

The Faith of Jewish and Proselyte Believers Before the Institution of the Church

1. 1st Century Judaism and the Community-Based Faith Taught by Jesus

The first century of the Common Era was a period of remarkable religious vitality in Jewish Palestine. Judaism at this time was not monolithic; it was composed of several sects and movements, including the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots (Wyllen, 1996). Central to Jewish religious life was the Temple in Jerusalem, the Torah, and synagogue-based communal worship. These provided the framework for a faith that was not merely individual but inherently communal, involving shared meals, almsgiving, prayer, and ritual observance (Moore, 1927; Riches, 1990).

Jesus of Nazareth emerged within this rich tapestry of Jewish religious life, teaching in synagogues and engaging the same theological and social concerns that animated his contemporaries. His message—proclaiming the Kingdom of God—was deeply Jewish but offered a renewed emphasis on personal repentance, compassion, and inclusion of the marginalized (Evans, 2011; Saldarini, 1994). His faith was characterized by a relational model of holiness rather than a purely ritualistic or nationalistic one.

According to Lohfink (1984), Jesus' teachings envisioned a restored Israel living in ethical community—a model centered not on Temple sacrifices but on communal love, mutual forgiveness, and faithfulness to God. The Sermon on the Mount exemplifies this, emphasizing internal purity, humility, and social justice rather than ritual precision (Fredriksen, 2018). Jesus' method of teaching—using parables and direct action—aligned with rabbinic pedagogy of his time, but his message extended covenantal faith to all who would “hear and do” the will of God (Overman, 1996).

The Jewish faith of Jesus and his followers, therefore, was a continuation and deepening of existing traditions rather than a new religion. Scholars such as Schäfer (2012) and Wilson (2021) emphasize that early Jesus movements operated firmly within Jewish frameworks—attending

synagogues, observing festivals, and adhering to kosher laws—while interpreting Torah through the lens of divine mercy and eschatological hope.

2. Followers of “The Way” and Their Practice Before the Institution of the Church

Before the formal establishment of what came to be known as the Church, Jesus’ disciples and early followers were called “The Way” (Acts 9:2). This self-description underscores their understanding of faith as a way of life, not an institution (Judge, 1960; Kee, 1995). Their community practices reflected continuity with Jewish traditions, particularly in prayer, charity, and shared meals, but introduced new dimensions centered on the person and teachings of Jesus.

According to Hellerman (2009), these early believers lived in kinship-style communities, pooling resources and supporting each other materially and spiritually (cf. Acts 2:42–47). This practice echoed the communal ethos of the Essenes at Qumran, as observed by scholars like Evans (2011), but was open to all ethnicities and social statuses. The inclusion of Gentile proselytes (non-Jews who adopted Jewish customs) and God-fearers marked an early universal dimension of “The Way.”

Fredriksen (2018) highlights that before being distinguished from Judaism, these groups were perceived as one among many Jewish sectarian movements—loyal to Torah, but with a messianic focus on Jesus as the promised Redeemer. Their gathering places were often homes, where the breaking of bread and prayer occurred. These home fellowships mirrored synagogue gatherings but lacked the hierarchical priestly structures of later Christianity (Bossman, 1987; Gooder, 2007).

Skarsaune (2008) notes that Followers of the Way maintained Jewish liturgical rhythms—Sabbath observance, Passover reinterpretation (as the Lord’s Supper), and daily prayers—but infused these practices with new theological meaning tied to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The early community thus represented a transitional faith—a bridge between Judaism and the Church, without yet being institutionalized.

Importantly, the early believers' focus on communal ethics, social equality, and hospitality (Bilezikian, 2009) anticipated later Christian ecclesiology but was rooted in Jewish covenantal ideals. The leadership was informal—based on charisma and service rather than ecclesiastical office. Women played visible roles, such as Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, and Priscilla, suggesting the early community's relative openness (Lohfink, 1984).

By the mid-first century, as Gentile inclusion increased and the Temple was destroyed (70 CE), the distinction between Jewish followers of Jesus and Rabbinic Judaism became more pronounced. Nevertheless, the foundational features of The Way—its communal life, inclusive love, and devotion to God—remained the bedrock of the Christian ecclesia that followed (Gonzalez, 2010).

Conclusion

Before the formal institution of the Church, Jewish and proselyte believers practiced a vibrant, community-based faith centered on Jesus within the matrix of first-century Judaism. They were neither wholly separate from their Jewish roots nor yet part of a distinct Christian religion. The movement known as The Way expressed faith through shared meals, teaching, prayer, and service—embodying the Kingdom of God in lived community. Their faith continuity with Judaism, combined with an emerging Christ-centered theology, provided the essential foundation upon which the later Church was built.

Bibliography

- Bilezikian, G. (2009). *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness*. Zondervan.
- Bossman, D. M. (1987). "Authority and Tradition in First Century Judaism and Christianity." *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 17(1), 2–15. [DOI: 10.1177/014610798701700102]
- Evans, C. A. (2011). *The World of Jesus and the Early Church: Identity and Interpretation in Early Communities of Faith*. Hendrickson Publishers.
- Fredriksen, P. (2018). *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation*. Yale University Press.
- Gonzalez, J. L. (2010). *The Story of Christianity: Volume 1*. Zondervan.
- Hellerman, J. H. (2009). *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*. B&H Academic.

- Judge, E. A. (1960). "The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community." *Journal of Religious History*, 1(1), 12–22.
- Kee, H. C. (1995). *Who Are the People of God?: Early Christian Models of Community*. Yale University Press.
- Lohfink, G. (1984). *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*. Fortress Press.
- Moore, G. F. (1927). *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*. Harvard University Press.
- Overman, J. A. (1996). *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew*. Fortress Press.
- Riches, J., & Riches, J. K. (1990). *The World of Jesus: First-Century Judaism in Crisis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schäfer, P. (2012). *The Jewish Jesus: How Judaism and Christianity Shaped Each Other*. Princeton University Press.
- Skarsaune, O. (2008). *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*. InterVarsity Press.
- Wylen, S. M. (1996). *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction*. Paulist Press.
- Wilson, M. R. (2021). *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*. Wipf & Stock.