



Early Christianity

Oh you who have believe! Be the helpers of Allaah as said Jesus Son of Mary to the disciples, "who are my helpers (in the cause) of Allaah?" The disciples said "we are Allaah's helpers." Then a group of the children of Israel believed and a group disbelieved. So we gave power to those who believed against their enemies, and they became the victorious.

{*as-Saff (61): 14*}

At his ascension, Jesus, *peace be upon him*, left behind a multitude of followers relying on what he had taught them for the worship of God.¹ According to the Qur'aan, he never said anything about God or himself which he had no right to say. He was a man and a Prophet who told his followers to worship One God, as Muslims. However, to the Christians, all of this is of no consequence for they do not consider the Qur'aan to be the word of God. Therefore, the

¹The Unitarian concept of God and the prophetic human nature of Jesus, was held by many early communities basing their way of life on the teachings of Jesus, such as the *Ebionites*, the *Nazarenas*, the *Cerinthians*, the *Basilidians*, the *Carpocratians*, the *Hypsistarians*, the *Symmachians* and the *Elkesaites*.

objective of this section is to present the information of researchers on this subject.

Around 90 CE, the *Shepard of Hermas* was considered to be a book of revelation by the church, according to EJ Goodspeed and is one of two books found in the *Codex Sinaiticus*, which have not been included in the modern Bible.² In it are twelve commandments and the first is: **"believe that God is One and that He created all things and organized them, and out of what did not exist made all things to be, and He contains all things but Alone is Himself uncontained. Trust Him therefore and fear Him, and, fearing Him, be self-controlled. Keep this command and you will cast away from yourself all wickedness, put on every virtue of uprightness, and you will live to God if you keep this commandment."**

Here God is One and He is uncontained, comparatively, the Anglican affirmation of faith (the *Nicene Creed*) however goes: **"I believe in One God, the father almighty, Maker of the heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;**

²*The Apostolic Fathers (1950)*

and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made...And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by Prophets...”³

According to Theodore Zahn in *Articles of the Apostolic Creed*⁴ until around 250 CE the article of faith was simply, “I believe in God, the Almighty,” which today is only one element of the Anglican creed. J.R. Harris quoted Aristedes, an early Christian apologist as saying that **“the Christian worship in the beginning was more purely monotheistic than that even of the Jews.”**⁵

During the early history of the Christian church there existed a prospering group called the ‘*Ebionites*.’ On the origin of the

³ *Alternative Service Book*, (1980)

⁴(1899), pp. 33-37

term Robert Wilken says that this Hebrew word means ‘*poor persons*’ and continues to explain that there is no evidence to support the claim of some Christian writers that it is derived from a person called ‘*Ebion*,’ he highlights: **“The origin, history and distinct character of the *Ebionites* has been subject to intense debate in recent years. It is possible that the *Ebionites* go back to the earliest period of Christian history, where most Christians were Jews and some continued to observe the Jewish law. If so, they would be the earliest example of a Christian movement within Judaism that was eventually left behind as Christianity adapted to the influx of gentile converts. These Christians eventually became a distinct group that, along with other groups (e.g. the *Gnostics*) was rejected as heretical by the emerging ‘great’ church. They are sometimes identified with the *Minim* (heretics) mentioned in the Talmud. The *Ebionites* were Jews who accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the *Messiah* (Christ) while continuing to maintain their identity as Jews. They cultivated relations with Jews as well as Christians**

⁵J.R. Harris, *Celsus and Aristedes* (1921)

though they were welcomed by neither. They followed the Jewish law, insisting on circumcision, keeping the Sabbath and celebrating the Jewish festivals (*Yom Kippur, Passover* etc.) and observing the dietary laws (e.g. abstention from pork) and other Jewish customs. They repudiated the apostle Paul because of his denigration of the Jewish law. They saw Jesus as a prophet, an exceptional man in the line of Jewish prophets (as described in Deuteronomy 18: 15) and denied the virgin birth. They justified their way of life by appealing to the example of Jesus' life. He was circumcised, observed the *Sabbath* and celebrated the Jewish festivals, and taught that all the precepts of the law should be observed. They celebrated *Easter* on the same day that the Jews celebrated the *Passover*, and they held the city of Jerusalem in high esteem.”⁶

Furthermore, there were other Jewish Christian sects according to Wilken, including the *Nazarenes*⁷, the *Symmachians* and the *Elkesaites*.

⁶ *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, p. 576

⁷ They believed in the virgin birth and that Jesus was a Prophet and the Messiah of the Jewish peoples.

Because it is difficult to distinguish one from another, he suggests that *'Ebionite'* may have been used to characterize any form of Jewish Christianity which stressed observance of the law. The *Ebionites* had their own gospel and ancient writers, according to Wilken, mention three Jewish Christian gospels. Wilken writes: **“There was a resurgence of Jewish Christianity in the late fourth century, encouraged by Jewish messianism...after this period little is known about the *Ebionites*.”**

According to *Compton's Encyclopedia* the early Jewish Christians were persecuted because they recognized that Jesus was the expected Messiah, while the Jewish authorities considered him as an imposter and traitor: **“The early Christians were all Jews. They remained in Jerusalem and partook in the religious observances in the Temple. They differed from their fellow Jews only in that they believed that the Messiah had come. Had they kept quiet about their conviction, they might well have remained a sect within Judaism. However, they insisted on preaching to all who would listen that the Jesus whom the Jewish authorities**

had persecuted was the one Israel had long awaited. This preaching aroused great hostility on the part of religious leaders and the early Christians were persecuted...these Christians had no thought of venturing beyond the confines of Israel with their message.”⁸

The Unitarian concept of God and the prophetic human nature of Jesus, was held by many early communities basing their way of life on the teachings of Jesus, such as the *Ebionites*, the *Nazarenes*, the *Cerinthians*, the *Basilidians*, the *Carpocratians*, the *Hypsistarians*, the *Symmachians* and the *Elkesaites*.

Trinitarian Christians point out that these groups have ‘always been seen as heretical by the early Church,’ by this they mean the *prevailing* Church without attempting to establish whether that Church followed authentic teachings. To repeat Wilken, the *Ebionites* for example were **“eventually left behind as Christianity adapted to the influx of gentile converts. These Christians eventually became a distinct group**

⁸ Compton’s Encyclopedia, ‘Christianity,’ (CD – ROM Home Library, 1997)

that, along with other groups (e.g. the *Gnostics*) was rejected as heretical by the emerging ‘great’ church.”⁹

This shows that the so called ‘heretical’ church was rejected by an ‘emerging’ Christianity. In other words, the earlier followers of Jesus’ teachings were to be condemned by later followers of an adopted faith.

In *Theology and History of Jewish Christianity*, Hans-Joachim Schoeps taking up the research of Harnack and Schlatter and completing it with studies by C. Clemen, T. Andrae and H.H.

Schaeder comes to the following broadly substantiated conclusion: **“Though it may not be possible to establish exact proof of the connection, the indirect dependence of Muhammad on sectarian Jewish Christianity is beyond any doubt. This leaves us with a paradox of truly world historical dimensions: the fact while Jewish Christianity in the Church came to grief (disappeared) it was preserved in Islam and, with regard to some of its**

⁹ *The Encyclopedia of Religions*, p. 576

driving impulses at least, it has lasted till our own time.”¹⁰

Hans Küng et al. note that “the traditional and historical parallels between early Judaic-Christianity and Islam are inescapable.”¹¹

John Toland writing in 1718 concluded: “Since the *Nazarenes*, or *Ebionites*, are by all the Church historians unanimously acknowledged to have been the first Christians, or those who believed him from amongst the Jews, who were his own people and apostles, with which he lived and died and witnessed his actions, considering this, I say how was it possible for them to be the first of all others (for they were made to be the first heretics), who should form wrong conceptions of the doctrines and designs of Jesus? And how did the Gentiles, who only believed in Jesus after his death from the preaching and information of people that never knew Jesus, have truer notions of doctrine and Jesus, or whence could

¹⁰ Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Theology and History of Jewish Christianity* (1949), p.342

they have their information but from the believing
Jews.”¹²

¹¹Hans Küng (ed.), *Christianity and the World Religions – Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism* (1986), p.24

¹² John Toland, *The Nazarenes* (1718), p.73-76 – The book can be found at the *British Library*.