



*The earliest New Testament letter sheds light on the emergence of a Christian social and religious group distinct from Judaism or other Greco-Roman groups.*

## Christian identity in 1 Thessalonians

Christian origins and Christian identity formation are being studied increasingly with the use of cognitive and social psychology.<sup>1</sup> These studies represent a new angle on the discussion about the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism. When was Christianity recognizable as a social and religious group distinct from Judaism, from other Greco-Roman religious groups, voluntary associations and scholastic communities? Cultural anthropology is able to detect groups that have developed institutionalized forms or a material culture. However, early Christian identity formation deals with groups that are relatively unstable, with little institutional structure and without a distinctive material culture. In this setting social and cognitive psychology provides better tools to study identity formation in the rhetoric of a community and its leaders. 1 Thessalonians is such a piece of rhetoric, written only about 20 years after the start of the Christian movement.

The addressees are marked out as a distinct social grouping, an assembly “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 1:1), a phrase which distinguishes this group theologically as well as socially from other groups. The addressees are ‘beloved by God,’ who has ‘chosen’ them (1:4). They have put their hope in Jesus Christ whom they imitate and whom they expect from heaven (1:3, 6, 10). They experienced the power and joy of the Spirit (1:5-6). Thus, they are ideologically and socially connected to the triune God in a creed distinct from other Jewish and Greco-Roman religious groups.

This group was also connected to the missionary team, not merely by historical accident, but as the source for its origin and identity. The group formed around the message of the founding team (“our gospel”), while its team members became representative models for group behavior (1:5-6). This

attachment to the founding team continued in their absence, since the Thessalonian believers are portrayed as the “crown of boasting” for the team at the Lord’s return (2:18-19)—which means that the loyalty of the Thessalonian community increased the team’s honor before their heavenly Patron. The team’s relationship with the Thessalonian community is unique (3:1-13).

Moreover, the Thessalonian believers are portrayed as connected to each other. They are addressed as “brothers,” which creates a fictive kinship group conforming to contemporary social usage. This kinship group is socially connected with other similar groups in Macedonia and Achaia through the networking efforts of various group members (1:7-8), as well as the missionary team (e.g., 2:2).

These connections to the triune God, the missionary team, one another and other similar communities point to social structures in the Thessalonian community and define their group identity. Their identity is defined by ideological belief structures, mediated through particular authority structures and effectuated in social networks.

Groups define themselves not only by what makes group members similar, but also by what differentiates them from other groups. This process, too, is visible in this brief letter. Thessalonian believers are distinct from idol worshipping Thessalonians, from whom they turned away even as they suffered persecution at their hands (1:6, 10). Thus, these believers are similar to Judean believers because of their common fate of persecution, while both groups are distinct from Thessalonian and Judean unbelievers who initiated persecution (2:14-16). The Thessalonian believers are not to live in lust like unbelievers but adhere to their own norms for group behavior (4:5), while even grief over their dead is distinct from the normal grief in the Greco-Roman world (4:13).

The letter also reinterprets favored Greco-Roman identity markers to attribute honor to Christian identity. Unlike the mythological nymphs who cuddle the infant Dionysius (and the cultic female attendants), the missionary team offers truly tender leadership “like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (2:7). And unlike the imperial promise of “peace and security” (5:2), Christ offers true salvation and security. Christian identity offers better worship, better leadership, and everlasting peace.

In summary, Christian identity is defined both by beliefs and values treasured by insiders (a triune confession, apostolic authority, and local and regional fictive kinship) and by marking boundaries with outsiders (distinct

from Greek idol worship and Roman imperial ideology). That letter *argues* for this vision of identity, which likely does not yet fully overlap with the experience of the Thessalonian believers. Yet, the frequent references to the history of the missionary team in Thessalonica indicate that vision and experience overlap sufficiently to suggest clear awareness of a distinct Christian social identity in Thessalonica by the missionary team as well as local believers. This was established within 6-12 months after the community’s founding (see Acts 17:1-9), but references to the missionaries’ founding activity show that this awareness dates from the very beginnings of the Thessalonian church. Even outsiders recognized the distinctiveness of Christian social identity in its earliest stages, since Thessalonian unbelievers ‘persecuted’ the believers, probably to enforce social compliance with traditional household and civic customs which believers may well have abandoned in favor of the competing beliefs and behaviors of their new-found social identity.

What do these observations contribute to the discussion about the parting of the ways? I would argue that before we ask when believing communities were first identifiable as distinct religious groups in the Greco-Roman world, we need to inquire when these Christ-believing communities perceived themselves to be a distinct social and religious group. We answered this question from Paul’s earliest letter,<sup>2</sup> observing that Christian social identity is clearly seen as distinct from Jewish and Greco-Roman groups. Even though socially the group’s identity might have been unstable (it was only 6-12 months old when 1 Thes was written), and even if this social identity was not readily accepted within existing social structures in Thessalonica because it competed with traditional values, the founders clearly envisioned Christian identity as a unique and distinctive social group, and successfully convinced at least some Thessalonians of their case. Even though the parting of the ways may not yet have been sociologically observable in terms of established social institutions or a material culture, the observed cognitive and social psychological phenomena indicate that this sociological result was just a matter of time. The separation was already present in the first observable definitions of Christian social identity and its boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Bengt Holmberg, ed., *Exploring Early Christian Identity*, WUNT 1:226 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), Bengt Holmberg and Mikael Winninge, eds., *Identity Formation in the New Testament*, WUNT 1:227 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) and Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro, eds., *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science*, vol. 89, *Biblical Interpretation Series* (Leiden: Brill, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Galatians is sometimes dated first, but similar arguments about Christian identity can be drawn from observations of that letter.

## Reviews & Annotations

**Matt Jackson-McCabe, ed.**  
*Jewish Christianity  
Reconsidered* (Minneapolis,  
MN: Fortress Press, 2007); 387  
pgs. ISBN: 0800638654. \$35.00.

The main theme of RCEC is the origin of Christianity and its continuity—or discontinuity—with later orthodox Christendom. Anyone interested in the formative phases of Christianity will have to deal with its relationship with the Jewish people, culture and religion. This is not new. Christian scholars throughout church history have recognized their Jewish roots and defined their relationship with Judaism. What is new is the recognition that in an early stage Christianity was still fully Jewish, and that for several centuries some believers in Jesus remained self-confessed Jews. These Jewish believers in Jesus are commonly designated by the general term 'Jewish Christianity'.

In 2006 I taught a seminar at ETF on the subject 'Identity and significance of Jewish Christianity in the formative years of the Church.' I had a hard time choosing a handbook. I decided to work with Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> It is exciting and involved, nicely documented, and capably argues its position. However, it is slim (only 153 p.); the work of a single scholar, and by now, dated. In 2007 one other impressive publication on the same subject matter appeared beside this present book: Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, August 2007). 930 p.

I do not know which editor was the first to recruit other authors. My guess is on Skarsaune and Hvalvik, though the team of contributors to *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered* consists of equally capable scholars.

<sup>1</sup> Ray Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: from the end of the New Testament period until its disappearance in the fourth century* Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

Both print a nice selection of articles on related subjects, written by specialist in their field.<sup>2</sup> Both provide excellently categorized bibliographies. Either one of them could serve well as a textbook for my seminar. I have chosen Jackson-McCabe, not only because it is less expensive, but also because it is less massive than Skarsaune and Hvalvik. Of course its more modest size is a disadvantage too. In less than 400 pages it cannot cover the field completely. However, even Skarsaune and Hvalvik with their book of almost 1000 pages are far from exhaustive. Elizabeth Boddens Hosang and Bart J. Koet in their review of *Jewish Believers in Jesus* can still complain that important subjects and documents were insufficiently discussed.<sup>3</sup> These are the chapters in Jackson-McCabe:

- Introduction (Matt Jackson-McCabe)
1. What's in a Name? The Problem of 'Jewish Christianity' (Matt Jackson-McCabe)
  2. The Jerusalem Church (Craig C. Hill)
  3. Paul and Christ-believing Jews Whom He Opposes (Jerry L. Sumney)
  4. Ebionites and Nazarenes (Petri Luomanen)
  5. The Q Document (William Arnal)
  6. Matthew's Gospel: Jewish Christianity, Christian Judaism, or Neither? (Warren Carter)
  7. The Johannine Community as Jewish Christians? Some Problems in Current Scholarly Consensus (Raimo Hakola)
  8. The Religious Context of the letter of James (Patrick J. Hartin)
  9. John's Jewish (Christian?) Apocalypse (John W. Marshall)
  10. The Holy Vine of David Made Known to the Gentiles through God's

<sup>2</sup> Contributors to Jackson-McCabe will be mentioned below. Contributors to Skarsaune & Hvalvik are (in alphabetic order): Philip S. Alexander, Richard Bauckham, James Carleton Paget, Anders Ekenberg, Torleif Elgvin, Craig A. Evans, Donald A. Hagner, Gunnar af Hällström, Sten Hidal, Peter Hirschberg, Reidar Hvalvik, Wolfram Kinzig, Lawrence Lahey, Oskar Skarsaune, Graham Stanton and James F. Strange.

<sup>3</sup> In RBL 07/2008 and also at [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5985\\_6372.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5985_6372.pdf).

Servant Jesus: 'Christian Judaism' in the Didache (Jonathan A. Draper)  
11. The Pseudo-Clementines (F. Stanley Jones).

The question on top of the back dustcover is "What is 'Jewish Christianity'? Where in antiquity do we find it?" All the contributions deal with an important group or a key document representing Jewish Christianity in antiquity, but the book does not answer (or even aim to answer) the question. Nowhere do we find an inventory of other documents possibly related to Jewish Christianity, and nowhere is the selection of groups and texts that are treated explained or defended.

On the whole the essays in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered* form a less harmonious collection than Skarsaune and Hvalvik's *Jewish Believers in Jesus*. After the introductory chapter by the editor on terminology, one would expect consistent usage of terminology in the rest of the book. But that is not the case, not even for crucial terms like 'Jewish Christianity' and 'Christian Judaism' (cf. p. 79, 159, 287). While reading through the eleven interesting and well-written essays, one cannot but wonder where the volume is going. The contributors each have their own views, their own questions and their own interests. Maybe their assignment was each to answer their part of the question on the back. However, as no one summed up or concluded the book, it is hard for the reader to see what progress is made and what remains to be researched. If at the end of the book the editor had provided a chapter comparable with the final chapter of Skarsaune and Hvalvik (The History of Jewish Believers in the Early Centuries—Perspectives and Framework), *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered* would have been twice as valuable. Now it is only an interesting collection of nice essays on an important topic.

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