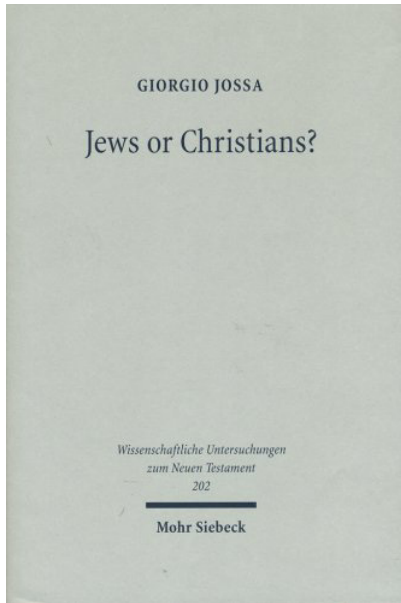


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Jossa, Giorgio

Jews or Christians? The Followers of Jesus in Search of Their Own Identity

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This volume is an English translation of the Italian *Giudei o cristiani? I seguaci di Gesù in cerca di una propria identità*, originally published in 2004. Jossa's primary contention is that, when taking into account Christianity of a Jewish origin as well as that of a Gentile origin, there is evidence that indicates the emergence of a Christian identity as distinct from a Jewish identity as early as the first years of the Jesus movement.

In the introduction Jossa briefly surveys a number of significant works on the study of the division between Judaism and Christianity. He contests both the chronological markers usually set for the division as being between 70–135 C.E. and the reasons for the division as being essentially theological (i.e., Christology, law, and the means of reconciliation). While Jossa is cognizant of the fact that the theological enunciations were effective expressions of self-identity for the first Christians, he believes that greater stress needs to be laid upon the historical context of the wider Greco-Roman world (as opposed to an exclusively Palestinian viewpoint) and also upon the social realities that caused the separation. He acknowledges that the separation of Judaism and Christianity was a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to any single factor. Jossa also emphasizes that the separation had as much to do with Gentile viewpoints as with Jewish viewpoints. There were Christian (i.e., Pauline) communities that never had been part of Judaism

because they were born outside the synagogue. Jossa maintains that the separation goes back as far as the preaching of Paul and even earlier, “with the birth of the Christian community after the death of Jesus, if not in the very preaching of the prophet of Nazareth” (13), which is where Christianity as a religion independent of and separate from Judaism has its roots.

In chapter 1, “The Jews from 4 BCE to 100 CE,” Jossa examines scholarly descriptions of Judaism as they relate to the division between Jews and Christians. He rejects the “Liberal Historiography” that proposed that Hellenism was a liberalized version of Palestinian Judaism, and he also rejects the view of a clear and linear progression from Pharisaism to rabbinic Judaism. Jossa believes that reference to “Judaisms” in the plural stems from a definition of Judaism derived from intellectual categories rather than from social categories. The essential part of Jewish identity was ethnicity, and in a foreign city many Hellenistic Jews could have attempted to reinforce their cultural and religious identity rather than compromise it. The same holds for Palestinian Judaism, and Jossa prefers to speak of a “plurality of orientations within Judaism” (27, 41). While acknowledging that Hellenism permeated all regions of the Mediterranean and even Palestine, he points out that there would still remain linguistic and cultural differences between Jews of the Diaspora and the Jews of Palestine. On the Pharisees, Jossa argues that they had a more pervasive effect on Jewish life in Palestine than what many scholars are prepared to admit. What he regards as significant is the variety of messianic hopes and speculations about intermediary figures in Judaism and how they affected the Jewish-Christian divide. Groups that speculated about such figures (e.g., Metraton from 3 Enoch) were marginal groups whose speculations were rejected by the official theology and relegated to the margins of Israel’s spirituality. Christianity was much like one of these groups; with the exception that the notion of exaltation is intensified and combined with the idea of resurrection, it made Jesus the object of worship, and all of this was predicated of the human founder of a movement that was unprecedented. The upshot of all this is that for Jossa one cannot entertain the idea that the first Christians were merely a new orientation within Judaism and thus push the parting of the ways toward 135 C.E. with the reorganization of rabbinic Judaism. Of such a position he says, “I find it frankly untenable” (42), and positing a post-85 C.E. parting fares little better. Jossa rehearses many of the well-known objections against the widespread effects of the Birkat Haminim from the council of Jamnia and maintains that the curse probably existed prior to 70 C.E. against heretics in general and was applied to Christians (i.e., the Nosrim) only later.

The content of chapter 2 concerns “The Christians from 30 CE to 100 CE” and is the largest chapter of the book. Jossa works his way through various figures and groups, including Jesus, the Jerusalem church, the Hebrews and Hellenists, Paul, and the Gospels of Matthew and John, and how they are related to the parting of the ways. While he does

not think that the parting can be related back to Jesus himself, he believes that it is in positions taken by Jesus “that the roots of the future separation were in fact planted” (45). In particular, it was Jesus’ nonconformist approach to the law (which fell short of abrogation) and his messianic claims that contributed to that division. Jesus did not call people to abandon the purity laws but to “reflect on their range and obligatory nature” (50, 81).

Jossa also contends that sharp and significant christological developments took place not merely during 70–135 C.E. but during the earliest days of the Jerusalem community. He contests the view that the early Jesus movement was just another Jewish sect. In his mind the “paschal experiences” of the disciples included not only identifying Jesus with the Son of Man who was to come but as the Son of Man, Messiah, and Lord who shared God’s throne. While much of this is drawn from Jewish categories of the exaltation of heavenly mediators, it ultimately moves beyond them in so far as the claim that a human figure and founder of a movement has been designated Messiah and had been exalted to God’s throne goes well beyond standard assertions. At any rate, to say that a human figure could share in God’s sovereignty was blasphemous. On the sociological side of things, the division was also accelerated by the early community worshiping Jesus and by deliberately taking on the name “Christians,” a self-designation that was made as a conscious act of expressing their identity as those who belong to Jesus as their *Kyrios*. On this last point Jossa is on far weaker ground. Apart from the question as to whether or not Luke is being anachronistic in applying the designation to the church in Antioch in the early 40s (for what it is worth, I do not think that he is being anachronistic, but it is moot in scholarship), the term “Christian” seems to be predominantly a derogatory title (i.e., “sycophants of Christ”) and does not become an actual self-designation until the time of Ignatius of Antioch. More likely, the title was applied by pagan authorities as a means of distinguishing the messianists from other Jews in Antioch.

In regard to the Hellenists and Hebrews of the early church, Jossa maintains that there was a theological difference between these groups. The Hellenists had a different “spirituality” and were a “novelty in the life of the community of Jerusalem,” a novelty that created divisions within the church and caused the authorities to reach against them (79). The Hellenists advocated emancipation from the law and did so in light of their paschal experiences, where it was “faith in the role of the Son of Man and Lord that challenged the Mosaic Law as the instrument of reconciliation, and thus determined the break with official Judaism” (83). In contrast, the Q document was written by Jewish Christian groups in the mid-first century as both a collection of Greek sayings of Jesus but also out of a desire to oppose the non-law obedient position of the Hellenists. This is perhaps Jossa’s most slippery argument. (1) There is little to prove that there were significant theological differences between the Hellenists and Hebrews. Acts 6:1–5 is

about the inequities over the supply of food to widows and has nothing to do with christological disputes. (2) In Stephen's speech it is precisely continuity with Jesus against the temple that provokes the mob lynching (Acts 6:13-14). (3) We have no reason to think that the Hellenists were non-law observant. The only theological difference between them and the Hebrews is that the Hellenists were probably the first to admit Gentiles into their ranks without proselytism (Acts 11:19-21), but eventually the Jerusalem church conceded this point (Gal 2:1-10; Acts 15). (4) An inference from Jesus' exaltation to the abrogation of the law is not made anywhere in sources associated with the Hellenists. (5) The Q source (if it existed) may just as well have derived from Hellenistic circles, and this might signify the law-observant tendencies of the Hellenists. (6) The persecution in Jerusalem was not limited to the Hellenists but also included the Aramaic-speaking Christians, as evidenced by the martyrdom of James the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:1-2).

On Paul and the Pauline mission, Jossa concurs with W. D. Davies that Paul did not change religions during his "conversion." Jossa is reluctant, however, to make Paul into a radicalized Hellenistic Jew, as proposed by Daniel Boyarin. For Jossa, Paul's contribution to the parting of the ways was that his exalted Christology effectively eclipsed Torah. In addition, Paul attributed to Christ characteristics and powers that were traditionally those of God. Moreover, following James Dunn, Jossa thinks that in Gal 1:13-14 Paul no longer thought of himself as being in Judaism. While Paul continued to think of himself as a Jew, it was no longer in ethnic categories associated with circumcision but in spiritual categories associated with circumcision of the heart. Paul's mission was focused solely on Gentiles and not on Jews, and Paul's churches with their law-free provision for Gentiles created a new social identity independent of Judaism. That is confirmed by Paul's remark in Phil 3:20 that the believer's citizenship or urban community is in heaven and not in the synagogue. Finally, by defining their identity and allegiance through faith in Christ, "this creates a clear separation from the synagogue" (101). In this way Paul contributed to the fateful division between Christianity and Judaism. While Jossa rightly emphasizes the theological and sociological contribution of Paul to the parting of the ways, several points are overstated or incorrect. (1) The fact that Paul tried to "win the Jew" (1 Cor 9:20), that the gospel was for the "Jew first" (Rom 1:16; 2:9-10), and his experience of synagogue punishments (2 Cor 11:24) would all suggest that Luke's portrait of Paul as missionizing among Jews and Gentiles is probably correct. That implies that his churches did include, in some locations, a mixture of Jewish and Gentile adherents. (2) Paul rejected the imposition of the Torah upon his Gentile converts; nonetheless, it seems clear from the collection that Paul took up for the saints in Jerusalem that he wanted his converts to stay in a positive relationship with the Jerusalem church and thus with Judaism. (3) It is difficult to see the social reality of the Pauline churches as entirely independent of Judaism when their language, symbols, and scriptures remained firmly indebted to them.

In coming to the Gospels of Matthew and John, Jossa first sets out the views that associate John and Matthew with the Birkat Haminin in the post-85 C.E. era. It is thought on this perspective that these Gospels are witnesses of a break between Jews and Christians after the council of Jamnia in the last quarter of the first century. Such a perspective supposes that there was a brand of Jewish Christianity that was initially attached to the synagogue and only in this later post-85 period was it forced into separation. Jossa rightly points out that part of the issue here is what is meant by “Jewish Christianity.” In his view, “Jewish Christianity” is that Christianity of Jewish origin and can include the Hellenists and Hebrews. In contrast, “Judaean-Christianity” refers to a version of faith in Jesus as Messiah that includes “all those who have recognized Jesus as the Lord and Messiah, but who want to preserve a Jewish identity and in particular continue to observe the Law” (108). Jossa contends that the division attested in these two Gospels precedes the council of Jamnia. First, the affirmations of the law in Matthew (e.g., 5:17) probably have its opposition against Paul and the Hellenists rather than between the community of Matthew and the academy of Jamnia. Second, expulsions from the synagogue probably go back to pre-70 C.E. episodes related to confession of Jesus as the Messiah. In fact, Jossa prefers the tradition of Eusebius that attributes the execution of James the Just around 62 C.E. to his confession of Jesus as Messiah (in contrast to Josephus, who gives the charge against him and his companions as being a “law-breaker”). The primary points of division reflected in Matthew and John stem from the martyrdom of James and the outbreak of the Jewish War, where Christians fled to Pella or Syria/Asia Minor. While Jossa does not deny a reaction to Jamnia by Matthew and John, Jossa does not think that this is their primary purpose. This is an innovative and compelling line of argumentation that dates the divide as reflected in Matthew and John to the pre-70 C.E. period. Still, I would dispute whether we should prefer Eusebius’s account over Josephus’s explanation as to why James was put to death. The charge of being a “law-breaker” is a point of continuity between Jesus and James. And while the significance of the council of Jamnia and the power of its decrees has certainly been blown out of all proportion by scholarship of a previous generation, we should recognize that it was still a momentous watershed in Jewish-Christian relations.

In the final chapter, “Jews and Christians as Seen by the Romans,” Jossa draws attention to the Neronian persecution and the imposition of the *fiscus Iudaicus* as evidence for a Jewish-Christian division. He argues that the Neronian persecution presupposes that Christians were a group that was regarded as distinct from Jews by Roman authorities. Jossa also advocates that there is no evidence that Christians ever paid the *fiscus Iudaicus* either.

There are several points that can be contested in this volume. I seriously doubt whether the title “Christian” was a self-designation, and Jossa’s description of the Hellenists strikes me as problematic for the reasons outlined above. Furthermore, we can question whether

there actually were Christian communities absolutely independent of Judaism prior to 70 C.E. Whereas there were Christian congregations comprised largely of Gentiles and independent of the synagogue, that does not make them any less Jewish or disassociated from Judaism. In the Pauline correspondence it is precisely issues related to Jewish law, Jewish identity, and Jewish theology that persistently arise. Many of these Gentile Christians had a background in Judaism and in the synagogue, even if they were no longer part of the Jewish social network. These Pauline communities, if anything, felt a temptation to pursue a closer relationship with the Jerusalem church and with Judaism than exhibiting a propensity to drift apart from Judaism in an absolute sense. Independence from the synagogue is an odd criterion to use to establish independence from Judaism. While it is clear that eventually some Gentile Christian communities sought to distance themselves from Judaism (see the study of Magnus Zetterholm on Antioch), it is unclear if this occurred in any significant way in the pre-70 C.E. period. Moreover, we should admit that the parting of the ways was probably experienced differently in different regions and in different chronologies.

On the whole, however, I believe that Jossa's thesis is compelling and convincing. He successfully develops and defends an argument about the origins of the Jewish-Christian rift in the pre-70 C.E. period, and this divide has its roots in the life history of Jesus and in the primitive Christian community. This monograph is an excellent counterpoint to those studies that regard the parting of the ways as belonging primarily to the 70–135 C.E. period (e.g., J. D. G. Dunn) and those that question whether or not there really was a parting of the ways in any substantial form in the first century (e.g., A. Y. Reed and A. H. Becker). Jossa makes a fine contribution to studies on Christian origins, and his work is worth consulting.