

The Oriental Stream of Christianity *and the Early History of Oriental Orthodoxy*

The early history of Christianity was not simple. It was complex. In addition to the many interpretations of the message, vision, and teachings of Jesus, there were many communities of followers coming into being in different religious and cultural centers and milieus each with their own unique way of explicating the treasury of what they had gained from their following of the Jewish Messiah.

There were, of course, the earliest followers in the center of Jerusalem itself and in the surrounding communities of Palestine. Largely these were Jewish believers, rooted in the Torah (Torah observant), which became the foundation of the later Jewish Church distinct from Judaism itself in that they were followers of the new Messiah.

As history rapidly progressed this initial community began to express amazing diversity as the followers of Jesus moved East and West into neighboring towns, communities, ethnic and cultural centers and nations. The movement, from that moment forward, would never be the same. It would always reflect, not a monolithic seeing of

Jesus and his teaching, but a plurality of viewpoints and interpretations sometimes which were at odds and developing into fiercely competing visions that vied for authority and dominance.

The Christian tradition, then, began to exist in many different forms, some of which remained much closer to the original

message and concerns of Jesus, and some striking out in entirely new interpretive directions. The “first form” of Christianity, we might even call it the original form is one that is now almost entirely lost to us. A few texts remain to remind us of its form and flavor, but it rapidly disappeared under the weight and pressure of vast historical changes, such as the fall of Jerusalem, and the adversarial nature of

Gentile Christianity as it developed through the missionary endeavors of the Apostle Paul.

Jewish Christianity

It is important to note that at the outset it is perhaps best not to speak of this as a form of Christianity at all, but simply a form of Judaism. The first followers of Jesus were



entirely Jewish and Torah-observant (as was Jesus) in their understanding of the work of the Messiah. Their religious life and culture were Jewish, they participated in the forms and traditions of Judaism as they understood them. They simply saw Jesus as the fulfillment of a common expectation that the Messiah would come. They understood his words and his work as a form of Judaism that got to the interior heart of things because he understood the Torah to be a practice not merely of outer observance, but of an inward reality—“the inside of the cup.”

That community existed and grew and had satellites all over Judea, Samaria, Galilee and the Trans-Jordan. Their leaders were honored Jewish citizens. Yakov (Jacob, or James) was the first leader of the Jerusalem community, and now we realize that other brothers and relatives of Jesus succeeded him after his martyrdom.

When Jerusalem fell and they were forced to flee, these Jewish Christians continued to exist and gradually found themselves not only estranged from conventional Judaism which was itself in turmoil, but also at odds with the rapidly growing and dynamic Gentile Church who eventually saw these communities not only to be a threat, but also heretical because they continued Torah-observant practice and maintained a distinct theology that was different from the proto-orthodox theology that was developing in the Gentile Church as a result of the teachings of Paul.

Syrian Christianity

This is a large, ongoing discussion, but it now clear that Jewish theology, which maintained a more original vision and interpretation of the teachings of Jesus, influenced the Eastern stream more than it did the western streams of Christianity that were Greco-Roman. The East while not

Jewish, shared a Semitic culture, and the lands of Syria which were proximate to Galilee became not only a new homeland for Jewish refugees, but also the heartland for a more Semitic or Oriental strain of Christianity that then flowed into the whole Middle East and further North, East and South into Asia and Africa. Jewish and Syrian Christians alike used the original language of Jesus, Aramaic (sometimes later called Syriac) as their primary language of discourse, and would, hold, then a closer affinity to Yeshua’s original teaching than, perhaps, would the Greco-Roman world with its thought and culture based on Greek and Latin and their linguistic sources.

This is a large ongoing scholarly discussion, but we flag it here to help us understand something of the struggle to recover an understanding of Oriental Christianity and its differences with the Occidental style and thought in the West with which we are so familiar.

The Origins of Oriental Orthodoxy

The branch of Christianity that moved out of Palestine primarily to the East is often called “Oriental Orthodoxy” because it reflects a way of original understanding that had its Jewish roots and its Semitic culture as a basis for understanding the thought, vision, and teachings of Jesus (or Yeshua as he was called in Aramaic and in his day). Through the centuries this branch eventually extended into the regions of present-day Syria, Turkey, Persia, Armenia, India, Tibet and China, as well as Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. It lived, flourished, and then in some parts of Asia disappeared altogether, though it still exists in many communities throughout regions of Asia (most notably in the Mar Thoma churches of South India, and in the Coptic, Armenian and Syrian Orthodox churches in various Christian regions of the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa).

At various times branches of this oriental form of Orthodoxy have also made their way to the West and have existed in small immigrant communities. Today many congregations from world-Orthodoxy are established across North America made up of people who have come from other Christian traditions, as well as those who inherit Orthodoxy from birth. A number of these are from the Oriental Orthodox branches, some of which have been called “Syrian,” not because they came from Syria necessarily, but because the liturgical language of the church was Syriac (a form of Aramaic, the original language of Jesus). Syriac retains its sacred character in many of these ancient churches, though it is not spoken as a living language except by small groups living in the Middle East.

A Brief History of Oriental Orthodoxy

At the heart of the Christian faith are, of course, are the life and teachings of Yeshua—the Jewish sage and Messiah. Early Christian beliefs and practices honoring his Messianic message and mission existed in the chaotic world of the first century. The first Christians struggled to define themselves and the teachings of Yeshua in such a way that the world around them might hear and comprehend. At the beginning, as we know, the first Christians were Jews, but as the faith spread to other regions and the cosmopolitan centers of the Roman Empire it entered the non-Jewish world where Syriac and Greek were the predominant languages. These fledgling communities at the beginning were small and disparate, with diverse perspectives, and as a result, competing viewpoints often arose which are still reflected today in further divisions of thought such as the Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Coptic, and Syrian traditions.

It was from Antioch, a city where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, that the faith spread North and West into the heartland of the Roman empire, and also East and South into the Persian Empire and beyond into India, and eventually to China. By 300 A.D. there were Christian communities from England to India, from Ethiopia to the Black Sea.

As Christianity spread East, Christian merchants traded and settled along the ancient caravan and sea trade routes through Persia, Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, Sri Lanka and China (as well as to Arabia and the east African coasts), bringing the Christian message with them. Christianity was brought east along these trade routes, where Episcopal and monastic sees supported the lives of the followers of Yeshua in such vibrant centers as Edessa (modern Urfa in Turkey), Nisiblis in Syria, Mosul, Kirkuk, Baghdad, Basra of modern Iraq, Ray and Halwan in Persia, Merv, Bukhara, Samarqand, and Navakat in Central Asia, Kashgar in Northern India and Tibet, the Malabar Coast of Southern India, Almalik and Khan Baliq in Mongolia, and Chang’an and many other cities in China as well as a multitude of other less known cities and regions.

Lay folk and missionaries, priests and bishops, abbots and monks cooperated across this broad expanse in a loose alliance over these thousands of miles. At its height, between the fourth and eighth centuries, Oriental Orthodox churches were more widely spread across the East with, it is believed, a larger population and a greater range of activity among more diverse and developed cultures than the Churches of the West had experienced to that point.

The Oriental churches continued live, flourish, but then after the tenth and eleventh centuries in some of the furthest flung parts of Asia (China, for example) began to disappear, though they have continued to exist throughout many regions of Asia (most notably the Mar Thoma churches of South India and the Coptic, Armenian and Western and Eastern Syrian churches of the Middle East and Iran). At various times, branches of Oriental Orthodoxy have also made their way to the West in immigrant communities.

Concurrently, with its stretch across Asia, Christianity was also spreading across North Africa, the Balkans, Europe, and into the British Isles and Ireland, as well as North into Russia and Scandinavia. As these multiple cultures embraced Christianity East and West they left a legacy of rich diversity and thought with which we, thankfully, can engage today. Nothing is clearer now than that all of this is the heritage out of which, perhaps, a new understanding of faith following the path of the Jewish sage, Jesus, may emerge at a critical point in modern history.

The histories of Oriental and Occidental Christianity are long and complex and have not ceased evolving to the present moment. We are just now beginning to understand the force behind each that has been obscure to us for so long in both streams. There has been much obscurity and misinformation about the true natures of these ways of being Christian. Suffice it to say, the two histories have touched and been interwoven at interesting junctures and powerful points of time—just as they are today—but their sad division was of critical importance for both streams as they separated into different worlds of influence.

—*L. Bauman*
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