

JEW AND GOD-FEARERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

by

Canon Edward Every

The object of this note is to point out some questions which are not easily answered. It is often asserted that Paul was the founder of Christianity as we know it; without Paul, it is said, the Christians would have been a party or sect among the Jews. But no book of the New Testament attributes to Paul alone the rapid spread of Christianity among the Gentiles. It is made very clear in the letters of Paul that men who were not under his influence, whose ideas were unacceptable to him, proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and addressed that proclamation to the Gentiles. These Christians, generally called Judaisers, were certainly not trying to keep Christianity within the limits of the Jewish family; they were trying to bring about conversions to Judaism, on the assumption that Christianity is a form of Judaism.

The God of Israel was already worshipped by Gentiles. Any message addressed to all Israel, as it came into the Diaspora, was bound to be heard by Gentile God-fearers. My first question concerns the attitude of God-fearers, as distinct from proselytes, to the Messianic Hope. We often discuss the relation between Jesus and the Zealots. But no-one, as far as I know, even asks the question: "What did the Zealots expect to do about the Gentiles, if they won the war with Rome?" The writers of the Four Gospels certainly did not participate in the war; with one exception they wrote after the war was over. But they wrote in the expectation that, in the *future eschaton*, the Messiah will reign in a New Jerusalem (Luke 1:33; Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30 cf. Acts 1:6, Revelation 21). This *Jewish* Messianic expectation is addressed to Christians *from the Gentiles*.

In three passages in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the Hellenistic opposition to Paul is represented as an expression of anti-Jewish feeling. Paul is regarded as a Judaiser. In the Macedonian Roman colony of Philippi, the owners of a slave-girl whom Paul exorcised are represented as saying, "These Jews disturb our city, teaching customs which we Romans cannot lawfully practise" (Acts 16:20-21). At Corinth, after the Proconsul Gallio refuses to intervene in a Jewish controversy, it is stated that, "They (in some MSS, the Hellenes) took Sosthenes the chief ruler of the synagogue and beat him before the tribunal" (Acts 18:7). This is a Gentile reaction

to what is seen as Jewish proselytism. In Ephesus, during the riot in the theatre, the Jews put forward their spokesman, Alexandros. "As soon as they knew that he was a Jew, with one voice they all cried out for two hours, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians'" (Acts 19:34). The riot is an attack on the Jews who are supposed to be against Artemis and all other Hellenic deities. Paul is supposed to be spreading Judaism.

Has anyone asked the question whether there were Jews, outside the Jewish-Christian circle, who believed that a mass movement of the Gentiles into Judaism would accompany the coming of the Messiah? "The kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the entire kingdom shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High" (Daniel 7:27). It would be natural, on this basis, for those who believed that the Messiah had already come, although his coming was hidden for the present, to consider the conversion of the Gentiles to Judaism to be their duty. Paul and those who accepted Paul, including Peter and James, denied that this was their duty, holding that the Law had been given to Israel and not to all mankind, while the Gospel was given to all mankind. But there were Christians who expected the universal extension of the Law.

A different reason for the attempt to Judaize the Gentile Christians is generally given. It is asserted, by Jews and by Christians, that any Jew who under any circumstances voluntarily ate or drank with any Gentile faced expulsion from the Jewish community. If the Gentile should be a God-fearer, and the food clean from the Jewish standpoint, this made no difference at all; a Jew must not eat at the same table with any Gentile or use vessels which Gentiles used for cooking, eating and drinking. Thus Jewish-Christians wishing to remain Jews could have no social contact with Gentile-Christians, involving common meals, unless the Gentile-Christians became Jews. This was a practical requirement of the Jewish-Christian situation, until the complete separation between Jewish-Christians and other Jews.

But it is very doubtful whether this assumption is supported by the facts. Did this ban on social intercourse exist at this period? Did it exist in earlier times? Nehemiah, as Governor of Jerusalem under the Persian king, entertained at his table "Jews and officials from the nations round about us" (Neh. 5:17); Esther, a Jewess, invited King Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet which she prepared for them (Es. 5:6). The book of Daniel does not say that the Jews at the Babylonian court wished to eat at a separate table or to use their own vessels. It is simply stated that they required water and vegetables, food and drink not forbidden by their law and not offered to the deities of Babylon (Dan. 1; cf. 2 Kings 25:29). When Peter invited the envoys of Cornelios to stay the night in the house of Simon the Tanner at Joppa, this was not noticed as an innovation in Acts 9; the innovation came when Peter entered the house of Cornelios at Caesarea, a place where he might receive "common or unclean" food. Could

the Jew be the host of Gentiles, although he might not be their guest? I notice that at a much later period the Fathers and Synods of the Christian Church seem to believe that it is the custom of some Jews to give gifts of unleavened bread to Christians. The 38th canon of the Synod of Laodicea (4th century C. E.) states that it is not lawful to receive unleavened bread from the Jews. The previous canon, the 37th, forbids Christians "to receive portions sent from the feasts of Jews or heretics or to feast together with them". The 70th of the canons called Apostolic (of uncertain date, but earlier than 400 C. E.) strictly forbids the Christian clergy and laity, on pain of the censures of the church, to feast with the Jews or receive from them "any of the gifts of their feasts, such as unleavened bread".

The Council of the Christians of Jerusalem, in its directions to the Gentile Christians reported in Acts 15 and Acts 21, seems to assume that social intercourse is possible between Jews and some Gentiles, if these Gentiles keep certain rules. The Gentile Christians are told not to eat "what is strangled", "blood" and "things offered to idols". They are not to practise "*porneia*"; this may well mean that they are not to marry certain classes of their near relatives. Keeping these rules, they will be accepted as members of the Christian community by the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem. The reason given for these rules is that there are those in every city who teach the law of Moses (Acts 15:11). This, as a reason, is somewhat obscure. But it appears to me to mean that Jews will regard the Gentile Christians as God-fearers rather than as idolators if they keep these rules. By not eating things offered to idols they dissociate themselves from all idolatry. The command not to eat blood was given to Noah and thus applies to the human race as a whole. Eating "what is strangled" is eating blood.

Paul does not refer to these directions in his letters and it is often said by modern Protestant New Testament scholars that he could not possibly have accepted them, because they involved a food law. But he explicitly forbade the eating of "things offered to idols" (1 Cor. 8:1-4 etc.), if they were clearly and definitely known to be in that category of things. Most meat and wine sold in the city market might well have been offered to the deities of the city. A Christian could buy in the market, asking no questions about whether what he bought was offered to the god or goddess worshipped by the seller. But he should not buy and eat anything which was described to him as offered to an idol (1 Cor. 10 etc.). This would do harm to those Christians whom Paul described as "weak" and "without knowledge". He writes that these Christians, or some of them, eat vegetables and drink water, avoiding meat and wine, because of their doubts (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8:10). The commentators often assume that these people were Gentiles, knowing how difficult it was to be sure that any meat or wine sold in the market was not offered to idols. But it is also possible that they were Jewish-Christians who were ready to eat and drink with Gentile-Christians, if the

food and drink were "clean". The Christian community, composed of Jewish-Christians and non-Jewish Christians, was the host at its own common meals; the Gentiles present were guests. Paul writes that at such meals food acceptable to all guests should be served and nobody should be condemned for refusal to eat on account of doubt. No offence should be given to the Jews or to the Hellenes or to the Church of God (1 Cor. 10:32). This is very like the directions given in Acts 15.

Paul described himself as living in the manner of the Gentiles and, more often, as "not under the Law" and "free from the Law". This has been interpreted as meaning that Paul was assimilated. But with all that Paul writes in criticism of claims made for the law he never explicitly stated that he had deliberately and willingly done, and regarded as good, any action which the law forbids. He never said that the law forbade him to eat with the Gentiles. James tells Paul, in Acts 21:24, that he himself believes, whatever others may say, that Paul himself keeps the law and advises Jewish-Christians to keep it, although giving other directions for Gentile Christians, which James himself approves. Paul then, on the advice of James, purifies himself and prepares to offer a sacrifice in the Temple, with four other Jewish-Christians (Acts 21:23-26). Some modern Protestant scholars ascribe this to the author of Acts in his desire to deny the rift between Paul and the Jewish-Christians of Jerusalem. But the fact that it was believed to have happened should be noticed. Paul might seem to be keeping the law in his relations with Jews and lawless in his relations with Hellenes (1 Cor. 9). But he assumes that among the members of the Church to which he writes there are some who keep the sabbaths and the new moons, even if there are others who treat all days alike (Rom. 14; Col. 4 etc.). He tells them not to criticise each other; he does not condemn either group. In the one passage where he seems to attack those who *observe times* (Gal. 4:10) it is perfectly possible that he is attacking astrology.

In his lifetime the Temple was still standing. The war with Rome must have changed the relations between the Jews and the Gentiles. But after that war Gentiles continued to become proselytes and Judaisers among the Christians continued to exist. These were not the only Christians of Jewish origin who kept the Mosaic Law. Some Jewish-Christians had fellowship with the main body of the Christian Church. There is evidence of this during the two centuries after Paul, if not later. These were men who respected the position of the Gentile Christians and did not seek to Judaise Gentiles, yet believed that they themselves should keep the law, as their forefathers had been Jews either by birth or by religion.

The Ethiopians are the surviving example of this kind of Jewish Christianity. They believe that centuries before Christianity reached Ethiopia the Royal House and a great part of the population of the country was Mosaic in religion, law and custom and to some extent by descent. Their tra-

dition is that the ark of the covenant was brought from Jerusalem to Aksum, the Holy City of their church and nation. Their male children are circumcised on the eighth day after birth. They keep holy both the seventh day of the week and the first day of the week. Their law about food is identical with the Mosaic law as it is understood by the Jews living among them. Their calendar is very clearly influenced by the Jewish calendar. But they are not, in the strict historical sense of the term, Judaisers, for religiously and ecclesiastically they are in full communion with Christians in other countries and foreign Christians living among them who do not keep the Mosaic law (i. e. with the other non-Chalcedonian churches, the Copts, the Armenians, the Syriac Church of Antioch and the Syrian Orthodox Church in India). They also assert that their keeping of the law is not the means by which they are saved; it is rather their national custom. But it is, for all that, a religious duty, as a mark of loyalty to their heritage and to the covenant of God with their forefathers. Their theology is "oriental orthodoxy" or "monophysitism"; they believe Jesus Christ to be the God-Man, "in One Nature of the Word that has become Flesh".

Canon Edward Every is a Canon of St. George's Cathedral, Jerusalem, with special responsibility for liaison with the Eastern Churches.