

## THE RISE OF NORMATIVE JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY: THE ROLE OF POLITICS IN THE FORMATION OF 'RELIGION' IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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### Abstract:

How did it come to pass that a small Jewish messianic movement in the first century, whose leader had been executed by the Roman Empire, rose to power in that same Empire just a few centuries later and was proclaimed state religion in a process which involved an absolute rejection of Judaism? This classic question is intertwined with the complex issue of the so-called parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity, and, indeed, with the problem of the rise of rabbinic Judaism. This essay presents an analysis of these processes based not only on the literary evidence but also on archaeological remains, which reveal how local developments may shed light on larger socio-political and religious dynamics in the Roman Empire.

### Keywords:

Jesus movement, Jews, Christians, Synagogue, Church, Empire, Normativity, Colonialism, Resistance, Capernaum, Parting of the Ways

## Introduction

Once upon a time in a world far away there were no Christians. Jews were relatively well integrated in a Roman society, which accepted the God of Israel as one of the minor ethnic gods of the empire.<sup>1</sup> They even respected this God's awkward attitude toward all other gods with whom the empire worked in partnership. This was so despite some less than peaceful interaction in the Jewish homeland. As Pompey's armies conquered the East, including Jerusalem, in the 60s BCE, Judaism resisted Jupiter's rule in various ways and eventually gave birth to what in Rome's eyes was a series of revolutionary movements attempting to retake control over their land. Among them were counted Theudas, the (Jewish) Egyptian, Judas from Sepphoris, Simon of Perea, and Judas the Galilean.<sup>2</sup> Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>3</sup> who proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, the salvation of Israel, was also among these disturbers of the status quo. His aim, as some of his followers would later phrase it in the Book of Acts, was to restore "the Kingdom to Israel."<sup>4</sup> This message, which Jesus proclaimed in public institutions such as the synagogues of the various administrative subdivisions of land as well as the Jerusalem temple, institutions "where all the Jews come together,"<sup>5</sup> was taken abroad by his followers after

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<sup>1</sup> On gods and their lives in ancient cities, see Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2010, 3–102.

<sup>2</sup> For a convenient overview and brief discussion of these and other revolutionary Messiahs, see Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies: A Guide to the Background Literature*, Peabody: Hendrickson 2012, 431–443. Most of the information we have on these developments comes from Josephus.

<sup>3</sup> While all Gospels claim that Jesus grew up in Galilee, Matthew's Gospel alone identifies Jesus as a Judean living in self-imposed 'exile,' first in Egypt and then in Galilee, persecuted by political authorities that want him dead. After campaigning about a year in Galilee, proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom of Heaven and gathering a sizable crowd of followers, he returns to Judea with his people, aiming at Jerusalem. See esp. Matt 1:18–2:23; 19:1–21:17.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:6.

<sup>5</sup> John 18:20. On this passage, see Birger Olsson, "'All My Teaching Was Done in Synagogues...'" (John 18,20)", in: G. Van Belle and J.G. van der Watt (eds.), *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings*

his death and spread there primarily in Jewish associations but also beyond such settings.

Ironically, despite the defeat of the Jews in the Jewish–Roman war some 40 years after the empire’s execution of Jesus, and again in the wars of 117 and 135 CE a few hundred years later, as the fourth century was coming to a close, the empire was run by Romans who, under the name ‘Christians,’ worshipped the Jewish God, the God of Israel. And despite the fact that these rulers worshipped a Jewish God manifesting himself in a Jewish Messiah they had themselves executed, they introduced severe anti-Jewish legislation aiming at circumscribing Jewish communal life and restricting interaction between Jews and Christians. On the orders of the emperor himself, Theodosius I, persecution also followed against Graeco-Roman cultic activities.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of these measures was to secure political stability and military strength based upon exclusive empire-wide worship of one God, a formerly minor ethnic god, the God of Israel, now the God of the multi-ethnic Roman Empire. The Jewish people, refusing to redefine their ethno-religious identity and relation to their God as *their* God, became a socio-theological problem for the Late Antique and Mediaeval church, simply by existing. For normative Christianity, the world was not theologically big enough for co-existence among Christians and Jews, since the nature of Christianity demanded, in its reinterpreted multi-ethnic form, the delegitimization of Judaism and its absorption into the new religion, which was, according to the theologians, in fact the religion of Abraham and his descendants.<sup>7</sup> An anti-Jewish Christian discourse of contempt arose in the church to

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*Seminar* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 184), Leuven: Leuven University Press 2005, 203–24.

<sup>6</sup> On this development, see also Anders Runesson, “Inventing Christian Identity: Paul, Ignatius, and Theodosius I”, in: B. Holmberg (ed.), *Exploring Early Christian Identity*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008, 59–92.

<sup>7</sup> On the idea that Abraham and the other heroes of the Hebrew Bible were in fact adhering to (Catholic) Christian beliefs, see especially the commentary on Romans 9–11 by Nicholas of Lyra, conveniently reproduced in Ian Christopher Levy, Philip D. W. Krey, and Thomas Ryan (eds.), *The Letter to the Romans* (The Bible in Medieval Tradition, 2), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013, 220–245.

support and promulgate such claims. It was expressed not only in learned treatises for the religious elite but also in sermons and church art so that all, including the illiterate, could see and learn.<sup>8</sup> One example, conveying with unpleasant clarity such theology to the people, is the Mediaeval so-called living crosses, where the arms of the cross upon which Jesus hangs crucified simultaneously crowns the church and stabs the synagogue.<sup>9</sup> In such images, which had their roots in the Late Antique theology of the church fathers, the life of the church requires the death of the synagogue.<sup>10</sup>

We all know the inherent dangers of such violent theological discourses, and how they eventually became one of the key components as the Holocaust was planned and carried out in Europe's most well-educated country and beyond. But what were the circumstances under which they came into being? Which hermeneutical, social, and political mechanisms were active in this process, that turned on its head a Jewish messianic claim that Israel's long wait was over, that its redemption was near? How could Israel's redemption, the 'restoration of the Kingdom to Israel,' become in normative Christian theology a violent longing for the disappearance of *Israēl kata sarka*?<sup>11</sup> Who benefited from such theology and how and why did it prevail?

In this essay, we shall focus on the period during which this type of theology was formed, and on ways in which Christian normativity – or

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<sup>8</sup> On the Jews in Christian art, and how such art has communicated a theology of contempt, see Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art: An Illustrated History*, New York: Continuum 1996.

<sup>9</sup> See Schreckenberg, *Jews in Christian Art*, 64–66..

<sup>10</sup> Cf., e.g., Jerome on Matt 27:25–26, where 'the Jews' choose the devil instead of God when given a choice by Pilate. There is no place in such theologies for Judaism/Jews existing alongside Christianity, even with minimal legitimacy. This mode of interpretation continued also among the reformers in the 16th century, including Luther, who claimed the Jews to be the devil's people: *Vom Schem Hamphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi*, WA 53.587. (For an English translation of *Vom Schem Hamphoras*, see G. Falk, *The Jew in Christian Theology: Martin Luther's Anti-Jewish Vom Schem Hamphoras, Previously Unpublished in English, and Other Milestones in Church Doctrine Concerning Judaism*, Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland 1992; the reference to Matt 27:25 is found in § 19, p. 171.)

<sup>11</sup> As Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969, explains, this expression refers to "Israel with all its customs, especially those customs which are past and gone because of Christ's sacrifice" (122).

'ought-ness' – was expressed and put into practice. In order to reconstruct what transpired between the first and the fifth centuries we shall first discuss various strategies applied as theology was established 'on the ground.' Then, we shall proceed to look at evidence indicating colonial aspects of the project of creating normative Christianity, focusing on archaeological remains. Finally, we shall conclude the study with some comments on certain New Testament texts that were used as tools in this process, asking whether the New Testament itself may be described as colonial in nature, as it lent itself so easily to such political practices.

### Bringing Normativity into being: The Language of 'Ought-ness'

The coming into being of normativity is not an automatic process. It is always in one way or another other related to power. The outcome of such use of power will depend on the level, type, and extent of the power exercised: informal, social, institutional, political, military, or colonial, or a combination of some or all of the above. Either way, the very idea of the normative contains within it a more or less clearly defined 'other,' i.e., a phenomenon which negatively legitimizes that which is put forward as normative. In other words: without 'heresy,' there is no 'orthodoxy.'<sup>12</sup> Struggles may take place within specific collectivities or between distinct but related groups. Generally speaking, then, attempts to reach normative status may be a continuous struggle within a movement; a struggle that splits a movement resulting in in-group versus out-group rhetoric; or struggles between groups that never belonged together but exist in proximity to one another.

The question is how normativity, once established, prevails. Exercise of power in various forms is necessary, as noted, but perhaps more interesting is to ask how normativity is 'spoken,' and how such 'languages' are developed and combined. For historians of antiquity and Jewish and Christian origins, the most obvious normativity-tool to investigate would be the spoken and written word: letters, sermons, narratives, biblical commentaries and learned theological treatises. The

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<sup>12</sup> But cf. Jonathan Klawans, "Heresy Without Orthodoxy: Josephus and the Rabbis on the Dangers of Illegitimate Jewish Beliefs", *JJMJS* 1 (2014), 99–126 [<http://www.jjmjs.org>].

process of canonisation is a key factor in this regard, of course.<sup>13</sup> All that is spoken, however, is spoken in specific settings, under specific social, institutional, political, and other circumstances. These circumstances are equally or more important than the spoken or written words themselves in the process of establishing the normative, since these settings infuse the words and discourses with legitimizing authority.

The immediate, more formal social construction embedding, supporting, and promoting that which 'ought to be' is the institutional: hierarchies and how they are formed employing actors from specific social locations. With this factor follows another: art and architecture, used in the service of identity formation and preservation.<sup>14</sup> As grass-root movements move through social strata reaching into elite layers, as the Jesus movement did, this becomes an increasingly important tool, since claims to a place in society may be expressed through architecture. Finally, closely related to institutional presence and hegemony, we need to take into account the forces of colonisation as a factor, accomplished on the basis of, or through, military power, and intertwined with discourses of religio-political normativity.

A combination of factors such as these produced what became known as normative Christianity. Since textual sources are most often highlighted as the rise of normative Christianity and Judaism is discussed, it is of some importance that the institutional and archaeological evidence, art and architecture, is not forgotten. An 'on-the-ground perspective' may enhance our understanding of what really went on as this Jewish movement of Jesus followers turned into a non-Jewish religion ruling an empire within which Israel was one among a multitude of conquered nations. Since the synagogue was the centre of

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<sup>13</sup> On canonisation, see, e.g., Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon*. Revised and Expanded Edition, Peabody: Hendrickson 1995. On political factors in the formation of Christian unity, see Samuel Rubenson, "Mångfald och enhetssträvanden", in: Dieter Mitternacht and Anders Runesson (eds.), *Jesus och de första kristna: Inledning till Nya testamentet*, Stockholm: Verbum 2006, 370–385, here esp. 371–375.

<sup>14</sup> On the interplay between the institutional, space, and theology, see most recently Anders Runesson, "Placing Paul: Institutional Structures and Theological Strategy in the World of the Early Christ-believers", *SEA* 80 (2015), 43–67.

much of Jesus' activities on the one hand, and the main target of Late Antique and Mediaeval Christianity's anti-Jewish attacks on the 'other,' it makes sense to pay attention to how this institution developed during these centuries as we search for clues that may help explain the birth-mechanisms of what became normative Christianity.

### Synagogues, Church, and Empire

As is well known, the New Testament repeatedly states that Jesus and his followers attended synagogues on Sabbaths, and in that setting tried to convince other Jews that the Kingdom was near.<sup>15</sup> But what was a synagogue in the first century? What type of institution was it? I believe that in the answer to this question lies a key to what happened between Christ-believers and other Jews, processes that led to later developments in which Jews and Christians became (related) strangers as Christianity rose to prominence in the Roman Empire.

Today, when we speak of a synagogue we mean a religious institution and/or the building in which Jews come together for religious services. In antiquity, things were quite different. First, we need to note that behind what we translate into English as 'synagogue' when we read ancient texts lie hidden no less than 17 Greek terms, 5 Hebrew terms and 3 Latin terms.<sup>16</sup> The most common of these were the Greek *proseuchē* and *synagōgē*. Importantly, recent research has convincingly shown that *ekklēsia*, usually and problematically translated into English as 'church', was another such synagogue term, which was used frequently around the first century.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Matt 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:21, 39; 6:2; Luke 4:14–30, 44; 13:10–17; John 6:59; 18:20.

<sup>16</sup> For sources, see the index in Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue From its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, Series 72), Leiden: Brill 2008; abbreviated hereafter as ASSB.

<sup>17</sup> See especially Ralph Korner, *Before "Church": Political, Ethno-Religious and Theological Implications of the Collective Designation of Pauline Christ-Followers as Ekklēsiai*. Ph.D. thesis, McMaster University 2014; Ralph Korner, "Ekklēsia as a Jewish Synagogue Term: Some Implications for Paul's Socio-Religious Location", *JJMJS* 2 (2015), 53–78 [<http://www.jjmjs.org>]; Andrew Krause, *Rhetoric, Spatiality, and the First Century Synagogue: The Description and Narrative Use of Jewish Institutions in the Works of Flavius Josephus*, Ph.D. thesis, McMaster University 2015.

Second, while the mere fact that so many ancient terms are translated into English using only one word should signal to historians that we need to tread carefully here to avoid anachronisms, what is more important is that these terms were used interchangeably for two types of institution.<sup>18</sup> The first of these was the village assembly, a kind of public municipal institution in which people came together to make decisions concerning local affairs; archives were kept in these settings and judicial proceedings were held in the same institutional space. Also, since religion was not thought of as separate from other spheres of society, including politics, Torah was read and discussed on Sabbaths. No specific Jewish group, like the Pharisees,<sup>19</sup> was in charge of public synagogues. As the administrative nature of these institutions would indicate, they were run by local village and town scribes. Such synagogues were, further, open to all, women included, and we know of no restrictions with regard to who was allowed to read or debate what was read. Some groups, such as the Jesus movement, used these public synagogues as a platform for proclaiming their own version of Judaism.<sup>20</sup>

Third, the other kind of institution that was designated by the same synagogue terms was of a voluntary association type, very similar to other such voluntary associations in the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>21</sup> Jewish association synagogues were institutions created by Jews belonging to specific groups, such as the Essenes or the Pharisees. They could also be formed around other networks, based, e.g., on geographical location or social standing.<sup>22</sup> These institutions were not public; they

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<sup>18</sup> For full discussion, see Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (ConBNT, 37), Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 2001.

<sup>19</sup> This case has been made forcefully by several scholars. See, e.g., Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University press 2005, 40, n. 74, and 41: "[T]he truth of the matter is, the Pharisees had little or nothing to do with the early synagogue, and there is not a shred of evidence pointing to a connection between the two."

<sup>20</sup> See n. 15 above.

<sup>21</sup> On synagogues as associations, see also Peter Richardson, *Building Jewish in the Roman East*, Waco: Baylor University Press 2004; Philip Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, Minneapolis: Fortress 2003, 2nd ed. 2013, available online here: <http://philipharland.com/associations/>.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., the so-called Synagogue of the Freedmen in Acts 6:9.



were for members only. Philo calls the Essenes' association a *synagōgē*,<sup>23</sup> and we have another mention of a Jewish association in the Theodotos inscription from first-century Jerusalem.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, while all Jews came together in public synagogues to make local decisions, carry out judicial proceedings, read Torah on the Sabbath, or just hang out on any day of the week, some groups of Jews also had their own association synagogues in which they interpreted Jewish life in specific ways. While Jesus never belonged to an association synagogue, as far as we know, and never created a new formal association himself (he preached mostly in public), his followers did so after his death. We see this clearly in, e.g., the Gospel of Matthew,<sup>25</sup> and we hear of such institutions also in Paul's letters and in Acts. The Pharisees thus had their own associations, and Jesus' followers began forming theirs in the mid- to late first century, drawing part of their membership from the Pharisees.<sup>26</sup> For the Jesus movement this meant the creation of new leadership positions, community rules, and so on.

If we look at synagogue institutions at this time, thus, Pharisees had their own institutional structures and leaders and the Christ-followers had theirs. These institutions, these associations, were independent of each other from the very beginning. Both groups of Jews would, however, still attend the public synagogue assemblies, and there they would debate their differences and try to convince one another – and others.

Christ-followers then spread rather rapidly all over the Mediterranean world in the second century onwards, first and foremost in places where Jews already lived and where there were synagogues. In these synagogues they would preach their message about Jesus and the Kingdom to their fellow Jews as well as to non-Jews who sometimes also were present because they were interested in Judaism (the so-called God-fearers). As they did so, they began organising themselves as association synagogues, gathering either in

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<sup>23</sup> *ASSB*, no. 40.

<sup>24</sup> See *ASSB*, no. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Matt 16:18; 18:18.

<sup>26</sup> Paul is the clearest example, of course, but we hear of Pharisaic Christ-followers also in Acts 15:5.

private homes or as subgroups within existing synagogues, if other Jews allowed them to do so.<sup>27</sup>

In the second century, however, something new begins to happen. In order to describe this development, we need to widen the perspective and take a look at the larger Graeco-Roman world. Mediterranean societies were inhabited not only by humans but also by their gods, the latter of whom were served by their humans through cults of various sorts. Some of these gods originated in specific geo-political places, such as Isis and Serapis, who came from Egypt, and the Mithras cult which originated in Persia. These cults originally drew their membership from people who were associated with these nations. In antiquity, what we call 'religion' was thought of as connected closely with specific geographical locations, or countries, ethnic identities, and specific laws, so that we see a connection between land, law, people, and god(s), as Steve Mason has argued.<sup>28</sup> If you belonged to a specific ethnic group, you worshipped a specific god associated with this people and their land, and had no problem with the fact that others from other nations worshipped their own gods. This was so also for the Jewish people: The Jews, as much as everyone else, had their own land, their own law and worshiped their own specific God, the God of Israel. At some point, however, many Graeco-Roman cultic associations began to attract worshippers from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds. The Isis cult, for example, grew to become extremely popular around the Mediterranean, eventually making it all the way to the Roman forum. The role of the ethnic identity of those who worshipped such specific gods was weakened, and anyone, regardless of ethnic belonging, could now become members of these cults. Non-Egyptians began worshipping Isis too.

We see a similar development happening in diaspora synagogues already before the arrival of the Jesus movement. Once the Christ-

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<sup>27</sup> For discussion of this process, see Anders Runesson, "Was there a Christian Mission Before the Fourth Century? Problematizing Common Ideas about Early Christianity and the Beginnings of Modern Mission", in: M. Zetterholm and S. Byrskog (eds.), *The Making of Christianity: Conflicts, Contacts, and Constructions*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2012, 205–247, and literature cited there.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History", *JSJ* 38 (2007), 457–512.

believers entered the scene, the speed at which this occurred increased, especially in their own institutions, which were often called *ekklēsiai*. Since these associations were interested in non-Jews for theological reasons (the end of time was thought to be getting closer and the presence of non-Jews in Jewish settings confirmed this<sup>29</sup>), non-Jews were especially welcome as members. Acts 15 deals with how to handle such non-Jewish members, without losing sight of the fact that the heart of this messianic movement was Jewish. Paul does the same thing in Romans 11. At some point, and Ignatius is our first witness to this development in the second century, these non-Jews would no longer accept ethnicity as a membership criterion, just as other Graeco-Roman cults, such as the Isis cult, had already lost their focus on ethnic identity markers.

For these non-Jews, it would no longer be acceptable to claim that religio-ethnic Jewish status was compatible with, or necessary for, belief in Jesus as the Christ. Ignatius says it outright: You cannot practice Judaism and be a 'Christian' at the same time.<sup>30</sup> These gentile Christ-believers thus divorced themselves from Jewish Christ-believers who maintained, as Jesus and his earliest followers had done, their Jewish identity as a vital component of their religious identity. This new development, following the same pattern as many other cults in the Graeco-Roman world, led to a rising popularity of Christ-belief as disconnected from Judaism. It was this form of non-Jewish Christianity that found its way into the leading strata of Roman society and eventually to the emperor himself. And it was this form of Christ-belief, associated with our word 'church,' that became state religion in the Roman Empire under Theodosius I in the 380s. Jewish Christ-believers and non-Jewish Christ-believers no longer gathered in the same association synagogues, but had parted ways with one another.

This process, which saw the rise of normative Christianity as we know it today, without ethnic identity markers, took place over several centuries. It was, further, primarily a project of the elite – first the

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<sup>29</sup> For this Jewish pattern of thought, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)*, Baylor University Press 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Ignatius, *Magn.* 10:3. On this development, see also Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation Between Judaism and Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2003)

ecclesiastical and later the political. As late as in the sermons of the Antiochean priest and later archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom,<sup>31</sup> we witness the preacher's frustration over the fact that grass-root Christians still understood their religion to be intertwined with Judaism, and so felt free to attend both Christian churches and Jewish synagogues.<sup>32</sup>

Synagogues at this time, however, had also, partly as a response to the rise of Byzantine Christianity, developed in new directions. When Jews in the land lost administrative control over their towns, which were taken over by Christians, the institution of the public synagogue ceased to function – local decisions were now taken elsewhere, by Christians. What remained, then, were only the association synagogues, in which Jews could gather for their own religious and other purposes, maintaining and strengthening their identity in ways similar to what they had done and were doing in Diaspora settings. It is during this time that one of these Jewish groups, the rabbis, rise to prominence in Jewish society, eventually becoming mainstream Judaism sometime between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> And it is in this process that other Jewish groups, including the messianic Jews, lose the battle for Jewish normativity and are marginalised in Jewish society.<sup>34</sup> 'Judaism' becomes defined as Rabbinic Judaism, just as

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<sup>31</sup> Ca. 347–407 CE.

<sup>32</sup> These sermons were delivered by Chrysostom between 386 and 387 CE in Antioch; see *Against the Jews* 1.3,4; PG 48, 847, 848. For discussion of the period in between the New Testament and Chrysostom with a focus on Syria, see Michele Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game: Gentile Christian Judaizing in the First and Second Centuries CE*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2004, 43–72.

<sup>33</sup> The previously common assumption that the rabbis took control over Judaism immediately after the fall of the temple 70 CE has been thoroughly rejected by recent research. See, e.g., Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*; Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark 2000); Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001.

<sup>34</sup> This does not mean that such Jewish–messianic groups were not influential; indeed, it is likely that some aspects of rabbinic Judaism developed as responses to claims made by Jewish followers of Jesus. For discussion, see Karin Hedner Zetterholm, "Alternate Visions of Judaism and Their Impact on the Formation of Rabbinic Judaism", *JJMJS* 1 (2014), 127–153 [<http://www.jjmjs.org>].

‘Christianity’ becomes defined as Non-Jewish Christianity. We know of Jewish versions of Christ-belief existing in the second century, and even as late as in the fourth century,<sup>35</sup> although they were marginalised by Rabbinic Judaism on the one hand, and labelled as heretics by non-Jewish church authorities on the other, the latter being politically empowered by the empire.

### Christian Colonialism and Jewish Resistance

There is a clear connection between religio-political developments within the empire and what eventually became normative Christianity; we need, therefore, to look at how the empire, through colonial activities, embodied normative Christian discourses on the ground in order to appreciate more fully what transpired over the first few centuries of the Common Era. One of the key claims made by non-Jewish Christians as they worked to define their form of Christianity as normative Christianity, was that the Jewish people, the people of Israel, had lost their special connection to the God of Israel and the land of Israel, and that the Mosaic law had been annulled after the coming of the Christ. The non-Jewish Christians were, the church fathers claim, the new, and true, people of God, replacing the Jews.

This theological supersessionism, expressed over and over again in sermons and theological tractates, also took concrete colonial form as the land of Israel was turned into a Christian Holy Land, beginning with the activities of Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena in the early fourth century. Churches were first built in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, then all over Judaea, Samaria (on Mount Gerizim) and the Galilee. It is instructive in this regard to map the distribution of Jewish synagogues and Christian churches in Late Antique Galilee, as

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<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 47, and the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and *Recognitions*, originating in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, reworked in the 4<sup>th</sup>, still transmitted in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. See esp. *Recognitions* 1:27–71. One may also refer to the writings of church fathers as they denounce such groups; we hear of Ebionites, Nazoraeans etc. Irenaeus complains: “They worship Jerusalem as if it were the House of God” (*Against All Heresies* 1.26.2). For the *Recognitions*, too, Jerusalem was the Holy Place. See, e.g., Edwin K. Broadhead, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus: Redrawing the Religious Map of Antiquity* (WUNT, 266), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010, and Matt Jackson-McCabe’s discussion of this volume in *SCJR* 8 (2013), 1–4 [<https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/viewFile/5191/4675>].

Mordechai Aviam has done.<sup>36</sup> One may note on such maps how (non-Jewish) Christian institutions cluster primarily in the northwest, but also how they begin to appear in the midst of Jewish towns and villages, such as Capernaum on the northern shore of Lake Tiberias. As it happens, the history of Capernaum, as reconstructed from the archaeological remains of a synagogue and a church located not more than 30 meters from each other, captures in miniature the larger developments in the empire, as non-Jewish Christianity appears in imperial form on the scene and finds new ways of embodying the normative.<sup>37</sup>

Beginning with the synagogue, the white limestone edifice at Capernaum visible today dates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but underneath this synagogue, the excavators Virgilio Corbo and Stanislao Loffreda found the remains of a first century synagogue, constructed in local black basalt stone.<sup>38</sup> While we cannot go into details here, the history of the synagogue(s) in Capernaum may be reconstructed as follows:

1. In the first century a synagogue is constructed of black basalt stone. This is the synagogue in which Jesus attended Sabbath services according to the New Testament Gospels.<sup>39</sup>
2. Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, this synagogue was renovated and enlarged.

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<sup>36</sup> Mordechai Aviam, "Distribution Maps of Archaeological Data from the Galilee: An Attempt to Establish Zones Indicative of Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation", in: J. Zangenberg, H. W. Attridge, D. B. Martin (eds.), *Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity in Ancient Galilee: A Region in Transition*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2007, 115–132.

<sup>37</sup> For a detailed analysis of the archaeological remains in Capernaum, set within the larger perspective of developments in the Mediterranean world, see Anders Runesson, "Architecture, Conflict, and Identity Formation: Jews and Christians in Capernaum From the 1st to the 6th Century", in: J. Zangenberg, H. W. Attridge, D. B. Martin (eds.), *The Ancient Galilee in Interaction: Religion, Ethnicity, and Identity*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, 231–57.

<sup>38</sup> See the excavation report by Virgilio C. Corbo, *Cafarnaon, vol. 1: Gli edifici della città*, Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing press 1975, 8–169. For a slightly different interpretation of the first-century remains, see Stanislao Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum*, 2nd ed., Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press 1993. The reconstruction below follows Loffreda regarding the first and second phases of the synagogue.

<sup>39</sup> According to Luke 7:5, the edifice was funded by a non-Jewish centurion.

3. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the black basalt synagogue was destroyed and the monumental white limestone synagogue was constructed using the remains of the black synagogue as foundation.

Now, just south of the synagogue archaeologists found the remains of an octagonal Byzantine church. The close proximity of the synagogue and the church has puzzled scholars ever since the discovery of these buildings. How was it possible for a church to be constructed so close to a synagogue? To complicate matters even more, when the archaeologists excavated below the Byzantine church they found remains of earlier churches, or perhaps better: messianic association synagogues.

The octagonal Byzantine church, constructed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, replaced what was an earlier house-church, or house synagogue, dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This edifice was, however, built around an older private house in which one of the rooms was set aside for worship already in the late first century. Although no certainty can be had, this house has been identified as the house of Peter. Be that as it may, what we can say with certainty is that Christian tradition early on, before the fourth century when pilgrimage places became popular, identified this building as associated with Jesus and his first disciples. In other words, followers of Jesus gathered in this place already in the late first century, and continued to do so for several centuries.

If we compare the dates of the synagogues and the gathering place of Jesus' followers, we find an interesting pattern, which suggests the co-existence of Jews and Christ-believers from the first to the sixth century in one place, only 30 meters apart. But how are we to understand the nature of this co-existence? I propose the following historical reconstruction:<sup>40</sup>

1. In the first century, Jews gathered in the black basalt synagogue, which was a public synagogue. This was the synagogue which both Jesus and his followers attended.
2. At the same time, what is now called the House of Peter had become a meeting place for those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. This is indicated by late first-century graffiti and may receive further support if paired with information about

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<sup>40</sup> See also Runesson, "Architecture, Conflict, and Identity Formation".

the two buildings in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>41</sup> Such a gathering place is best described as an association synagogue for those who were messianic Jews. These Jewish believers in Jesus gathered in both places, most likely, trying to convince other Jews in the public synagogue to become Christ-believers as themselves. At this time, Capernaum was a Jewish town, run by Jews.

3. In the fourth century, an earthquake hit the area. The private house that had functioned as gathering place for messianic Jews was turned into a more formal house 'church'/synagogue. The centre of this messianic synagogue was still the same room in which the earlier Jewish Christ-believers had gathered. While pilgrims now came in from other parts of the Mediterranean world, the Christ-believers here were still mainly of Jewish origin. The town was still Jewish, as Epiphanius insists.<sup>42</sup>
4. Then something drastic happened in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The house church was torn down completely, and a new octagonal church was constructed according to the latest architectural fashion. This church was undoubtedly built by non-Jewish Christians.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Mark 1:29.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the information given on the Franciscan website describing the excavations: <http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/sites/TScpinha.html>: "St. Epiphanius informs us that until the fourth century A.D. the population of Capharnaum was entirely Jewish: 'This praxis, forbidding any one of a different race to live among them (i. e. among the Jews) is particularly followed in Tiberias, in Diocaesarea (i. e. Sepphoris), in Nazareth and in Capharnaum.' On the other hand, some passages of the Mishnah stress that the Jewish population of Capharnaum during the first three centuries of the Christian era formed two distinct and antagonistic blocks: Orthodox Jews, and Minim or heretics. From the context it is clear that those Minim of Capharnaum were Jews converted to Christianity, i. e. Jewish-Christians."

<sup>43</sup> Runesson, "Architecture, Conflict, and Identity Formation". See also <http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/sites/TScpinha.html>: "It is difficult to tell when exactly and to what extend [sic] the Gentile-Christians (i.e. Christians converted from the gentiles) supplanted the Jewish-Christian community of Capharnaum. There is however no reasonable doubt that the mid-fifth century octagonal church was built by Gentile-Christians." One may



The Jewish Christ-believers now disappear from the history of this place. The town of Capernaum expands, and remains of non-Jewish buildings and other artefacts abound from this period. Capernaum was now primarily a non-Jewish Christian pilgrimage city, and administration was in the hands of non-Jews.

5. At the same time, the limestone synagogue was constructed, probably with the help of the affluent and more powerful Jews of Tiberias. But this synagogue could not have functioned as a public administrative institution, since the town was now in the hands of non-Jewish Christians. Interestingly, the building adheres to rabbinic norms and avoided art displaying humans, the zodiac etc., motifs which were common in other contemporary synagogues.<sup>44</sup> It is possible to interpret the construction of this new synagogue as an act of resistance, in which the Jewish community claimed a place in this town.
6. If rabbinic Judaism were behind this move, and no public synagogue institution had a place in this city anymore, this means that there was no longer any Jewish public space left for those Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. In addition, the Byzantine Christians had taken over the house-synagogue and built a modern non-Jewish church in its place. What was once a Jewish small town, the 'headquarters' of Jesus, Peter and other disciples on the shores of Lake Tiberias, had now become the battleground of two emerging world religions: non-Jewish Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism.

As this example, based on the archaeological remains understood within a larger historical frame, indicates, the rise of non-Jewish Christianity as normative, empire-backed Christianity was not a simple straightforward 'victory' over Judaism. It was a complex process in which the winners also included rabbinic Judaism, the mother of all modern varieties of mainstream 'Judaism'. The losers, squeezed

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add that non-Jewish Christians also built a similar octagonal church on Mount Gerizim around the same time.

<sup>44</sup> On Jewish art, see most recently Lee I. Levine, *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity Historical Contexts of Jewish Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2013.

between the expanding giants of rabbinic Judaism and non-Jewish Christianity, were varieties of second temple Judaism, including messianic Judaism.

### Conclusion: The Rise of Normative Christianity and Judaism

In conclusion, the rise of non-Jewish Christianity as normative was the result of several consciously applied strategies, of which colonial take-over of the land of Israel was only one. This development, however, was one which matched well the theological notion that the Jews had now been replaced by non-Jewish Christians as the people of God and lost their land as a result. The process resulted in the loss of some Jewish public synagogue institutions and paved the way for the success of rabbinic Judaism in what is known to us as 'the synagogue,' an institution that originated as a Jewish voluntary association. This means that the process in which normative Christianity and Judaism arose was not a parting of the ways process in the strict sense, simply because what is today mainstream Christianity and mainstream Judaism never belonged together institutionally. That which never belonged together cannot part.

Modern Christianity originated in the second century in conflict with Jewish believers in Jesus within and beyond messianic-Jewish association synagogues, as Christ-belief was de-ethnicized by non-Jews and accepted as such by the powerful. Modern Judaism has, obviously, no roots within such messianic associations. Rather, modern mainstream Judaism traces its origin back to rabbinic associations, which were separate from other associations from the very beginning of the second century onwards.

Establishing facts on the ground through colonial activities in the Jewish homeland resulted in the creation of a (non-Jewish) Christian Holy Land, which attracted steady streams of Christian pilgrims, one of many factors that contributed to the rise of non-Jewish Christianity as normative Christianity. This process also started a reaction among rabbinic Jews, who resisted colonialism by re-claiming space and providing a strong link to Jewish history through the representation of Temple-related symbols in synagogues, such as the menorah, the shofar, and incense shovel. Against the Byzantines in Capernaum, with their modern octagonal church architecture, the Jewish community turned to traditional architecture and temple-related art.

The rise of normative Christianity and normative Judaism was thus a process involving two deeply intertwined histories that cannot be understood in isolation from each other. The strength of rabbinic Judaism as it evolves into mainstream Judaism is what explains the frustration of normative Christianity, as reality refuses to mirror its supersessionist theology. Such frustration then leads to rhetorical violence in word and art, such as the barbaric depictions of the so-called living crosses in the Middle Ages that we have referred to above.<sup>45</sup>

Did this rhetorical violence that became intertwined with colonial politics of the empire have its roots in the New Testament? The simple answer is yes. But any text can be used against its intentions. The inner-Jewish polemic of the New Testament texts was transformed into anti-Jewish rhetoric as these texts were taken over by non-Jews. When these non-Jews reached the centres of political power in Late Antiquity, rhetoric could be implemented through action, as is indicated by anti-Jewish legislation and the creation of a Christian holy land. We should note in this regard also the latent force of, for example, the so-called Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel, which was originally a messianic-Jewish counter-colonial move against Roman culture and rule.<sup>46</sup> The same goes for Paul and his mission. But in the hands of politically empowered normative Christianity, such texts, describing an aim for global domination, turned into a new form of Christian colonialism, with direct results for Israel too. The use of these same texts by Europeans in later colonial projects shows how easily they lend themselves to warfare and violence, despite the fact that the texts themselves describe non-violent missions.

In the end, the kingdom of God was side-tracked and the kingdom of Rome, run with the claimed support of the former God of Israel, now the Christian God of the Empire, took over the land as a special possession, a holy relic. In this way, Christian pilgrimage supported

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<sup>45</sup> See n. 8.

<sup>46</sup> On Matthew, see Anders Runesson, "Judging Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew: Between 'Othering' and Inclusion", in: D. M. Gurtner, J. Willitts, and R. A. Burridge (eds.), *Jesus, Matthew's Gospel and Early Christianity: Studies in Memory of Professor Graham N. Stanton*, London: T & T Clark 2011, 133–151.

the colonial powers and established a connection between the heart of the empire – Rome and Constantinople – and the Eastern province. Jesus' aim, according to his followers in the first chapter of Acts, to restore the kingdom to Israel, changed into its opposite in Roman hands. This also prepared the way, however, for the beginnings of modern Judaism, as Rabbinic Judaism evolved into mainstream Judaism alongside normative Christianity. Christian anti-Jewish theology, however, which took root during these processes and developed further in the Middle Ages, still needs to be fought today. Historical research into the origins and socio-political dynamics of normative Christianity is an important place to begin such endeavours.