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The Phenomenon of Hebrew Christianity in the Early Church and Today

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The author shows that the basic problem of Hebrew Christianity today is the same as it was in the Early Church: how to relate to the rest of the Christian Church and yet how to relate to Jewish traditions and customs and in particular to the Law of Moses.

This article is one of four lectures on Christianity and Judaism given in several theological training institutions in South and East Asia in 1978.
(Editor)

In the well known mosaic of the Church of St. Sabina in Rome from the beginning of the 5th Century A.D. there are two female figures standing beside each other: the church of the circumcision (*ecclesia ex circumcione*) on the left, and the church of the nations (*ecclesia ex gentibus*) on the right hand side. Over the former St. Peter is standing, over the latter St. Paul, and each of the women has a book in her hand. The basis of the composition is evidently the saying of St. Paul to the Galatians ([2:7](#)): “to me was committed the Gospel for the uncircumcized, as to Peter that for the circumcized.”¹

In the centuries between the mosaic of St. Sabina and our own century we can hardly speak of the existence of “a church of the circumcision” or a particular Hebrew Christianity. Although there have always been Christian Jews in the Christian Church, it is hardly wrong to say that “the church of the circumcision” faded away in the 4th and 5th Century A.D.² However, during the last century new and self-conscious congregations and communities of Hebrew or Jewish Christians have grown up.³ Today one can find such communities and groups particularly in England, in US, in South America and of course in Israel.⁴ These congregations and groups of Hebrew (Jewish) Christians may differ from each other on several points, but they also have common features which make them distinct from the predominantly Gentile Church, the church of the nations (*ecclesia ex gentibus*).

The development of a particular Hebrew Christianity represents a challenge and a problem for the rest of the Christian Church. Some time ago a Hebrew Christian congregation in New York, called the Congregation of Jesus the Messiah, was suspended from the American Lutheran Church to which it had belonged. It must be stressed that this

¹ Cf. B. Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision*, Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Smaller Series no. 2, Jerusalem, 1971, p.1f.

² Cf. e.g. J. Danielou, *Das Judenchristentum und die Anfänge der Kirche*, Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen—Heft 121, Köln, 1964.

³ Cf. e.g. A. E. Thompson, *A Century of Jewish Mission*, London, 1902. H. J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity*, London, 1936.

⁴ The best survey of Hebrew Christianity in Israel today is found in P. Osterby, *The Church in Israel*, Denmark, 1970. Cf. also B. Maoz, *The Work of the Gospel in Israel*, The Banner of Truth, 150, 1976, pp. 24–32.

was mainly a congregation of Christian Jews, but it carried a typical Jewish Christian character in its life and worship, and it was suspended because it subordinated the Gospel to Jewish custom and demanded Law observance from its members.⁵ However, not all congregations of Hebrew Christians can be accused of similar sectarian doctrines; on the contrary there is today also a Hebrew Christianity which represents a genuine part of the Christian Church.

The problem of Hebrew Christianity is a twofold problem: first of all it concerns *indigenous theology* and *indigenous expression of Christian life and worship* among Hebrew/Jewish Christians. But since the Christian Church through Jesus Christ and the apostles grew out of the Jewish people and lives in continuity with the Old Covenant, there is a second aspect to the problem of Hebrew Christianity: in seeking an indigenous theology and indigenous expression of the Christian life and worship, the Hebrew Christians *seek to express anew the Jewish roots of the Christian Church* and the continuity with the chosen people of Abraham's descendants, which also means a new identification and solidarity with their own people. To get a firm hold on this twofold problem of Hebrew Christianity, we will first give a brief survey of the Jewish part of the growing Christianity in the Early Church, and then continue with a survey of Hebrew Christianity today, before we conclude with some remarks on how the Church of Christ today should tackle this problem of Hebrew Christianity.

HEBREW CHRISTIANITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

When we today speak of Hebrew/Jewish Christianity in the Early Church, we generally intend to denote certain sects of Jewish Christians in the second, third and fourth century—sects that lived apart from the mainline Christian Church and slowly died away. Biblical scholarship as well as patristic and archeological research have in the later years refuted this understanding of Early Hebrew Christianity. One has stressed that the first Christian Church in Jerusalem was a Jewish entity within the Jewish People, and after the time of the apostles Hebrew Christianity developed both within and outside the mainline church and became a comprehensive movement, before it faded away.⁶ Let us then first have a look at the first Christian Church in Jerusalem and Palestine before the decisive year 70 A.D.

In our context it is important to keep in mind that the Christian Church started as a Jewish and Messianic community in Jerusalem. Jesus, the resurrected Christ, was a Jew: born

⁵ WCC—CCJP Newsletter, Spring 1978, pp. 16–17.

⁶ Important contributions to Hebrew Christianity in the NT period and the Early Church: J. Danielou, *Theologie du Judeo-Christianism*, Tournai, 1958; J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, pp.210–246: *Jewish Christianity according to the Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1977, 2; *ibid. The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31, pp. LXII–LXXI: *Primitive Jewish Christianity*, New York, 1967; B. Reicke, *Glaube und Leben der Urgemeinde*, AbThANT 32, Zurich, 1957; H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums*, Tübingen, 1949: *Ibid, Das Judenchristentum*, Bern, 1964. Of particular importance is the mentioned work by B. Bagatti and by I. Mancini, *Archeological Discoveries Relative to the Judaeo-Christians*, Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Smaller Series no. 10, Jerusalem, 1970. Cf. also H. Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*, New York, 1973, and L. Goppelt, *Die Apostolische und nachapostolische Zeit. Die Kirche in ihrer Geschichte*, B.1-A, Göttingen, 1966.

of a Jewish mother he grew up in a Jewish setting with the Holy Scriptures of the Jewish Old Testament as his Bible. The *Apostles* were also Jews who had recognized their Messiah in the Jewish Jesus from Nazareth. Also Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, was a Jew by birth, and on several occasions he felt it necessary to stress his Jewish identity. *The first Christians in Jerusalem* were also Jews, and in the first years after Pentecost Day communities of Jewish Christians grew up in Judea, Galilee and Samaria.⁷ A radical change had taken place in the lives of these Jews as they accepted faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ. This radical change, however, did not mean that they stopped living as Jews or in a Jewish way. Their new faith did not remove them from the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and it did not make Moses superfluous. But Moses and his Law were now seen in a new perspective, and their faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ had given them a new fellowship and a new and perfect Covenant with the God of their fathers. What God had promised to the fathers, was now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is the recurring theme of the Acts of the Apostles in the NT (cf. ch. [2:3](#), [4](#), [7](#), [13](#), etc.).

Their Jewish identity and the Jewish way of life were not a problem for the first Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Palestine. There are two aspects of the life of the first Christian Church of the Jews in Palestine that we have to stress: First of all it is clear that they *continued to practice circumcision and to keep the Law*. According to [Acts 21:20](#) the Apostle James tells Paul who is back in Jerusalem from his missionary journeys: “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the Law.” On this line it is also told in the Acts of the Apostles how the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem used to go to the Temple ([2:46](#); [3:1](#); [5:12](#); [5:20](#)), and on his third missionary journey Paul was hastening back to Jerusalem to be there at the Jewish festival of Pentecost.

On the other hand, we also see that the community of Jewish Christians in Palestine represent a *particular entity* which is distinct from the rest of the Jewish People that did not accept the faith in the resurrected Christ.⁸ It is told in Acts that the first Jewish Christians had everything in common, and that they used to gather in their homes for fellowship in order to pray, to study the Old Testament and to celebrate the Lord’s Supper ([2:42](#), [45f](#)). This distinctive feature of the community of Jewish Christians was strengthened as this community grew and multiplied: the persecution of the Jewish Christians by other Jews and the fact that they were joined by Gentiles in Palestine as well as throughout the Roman Empire, broadened the gap between the church of circumcised Jews and the rest of their own Jewish People.

When the Church grew, however, and became a community of Jews and Gentiles, certain difficulties arose for the Jewish Christians in their fellowship with Christians of gentile stock. The difficulties were discussed at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem in the year 48 or 49 and are rendered in [Acts 15](#). The problem then was not the Jewishness of the Jewish Christians, but how Christians of gentile stock should live. The agreement of the council was that Gentiles should not be obliged to live as Jews and according to Jewish laws and customs in order to be recognized as Christians. The obvious presupposition of this agreement was that Jews should not live as Gentiles in order to be Christians. It seems that both Paul and the

⁷ For this paragraph and the following, cf. the paper on “The Relationship between Christianity and Judaism in the Acts of the Apostles and Today”.

⁸ Cf. J. Munck, *Paul and Salvation*, etc., pp.214ff.

mother Church of Jerusalem followed this guideline, but later a different development took place, as we soon shall see.

The Apostle Paul very much stressed the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Jesus Christ ([Rom. 10:12](#); [Gal. 3:28](#)). But this does not mean that he completely wiped out all differences between Jewish and gentile Christians. On the contrary, [Gal. 2:7](#) that we quoted in the beginning, indicates that Paul distinguished between the Christians of Jewish and gentile stock, and the distinction was precisely their different relationship to Jewish customs and laws. It is then also important to add that Paul never permitted the adherence to Jewish customs and laws to break the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ ([Gal. 2:11ff](#)).

For the later development of Hebrew Christian thought and theology it may be of importance to recognize that the Jewish Christians in Palestine developed a christology that was not different from the one that developed in the gentile part of the Early Church. From the Acts of the Apostles we get the impression that the function of Jesus and his titles as prophet, as the suffering servant of God and as Messiah played a greater role among Jewish than gentile Christians ([Acts 3:22f](#); [3:18](#); [8:32f](#); —[2](#); [3](#); [7](#); [13](#)) and it is particularly in the missionary proclamation of the Gospel to the Jews that these titles and functions are emphasized.⁹

In the year 70 A.D. the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews expelled from their Holy City. This also implied expulsion of the Jewish Christians from the Judean capital, and they were scattered throughout Palestine, but many of them gathered in the trans-Jordanian city of Pella. The uniting role of the mother church in Jerusalem was then lost, and although somewhat later a church of Jewish Christians was again established in Jerusalem, this scattering of Jewish Christians resulted in the development of a lot of different Hebrew Christian groups and sects. When the Jewish Bar-Kochba revolt was crushed by the Romans in 135 A.D., and the Roman rule over Palestine was further strengthened, this also had a certain influence on the complex development of Hebrew Christianity.

The writings of the Church Fathers and archeological excavations of the later years give us a complex picture of various groups of the entity that we here call Hebrew Christianity, and some of their literature and their writings have also been handed down to us. It would be too much to give here a list of the various groups and sects and of the differences between them. We will therefore limit ourselves to mentioning and describing the two main lines in the development of Hebrew Christianity from the 2nd Century on, well aware of the danger of oversimplification.

HEBREW CHRISTIANS WHO MAINTAIN COMMUNION WITH GENTILE CHURCHES

1. One part of early Hebrew Christianity did not separate from the predominantly gentile Church that kept the apostolic tradition—or at least it continued to live in some sort of communion with gentile Christians. In this trend both Jewish and gentile Christians respected the agreement of the Apostolic Council. These Jewish Christians continued to live as Jews in their Jewish surroundings, but recognizing gentile Christians as their brothers and without demanding from them that they should become Jews.

⁹ cf. B. Bagatti, op. cit. pp. 152–236, somewhat otherwise than H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie* etc., pp. 71–116.

One group of Hebrew Christians was called “*the Nazarenes*”. Probably the so-called Gospel of the Hebrews has its origin in this group. The Nazarenes—a name not always used with precise reference in the patristic literature—have often been listed as an heretical group, but it is clear from the writings of Origen¹⁰ and Eusebius¹¹ that they were generally considered as faithful, and that mainly national customs separated them from other Christians.¹² The Nazarenes also considered themselves the equals of the other Christians of gentile stock, and they wished, as the Nazarene writer Hegesippus says, to appear as true Christians distinct from the heretics, also heretics of their own stock. In the well known Dialogue of Justin with the Jew Trypho¹³ Justin himself explains that he stands in communion with Jewish Christians who believe in Christ and live according to precepts of the Law, but who do not oblige gentile Christians to live in the same manner.

Archeological discoveries in the later years have revealed that a “Church of the Circumcision” existed throughout the greater part of Palestine quite actively to the end of the fourth century and then, in a state of decline, for another two centuries. This church lived side by side with the “Church of the Gentiles”, and it had its own liturgy, expressive of Christian teaching with its root in Judaism, with its own books, buildings, worship and customs. It seems that large parts of this church followed the same trend as the Nazarenes which we have just mentioned, and to a certain extent lived in communion with the Church of gentile stock.¹⁴ This can be seen from the fact that a considerable influence from this Church was felt in the gentile Church of neighbouring countries, particularly in Asia Minor,¹⁵ and secondly from the fact that some very few communities of this Church of the Circumcision have survived in Palestine until today within the Greek Orthodox Church.¹⁶

EBIONITE CHURCHES WHICH SEPARATED FROM GENTILE CHRISTIANS

2. The second trend within early Hebrew Christianity is also mentioned in the just quoted Dialogue of Justin with Trypho. Justin here emphasizes that he does not approve of those Jewish Christians who absolutely obliged gentile Christians to live according to the Law of Moses, and who do not wish to communicate with the gentile Christians unless they do so. Justin here speaks of the Jewish Christians who later have been called *Ebionites*, and he also adds in this saying that he does not approve of their teaching about Christ, denying his divinity and asserting that he was generated of men and not born by a Virgin. This

¹⁰ *Contra Celsum*, Patrologia Graeca, 11, 1287–88. J. P. Migne, Paris, 1857, sqq.

¹¹ *Historia Ecclesiae* 4, 22, 3; (ed. B. J. Kidd, London, 1957).

¹² Cf. Bagatti, op. cit. p.30ff.

¹³ *Patrologia Graeca* 6, 575–578.

¹⁴ Cf. Bagatti, op. cit. pp.3–29, and Mancini, op. cit.

¹⁵ J. Danielou, *Das Judenchristentum*, op. cit.

¹⁶ J. Barclay, *Melkite Orthodox Syro-Byzantine Manuscripts in Syriac*, Studii Biblicj Fransiscani Liber Annus, 21, 1971, pp.205–219.

christological teaching of the Ebionites differed from the Nazarenes who maintained the divinity of Christ.¹⁷

The group of the Ebionites is the main representative of this second trend among the Hebrew Christians, but there were many smaller groups and sects scattered throughout Palestine and the Near East. They shared the view of the Ebionites on the obligation of Gentiles to follow the Law of Moses and also their particular teaching on the humanity of Christ. In the neighbouring countries to Palestine as well as in Asia Minor an influence was also felt from this heretic Hebrew Christianity, as there grew up in these areas groups of Judaizing Gentiles. As with the first trend of Hebrew Christianity this heretical trend dies out during the fourth and fifth century A.D.

We have briefly touched on the differences between the two main lines of Hebrew Christianity in their view of the Law and of Jesus Christ. But both trends kept *Jewish customs*, and particularly they followed the Jewish calendar and celebrated the different festivals according to this calendar. To illustrate this we will mention the question of Easter. The Christians celebrated their principal feast on two different dates. Some always chose the Sunday, others any day of the week as long as it was the 14th of Nisan. The reason for both dates was equally good, since the Sunday recalled the Resurrection of Jesus, while the 14th of Nisan was the date on which the paschal lamb was immolated, the date of the Jewish Passover that Jesus kept with his disciples. The greater part of the Churches of the Roman world adhered to the celebration on Sunday, whereas the Jewish Christian churches and others connected with them, e.g. in Asia Minor, kept the 14th of Nisan.¹⁸

At the Church Council of Nicea, held in 325, the main target was the Arian doctrine regarding the person of Christ, a doctrine largely taken from Ebionite teaching. We understand that the mainline and predominantly Gentile Christian Church which adhered to the apostolic tradition, had to reject this teaching as false doctrine and thereby also the Ebionite heresy. The same council, however, also confirmed that Easter should be celebrated on Sunday, and thereby rejected a custom that was common to the churches of Jewish stock. This decision represented a development in the Church whereby not only was the Ebionite Hebrew Christian heresy rejected, but the Nazarene trend too met with opposition. This development took place at a time when a more general hostility to Jews and everything Jewish grew up in the Church. The gap between the Church and the Jewish people became radically wider, and the losers in this development were the Churches of the Circumcision, who then slowly died away.¹⁹ The intolerance and the passion of the Great Church for unifying everything are the basic reasons for the decline of Hebrew Christianity. We must therefore regret that the predominantly gentile Church did not show more understanding and solidarity with the relatively large part of the Church of the Circumcision that followed the doctrinal line of Nicea, but adhered to particular Jewish customs in their community life and worship in line with traditions from the mother church of Jerusalem.

HEBREW CHRISTIANITY TODAY

¹⁷ For this and the following, cf. Bagatti, op. cit. pp.30–40.

¹⁸ Concerning the Quartodecimans, see the paper on “The Old Testament and the Jewish Festivals and their meaning for the Christian Church”.

¹⁹ Cf. Bagatti, op. cit. pp.80–82.

As briefly mentioned in the beginning, Hebrew Christianity appeared again in the arena in the late 18th and in the 19th century. Today it represents a movement which is present in many parts of the world. Although we in some countries can find particular Hebrew congregations (or synagogues as these also are called by their members), Hebrew Christianity today is properly called a movement, since we find Hebrew Christians in many of the historical churches, and since there are no “Churches of the Circumcision” such as in the Early Church. An important event in the development of Hebrew Christianity in our time was the establishment of the *International Hebrew Christian Alliance in 1925*. This alliance has today work and representatives all over the world in Europe, in Northern and Southern America, in South-Africa, in Persia (Iran) and as a matter of course in Israel. The alliance is an interdenominational organization whose aim is to help Hebrew/Jewish Christians to keep their Jewish identity and their connection with the Jewish People, and to encourage them to be witnesses of the resurrected Jesus Christ for their own people.²⁰ It is difficult to estimate the extent of the Hebrew Christian movement today, since there are absolutely no statistical data and we know very little about what is happening among Hebrew/Jewish Christians in e.g. Eastern Europe (Russia etc.) and in South America. Just to give some idea, we mention that Israel probably has about 1000 Christians of Jewish stock, in a population of 3 million Jews.

There are many similarities between the Hebrew Christianity of the Early Church and today, and it is obvious that Hebrew Christians today try to renew traditions of the Early Hebrew Christian Church of Jerusalem and Palestine.²¹ But both Judaism, the Jewish People and the Christian Church have undergone important changes, and the various aspects of Hebrew/Jewish Christian life and worship now appear in a different context and with new connotations. Whereas the Jewishness of the first Hebrew Christians was a matter of course in their Jewish milieu, Hebrew Christians today in a new way feel it necessary to emphasize their Jewish identity, because of the gentile character of Christendom—or to say it in a different way: because of the Graeco-Roman and Western features of the Christendom that Jews have met. For centuries Jews who joined the Christian Church more or less had to cut their connection with their own Jewish people. This was the demand of European Christendom throughout the Middle Ages and even up to our own era.²² Hebrew Christians of our times have reacted strongly to this, and therefore we often meet with the following slogan of Hebrew Christians: “You don’t have to become a Gentile in order to believe in Jesus Christ (Messiah).” On the contrary, the Hebrew Christians stress that their Jewish identity as children of Abraham according to the flesh has been completed through their faith in Jesus Christ and through their belonging to the one people that is being gathered in Jesus Christ. Hence Hebrew Christians very often call themselves “*completed Jews*” because of their faith in Jesus Christ, a terminology which is in line with Paul’s saying in [Rom. 2:28](#): “For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is the true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal.” Their strong emphasis on the continuity between their

²⁰ Information about this alliance can be found in their magazine, *The Hebrew Christian*, published in London.

²¹ For the following the discourse is to a large extent based on my own observations in Israel for the last three years.

²² Cf. f.i. the standard work of Rengstorff-Kortzfleisch, *Kirche und Synagoge*, Stuttgart, 1971.

new faith in Jesus Christ and the traditions of the Old Testament has also led the Hebrew Christians to the frequent use of the expression “*Messianic Jews*” when they speak of themselves. We remember that the word Christian stems from “Christ” which is the Greek word for the Hebrew “Messiah”.

From the foregoing we understand that the basic problem of Hebrew Christianity today is the same as it was in the Early Church: how do they on the one hand relate to the rest of the Christian Church, and how do they on the other hand relate to their own people, the traditions and customs of the Jews, and then also to the Law of Moses which in many ways represents the nucleus of the many Jewish traditions and customs? There are basically *two* ways in which Jews who have come to faith in Jesus Christ settle this problem, and these two ways are similar to the two main lines of Hebrew Christianity in the Early Church. But since both Judaism and Christianity have developed considerably since the first centuries, the two trends appear more distinct and differ from each other more radically today. For practical reasons we here limit our description to the situation as it is in Israel.

MESSIANIC CHRISTIANS AS A SECT OF THE SYNAGOGUE

1. The first trend is to some degree similar to the *Ebionite* movement of the first centuries. Those who adhere to this trend are Jews who have come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews, but they have remained in the synagogue. They do not practice baptism and do not have communion either with any Christian Church or with congregations of Christian Jews and Gentiles. They more or less follow the Mosaic Law according to the rabbinic tradition of post-biblical and medieval times: they practice circumcision, let their children pass the bar-mitzva, the confirmation of the synagogue, and bury their dead in the cemeteries of the Synagogue; they keep the fasts and the festivals of post-biblical Judaism, and take their meals according to the rabbinic prescriptions for the ritually clean food. Their faith in Jesus Christ, which distinguishes them from the rest of the Jews of the Synagogue, is then more or less an addition to the Judaism that they have inherited in the Synagogue, and beside the ethical and moral implications, this faith in Jesus as the Messiah is mainly expressed in the context of Jewish millenarianism: the returning Jesus will be the Jewish Messiah who will restore the kingdom to Israel and establish the millenium in Jerusalem before God finally creates a new heaven and a new earth. A similar millenarianism was also extant in Early Hebrew Christianity. The similarity between this trend and the Ebionites is mainly the lack of communion between them and the universal Christian Church, and their emphasis on the binding obligation of the Law and the traditions of the synagogue. However, the Ebionites represented a distinct community with their own churches and were separated from the Synagogue, whereas this trend of Jewish believers in Jesus has identified with the Synagogue, at least more or less. For this reason we would hesitate to speak of this trend as a kind of Hebrew Christianity and rather regard it as a particular sect of the Synagogue. But we have described this trend here to show in which direction the consistent development of heretical Hebrew Christianity leads—that is: back to the Synagogue.

MESSIANIC CHRISTIANS IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GENTILE CHURCHES

2. The trend of heretical Hebrew Christianity in Israel today represents a very small group. The main trend of today’s Hebrew Christianity is found among Jewish Christians who belong to the Catholic and to the main Protestant Churches, and in addition to this we find independent and interdenominational congregations and groups of mainly Hebrew

Christians. Although there are many groups with different doctrinal standards, there is a certain unity and a certain fellowship among these Hebrew Christians, and they have certain common denominators.

Vis-à-vis the Jews of the Synagogue these Hebrew Christians represent a distinct group because of their communion with the gentile Church and with gentile Christians, and because of their identification with the living Church of Christ that comprises both Jews and Gentiles. Their faith in Jesus Christ is not just an addition to the religious traditions of the Synagogue, but it has given a new meaning and a new direction to their Jewish identity, and their belonging to the new community of the Body of Christ is given priority.

But these Hebrew Christians within the denominational and inter-denominational Churches also represent a particular group within the Christian Church. Similar to the first trend they also follow *Jewish traditions and customs*, but they do it in a different way, and with a different emphasis. They do not feel obliged by the rabbinic traditions and prescription, but keep up Jewish traditions from biblical times. These traditions and customs they keep because of their meaning to the Jewish People as a nation, and also because of their biblical roots. They practice circumcision, because this custom always has been a sign that separated the Jewish people from the nations and hence expressed their belonging to the Jewish people, and because it is a sign that they also are children of Abraham according to the flesh. They keep the sabbath since it is practical in Jewish surroundings, and since this was the day of rest ordained by God; this does not mean, however, that the first day of the week is not commemorated as the day of the resurrection of the Lord. A peculiarity of Early Hebrew Christianity was the celebration of Easter/Passover according to the Jewish calendar, on the 14-15th of Nisan, and this is also a distinctive peculiarity of Hebrew Christians today. Then they celebrate the Passover meal in accordance with Jewish tradition and recite the Passover story and partake the meal with its different ingredients.²³ But this celebration of the Jewish Passover meal is determined by their faith in Jesus Christ, the true Passover Lamb, and through their commemoration of the death and resurrection of Jesus at this meal, it is transformed into a clearly Christian celebration. This must suffice to illustrate how these Hebrew Christians follow Jewish customs and traditions: partly as national customs, partly as a renewal of biblical traditions.

The teaching of the different groups of Hebrew Christians is in line with the main denominational distinctives in Christendom, despite the growing scepticism towards firm doctrinal standards. However, it is important to mention that Hebrew Christians of this trend are also influenced by a particular *millenarianism*, in which the State of Israel will play an important role as the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ will return to establish his kingdom of one thousand years at the Mount of Zion. This millenarianism is clearly influenced by Jewish and rabbinic apocalyptic, but when it is found among Hebrew Christians in Protestant Churches today, it also represents a heritage from the pietistic movement of the Church and the so-called left side of the Protestant Reformation.

The description of these two trends of Hebrew Christianity represents a simplification of the actual situation, as one will understand. In the United States there have developed in later years so-called Messianic Synagogues: communities of mainly Hebrew Christians who gather for worship in a house they call Synagogue, and who call their pastor "Rabbi" etc. These messianic Synagogues, however, should not as a group immediately be put in line with the Ebionites or the mentioned heretical Hebrew Christians, since some hold sound

²³ The *Messianic Assembly* in Israel has published its own "The Passover Haggada to the Glory of our Lord, Yeshua Ha-Mashiach", Jerusalem, 1977.

doctrines and keep communion with other congregations. This group is very complex, and every case in the group should be studied to see what line it follows.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The number of Hebrew Christians in Israel and in other parts of the world is growing, not very fast but steadily, and Hebrew Christianity is a developing movement. This is a challenge, not only to the Hebrew Christians themselves and their leaders, but also to the rest of the Christian Church which is mainly of gentile origin.

Despite the fact that the first Christian Church in Jerusalem and Palestine was a Jewish entity, the predominantly Gentile Church in the third and fourth centuries A.D. rejected almost everything Jewish in the life of the church in its fight against the Ebionite heresy. The result of this intolerance on the part of the "Great Church" was not only that the heretical Hebrew Christianity died away, but also that the other "Churches of the Circumcision" declined and eventually faded away. With the challenge of a growing Hebrew Christianity of today the Christian Church should take notice of what happened in the Early Church and learn from it. To us it is obvious that the mentioned heretical Hebrew Christianity which appears more as a sect of the Synagogue, cannot be accepted by a Christian Church that takes seriously the Christ event and the apostolic traditions of the New Testament. We here stress this point since there are within the Christian Church also gentile Christians who support this trend of heretical Hebrew Christianity. At the same time the Early Church in a negative way teaches us that the Christians of Jewish origin need the support and the understanding of the rest of the Church, so that they can develop their national customs and the biblical traditions kept by their people, and at the same time remain faithful to the Gospel and in a sound relationship to their Christian brethren of gentile stock.

In Jesus Christ the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles was broken down ([Ephes. 2:14](#)) and in Him they have become one. But this does not mean that they should be uniform: in the communion of faith, in the one church of Jews and Gentiles, both parts need the other one. In this fellowship the Christians of Jewish origin can maybe help those of gentile origin to maintain the Old Testament and the Jewish heritage of the Christian Church, and also in the reading of the New Testament the Hebrew Christians can supply the church with dimensions which are not new, but which too often have been forgotten.

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The African Church and Selfhood

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INTRODUCTION