

Early Jewish Christianity--A Lost Chapter?

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What do we mean by early Jewish Christianity? Who were these early Jewish Christians? Early Jewish Christianity describes the membership and manner of thinking of the first church--the kind of church that existed before A.D. 70 in Judea, Galilee and other places like Damascus. St. Paul was referring to the leadership of early Jewish Christians in Gal 2:9 when he spoke of James and Cephas (Peter) and John as "pillars." Paul goes on to say that he and Barnabas would go "to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised." Do we really know anything about these early Jewish Christians? Can we?

True, there are the sketchy accounts in Acts. However, these stories tell us mostly about the spread of the church; they tell us only a little about what Jewish Christians believed and how they understood themselves. In addition, there are a few interpolated accounts from the Ebionites--later descendants of early Jewish Christians. While a few scholars have tried to reconstruct early Jewish Christianity from these later garbled "books," in actuality, we know precious little about the period from Pentecost until the outbreak of the great Roman war in A.D. 66. Until recently, early Jewish Christianity has remained a lost chapter in church history.

Within the last few years, however, New Testament scholars have become increasingly aware that several Gospel narratives are best described as the literary deposits of early Jewish Christianity. Specifically, the narratives of Jesus' baptism, temptation, transfiguration and feeding of the five thousand were formulated by early Jewish Christians. I prefer to use the awkward term "formulated" rather than "written" in order not to prejudice the question of historicity. These well-known, but widely misinterpreted, narratives tell us much about the beliefs of early Jewish Christians as well as the way in which they understood themselves.

Before turning to a detailed examination of the first two of these narratives, we would do well to investigate the elements that make up each of these stories about Jesus. Heretofore, New Testament interpreters have tended to

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read all kinds of meanings into these stories because they have not understood their makeup or structure. These structural elements mark them as somewhat different from other kinds of stories in the Gospels.

Primary structural elements in these narratives are the references and allusions they make to Old Testament stories and passages. These stories about Jesus cannot be understood without first studying the Old Testament passages to which they refer. While it may be difficult for us as moderns to understand this reliance on OT stories, it made perfect sense to Jewish Christians. After all, they “lived” out of their Bibles much more than we do. Moreover, by relating Jesus to the stories and heroes from their Bible, they sought to show His meaning in terms familiar to themselves and the larger Jewish community.

A second element lying in the background of each of these Jewish Christian narratives is Jewish exegetical tradition. We naively think that they approached the OT stories directly, as we tend to do. They loved a Bible already interpreted. For example, consider Jesus’ words of institution at the Last Supper: “This is my body” (Mark 14:22). Lutherans, Anglicans and others who believe in the “real” presence understand the word “is” literally. Baptists and others interpret the word “is” to mean “stands for.” Similarly, Jewish Christians brought first-century Jewish understandings to the text of the OT.

The third element in each story is the work of Jewish Christians themselves. They sought to combine OT passages, plus first-century Jewish interpretive traditions, in such a way that these stories about Jesus reflected and even clarified their faith in Jesus. Accordingly, each of these stories seems to be composed of at least four elements: an incident in the ministry of Jesus, OT references and allusions, first-century Jewish exegetical traditions, and a creative combination of the previous three elements that pointed to the meaning of Jesus for their time.

Before we turn to an in-depth analysis of the temptation narrative, one critical issue must be discussed. The New Testament contains three accounts of the temptation: Matt 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13. In actuality, there are two narratives of the temptation--the brief Markan narrative and the pre-Gospel narrative lying behind the very similar accounts in Matthew and Luke. Since Matthew and Luke apparently did not know each other’s Gospels, they copied the narrative of the temptation from an older, pre-Gospel source called Q. Since the brief Markan narrative simply states that Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, scholarly attention has focused on the more detailed account used in Matthew and Luke. This detailed account found in Q is usually dated between A.D. 50 and 60. A history of this narrative would look like the following: an incident in the ministry of Jesus, later formulated by Jewish Christians, found its way into the source called Q. This Q narrative was copied with minor changes by the later writers of Matthew and Luke.

REFERENCES TO SCRIPTURE

Now let us turn to the narrative in Matthew and Luke. The crucial element for interpreting the meaning of the temptation narrative is found in the three

quotations from Deuteronomy by which Jesus answered the three temptations set before him. The Deuteronomic contexts of these three quotations point to three incidents in the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel under Moses. The contexts of the quotations show that the situation of Jesus in the wilderness of Judea was similar to that of Israel. So similar were the temptations of Jesus to those of his ancestors that one may say in some sense Jesus was reliving the experiences of his ancestors.

Note the parallel situations. In the climactic temptation according to Matthew (in Luke the order of Matthew's second and third temptation are reversed), the devil invites Jesus to "fall down and worship" him (Matt 4:9b). In Deut 6:13-14, Moses warned the people against going after "other gods." According to the later rabbinic tradition, the most celebrated incidence of such idolatry was the worship of the golden calf.

In the second temptation, the devil invites Jesus to prove his sonship by putting God to the test: if Jesus throws himself down from the temple, God will send angels to save his life. Similarly, Israel of old asked Moses to give them water in the wilderness and thereby prove that God was with them (Exod 17:1-7). In the first temptation, the hunger of Jesus recalls the hunger of Israel shortly after the deliverance in the Exodus (Exodus 16).

The words from Deuteronomy which are quoted in the introduction to the narrative—"led," "wilderness," "tempted," "forty"—imply another parallel. In Deut 8:2 the Lord "led" Israel "forty" years in the "wilderness," "testing [the same Greek word as 'tempted'] you." The sentence continues, "to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not." The first half of the sentence implies the last half. Presumably Jesus was tested/tempted for the same reason. The devil's business is to cause Jesus to sin as Israel had sinned. Jesus' business is to remain obedient to God.

JEWISH TRADITION

The Jewish tradition which the early Jewish Christians presumed in formulating/telling this narrative is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the exegetical tradition associated with Deut 1:1. Let us turn to the Dead Sea Scrolls first.

In the Dead Sea Scrolls the term "wilderness" conveys much more meaning than its literal definition. Wilderness was associated with the coming time of deliverance and the end of this present evil age. The people of the Scrolls believed in typology (the parallelism of two ages) and felt that the Mosaic age foreshadowed the coming time of deliverance. As Israel was destined to inherit the promised land, so they were preparing the way in the wilderness for inheriting the land in the new age. In their own life the sect imitated the institutions of the Mosaic age and believed that in their sectarian community they were already experiencing the coming salvation.

In addition, the term "wilderness" designated the devil's primary area of activity. Hence it meant a time and place of testing. Belial (the devil) tried to prevent their obedience to God's law by tempting them to disobedience.

Since the early Jewish Christians were familiar with this kind of wilderness theology, they presupposed this thought-world in formulating their narrative of Jesus' temptations.

The exegetical tradition associated with the book of Deuteronomy, and more narrowly with Deut 1:1, has never before been brought into discussions of the meaning of this narrative. The following sentences will explain this exegetical tradition and the following paragraph will show how it enhances our understanding of the narrative of the temptation. In Deut 1:1 we read: "These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness...." Accordingly, the words of Moses are interpreted to be words of rebuke to Israel for their failures in the wilderness.¹ While this tradition is presented in depth in later rabbinic works, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the earlier book of Jubilees show knowledge of it.

The rebuke tradition enables us to find an emotional coloring and an intensity in the narrative that was not apparent before. In the rebuke tradition God's anger is directed toward Israel for their apostasy, particularly their worship of the golden calf, in the wilderness. This underscores Jesus' achievement of obedience when faced with the same temptations. Also, the rebuke tradition answers questions that have puzzled scholars for a long time: Why does Jesus quote from Deuteronomy and not from the primary accounts of the incidents in Exodus, and why are Israel's transgressions summarized by three incidents? Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy because only these words are considered to be words of rebuke. In the rabbinic accounts the quotations from Exodus, among others, are cited only by way of illustration to lend specificity to the words from Deuteronomy. Further, within the accounts of the rebuke tradition, there is a tendency to summarize Israel's sins into three incidents. For example, two of the four targums speak of only three rebukes.

THE WORK OF EARLY JEWISH CHRISTIANS

Standing within Judaism and using interpreted passages from Scripture, the Jewish Christian scribes forged a narrative of remarkable unity and balance. The unity is seen in the smooth flow of the narrative. In Matthew's account (Matt 4:1-11) the setting (verses 1 and 2) prepares the hearer for that first temptation and flows naturally into it by quoting words from the context of the quotation that Jesus cites in verse 4. The temptations reach their climax in the third and great temptation to idolatry. Balance is achieved in two ways. Three temptations are juxtaposed with three quotations from Scripture, which put the devil to flight by exposing the sin into which he would entice Jesus. The three quotations also juxtapose the obedience of Jesus with the disobedience and consequent rebuke of Israel.

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the Jewish Christian scribes is the clarity of the theological message. A number of scholars have shown that Jesus' sonship is the focus of the temptations: "If you are the Son of God..." (Deut 4:3 and 6). The parallelism between Jesus and the wilderness

generation emphasizes Jesus' faithful obedience. Sonship means faithful obedience to God. Jesus' obedience demonstrates--rather than earns--that sonship.

Moreover, that sonship was a remarkable achievement: the adversary was the prince of this world. Israel, God's first son, had failed. Jesus binds the "strong man" (Mark 3:27) and begins to plunder his house.

While sonship is defined by obedience, we must say more about the Jewish Christian understanding of sonship in this narrative. Is "Son of God" a title for the messiah or is it used in a non-messianic sense? Many interpreters believe that the word "son" is quoted from Ps 2:7 and thereby designated the messiah who would liberate Israel from the Roman yoke. However, the narrative cites no traditional messianic conduct or titles. The messiah was supposed to fight the Romans; Jesus fights the devil. His weapon is Scripture, not a sword. Such titles as "Christ" or "messiah" are nowhere to be found here.

From a scholarly point of view, the narrative does much to clarify the title "Son of God." Today, most New Testament scholars still hold that the title "Son of God," except when it is used to designate messiah, originated in the Hellenistic Gentile world or the Hellenistic Jewish Christian church outside Israel. Certainly, the above research shows that "Son of God" was used non-messianically in an early Jewish Christian narrative. Moreover, defining "Son of God" by faithful obedience in the presence of demonic temptation is a very Jewish definition that has little or nothing to do with a Hellenistic/Gentile environment.

However, our definition of the term "Son of God" is not yet complete. Scholars have long recognized that the narrative of the temptation and the narrative of the baptism are intimately related, and, consequently, that the use of the term "son" in the baptism sheds light on the title "Son of God" in this narrative. A more complete definition must await our discussion of that narrative in the following pages.

In the preceding paragraphs we have found that the early Jewish Christians were preoccupied with Christology and tried to define the significance of Jesus out of their own traditions and past. This is an important insight for it defines the primary theological preoccupation of Jewish Christianity before A.D. 70. Nevertheless, this insight does not exhaust the theological significance of this narrative. The narrative also shows us how these people understood themselves.

EARLY JEWISH CHRISTIAN SELF-UNDERSTANDING

We have said that the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls held a view of history in which the Mosaic age would foreshadow or parallel the coming time of deliverance. This view is based on the presupposition that God acts in history. His activity in one age will be similar to his activity in another age. But specifically, the Mosaic age--the great deliverance from Egyptian bondage--is a pattern for the coming final deliverance from sin and death at the end of this present evil age. Not surprisingly, early Jewish Christians also held this view of

history. Jesus undoes the disobedience of the Mosaic generation. Thus, the narrative suggests that Jesus is bringing the history of Israel to a fulfillment. He had defeated the prince of this world. The narrative of the temptation heralds the time of deliverance. Consequently, the early Jewish Christians understood themselves in a certain way. In Jesus' victory the time of deliverance had begun. They were an eschatological community-in-waiting. The new age, the Kingdom of God, had already begun. They were living between the times. Yet the end was in sight, as the narrative of the transfiguration makes clear.

Let us turn now to the narrative of the baptism.

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Like the narrative of the temptation, the narrative of the baptism was also formulated by early Jewish Christians. Note what one scholar writes after his investigation of just one motif in the narrative: "Specifically, we have...anchored the story in the earliest milieu in which traditions of Jesus emerged - Palestinian, Aramaic-using Christianity."²

However, the history of this narrative is somewhat different from that of the temptation because this narrative found its way into Mark's Gospel. Its history begins with an incident in the life of Jesus. Early Jewish Christians formulated a pre-gospel narrative about the baptism. Mark used the narrative as the first of his stories about Jesus. Then, the later Gospels of Matthew and Luke introduced some changes into the narrative and incorporated it into their books. Since Mark's Gospel is the earliest written account of it, we will confine our analysis largely to Mark's account.

By way of introduction to this short narrative--it contains only fifty-three words in the original Greek--we must point out that it is long on controversy. There is little scholarly agreement about any aspect of the narrative. In terms of the elements composing a Jewish Christian narrative, scholars disagree about the OT passages to which it refers, about the Jewish traditions lying behind it, about the work of the formulators, and, especially, about the meaning or main thrust of the narrative.

Of course, there is disagreement about the literary form of the narrative, too. Rather than rehearse all the possibilities, we find the form is best described as a certain kind of "vision." In the OT, visions are described in a certain way: visions are characterized by such formal elements as the opening of heaven and the voice from heaven. After the OT period the form was modified by the introduction of another element. Especially in the targums, stress was placed on the contents of the words spoken by the heavenly voice. Thus the attention of the reader is drawn to the message of the heavenly voice.³ The Marcan narrative exemplifies the formal elements of this targumic version of the vision.

REFERENCES FROM SCRIPTURE

Let us now turn to the controversy concerning the words from Scripture in this narrative. Today, most interpreters say that the sentence spoken by the

voice from heaven quotes words from Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1. Others believe the words “beloved Son” in Mark 1:11 are quoted from the Septuagint translation of Gen 22 : 2 , 12 and 16. In Genesis 22, God refers to Abraham’s son Isaac as “your beloved son.” The word “beloved” plays a crucial role in the argument. Note the arguments for the minority report. First, the combination “beloved son” is found three times in the Greek text of Genesis 22. Second, the word “beloved” is *not found* in Ps 2:7. Third, the date of the Aramaic translation of Ps 2:7 which might supply the word is late and uncertain. Finally, Ps 2 : 7: “You are my son...” (spoken to the king) is usually considered a messianic psalm and the word “beloved” is *not* an appropriate designation for the messiah, a military hero!

In addition, significant indirect evidence, never considered before, points to Genesis 22. We are speaking of the Jewish Christian habit of quoting words from the context of a quotation, as we saw in the previous narrative. A significant number of important words in the narrative of the baptism seems to be quoted from Genesis 22. At least, the two narratives share the following words:

(9) (*and it happened*) In those days Jesus *came* from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (10) And when he came up out of the water, immediately *he saw the heavens opened (split)* and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; (11) *and a voice came from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son....”*⁴

Could this be coincidence?

Comments about two of the above shared words are needed. The RSV translators of the passage did not choose to translate the introductory phrase “and it happened.” Secondly, the word “split,” which the RSV translators chose to paraphrase as “opened,” is perhaps the key word in the narrative because it connects the story of the baptism with the crucifixion. In Mark 15:38 the “curtain of the temple was torn (split) in two....” In Jewish exegetical practice a significant common word between two passages allows the one passage to shed light on the other.

There are similar difficulties in associating the second half of the sentence spoken by the voice from heaven, “with thee I am well pleased,” with Isa 42 :1, a servant passage. The key word “well pleased” does not appear in the Greek version of 42 :1! Again, the Jewish tradition associated with the sacrifice of Isaac can account for this word.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that both halves of the sentence come from exegetical traditions based on Genesis 22 is the following sentence from a Palestinian book that retells the story of Abraham and Isaac. The book of Jubilees was written about one hundred years before Christ.⁵ This evidence has never before been considered by scholars.

Behold, Abraham loves Isaac, his son. And he is more pleased with him than everything.

Certainly, the cumulative effect of the above arguments is impressive. Let us now turn to the Jewish tradition lying behind this narrative.

JEWISH TRADITION

Again, there is controversy. If the majority of interpreters are correct, the heavenly voice spoke a combination of words from Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1. These words then designate the messiah and the servant of Isaiah. We have seen the weakness of this view.

Others hold that Genesis 22 is the source of the first half of the sentence. We are now prepared to state our thesis. We hold that Genesis 22 supplied the words "beloved son." However, Genesis 22 was not a static story within the Jewish community. In its many retellings, the story grew and picked up additional elements as it continued to address the needs of that community. The clearest example of this is the change in the role of Isaac. In Genesis 22 he is a mere lad, a passive figure. Yet, in a first-century retelling, he becomes a grown man of twenty-five who willingly allows himself to be sacrificed. In even later retellings, the knife actually grazes his throat and he sheds blood. We hold that the Jewish Christian narrative of the baptism quoted Genesis 22 *and* was modeled on the exegetical traditions current in the first century. These exegetical traditions were later written in the Aramaic targums and greatly expanded Genesis 22 in their retelling the story.

For our purposes we single out three aspects of the Jewish tradition found in the targumic accounts of the binding of Isaac on Mt. Moriah by Abraham, his father. First, Isaac, now a grown man, willingly seeks a sacrificial death in obedience to God's will and his father's request. (Jesus could not be compared with a child.) Second, in the targumic accounts, Isaac, as he is lying upon the altar, looks up to heaven and sees a vision (as Jesus did after his baptism). The formal elements of the vision are the same--heaven is opened, there is a voice, the main focus of the vision is the message of the heavenly voice. Even within these formal elements there are amazing similarities. Whereas Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending, Isaac sees the Shekinah. The Shekinah is a Jewish concept which describes the nearness of God to humans, particularly in the Jerusalem temple. Recall that Isaac is bound on an altar on Mt. Moriah, on which the Jerusalem temple will be built. The heavenly voice describes Abraham in the act of sacrificing Isaac and speaks of them both as "unique (only)" individuals. The Aramaic word translates the Hebrew word for "only" which is found in Gen 22:2, 12 and 16.

The third aspect of the Jewish tradition is the theological significance of the Isaac story. The Fragmentary Targum to Gen 22:14 simply states the sacrificial meaning of the story: God is called upon to remember the binding of Isaac and thereby to "loose and forgive them their sins and deliver them from all distress..."⁶

In the Jewish exegetical tradition in the targums, Genesis 22, Isaac, sacrifice, temple mount and forgiveness of sins belong together.⁷ Apparently, the

binding of Isaac was regarded as an anticipatory, original sacrifice which validated all subsequent sacrifices for sin on the temple mount.

THE WORK OF EARLY JEWISH CHRISTIANS

How does one describe the work of early Jewish Christians in formulating this narrative? If we knew where history left off and the modeling work of Jewish Christians began, our task would be simple. What do we know? No one has ever doubted that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. That Jesus saw a vision at the baptism is probable. Did he not see “Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18)? Paul also saw visions. We must rid our minds of the twentieth-century bias that visions are subjective experiences existing only in the minds of disturbed individuals. Did the heavenly voice first suggest the typology (parallelism) between Jesus and Isaac?

How do we account for the amazing similarities between the targumic development of Genesis 22 and the baptismal narrative? The simple answer is that Jewish Christians modeled one story upon another by using the words and details of one story to tell another. Two images, so to speak, have been superimposed one on the other so that in seeing one, the hearer thinks of the other. However, what caused Jewish Christians to see the relationship between the OT type and the baptism, particularly since the baptism and the deliverance of Israel in the Reed Sea are already parallels? In going behind the narrative we enter the realm of speculation. Again, was the parallelism first suggested by the heavenly voice? Were there other factors? Possibly the formulators were amazed at the similarities in the two stories. In both scenes God was very near. Jesus’ coming up out of the waters of baptism and Isaac’s looking up to heaven from the altar act out similar postures physically, and perhaps in relationship to God’s will. Possibly the greatest similarity was the ancient Jewish Christian confession “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3) and the Jewish view of the sacrificial efficacy of Isaac’s binding. Or, was the binding of Isaac one of the ingredients that entered into the ancient Jewish Christian confession? Clearly, such speculation does not help us understand the meaning of the story or help us arrive at any kind of certainty.

Since we have sketched in the elements that constitute the narrative, we should now turn our attention to the theological significance of the story. Again, we find that the primary thrust of the story is Christological and that the formulators of the story were seeking to understand the significance of Jesus in terms of their own background and Scripture.

The key theological phrase in the narrative is “my beloved Son,” since the targumic form focuses on the words spoken by the heavenly voice. Whereas the previous narrative stressed the obedience of the Son of God, this narrative probes the intimate relationship between Jesus and God. From their own Scripture they used a type (parallel) that spoke in categories with which they were familiar. As Isaac was the unique/beloved son of Abraham, so Jesus is

the unique/beloved Son of God. Perhaps, as they formulated this narrative, early Jewish Christians remembered the prayer life of Jesus: the word "Abba" carried with it the intimacy of a family relationship.

This typology showed the relationship of Jesus to God without reference to a messianic role. Perhaps the sole support for a messianic interpretation of the narrative is the supposition that the word "son" is a citation from Ps 2:7. Nothing else in the narrative points to the inauguration of a messianic role. Neither the vision, nor the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, nor a possible reference to the servant of God can be associated with the office of messiah. Indeed, messiahship was an office, a role in Judaism, not a description of a familial relationship.

The Isaac/Jesus typology also enabled Jewish Christians to explain the significance of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sin, since the binding of Isaac on the temple mount carried that message.

Earlier we said that the narratives of the baptism and the temptation were so closely related that the meaning of sonship in the one could throw additional light on the meaning of sonship in the other. Typology explains that relationship: the baptism/temptation recalls the Exodus through the sea and the wilderness temptations of the Mosaic age. Could this narrative refer to more than one OT type? In later rabbinic exegesis the second referent would be called a *davar acher* (another interpretation): Scripture carried within itself more than one layer or level of meaning. Indeed, the New Testament itself juxtaposes the Exodus and the death of Jesus. In the Lucan narrative of the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about "his departure [the Greek word also means Exodus] which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31).

Like the previous narrative, this narrative reveals much about the approach of Jewish Christians to theology. They thought in terms of typology: they drew parallels between Jesus and persons, events and situations from their past. Whereas the previous narrative drew heavily on the temptations of the wilderness generation, this narrative sees Jesus' relationship to God and the significance of his death foreshadowed in the patriarch Isaac. Nevertheless, this narrative reveals that the theology of history presupposed by both narratives is the same: God acts in history and His activity in one age foreshadows His activity in the coming age of deliverance. However, this narrative shows that their types were not drawn from just one generation in the past: the time of the patriarchs as well as the Mosaic age pointed to the coming of Jesus. Given this background, Jewish Christians communicated their theology in story form. Abstract theological propositions, such as we find in the later creeds, were not their medium of communication.

THE NARRATIVE OF THE BAPTISM AND THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The narrative of the baptism contains two theological thrusts: the relationship of Jesus to God and the saving significance of his death. Mark must have found this narrative to be compatible with his thinking, for both thrusts are key theological motifs in his Gospel. The title "Son of God," spoken by the voice in the baptism and by the Gentile centurion near the end, is one key to Mark's

Christological thinking. Secondly, it is commonplace to say that Mark proclaims a theology of the cross or that the shadow of the cross falls across this Gospel. Indeed, if our thesis is correct, that shadow falls across this narrative that inaugurates Jesus' public ministry.

Further, there is evidence that Mark himself tied the baptism to the cross. Two words indicate this: baptism and split ("tear" and "opened" are other translations). Think of the significance of the word "split" in three narratives. In Gen 22:3 Abraham split the wood for the sacrifice on Mt. Moriah; in Mark 1:10 Jesus saw the heavens "split" (by God) so the Spirit could descend; then, in Mark 15:38, as Jesus dies the curtain of the temple is split in two. This probably indicates that the temple has been replaced by the death of Jesus as the way to forgiveness. In the third prediction of the passion, Jesus asks, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38). By recording that statement, Mark may be tying the two scenes together.

Perhaps Mark also liked modeling one story on another since the figures of Jesus and Isaac are associated or merged together. In this Gospel, Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus tend to merge as do Peter and Satan.

CONCLUSIONS

Is early Jewish Christianity a lost chapter in church history? The preceding pages represent a beginning effort to recover that lost chapter. By examining more than one narrative, as we have done, we begin to see the outline of their attempts to "do" theology. Nevertheless, in drawing conclusions we would emphasize the preliminary nature of this probe. We have analyzed only two narratives. Most of this analysis is based on my recent book, *Narrative Theology in Early Jewish Christianity*. There I have discussed both the baptism and the temptation in more depth. In addition, the transfiguration and the feeding of the five thousand have been analyzed. Still, the book is a first attempt, confined to four narratives. Additional narratives like the walking on the water and the storm narratives need to be studied for a more thorough understanding of their theology.

Early Jewish Christians are also responsible for other writings in the New Testament. The Sermon on the Mount is apparently based on a Jewish Christian ethical source. They did hold Jesus to be the messiah (Christ) in some sense. They may be the authors of several Epistles. Much remains to be done. Scholars are just beginning to fill in the blanks.

The research that has been done raises more questions than it gives answers. Were early Jewish Christians a homogeneous group or are we talking about several groups? Are we talking about a non-messianic Galilean group as opposed to a Jerusalem group which stressed the messiahship of Jesus? Early Jewish Christians practiced circumcision and observed dietary laws. How observant were they? All these questions and many more beg for answers.

Having acknowledged the above limitations of the study, let us summarize our results. According to our study, early Jewish Christians were preoccupied

with Christology and one of the primary titles by which they expressed their belief in Jesus was "Son of God/beloved Son." This title is the focus of the two narratives analyzed above and of three of the four narratives analyzed in my book.

Equally significant is the meaning that this title conveyed in each of the narratives in which it occurred. In the narrative of the baptism, the words "beloved Son" describe the intimate relationship between Jesus and God. They recall Genesis 22 so that Isaac becomes a type of Jesus. As Isaac was the unique/beloved son of Abraham, so Jesus is the unique/beloved Son of God. Since the narratives of the baptism and the temptation were paired (because they stood in a typological relationship to the Exodus/wilderness temptation of Israel), the meaning of the words "beloved Son" informs the meaning of the words "Son of God" on the lips of the devil. Jesus demonstrates this relationship by his obedience to God in the face of demonic temptation. Also, the use of the title "Son of God" in the context of the demonic is important, too, as we shall see. The above research supports the insight of Joseph Fitzmyer in his discussion of the meaning of the title "Son of God" in the transfiguration and the baptism: "Here the Synoptic tradition has made use of a title that is pre-Pauline and has connotations other than messiah."⁸

If the above research is correct, it refutes the conventional wisdom of most New Testament scholars that the title "Son of God" on Jewish Christian lips designated the messiah, Ps 2:7 lying in the background. It further refutes the conventional wisdom that the title "Son of God" was imported into Christianity from the Hellenistic world. The Jewish Christian context of the title, the use of typology and the Jewish virtue of faithful obedience, all make that clear. Moreover, the use of the title "Son of God" by the devil, and in other parts of the Synoptic Gospels by the demons, and in the context of exorcisms, underscores the Jewish context of the title.

The above analysis also gives us insight into the early Jewish Christian use of Scripture. They used quotations. They quoted individual words from the contexts of quotations and individual words from OT stories to which they were alluding. They employed the exegetical technique of typology in relating their Bible to Jesus and the happenings of their own day. Indeed, this use of typology and its related theology of history points to an apocalyptic world-view. They believed in the two ages: this present evil age under the dominion of the devil and the coming time of deliverance. The OT foreshadowed the coming time of deliverance: the OT types pointed to their greater fulfillment in the age of salvation. Both narratives must be understood in this context. The failures of Israel point to the faithful obedience of Jesus. His obedience defeats the devil. The binding of Isaac points to the new way of forgiveness through the sacrifice of the cross.

Finally, these two narratives give insights into the self-understanding of Jewish Christians. They understood themselves as an eschatological community-in-waiting. (The feeding of the five thousand and the transfiguration further strengthen this insight.) Some Jewish Christians, or the whole group,

looked upon themselves as a “school” or learned community. They searched the Scriptures. They knew the Jewish exegetical traditions of the time. They wrote in Greek. They knew the rebuke tradition found in Hebrew sources. They employed the targumic “vision” form available in Aramaic. They wrote narratives of remarkable beauty and balance which conveyed profound theological truths. They exemplified a burst of creative intellectual energy we are only now beginning to appreciate.

Notes

1. This exegetical tradition is explored in much more depth (as is the Jewish tradition associated with the word “wilderness”) in my book, *Narrative Theology in Early Jewish Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 37-45.
2. Leander Keck, “The Spirit and the Dove,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970-71): 67.
3. I have followed the form-critical scholar, Fritzleo Lentzen-Deis, *Die Taufe Jesu nach den Synoptikern* (Frankfort-Am-Main: Knecht, 1970). Others hold the form to be a theophany or epiphany.
4. Stegner, *Narrative Theology*, p. 18.
5. Jubilees 17:16. The translation is found in the *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).
6. Geza Vermes made the translation. See *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), p. 195.
7. For dating the targumic materials dealing with the binding of Isaac, see my *Narrative Theology*, pp. 28-30.
8. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Anchor Bible, 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 973.

