ‘Messianic Jews/Christians’ went on to make and to declare many new theological claims about Jesus. Related closely to these declarations were instructions about how people (both Jewish and non-Jewish) should respond to His message and to His claims. Significant acceptance of the message took place, especially among (non-Jewish) ‘God-fearers’ who had been drawn close already over many years and in many contexts to the one true God, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Within this fast-moving and widely-spreading declaration about Jesus there was often much discussion (and many differences arose) around how this fourth event (namely the person and ministry of Jesus) related back to and is connected with the first three shared revelatory events. These discussions included, for example, key theological and pragmatic questions such as: How does the honouring of Jesus as LORD confirm or deny Jewish Monotheism? What, if any, is the purpose of the Temple, if Jesus has made a perfect and complete atonement for sin? Should the Torah be embraced by non-Jews, and if so how? And how does Israel’s election change in the light of an open summons for non-Jews to embrace the New Covenant?

Different answers to these and other related questions are found both within ‘Rabbinic’ streams and within ‘Messianic Jewish/Christian’ streams. There was no all-embracing normative response which could be ascribed to all ‘Rabbinic Jews’ or to all ‘Messianic Jews/Christians’ during the first decades of the ‘Church’.

The echoes of these open questions and the far-reaching ‘answers’ of the First Century can still be heard today within the missionary encounters and theological dialogue between ‘Rabbinic Jewish’ groups and ‘Messianic Jewish/Christian’ groups.

Ultimately,(and despite the internal differences in regard to many important questions about election, Torah theology and practice, Kingdom presence and future promise, Gentile inclusion etc.,) the demarcation point within these early years leading up to the ‘parting of the ways’ coalesced around a clear ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ to the person and work of Jesus (the fourth revelatory event). This should come as no surprise, for the same reality was already firmly in place during the early public ministry of Jesus, see for example John 7:37-43, which concludes with the words, “... *the people were divided because of Jesus.*”

Within this explanation the prevailing Jewish rejection (the Jewish ‘No’) of the revelatory significance of this fourth event is what causes the ‘parting of the ways’. The ‘parting’ is seen generally as having taken place by the time of the destruction of the Temple, yet the full recognition of this parting took many centuries to fully unfold or to be fully entrenched or fully understood. In this traditional explanation the shared Biblical Jewish heritage of the three previous revelatory events cannot hold the two Jewish groups together, namely those with a ‘Yes’ to Jesus and those with a ‘No’ to Jesus. A new religion is therefore formed as the ‘daughter’ leaves or perhaps is ‘forced out’ from the world of the ‘mother’.

This new world in which the daughter enters and largely flourishes is often seen, especially by ‘Rabbinic Jews,’ as a significantly non-Jewish world, shaped largely by Hellenism and wider Greek and Pagan ideas and values. Christianity is therefore seen as a new religious movement separated from Biblical Judaism and most significantly from Rabbinic Judaism (in its different forms post the destruction of the Temple). Rabbinic Judaism is also seen in this explanation as providing the authoritative and normative development of Biblical Judaism.

Holders of this traditional explanation often underplay the Jewish Biblical origins of ‘Christianity’ and consequently overplay the Greek and Pagan influences. Alongside this there is often an undermining of the significance of ‘Messianic Jews,’ both in the First Century and throughout subsequent Church history up to and including the present day.

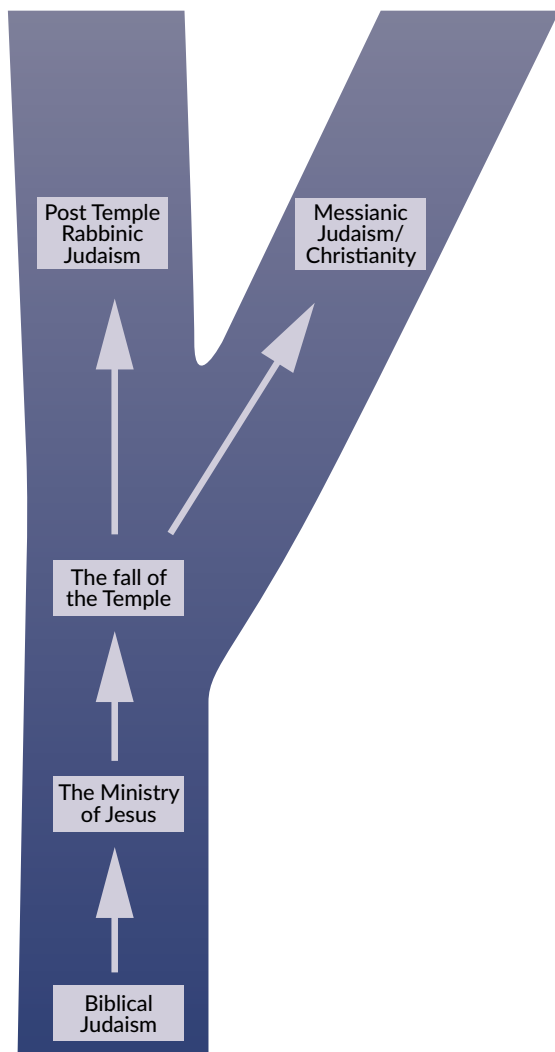
It is also the Rabbinic Jewish side which tends to present Christianity as falsely distorting Biblical Judaism and the Messianic hope contained within it. From the Christian side this explanation can accelerate a pursuit of Replacement Theology, as the emphasis is on Christianity breaking free from the 'shackles' of Biblical Judaism and beginning something new, and in some ways is seen as being significantly detached from Jewish faith and practice. In some extreme forms of Replacement Theology it is seen that the 'mother' is dead and the only appropriate 'Kingdom focus' is now solely on the new emerging 'daughter'.

There are also other seeds of potential polemic and conflict in this explanation, as 'Rabbinic Judaism' claims to be the only true inheritor of Biblical Judaism. Biblical Judaism is seen as flowing directly into post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism. Therefore there is conflict over who can claim to be the true 'People of God', the true 'Israel' and the true keepers and interpreters of the traditions of the Patriarchs and the Prophets. However, this conflict scenario is potentially muted by two core realities.

Firstly, this explanation recognises there is still a mother/daughter relationship (even if at best it is somewhat of a dysfunctional relationship) , and secondly, keeping a clear dividing line between 'Judaism' and 'Christianity' can, in some cases, lead to developing forms of a 'mutually affirming' Two-Covenant Theology. Holders of such a theology believe that such an understanding makes space for a faithful distinct 'Jewish path' and a faithful distinct 'Christian path' to emerge in a spirit of mutual respect, distinctiveness and potential shared learning.

The diagram on the next page is an attempt to illustrate this traditional explanation.

THE FIRST (TRADITIONAL) EXPLANATION OF THE 'PARTING OF THE WAYS'



The second explanation is much more nuanced in regard to the 'parting of the ways', and there is a greater emphasis on both Rabbinic Judaism and 'Messianic Judaism/ Christianity' having legitimate claims to upholding and developing Biblical Judaism. There is, to use James Dunn's insightful phrase, a "*contested identity*" found within

Rabbinic Judaism and ‘Messianic Judaism/Christianity.’ Christianity is in this model not a daughter who leaves (or is forced from) the mother to find a new (predominantly non-Jewish) path forward, but both Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity share equally in drawing from the flowing stream of Biblical Judaism. In other words, Biblical Judaism with its three revelatory events and core values remains the mother, but post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are children (twin siblings perhaps?) born equally out of the same womb of Second Temple Biblical Judaism.

Christianity, is not therefore, a newer movement than Rabbinic Judaism; both are born out of the varying responses to the fourth revelatory event and other core related factors, such as the destruction of the Temple, the growth of the Gentile mission of the ‘Church’, the Jewish exile from the Land of Israel and the shared engagement with the wider Hellenistic world.

In this explanation there is much more awareness of the shared history of interaction between Jews and Christians and subsequent mutual reformulation and development. Many of the boundary markers between Rabbinic Jews, Messianic Jews and Christians in this explanation are therefore much more fluid. There is, for example, awareness that you cannot simply speak of Christianity as a newer movement than Rabbinic Judaism, as for example the Talmud is compiled significantly later than the writings which make up the New Testament. Also holders of this explanation often argue that the prevailing Hellenistic world influenced and shaped emerging Rabbinic Judaism equally as much as it influenced and shaped emerging streams of Christianity.

Regarding this influence of Hellenism upon Rabbinic Judaism it should be noted that the Maccabees, who in many ways can be seen as the forerunners of the Pharisees (who in turn can claim to be one of the forerunners of post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism), secured significant freedom for Jewish life in Judea by integrating key parts of Hellenistic culture into Judaism. For many Jewish people such integration was not seen as a threat or as a difficult compromise they were forced to adopt, but rather as enrichment to be widely welcomed.

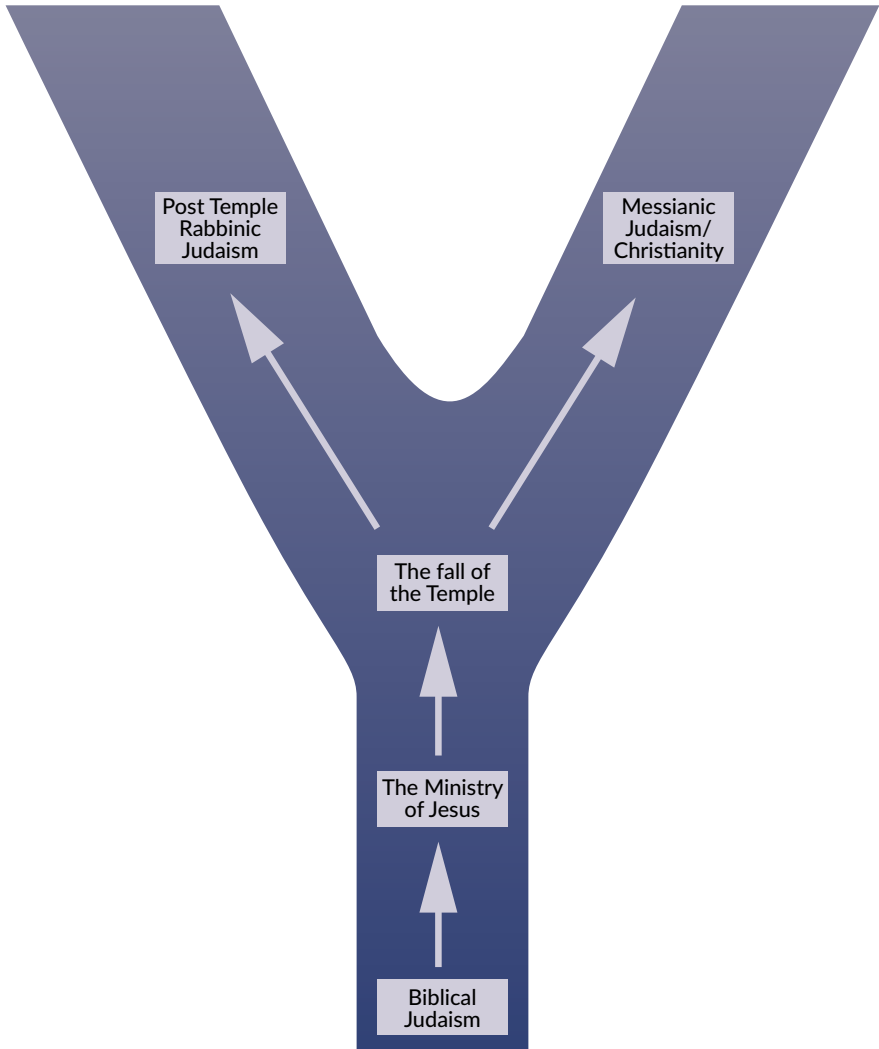
This second explanation tends to enhance a sense of the Jewish roots of Christianity and the significance of Messianic Judaism. It draws in part from the contemporary research which has led to offering a ‘new perspective on Paul’ (and by association Second Temple Judaism) and the modern quest for the Historical Jesus. This quest

rightly affirms the 'Jewishness of Jesus' and His ministry and His Kingdom focused message which connects so well within the contexts of late Second Temple Judaism.

This more nuanced modern explanation has also been aided by recent Jewish scholarly work which has in many ways re-evaluated and affirmed the Jewish context of early Christianity. Also relatively new discoveries, including the Dead Sea Scrolls (1948), the Nag Hammadi texts (1945), and the Didache (1873) have added useful source material which helps in exploring and engaging with the rich interconnections between Second Temple Judaism and emerging 'Messianic Judaism/Christianity.'

The diagram on the next page is an attempt to illustrate this second explanation.

THE SECOND EXPLANATION OF THE 'PARTING OF THE WAYS'



The third explanation is probably less well known and less rehearsed, but simply put it reverses the first traditional explanation. It would therefore see 'Messianic Judaism/Christianity' as the true heir of Biblical Judaism.

There is in the view of this explanation no significant theological break between Biblical Judaism and emerging 'Messianic Judaism/Christianity.' Rather, a simple

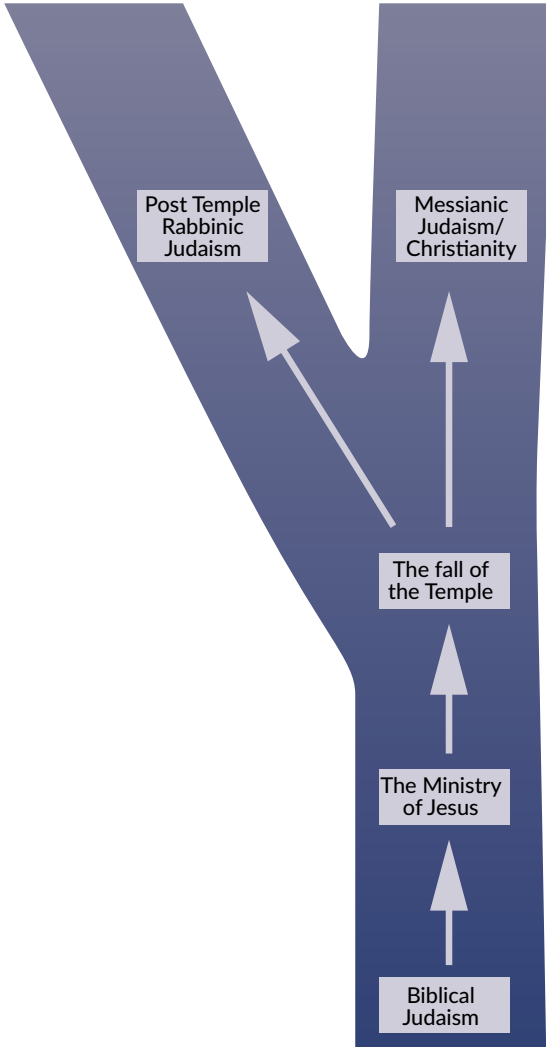
historical anomaly arose out of the Jewish 'No' to Jesus, namely the emergence of the only strand of Judaism (apart from 'Messianic Judaism/Christianity') which survived the destruction of the Temple, in other words Rabbinic Judaism. This strand is understood within this explanation as a false development with regard to upholding the main beliefs of Biblical Judaism.

Post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism is viewed (in this explanation) largely as a post-Messianic Jewish/Christian construct. This understanding can be seen as having shaped some of the early Church Fathers; for example Ignatius, who was keen to declare Christianity is not based on Judaism, but Judaism on Christianity. Also Justin Martyr who taught that Jewish believers are grafted into the Church to share the inheritance of believing Gentiles. Such an understanding is of course, a total turnaround of Paul's teaching (see Romans 9-11) where Gentile believers join the true Israel of Jewish believers (the faithful remnant) in order to share fully in the inheritance and blessings of the Gospel.

In upholding this explanation there is potentially a strong temptation for some to demean post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism, and maybe at times (and perhaps unintentionally?) a demeaning of Jewish identity itself. However, at the same time this explanation would seek to anchor Christianity firmly in her Biblical Jewish heritage as the true inheritor and interpreter of this rich Biblical heritage.

The diagram below is an attempt to illustrate this explanation.

THE THIRD EXPLANATION OF THE 'PARTING OF THE WAYS'



In all these three explanations, as was said in the introduction, there is much at stake, for how one accepts, rejects or seeks to refine an explanation will impact upon our engagement with Scripture and with various traditions. It will also affect how we define Jewish and Christian identity, and associated issues of authority, spirituality and mission strategy.

SEEKING A HELPFUL ILLUSTRATION OR DREAMING DREAMS OF RIVETS, MEANDERING RIVERS, BOWS, JUGGLERS AND FADING THREADS.

The three explanations I have presented see the ‘parting of the ways’ in terms of a stream (or river) flowing and creating new distinct channels as a result of responding to the ministry of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple. The picture of a stream/river has been helpful for some, and I tried to develop it in my book, *The Case for Enlargement Theology*. Here however, the picture of the river is extended way beyond this initial First-Century ‘parting of the ways’. Here I wrote; *“The river runs through time beginning to mark a definite course from the initial spring, namely the covenant call of Abraham. The river continues to widen and deepen as it is fed by the gifts of the covenants (Rom 9:3-5), yet at times the course of the river shrinks and appears dry as a result of God’s judgment and times of exile for Israel. However in the fullness of God’s covenantal purposes the river is wonderfully refreshed and enlarged by flowing through a new spring, namely the person and work of Jesus. Here the river draws in a new tributary, the in-gathering of the Gentiles. Yet at this very point of enlargement the river is divided, part of the river appears blocked, a hardening takes place. From this point the river begins to form a delta with three distinct yet connected streams. As the streams flow into the one delta, it is difficult at times to trace out the future courses of the streams as at times the streams flow in isolation, while at others within shared boundaries. However the promise remains that the three distinct yet connected streams within the one delta will become one when the river reaches the sea. Here the sea represents the full consummation of God’s covenantal purposes.*

As with any metaphor there are always limitations and lack of precision. However, the metaphor of the river is, I hope useful in attempting to show the continuity and discontinuity, the connectedness and disconnectedness, the unity without uniformity of the threefold ‘people of God’ within the constraints and insights of Enlargement Theology.”

Other pictures, models and metaphors have been suggested. I have already introduced the imagery of a ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ relationship, or of ‘twin siblings’ going their separate ways. In all of this it is worth noting that the clearest Biblical metaphor is provided by Paul in Romans chapter 11 with the teaching of the one olive tree with one root and many spreading branches. These branches are at times grafted in and at times cut out according to God’s purposes.

In addition to this Biblical picture of the olive tree, I have found the following illustrations and metaphors helpful. Firstly, Karl Barth, drawing upon Paul's teaching in Romans 11 states: *"There are two forms of the elected community. The two poles between which history moves (in a unilateral direction from here to there) but in such a way that the bow of the one covenant arches over the whole. For all the necessary sharpness, therefore restraint is also needed. The antithesis between the two cannot be formulated in exclusive terms. Behind and above the human obduracy characteristic of the Israelite form of the community stands indeed the divine rejection, but there stands also God's election in which He has determined Himself to take upon Himself the rejection. And behind and above the divine calling characteristic of the Church form of the community there stands also the rejection that God Himself has taken upon. The ineffaceable differentiation of the two forms of the community has certainly to be noted. But it has also to be noted that thereby its indissoluble unity is also brought to light."*

Secondly, David Stern, also reflecting upon Paul's teaching in Romans 11 states: *"Traditional Jewish theology sees God as throwing one ball into the air, the Jews. Christian Replacement Theology sees him as having thrown the Jewish ball into the air in the past, but now he has let it fall and is juggling the Christian ball. Two Covenant theology and Dispensationalism sees God somewhat more coordinated—he can juggle two balls at a time, both Jews and Christians. But only "olive tree theology" credits God with being able to juggle all three balls at once. Gentile Christians, Messianic Jews and non-Messianic Jews, without letting any of them drop to the ground."*

Thirdly, James Dunn offers two helpful images. However, firstly he wisely states that no single illustration or image can adequately describe such a complex historical process or development, before offering the images of fading garments and popping rivets. Dunn states: *"Probably the simplest imagery to use is the process in which parts of a garment pull apart over time, the threads which begin to break under the stresses of 'wear and tear', or the popping of rivets as heavy seas put unbearable strains on the metal plates of a ship and so on. Such imagery is still inadequate, but a focus on the strains and tensions between Jews and believers-in-Jesus, including not least Jewish believers-in-Jesus, seems most likely to bring to light what became the irreconcilable features which brought about the emergence of two different (and opposed) identities."*

As stated, I found such illustrations and imagery helpful in trying to understand and explain the 'parting of the ways'. Yet as with so much of theology (especially in areas of Christology and Trinitarian reflection) one becomes acutely aware of the limitations

of language and of illustrations and metaphors when seeking systematic expressions of theological truth, doctrinal convictions and complex historical movements.

GOING DEEPER OR LOOKING BEHIND THE EXPLANATIONS

Before you select your preferred explanation (or much better still offer a new one!) for the ‘parting of the ways’ and any helpful images or metaphors to illustrate your explanation, let’s begin by looking at some key factors which must impact upon and shape any explanation offered for the ‘parting of the ways’. For me I think there are four main ones we must consider:

FIRSTLY, THE DIVERSITY WITHIN FIRST-CENTURY JUDAISM.

All three explanations seem to present Biblical Judaism as a unified mono-cultural religious movement. Biblical Judaism is seen as the ‘one way’ which then split, forming two ways: post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. Clearly this was not the case in the First Century, and probably never was. In this First-Century period up to the destruction of the Temple there are at least five distinctive Jewish religious groupings, sects, schools of teaching or parties. I think it is helpful in any discussion of Biblical Judaism in the time of Jesus to talk of its several varieties. Some scholars talk of several Biblical Judaisms. However, I think this confuses the issue, as despite the real differences and diversity within the several varieties of Biblical Judaism, there nevertheless existed an over-arching and unifying Jewish identity and a historic continuity. For example, there is a clear and widely affirmed difference between Jews and Samaritans. This ‘Jewish unity’ is based on belief in the election of Israel, reverence for the Torah and Temple and above all faith in the one true God - the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I think a detailed study of these varieties is very helpful in viewing the ‘parting of the ways’. The key point here in regard to the ‘parting of the ways’ is that it is important to recognise that ‘Messianic Judaism/Christianity’ certainly prior to the destruction of the Temple, must be seen as fully part of the Jewish world. From this viewpoint one sees that the mission work undertaken by these first-generation ‘Messianic Jews’/Christians’ must be seen as a challenging renewal message focused primarily within Judaism itself, before it became in most later contexts, a challenging external message to ‘normative’ Judaism.

The five parties are as follows (and not in any particular order): Sadducees, Pharisees, Messianic Jews/Christians, Zealots and Essenes. All five groups shared in claiming a true Jewish identity, a commitment to Torah and a vision of the coming Kingdom. Yet within their understandings of, and the outworking of, identity, Torah commitment and Kingdom vision there were irreconcilable differences and unique, and at times contradictory, convictions were being held.

Let's take a brief view of each of these parties in turn while recognising that all parties had within them different strands and none should be viewed as being strictly uniform.

The Pharisees: One of the three Jewish parties (along with the Sadducees and the Essenes) mentioned by Josephus. Pharisaic groups seem to have flourished from the late Second Century BC, and emphasised a separation (the Hebrew word *'Perushim'* means to separate) from non-religious concerns and towards a commitment to seeking to know and to faithfully live out Torah in everyday life. Some scholars, although suggest the original context of the separation was to distance themselves from the values and practices of the Sadducees.

The Pharisees were different from the Sadducees in three main doctrinal ways namely the Pharisees belief in the gift from God of an 'oral Torah' along with a well-developed faith in the 'after-life', and in the realm of angels and spirits. In the Gospel account Jesus had many conflicts with the Pharisees, yet in many ways Jesus seemed closer to the Pharisees than any other Jewish group, and perhaps the New Testament indicates the Pharisees were more 'open' to the 'Christian' message than the Sadducees and other Jewish sects.

In some areas of Jewish and Christian thought the Pharisees are seen to be the direct fore-runners of post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism. While there are some strong connections between Rabbinic Judaism, which re-emerged and was re-constituted post-Temple beginning in Yavneh (and later in the Galilee, based firstly in Sepphoris and then Tiberias) and the Pharisees at the time of Jesus, a direct seamless continuity between the two, I think is often over-stated. I think it is unhelpful simply to say Pharisaic Judaism became Rabbinic Judaism post the destruction of the Temple. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, the recognised leader of this reconstituted Rabbinic Judaism, Johanan ben Zakkai, clearly distanced himself and the emerging movement from the Pharisees (and the Sadducees). Secondly, the Pharisees at the time of Jesus

were strongly rooted in Judaism with a central Temple. This Temple identity should not be underplayed and clearly the reconstituting of Jewish life based at Yavneh (with its academy and later Rabbinic council) is a reconstruction of Judaism without the Temple. Therefore to speak of a direct continuity is overstating the link and underplaying the significance for the Pharisees of the loss of the Temple.

The Sadducees: Jewish religious leaders claiming direct descent from Zadok the Priest (1 Kings 1 and Ezekiel 44:15-16). They were closely associated with the Temple Priestly traditions and the Jewish 'aristocracy'. They rejected the oral based traditions of interpreting Torah and sought to maintain the written (revealed) Torah. The Sadducees seemed to take a leading role in opposing the teaching of the Apostles and the emergence of 'Messianic Jewish/Christian' communities.

The Messianic Jews/Christians: A new Jewish sect focused upon and loyal to, the teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. They believed that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah of Israel and LORD of all, and that through His atoning death, resurrection, the outpouring of His Spirit, and His promised glorious return, all the promises made to the Patriarchs (Romans 15:8) will be fulfilled and God's Kingdom purposes will be fully established. The sharing of this 'Good News' would include reaching out to all groups of people from every tribe and nation, and in this reaching out they believed they would be empowered and equipped by the Holy Spirit/the Spirit of the ascended Jesus.

The Zealots: A Jewish sect committed to military revolt against the Roman occupiers of the Land of Israel. At the heart of their identity was a 'zeal' for the Torah and the rule of God. This zeal was often stimulated by eschatological and Messianic expectations and was manifested by outbursts of religious violent anger. The Zealots often claimed they were descended from Judas of Gamala, who led a major Jewish revolt in 6 AD. The Zealots are also associated with the Jewish resistance which refused to surrender at Masada. In the Mishnah the Hebrew word '*Kannaim*' is used when referring to this sect. In modern scholarship there is much debate regarding what (if any) the relationship was between the Zealots, the separatists at Qumran, and other Jewish groups opposed to Roman rule during this turbulent First Century period.

The Essenes: A Jewish sect associated with an ascetic and separatist community based lifestyle. They probably had their origins in the late Second Century BC and rejected what they saw as the corruption within Jewish leadership and Temple

practices. Philo, Pliny, and Josephus all mention the Essenes, but there is no mention of them in the Talmud and they appear to have little influence upon the subsequent development of Jewish life or religious thought post the destruction of the Temple.

The Essenes are marked by a strong eschatological mind-set which was part of this group along with a separatist identity which sought to re-define the 'true Israel'. Some scholars suggest a link between the Essenes and John the Baptist and more directly to the Dead Sea Scroll community at Qumran. It is hard to know how much (if any) contact Jesus or early 'Messianic Jews/Christians' had with the Essenes, but there is a tradition that the final Passover meal shared between Jesus and the inner group of His disciples was hosted at an Essene guesthouse in Jerusalem.

SECONDLY, THE WIDE RANGING INFLUENCE OF HELLENISM.

All three explanations seem to present Biblical Judaism as a movement largely immune to external influences. Yet at the time of Jesus, the Land of Israel had been under Roman rule for nearly one hundred years. Also before this, from the time of Alexander the Great, Hellenism had been highly influential in many areas of Jewish thought and practice. In this context it is worth noting that many of the Maccabean fighters who established the Hasmonean ruling dynasty were strongly influenced by Hellenism.

Jerusalem at the time of Jesus was therefore a largely Hellenistic city and the cultural and commercial life of the Galilee was largely shaped by the great Hellenistic cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris. The whole land was under Roman control and the Greek language was widely used (there is nothing anti-Jewish in the fact that the New Testament was written in Greek).

This insight should make us cautious about those who want to stress the significant differences between Judaism in the Land of Israel and Judaism in the Diaspora. Clearly there were differences, but a 'parting of the ways' analysis which links the growth of Christianity solely to a Hellenistic diaspora context grossly overplays the differences. It ignores both the Hellenistic influences within the Land of Israel and the Biblical evidence for the significance of the Land of Israel, and especially Jerusalem, as the prime context for early and significant Christian growth, as recorded in key Biblical texts such as Acts 2:46, 15:4 and 21:20. Clearly Jerusalem is where the decisive acts of Jesus took place and where the first significant 'Messianic

Jewish/Christian' expansion occurred along with the first organisational and doctrinal decisions of the emerging 'Church'.

It is also important to note that the Roman occupiers of the Land of Israel brought with them their own rich religious and cultural life. As part of their religious mindset there was a degree of tolerance and even respect for the religious practices of others, and some Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus seemed to be content to give to 'Caesar what is Caesar's if they could freely give to the LORD what belonged to the LORD'. Such a view could refer to the Sadducees, the 'Messianic Jews/Christians' and the Pharisees mentioned in the previous segment. However, for others, such as the Zealots, there was a compelling religious requirement to do all they could in order to remove the yoke of the occupiers. This religious conviction is what gave birth to many Jewish groups whom we may refer to broadly as 'Zealots' (as described in the early segment). Such groups we associate with those at the forefront of Jewish military resistance during the Jewish/Roman war (67-70), which led to the destruction of the Temple and then the later (132-135) failed Bar Kochba revolt.

This range of Jewish response to Roman rule (and associated Hellenistic cultural values) should not be a surprise, for it was clearly the case some generations earlier. For when Pompey entered Jerusalem in 63 B.C., many Jewish people welcomed him and the gates of the city were opened to his entourage. Yet other Jewish people, at the very same time, gathered upon the Temple Mount and organised a short-lived, but fierce military resistance.

THIRDLY, THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEMPLE WITHIN THE PRACTICES AND VALUES OF BIBLICAL JUDAISM.

The influence of and attitude to the Temple shaped all five varieties of Biblical Judaism. It would be hard to over-estimate the importance of the Temple. It was the Temple which gave to Jerusalem its destiny and focus and therefore its unifying role for the whole Jewish world.

The Temple pointed to the hope of atonement and the reality of God's presence. Just as Israel was considered the centre of the world, and Jerusalem the centre of Israel, so the Temple was the centre of Jerusalem. And at the centre of the Temple was the Holy of Holies, served by the High Priest, who in turn was joined by Chief Priests and then moving outwards from the centre by the Priests, the Levites (helpers of the

priests) and then by local worshippers, and then by regular or occasional pilgrims gathering for the three annual festivals. Within this pilgrim category there would be many non-Jewish God-fearers. The sheer impact of the Temple in terms of numbers and economic activity, let alone religious significance cannot be over-stated.

The Temple was clearly one of the unifying factors of Biblical Judaism yet associated issues of purity, identity, and spirituality differed greatly within the five varieties of Second Temple Judaism. Of these five varieties, it is worth noting that only 'Messianic Judaism/Christianity' survived following the destruction of the Temple.

In many ways the destruction of the Temple affirmed the 'Messianic Jewish/Christian' narrative with its dual emphasis upon the Temple being redefined as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (which is within the heart of every true believer), and the celebration that the sacrifice of atonement once and for all has taken place through the death of Jesus (Hebrews 2:17).

It was not that the Temple was bad or valueless. On the contrary, Temple terminology is affirmed and used frequently throughout New Testament teaching to explain the atonement achieved by the death of Jesus (see for example Romans 3:22-25 and Hebrews 9-10). Also the early believers, following the tradition of Jesus Himself, met regularly in the Temple for teaching, prayer and fellowship. It was simply that the Temple was no longer essential for the unfolding of God's redemptive purposes.

The fact that the Temple was no longer essential is probably also reflected by the titles given to the emerging leaders in the 'Church'. In the New Testament none of the titles is drawn from the Temple or Priestly cult, but rather they appear mainly functional, e.g.: Deacon (Assistant), Presbyter (Elder), Overseer (Leader/Bishop). The worship of the 'Church' is not replicating the Temple with the leadership of Priests, but within the 'Church' all worshippers are now in one sense 'Priests' and together they are forming the 'Temple' of God.

Yet for those for whom the Temple was essential its destruction could mean no other than the ending of their religious life as they perceived it. As the Temple was being destroyed the priests were slaughtered as they carried out their worship and service, and thus they lost everything as did those linked closely to them, namely the Sadducees and many of the Pharisees and other scribes and Rabbinic leaders. The Zealots fought to the end, but the end swiftly came. The Essenes may have hoped

that they would remain safe, based in their remote desert location or that God would miraculously intervene to save and vindicate them, but their centre at Qumran also fell a year or so earlier under the same forces which destroyed the Temple. The destruction was so total that they never recovered.

Yet out of these ashes of destruction a reformulated Rabbinical Judaism was born and grew up in a post-Temple world. For some in emerging Rabbinic Judaism the loss of the Temple was soon seen as a spur for new theological developments, but for others the loss of the Temple remained a source of immense grief for the Temple was seen as an inseparable part of the Torah to which they sought to be fully dedicated. The destruction of the Temple was primarily a political act by the Roman occupiers yet the long-term consequence was primarily religious for the Jewish people.

FOURTHLY, THE CHALLENGE OF GENTILE INCLUSION.

Non-Jewish people had often been drawn to the beauty and truth of Biblical Judaism. The call of Monotheism, the reverence of the Temple worship, the focus of Torah living and the radical appeal of the Prophets drew many God-fearing Gentiles into the orbit of Biblical Judaism. This reflected Israel's calling to be a 'light to the nations'. Yet for Biblical Judaism at its very core there remained an ethnic identity. Often this ethnic identity was linked to a particular geographical location, namely Judea or Israel.

Clearly at the time of Jesus, some Jewish groups sought to reach out to non-Jews with the intention that they would eventually become proselytes and be absorbed into Jewish descent. However, it is unclear how far-ranging was this 'Gentile outreach' and throughout the Second Temple period (see for example Ezra 9-11) Judaism was primarily ethnic. However, the 'Messianic Jewish/Christian' movement soon through its universal missionary vocation, began to reach out in a determined and focussed way to non-Jews.

One of the most striking things about the growth of the 'Church' was the speed and range of its growth, especially among the Gentiles, many of whom were already God-fearers. The pattern of this missionary work along with its speed of growth is outlined in the Acts of the Apostles and implications of this growth provide the content for much of the teaching contained in the New Testament letters.

This Gentile growth built upon the Jewish growth of the first decades of the Church (Acts 6:7 and Acts 21:20) and these Jewish Believers in Jesus broadly rejoiced in this Gentile outreach as the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 records. Gentile inclusion was never resisted by the early Jewish believers. However, perhaps inevitably if not intentionally, the Church began to lose aspects of its Jewish ethnic identity as a result of the huge numbers of Gentile converts and the far-ranging reach of missionary activity.

Unquestionably the ‘Church’, certainly up to the destruction of the Temple and arguably well into the Second Century, was viewed by many as a Jewish movement, albeit defining Jewishness without a predominant Rabbinic or Priestly focus. However, by the end of the Second Century the Church had largely lost its Jewish focus to most, and the Christian Church was often viewed as distinct from the Jewish people, perhaps as a new fourth ‘race’ if one is to use Aristides’s statement when reporting to the Emperor Hadrian (117-138) that there are now *“four races in the world, Barbarians, Greeks, Jews and Christians.”*

Messianic Jewish life continued, but sometimes it seemed to flow in separate channels beyond the mainly now Gentile-led Church, channels described sometimes as Nazirites or Ebionites. Such groups were often viewed with suspicion by the wider Church based in part on the belief that these groups promoted heretical ideas, often linked to a less ‘developed Christology’ or to ‘zealous and separatist forms of Torah observance.’

Certainly by the end of the Fourth Century, Messianic Jewish life within the Church had ceased to have any major leadership role or theological significance. This cessation was partly due to the dominance of Gentile identity within the Church and partly due to the dominance of a Rabbinic Jewish life with its resounding ‘No’ to the claims of Jesus within the wider Jewish world. Messianic Jews therefore had their identity ‘squeezed,’ and their legitimacy challenged from both sides; namely Post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism and Post-Temple emerging (mainly Gentile-led) Christianity.

Often when one views and explains the ‘parting of the ways’ it is this later largely ‘non-Jewish Christianity’, often with its own anti-Jewish polemic and practice which distorts how one sees the earlier ‘parting of the ways’.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS OR SOME CONCLUDING HOPES

I have so far presented three explanations for the so-called ‘parting of the ways’ along with a range of illustrations and metaphors which may hopefully shed some light on these explanations.

I have also outlined four key factors; namely, the diversity within First-Century Judaism, the wide ranging influence of Hellenism, the importance of the Temple (and its destruction), and the challenge of Gentile inclusion, all of which must be taken into consideration when seeking to understand and describe the ‘parting of the ways’ which initially took place in the early decades following the teaching ministry of Jesus.

With regard to offering a concluding explanation for the ‘parting of the ways’, I am drawn to the second explanation; however, this explanation needs to be enlarged to show the diversity within the stream of Biblical Judaism and within both emerging Christianity (with the significant input resulting from Gentile inclusion) and Rabbinic Judaism.

For me this second explanation rightly sees both post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism and ‘Messianic Judaism/Christianity’ as having a legitimate claim of inheritance from Biblical Judaism. Understanding these movements as siblings is more in keeping with the events on the ground than speaking of a mother and a daughter. Also this second explanation avoids a hierarchical view of one movement taking prominence as the only (normative) inheritor of Biblical Judaism.

Today our looking back to this ‘parting of the ways’ is often filtered and perhaps blurred through the lens of the subsequent growth and interactions of the siblings during the past two millennia. Also our looking forward is equally filtered and blurred. Yet for all of us who want our mission encounters with Jewish people today to be Biblically astute and Spirit led, I think there are four convictions we need to keep clearly in focus despite the blurring complexities of history.

Firstly, it is important to affirm that Christianity is born out of Biblical Judaism. There is a legitimate continuity which needs to be celebrated and explored. It is vital for the Church as it moves forward through times of renewal, reformation and fresh

expressions, as well as times of struggle discord and decay, never to lose sight of her Biblical Jewish roots. For these roots sustain, nourish and bless.

Secondly, and flowing from the first conviction, is the affirmation that a Jewish ‘Yes’ to Jesus is theologically, historically, and experientially appropriate. Equally appropriate now in the Twenty-First Century as it was in the First Century. The Jewish religious ‘No’ to Jesus, codified by post-Temple Rabbinic Judaism, must not be seen as the sole arbiter of Jewish identity. This means today that the Church must seek ways to honour and support Messianic Jewish Believers as well as to educate the wider Jewish community so that it sees the legitimacy of Messianic Jewish identity.

We thankfully note that there are a number of encouraging signs in this regard, for example, the significant interest in, and the Jewish scholarly reappraisal of, Jesus and His ministry as an authentic part of Biblical Jewish life in the later Second Temple context.

Thirdly, while in no way endorsing the Jewish ‘No’ to Jesus as represented by the various form of Rabbinic Judaism today, it is important never to demean Rabbinic Jewish life. There is much we as Christians can learn and many shared Biblical values to celebrate and affirm. While one remains robustly evangelistic, nevertheless one acknowledges a ‘mutual closeness’ in many encounters with Rabbinic Jewish communities. This ‘mutual closeness’ does not exist, I suggest in even the most positive and affirming encounters with any other religious groupings.

Fourthly and finally, one affirms that the ‘parting of the ways’ is not the end of the journey. This is partly because at one level we affirm that the ‘parting of the ways’ continued to overlap and intersect. To use John Atkinson’s telling phrase an “Indelible connection” remains. Also it is not the end because we hold out for the time when, “All Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26), and when the inhabitants of Jerusalem will cry out: “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*” (Matthew 23:39). At this point we will see the full grafting in of what has been cut out, and the flowing together in the one river of the separate streams and the restoration of the ways which had been parted.

In the meantime we continue to walk gently, reflect deeply, speak carefully and pray faithfully. We pray faithfully by adding our prayers to the prayers of the very first believers in Jesus as we cry out, “*Amen. Come Lord Jesus*” (Revelation 22:20).

ENDNOTES

1. Also sometimes referred to as Rabbinism or Rabbinical Judaism.
2. Please see the bibliography for details of some of the books written by these key writers.
3. For some, speaking of the 'parting of the ways' is not simply an over-simplification, but it is viewed as an unhelpful concept.
4. The term Messianic Jews is my preferred term here. However I realise other descriptive terms are offered by others, such as Jewish Christians, Jewish Believers in Jesus, Nazarites etc.
5. See selective bibliography for details.
6. *The Case For Enlargement Theology* (second edition) Glory to Glory publishing, 2011, pp 194-195.
7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: the Doctrine of God*, (Vol 2) T and T Clark, 1957, p 200.
8. David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (sixth edition) JNTP, 1999, pp 415-416.
9. James Dunn, *Christianity in the Making* (Vol 3) *Neither Jew nor Greek*, Eerdmans, 2005, p 602.
10. See for example a discussion on this point in my book, "Walking an Ancient Path", Glory to Glory Publications, 2016, pp 61-62.
11. While rightly outlining these five main parties within Biblical Judaism, it is worth noting that the vast majority of Jewish people had no direct allegiance to any one specific religious party.
12. For more information about the Essenes and the community at Qumran, and possible links with John the Baptist see my CMJ Olive Press Research Paper, *The LORD is Gracious* (Issue 20, 2013). This can be downloaded from the CMJ UK website.
13. My understanding is that these early 'Messianic Jews/Christians' did not share in the sin-offerings however some scholars dispute this, see for example James Dunn, *Christianity in the Making* (Vol 3) (See selective bibliography for details) p 603.
14. While Rabbinic Judaism is based on a post-Temple narrative it is worth remembering there remained in many aspects of Rabbinic Jewish thought and liturgy the hope that the Temple would be rebuilt. Many of the traditions of the Mishnah are preserved with the hope that one day the Temple would be rebuilt. Along with this was the hope of the rebirth of the nation of Israel. A hope

which has become a reality, for many in our own living memories. This fact has prompted and encouraged some to suggest that the rebuilding of the Temple will also 'shortly follow' on from the re-gathering of the Jewish people and the re-establishment of Israel as a nation.

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