

SHEM-TOB'S HEBREW MATTHEW AND  
EARLY JEWISH CHRISTIANITY

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Fourteen years ago, I began work on a Hebrew Matthew preserved in a Jewish polemical treatise of the fourteenth century. The treatise, entitled *Even Bohan*, was written in 1380 by the Spanish writer, Shem-Tob ben-Isaac ben Shaprut. In 1987, I published the Hebrew text along with an English translation and a detailed analysis.<sup>1</sup> In 1995, I published a second edition of the work, entitled *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*.<sup>2</sup> I argued that Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew is older than the fourteenth century and that Shem-Tob received his text from earlier generations of Jewish scribes.

A textual profile of this document reveals that it agrees sporadically with early Christian and Jewish writings. It has readings in agreement with Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century), the Old Syriac version (second century; MSS date to the fourth and fifth centuries), the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* (first or second century; MS dates to the fourth century), the Pseudo-Clementine writings (third/fourth century) and the *Protevangelium of James* (second/third century).

It also has readings in agreement with the *Tol'doth Yeshu* (between the sixth and tenth centuries), the *Milhamot HaShem* by Jacob ben Reuben (1170), *Sepher Joseph Hamekane* by Rabbi Joseph ben Nathan

1. George Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

2. George Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995).

Official (thirteenth century), and the *Nizzahon Vetus* (thirteenth century).<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of these agreements, I conjecture that a Shem-Tob type text of Matthew goes back to an early period of the Christian era. A distinction should be made between the Shem-Tob type text of Matthew and the Shem-Tob Hebrew Matthew I published. The Shem-Tob type text is earlier than the Hebrew text now available. Shem-Tob's Hebrew text, as I have shown, includes considerable revision and corruption, and is at best only an approximate representation of the earlier form.

The purpose of this paper is to supply additional information regarding the date of the Shem-Tob type Matthean text by comparing the distinctive theology of our only representative of it with the theologies of early Jewish Christian groups.<sup>4</sup> My intent is to locate this form of the Gospel of Matthew within the history of Jewish Christianity<sup>5</sup> with the hope of ascertaining its date with more accuracy.

3. The agreements of Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew with these documents are discussed in *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 160-212.

4. For a recent survey of research on early Jewish Christianity, see S.C. Mimouni, 'Le judéo-christianisme ancien dans l'historiographie du XIX<sup>ème</sup> et du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle', *REJ* 151 (1992), pp. 419-28.

5. My definition of Jewish Christianity is the following: it is any community of ethnic Jews (with or without proselytes) who have become Christian by believing in Jesus, but who retain their ethnic identity and continue to keep the Law of Moses. The definition of Jewish Christianity is an elusive one. Mimouni takes a definition similar to mine (Simon C. Mimouni, 'Pour une définition nouvelle du judéo-christianisme ancien', *NTS* 38 [1992], pp. 161-86). Daniélou understands it to be 'the expression of Christianity in the thought-forms of Later Judaism' (Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964], p. 10). Similarly, A.F.J. Klijn, 'The Influence of Jewish Theology on the Odes of Solomon and the Acts of Thomas', in *Aspects du judéo-christianisme: Colloque de Strasbourg 23-25 avril 1964* (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1965), pp. 167-79 (170). But, in 1974, Klijn argued that it is impossible to define the term 'Jewish Christian' because it is a name that can almost always be replaced by 'Christian' (A.F.J. Klijn, 'The Study of Jewish Christianity', *NTS* 20 [1974], pp. 419-31 [426]). Taylor argues that for the term to have any real meaning it must refer to ethnic Jews with their Gentile converts who upheld the praxis of Judaism. She also believes that it is bi-religious, made up of Judaism and Christianity as two distinct religions (Joan E. Taylor, 'The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention?', *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 [1990], pp. 313-34). Segal writes, 'Jewish Christianity is not an ethnic designation but a position on the issue

Before I make my comparisons, I will state two assumptions and give my rationale for them. First, in my judgment, Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew is the work of a Jewish Christian, not a Gentile Christian. Its theology is heterodox in nature, generally corresponding to what we know about Jewish Christianity. Moreover, it is written in Hebrew. Gentile Christians wrote in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic and other languages, but rarely in Hebrew.

Second, in my judgment this text is not a Jewish translation of canonical Matthew. To be sure, the Jews sometimes translated parts of the New Testament into Hebrew. They debated the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and wrote polemical treatises against the Christian religion. To facilitate their program of polemics, they sometimes translated Christian documents into Hebrew. But, there are good reasons why this text should not be considered a Jewish translation:

1. It contains 19 instances where a symbol for the Tetragrammaton, the Divine Name of God in the Hebrew Bible (Yahweh, or Jehovah) occurs.<sup>6</sup> It is inconceivable that a Jewish translator would have inserted a symbol for the Divine Name into his translation, when neither the Divine Name nor a symbol for it ever appears in the canonical version.<sup>7</sup> That Shem-Tob, or any Jewish translator during the Middle Ages, would have implanted a symbol for the ineffable name of God into a hated Christian document like the Gospel of Matthew is highly unlikely.

of the correct way to carry out the teachings of Jesus. Social and theological issues were parallel.' (Alan F. Segal, 'Jewish Christianity', in Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata [eds.], *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992], pp. 326-51 [348]). For further definition, see Glen A. Koch, 'Jewish Christianity', in Everett Ferguson (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland, 1990), pp. 488-91; Stanley K. Riegel, 'Jewish Christianity: Definitions and Terminology', *NTS* 24 (1978), pp. 410-15; Robert Murray, 'Defining Judaeo-Christianity', *Heythrop Journal* 15 (1974), pp. 303-10; Bruce J. Malina, 'Jewish Christianity or Christian Judaism: Toward a Hypothetical Definition', *JSJ* 7 (1976), pp. 46-57.

6. Mt. 1.22, 24; 2.13, 19; 3.3; 4.7, 10; 5.33; 15.8; 21.9, 12, 42; 22.31, 32, 37, 44; 27.9; 28.2, 9. The symbol consists of the Hebrew letter ׀ followed by two short strokes (thus: ׀׀).

7. The words κυριος and Θεος occur in New Testament quotations of the Old Testament in passages where the Tetragrammaton originally appeared. I consider these to be standard renditions of the Divine Name rather than symbols for the Tetragrammaton. Concerning the Tetragrammaton and the New Testament, see my previous study, 'The Tetragram and the New Testament', *JBL* 96 (1977), pp. 63-83.

2. Its text type differs from the standard Christian type. If a Jew, engaged in polemics, had translated Matthew into Hebrew, he would most likely have rendered the Greek text used by the church during the Middle Ages, that is the Koine or Byzantine text, or perhaps he would have translated the Latin Vulgate, the official version of the Roman Catholic Church. But, Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew differs so radically from both the Greek and Latin texts of the Middle Ages, it cannot be a translation of either.

Now to my comparison of theologies. I divide my remarks into two parts. Part 1 includes a brief discussion of four distinctive motifs found in the Hebrew Matthew. Part 2 compares these motifs with the theologies of Jewish Christian groups reported in the New Testament and early Christian literature. I conclude with a few remarks regarding the results of my comparison.

### *1. Important Motifs in the Hebrew Matthew*

#### *Exaltation of John the Baptist*

Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew exalts John the Baptist above the role he plays in the canonical Matthew. Here are some typical instances:

Mt. 11.11. The Hebrew reads, 'Truly, I say to you, among all those born of women none has risen greater than John the Baptist'. The familiar phrase following in the Greek text, 'yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he', is absent in the Hebrew. The Hebrew thus asserts that John the Baptist is the greatest man who ever lived.

Mt. 11.13. The Hebrew reads, 'For all the prophets and the law spoke concerning John'. The Greek reads, 'For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John'.

Mt. 17.11. The Hebrew reads, 'Indeed Elijah [= John the Baptist] will come and will save all the world'. The Greek reads, 'Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things'.

In summary, these Hebrew passages assert that none is greater than John the Baptist, the prophets and the law spoke concerning John, and John (Elijah) came to save all the world. Traditional Christianity used such language only in regard to Jesus. Its appearance in the Hebrew Matthew to describe John elevates the Baptist to a salvific role, significantly higher than the role he plays in the canonical text.

*Continued Relevance of the Baptism of John*

The Hebrew Matthew appears to speak only of the baptism of John. It presents John preaching in the wilderness of Judah, with many from Jerusalem, Judah and the surrounding countryside attending his baptism (Mt. 3.1-6). Jesus is among those who come, and though John hesitates to baptize him, when assured that it is necessary for fulfilling all righteousness, he performs the act.

By contrast, there is no clear reference to Christian baptism in the Hebrew Matthew.

There are two relevant passages regarding baptism in the Greek Matthew: (1) Mt. 3.11, 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'; (2) Mt. 28.19, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.

But neither of these references appears the same in the Hebrew text. For Mt. 3.11, the Hebrew reads, 'He will baptize you with the fire of the Holy Spirit', a reading that supports the concept of judgment (especially considering its immediate context before and after, i.e., vv. 10 and 12) as much as that of Pentecostal baptism.<sup>8</sup> For Mt. 28.19-20, the Hebrew reads, 'Go and teach them to carry out all the things which I have commanded you forever'. No reference to baptism occurs in this passage at all.

*The Delayed Inclusion of the Gentiles*

The Hebrew Matthew envisions the inclusion of masses among the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God not in this present age (though proselytes would apparently be welcome), but only after this present age ends (25.31-46).<sup>9</sup> Its theology in this regard corresponds to the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish thought, in which the entrance of the Gentiles is anticipated in the golden age to come.<sup>10</sup>

8. For a comprehensive discussion of the meaning of 'fire' in this context, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. II. *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 35-39.

9. See my discussion in *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 214-16.

10. There were differing views within Judaism about the fate of the Gentiles. That an extensive conversion of Gentiles would take place at the last day was an important one (Tob. 13.11). For a discussion, see Scot McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 47. John P. Meier writes, 'Needless to say, the way in which the Gentiles are involved in the events of the

Here are some relevant texts in the Hebrew. The first three generally confine Jesus' mission to the Jews.

1. Mt. 10.5-6, 'To the lands of the Gentiles do not go and into the cities of the Samaritans do not enter. Go to the sheep who have strayed from the house of Israel'.

2. Mt. 15.21, 'They did not send me except to the lost sheep from the house of Israel'.

The Greek includes both these references, but it lacks the exclusive ending of Matthew as recorded in the Hebrew.

3. The Great Commission at the end of the canonical Gospel mandates the followers of Jesus to make disciples of all nations. But the Hebrew says nothing about the nations in this passage. It reads, 'Go and teach them [that is, the Jews] to carry out all the things which I have commanded you forever' (Mt. 28.19-20). The target audience of this commission apparently includes the Jews only.

There are several other passages in the Hebrew, which, though not actually confining Jesus' mission exclusively to the Jews, imply Jews as the primary target.

end time varies from writer to writer. For example, their coming to Jerusalem is sometimes imagined in a positive way (the Gentiles as devout pilgrims, joining Israel in its worship of Yahweh), sometimes in a negative way (the defeated Gentiles are made to bow down before a triumphant Israel)' (*A Marginal Jew*, II, p. 314). See also E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 213-14, who cites six different views about the Gentiles and the end-time. Further, see E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983], p. 18: 'Many Jews, and all the Jewish Christians whose views are known to us, expected Gentiles to be brought into the people of God in the messianic period'; Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus's Promise to the Nations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 56: 'In other words: the gathering in of the Gentiles occurs in the hour of the final judgment'; Richard Bauckham, 'James and the Jerusalem Church', in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 415-80 (425). See further George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, pp. 323-53; T.L. Donaldson, 'The "Curse" of the Law and the Inclusion of the Gentiles: Galatians 3.13-4', *NTS* 32 (1986), pp. 94-112 (99-100); *idem*, *Jesus on the Mountain* (JSNTSup, 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 43-45, 62-69; B. Sundkler, 'Jésus et les païens', *RHPR* 16 (1936), pp. 485-88; Roger D. Aus, 'Paul's Travel Plans to Spain and the "Full Number of the Gentiles" of Rom. XI:25', *NT* 21 (1979), pp. 232-62; George Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 1990), pp. xiii-xix.

1. Mt. 9.13. Instead of the familiar phrase in the canonical text, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners', the Hebrew reads, 'I have not come to *restore* the righteous, but the wicked'. Jesus' mission in the Hebrew text is one of *restoration*, aimed at those who have fallen away from God's people (i.e., the Jews), not one in which an initial call is made to the lost among the masses of humanity.

2. Mt. 13.38. In the canonical text, Jesus says, 'The field is the world'. He is talking about sowing his words of life. He sows his words to the whole world. The Hebrew reads, 'The field is *this* world'. This is good Jewish parlance referring to *this present age* as opposed to *the age to come*. The Hebrew lacks the universal overtones of the Greek, suggesting only that Jesus sows his words during the present age.

### *Delayed Recognition of Jesus as the Messiah*

The Hebrew Matthew has the peculiar characteristic of not referring to Jesus as the Messiah until ch. 16. In this chapter, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus declares that Peter has received this revelation from God.<sup>11</sup>

Simon...answered and said: You are the Messiah...the Son of the living God, who has come into this world. Jesus said to him: Blessed are you Simon bar Jonah because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in Heaven (Hebrew Mt. 16.16-17).

Before this, the Hebrew Matthew never calls Jesus the Messiah. This is in stark contrast to the Greek where Jesus is called Christ/Messiah from the beginning of the Gospel (Mt. 1.1, 17, 18; 11.2). Compare the differences:

	<i>Greek</i>	<i>Hebrew</i>
1.1	The book of the genealogy of <i>Jesus Christ</i>	These are the generations of <i>Jesus</i>
1.17	the deportation to Babylon to the <i>Christ</i> fourteen generations	the Babylonian exile unto <i>Jesus</i> were fourteen generations

11. Earlier, I argued that 'Messiah' in 16.16 did not belong to the original Hebrew text, and that the Hebrew Matthew never identified Jesus with the Messiah (*Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 216-218; 'Hebrew Gospel of Matthew: A Report', *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 2.2 [1995], pp. 66-67). I now believe this is incorrect. The Hebrew, for some reason, delays recognition of Jesus as the Messiah only until partway through his career.

1.18	Now the birth of <i>Jesus Christ</i> took place in this way	The birth of <i>Jesus</i> was in this way
11.2	Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the <i>Christ</i>	John, when he was in captivity, heard of the work of <i>Jesus</i>
16.16	Simon Peter replied, You are the <i>Christ</i> , the Son of the living God	Simon... answered and said: You are the <i>Messiah</i> ... the Son of the living God

It is clear that different agendas are at work in the Greek and the Hebrew. In the Greek, Jesus is the Christ from the beginning. In the Hebrew, there is no reference to Jesus as the Christ/Messiah until 16.16.<sup>12</sup> Nothing is made of this in the Hebrew Matthew itself, but as we shall see, the Shem-Tob type text may have given rise to an early Jewish Christian type of Christology.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. *Early Jewish Christianity*

I now list and discuss several Jewish Christian groups found in the New Testament and the early Church Fathers and compare their theologies with these distinctive motifs found in Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew.

### *New Testament Groups.*

Raymond Brown lists four distinct types of Jewish Christians in the New Testament.<sup>14</sup> According to him, they differ from each other primarily in their attitude toward the Gentile mission. Brown's list is the following:

12. After Mt. 16.16, other references in the Hebrew Matthew imply Jesus is the Christ. See 16.20; 22.42; 24.5; 26.63-64.

13. The words, 'who has come into this world' (taken from Hebrew Mt. 16.16 as quoted above), could be understood as incarnationalist, corresponding to an early form of orthodox Christology. This understanding is supported by the similarity of certain phrases in the Gospel of John (Jn. 1.9; 6.14; 18.37). I argued in an earlier issue of this journal ('A Note on Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew and the Gospel of John', *JSNT* 47 [1992] pp. 117-26), however, that the author of the Gospel of John was dependent on a Shem-Tob type text of Matthew. If I am right, there would have been no borrowing by the author of the Shem-Tob type text from the Gospel of John. What the author of the Hebrew meant by this isolated phrase, 'who has come into this world', is, therefore, unclear.

14. He prefers to call these groups Jewish/Gentile Christianity, arguing that too much has been made of the difference between Jewish Christianity and Gentile



1. Jewish Christians (with their Gentile converts) who practiced full adherence to the law, including circumcision, as necessary for salvation. This type originated in Jerusalem and had success in Galatia, Philippi, and perhaps elsewhere.

2. Jewish Christians (with their Gentile converts) who exempted circumcision as a requirement for the Gentiles, but required Gentiles to keep some Jewish purity laws. This type originated in Jerusalem and was led by the apostle Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. It became the dominant form of Christianity in Antioch and possibly Rome and parts of Asia Minor.

3. Jewish Christians (with their Gentile converts) who exempted the Gentiles from circumcision and the rest of the law, except for the Jewish proscription forbidding marriage among relatives (1 Cor. 5.1; Acts 15.20, 29). This type originated in Antioch and was spearheaded in the West by Paul and his companions.

4. Jewish Christians (with their Gentile converts) who saw no abiding significance in the cult of the Jerusalem temple, or in keeping the law. It was truly non-law-observant. Beginning in Jerusalem, this movement spread to Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. According to Brown, a later and more radical form of this type is encountered in the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Brown's analysis of these groups distinguishes them primarily by how much of the law they required Gentiles to keep. Group 1 required the whole law, group 2 some Jewish purity laws, group 3 one purity law, and group 4 none of the law.

The first group apparently did not envision a *mass* inclusion of Gentiles (as Gentiles) during the present age. They considered the church thoroughly Jewish, and any Gentiles who were added to the community were required to become proselytes of Judaism.<sup>15</sup>

Groups 2, 3 and 4 excused circumcision as a requirement for conversion. Groups 3 and 4 especially set their aim on the inclusion of non-proselytized Gentiles during the present age and succeeded in bringing masses of non-Jews into the church. Paul was distinctively

Christianity. Raymond E. Brown, 'Not Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity, but Types of Jewish/Gentile Christianity', *CBQ* 45.1 (1983), pp. 74-79.

15. Michael Goulder (*A Tale of Two Missions* [London: SCM Press, 1994], p. 33) writes, 'But they knew that if they required Sabbath observance, circumcision, etc., which were equally part of the Law, that would be the end of the Gentile mission'.

successful in bringing non-Jews into the church, meriting for himself the title, Apostle to the Gentiles.

Now for a comparison of these Jewish Christian groups with Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew. It appears that the Hebrew text agrees at least partially with group 1 in regard to the inclusion of the Gentiles. Both the Hebrew text and this group, adhering closely to the requirements of the law, accepted Gentiles during the present age on the basis of proselytization. The Hebrew Matthew projects the mass inclusion of the Gentiles to the dawn of the golden age to come, and it is possible (probable?) that group 1 did the same. Groups 2, 3 and 4, on the other hand, represent a different attitude toward the Gentiles, accepting masses of non-proselytized Gentiles into their ranks now in the present time.

In regard to the other theological motifs, there is no agreement between the Hebrew Matthew and these four groups. None of the four supports the Hebrew Matthew in its exalted position of John the Baptist or in its view of the continued relevance of the baptism of John. And nothing appears in the theologies of these groups that corresponds to the delayed recognition of Jesus as the Messiah in the Hebrew Matthew.

I conclude, then, that none of these groups agrees completely, or in any significant way with the distinctive motifs found in the Hebrew Matthew and that none of them is a good candidate for having produced this text.

Before leaving the New Testament, there is one other group that should be considered. This is the group represented by Apollos and the twelve men Paul encountered at Ephesus (Acts 18.24–19.7). In both instances, these people knew only the baptism of John.

Apollos was a Jew and apparently a Christian.<sup>16</sup> He was also a teacher, originally from Alexandria,<sup>17</sup> who appeared in Ephesus approxi-

16. A.F.J. Klijn writes, 'Somebody who is taught in the way of the Lord and is fervent in the Spirit must have been a Christian, according to Acts' ('Jewish Christianity in Egypt', in Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring [eds.], *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986], pp. 161-75 [163]). This position is generally supported by Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 553; Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles* in F.J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity* (repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 231.

17. According to Codex Bezae, Acts 18.25 states that Apollos was taught the word of the Lord in his native country. A number of scholars have maintained that

mately twenty years after the beginning of the church, teaching a brand of Christianity that knew only the baptism of John. The next paragraph in Acts records the story of twelve other disciples, encountered by Paul at Ephesus, who also knew only the baptism of John.

Whether Apollos and these twelve disciples belonged to a special sect of the church—the evidence is unclear—they at least came from similar theological circles, emphasizing the importance of embracing Jesus while maintaining the continued significance of the baptism of John.

These disciples (for convenience I will call them the Apollos group) advocated a similar theology to that reflected in the Hebrew Matthew in regard to the baptism of John. They demonstrate that sometime during the mid-first century there were disciples of Jesus who knew only the baptism of John. It is also possible that they embraced an exalted position of John. But, there is no indication that they agreed with the other distinctive motifs in the Hebrew text, such as the delayed salvation for the Gentiles or the delay in the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. In spite of some similarities, therefore, no positive identification between the Apollos group and the community responsible for the Hebrew Matthew can be made.

### *Groups Reflected in the Early Church Fathers*<sup>18</sup>

#### *The Ebionites*

The church writers of the second through the fourth centuries, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius, Epiphanius and Jerome, all refer to a community of Jewish Christians called Ebionites. According

early Egyptian Christianity was heretical and/or influenced by Jewish Christianity. See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 44-60; Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), II, pp. 223-25; Klijn, 'Jewish Christianity in Egypt', pp. 161-75.

18. Munck maintains that primitive Jewish Christianity perished in the Jewish revolt against Rome. Later forms of Jewish Christianity are merely a continuation of Gentile Christianity along heretical lines (Johannes Munck, 'Primitive Jewish Christianity and Later Jewish Christianity: Continuation or Rupture?', in *Aspects du judéo-christianisme*, p. 91). According to Strecker, the view that Jewish Christianity is heresy did not come about until the third and fourth centuries. Evidence suggests that at an earlier time it existed independent of the Great Church, and was not hostile to it. 'Whereas Origen and Eusebius attest that in the eastern church the

to them, *the Ebionites use only the Gospel according to Matthew*,<sup>19</sup> repudiate Paul and his writings, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law,<sup>20</sup> observe the law, including circumcision, Sabbath and Passover, and adore Jerusalem as if it were the house of God.<sup>21</sup> They interpret Mt. 15.24 ('I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel') to mean that Christ came to dwell especially with fleshly Israel.<sup>22</sup>

In regard to Christology, they believe that Jesus was a mere man, whom God adopted to be the Christ because he obtained virtue through keeping the law. Usually they view the adoption taking place when the Christ/Spirit descended as a dove upon Jesus at his baptism.<sup>23</sup> They also believe that others could become Christs by keeping the law.<sup>24</sup>

complexity of Jewish Christianity is still acknowledged...in the third and fourth century, the western church had already forced Jewish Christianity into a fixed heresiological pattern by the end of the second and beginning of the third century... The simplistic, dogmatically determined classification of Jewish Christianity as a heresy which confronts the "great church" as a homogeneous unit does not do justice to the complex situation existing within legalistic Jewish Christianity' (Georg Strecker, 'On the Problem of Jewish Christianity', in Walter Bauer [ed.], *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], pp. 241-85 [283-85]).

19. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.26.2; 3.11.7; Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 3.27.4; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.3.7.

20. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.26.2; Origen, *Hom. in Jer.* 19.12; Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 3.27.4.

21. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.26.2; Hippolytus, *Refutatio omn. haer.* Prol. 7.8; 34.1-2.

22. Origen, *De princ.* 4.3.8.

23. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.14.4; 30.16.3. See Goulder, *A Tale of Two Missions*, p. 112.

24. Hippolytus (*Refutatio omn. haer.* Prol. 7.34.1-2) writes, 'They [Ebionites] live conformably to Jewish customs saying that they are justified according to the law, and saying that Jesus was justified by practicing the law. Therefore, it was that he was named both the Christ of God and Jesus, since not one of the rest kept the law. For if any other had practiced the commandments of the law, he would have been the Christ. And they themselves also, having done the same, are able to become Christs; for they say that he himself was a man like all'. See also Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.27.2 and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.18.5. A.F.J. Klijn and G.J. Reinink (*Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973], p. 22) write, 'Because of his righteousness Jesus was called Jesus the Christ at a later stage in his life. Nevertheless, Hippolytus is careful to insist that, according to the Ebionites, Jesus, even after becoming Christ, remained man...Jesus's humanity is

How accurate these statements are about the Ebionites is open to question. It is certainly possible that the Fathers have lumped several Jewish Christian groups together under the label 'Ebionite'. Whatever the case, some of these teachings have a possible connection to the Shem-Tob type Matthean text.

First, the Ebionites may not have expected the inclusion of masses of Gentiles (as Gentiles) to take place during the present age. Their insistence on circumcision and their repudiation of Paul suggests that any Gentiles who entered the Kingdom now needed to become proselytes of Judaism first. Paul, of course, argued against this position in Romans and Galatians and was, probably for this and perhaps other reasons, repudiated by the Ebionites.

But if the Ebionites believed this, they could hardly have derived it from the canonical Gospel of Matthew. The concluding verses of the canonical Matthew teach that a mass influx of disciples from all nations (apparently without proselytization) is to be included in the Kingdom of God now in the present era (Mt. 28.19-20). The ending of the canonical Gospel of Matthew thus appears to militate against Ebionite theology.

If, on the other hand, the Ebionites used a Shem-Tob type text of Matthew, their position regarding circumcision and the Gentiles becomes understandable, as well as their repudiation of the apostle Paul. Shem-Tob's version of Matthew envisions the mass inclusion of the Gentiles to take place only in the world to come, not during this present age, and by implication this repudiates Paul.

Second, the Ebionites believed that Jesus became the Messiah during his lifetime through progress in virtue. Again, they certainly did not derive this from the Greek Matthew. The canonical text considers Jesus to be the Christ from the beginning.

But if the Ebionites used a Shem-Tob type text of the First Gospel, their Christological beliefs become understandable. The Ebionites could have interpreted the delayed identification of Jesus with the Messiah in the Shem-Tob type text as an indication that Jesus became the Messiah later in life. From there it would have been easy to conclude that he became the Messiah because of his progress in virtue. One interpretation of Hebrew Mt. 3.15 ('to fulfill all righteousness') could have been used to support this belief.

emphasized by his saying that everyone who fulfilled the Law could also be called Christ.'

Elsewhere, I have argued that the Ebionites had access to a Shem-Tob type text. In an investigation of the Pseudo-Clementine writings, traditionally held to be Ebionite in character, I discovered that on occasion these writings reflect a Shem-Tob type text (sometimes negatively) in their quotations from the First Gospel and in their general discussions.<sup>25</sup> It is possible, then, that the Ebionites derived their views about the inclusion of the Gentiles and about Christology from a Shem-Tob type text of Matthew.

Given this possibility, it is tempting to dub the Hebrew text Ebionite and to trace its origins to this Jewish Christian sect. But there is reason to argue that this is not the case, primarily because Ebionite theology and the theology reflected by Shem-Tob's text also have some marked differences.

In declaring Jesus to be a mere man, the Ebionites are said to have rejected (1) the virgin birth of Jesus and (2) the notion that Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>26</sup> But both of these teachings, the Virgin Birth and Jesus is the Son of God, are found in the Hebrew Matthew (1.18-25; 16.16).

The Church Fathers also tell us that the Ebionites believe that Christ is a giant, standing 96 miles tall and 24 miles wide, and that the Holy Spirit is a female of the same dimensions.<sup>27</sup> They allow marriage and divorce up to seven times,<sup>28</sup> avoid eating meat,<sup>29</sup> observe the Eucharist once a year with unleavened bread and water,<sup>30</sup> and reject much of the Hebrew Bible, including sections of the Pentateuch, David, Solomon and the prophets.<sup>31</sup>

None of these items fit well with the Hebrew Matthew. Finally, there is nothing to suggest that the Ebionites exalted John the Baptist, or that they accepted the continued importance of his baptism.<sup>32</sup> On the basis

25. See George Howard, 'The Pseudo-Clementine Writings and Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew', *NTS* 40 (1994), pp. 622-28.

26. Tertullian, *De praescript. haer.* 33.11; *De carne Chr.* 14; *De virg. vel.* 6.1; Origen, *In epist. ad Titum*. Origen (c. *Celsus* 5.61) writes that there are two kinds of Ebionites, some who believe in the virgin birth and some who deny it. So also Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica* 3.27.1-3, and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.2.2.

27. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.17.5.

28. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.18.3.

29. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.15.3.

30. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.16.1.

31. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.18.4.

32. In my judgment, the Ebionites actually depreciated John the Baptist. The Pseudo-Clementine writings often reflect a negative attitude toward John. (Howard,

of a scrutiny of Ebionite teaching, then, it does not appear that the two belong in the same theological camp.

### *The Nazoraeans*

The Nazoraeans are named for the first time in history by Epiphanius (c. 315–403) and Jerome (c. 347–420). Unfortunately, their descriptions of this group are not totally in agreement. I will take them one at a time.

Epiphanius describes the Nazoraeans as Jewish Christians who practice the law, including circumcision, Sabbath and the rest, in addition to believing in Christ.<sup>33</sup> They apparently reject Gentiles who do not practice the law,<sup>34</sup> and differ from the Ebionites by accepting the New Testament, including Paul.<sup>35</sup>

Generally, they espouse orthodox beliefs,<sup>36</sup> including the resurrection of the dead, the divine creation of all things, the oneness of God, and the divine sonship of Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup> But Epiphanius cannot confirm their orthodoxy completely, since he thinks they may not accept the virgin birth of Christ. He makes it clear, however, that he is not certain about this.<sup>38</sup>

'The Pseudo-Clementine Writings and Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew'. pp. 622-28). Jones, however, notes that John is treated positively in *Recognitions* 1.27-71. He believes that this section of the *Recognitions* is based on a special source (F. Stanley Jones, *An Ancient Jewish Christian Source on the History of Christianity: Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions 1.27-71* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995], p. 128). Bammel, on the other hand, recognizes John's negative position in the Pseudo-Clementines and gives the subject an interesting airing (Ernst Bammel, 'The Baptist in Early Christian Tradition', *NTS* 18 [1971–72], pp. 95-128 [116-18]).

33. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29.5.4.

34. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29.8.6. According to him, the Nazoraeans *disobey* the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit ordered the Gentiles to follow no rules except to abstain from blood, things strangled, fornication and meats offered to idols. The most natural meaning of this passage is that the Nazoraeans insist on the Gentiles keeping the whole law, not just these four Noachide rules.

35. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29.7.2.

36. Some scholars argue that the Nazoraeans were totally orthodox, except for their practice of the law. See Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, the Hebrew University; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), pp. 44-45.

37. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29.7.2.

38. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29.7.6.

Jerome is much more certain, believing that the Nazoraeans in fact accept the virgin birth of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Also, from one reading of his comment in *In Esaiam* 9.1 he believes that the Nazoraeans accept Paul's mission to include masses of Gentiles during the present era.<sup>40</sup> He is, however, unclear on whether the Gentiles are to be admitted without circumcision.

Though the witness of Epiphanius and Jerome regarding the Nazoraeans is not completely uniform, it gives us a picture of them. Taking the two writers together, I conclude that the Nazoraeans were Jewish by race, accepted Jesus as the Christ, but continued to practice the law. Generally, they were orthodox in regard to Christology, with the possible exception of rejecting the virgin birth. They acknowledged Paul and his mission to the Gentiles, though it is unclear whether they required Gentiles to accept circumcision and the law.<sup>41</sup>

Comparing now these beliefs and practices, it appears that the Nazoraeans differ from Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew by showing no special recognition of John the Baptist or the continued significance of his baptism. Unless they rejected the virgin birth story, something that is uncertain, nothing suggests that they had a belief that reflects the Hebrew Matthew's delay in recognizing Jesus as the Messiah.

### *Concluding Remarks*

1. The Hebrew Matthew overlaps theologically with the Apollos group of Acts 18 and 19. The Apollos group knew only the baptism of John and, because of that, possibly embraced an exalted position of John the Baptist. But there is nothing to suggest that the Apollos group conformed to the Hebrew Matthew in regard to the delayed salvation of the Gentiles. Nor does the Apollos group appear to have any teaching that

39. Jerome, *Epist.* 112.13

40. Quoting the Nazoraean interpretation of Isa. 9.1, Jerome writes, 'And the Gospel of Christ shone to the most distant tribes and the way of the whole sea. Finally the whole world...has seen the clear light of the gospel' (*In Esaiam* 9.1). Robert M. Price, however, believes that the above understanding of this passage confuses Jerome's own interpretation with that of the Nazoraeans. See Price's review of *Nazarene Jewish Christianity, From the End of the New Testament Period Until Its Disappearance in the Fourth Century*, by Ray A. Pritz, in *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 2 (1995), pp. 143-47 (147).

41. Augustine (*Contra Faustum* 19.7) reports that the Nazoraeans 'stubbornly insisted on the gentiles becoming Jews'.



reflects the Hebrew Matthew's delayed recognition of Jesus as the Messiah.

2. The Hebrew Matthew offers an explanation for the Ebionite belief that Jesus became the Messiah by obtaining virtue through keeping the law. It is possible, therefore, that the Ebionites knew and used a Shem-Tob type text of Matthew and derived this teaching from it. But there is nothing to suggest that the Ebionites agreed with the Hebrew Matthew in regard to the exalted position of John the Baptist, or the continued force of the baptism of John.

3. Jewish Christianity during the first four centuries of the Christian era embraced many different beliefs. Interestingly, the distinctive motifs in the Hebrew Matthew are generally represented within this multifaceted segment of the church. But, since no single group mirrors all its distinctive motifs, none is a good candidate for publishing the Hebrew Matthew.<sup>42</sup>

4. What date should I assign to the Shem-Tob type Matthean text? I suggest that it dates *somewhere within the first four centuries of the Christian era*, a time when its distinctive motifs are reflected by various Jewish Christian groups. Significantly, this date is supported by my previous studies into the textual affinities of the Hebrew Matthew, in which I isolated many unique or rare readings that agree with early Christian and Jewish documents, some of which date back to the first four centuries of the Christian era.

I further suggest that this form of the Gospel of Matthew was produced by a Jewish Christian or a Jewish Christian group that was all

42. One might conjecture a relationship between the Mandaeans and the Hebrew Matthew. The Mandaean emphasis on John the Baptist and baptism might suggest a connection. But some Mandaean teachings (e.g. rejection of circumcision and the Sabbath, assertion that Jesus is a false Messiah) show little or no relationship to the Hebrew Matthew. For a discussion of the Mandaeans and their teachings, see Kurt Rudolph, *Die Mandäer. I. Prolegomena: Das Mandäerproblem*; II. *Der Kult* (FRLANT NS, 56; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960–61); E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937); Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins* (HTS, 24; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); Sinasi Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life* (Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement, 3; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Gnostic Imagination: Gnosticism, Mandaeism and Merkabah Mysticism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995).

but forgotten in early times. This person/group maintained strict observance of the law, believed that the righteous among the Gentiles would be saved in the age to come, observed only the baptism of John, elevated John the Baptist to an exalted position, and may have believed that Jesus became the Messiah sometime during his career.

#### ABSTRACT

The author attempts to pinpoint the date of the Shem-Tob type Matthaean text by locating its theology within the history of Jewish Christianity. After delineating four theological motifs in Shem-Tob's Hebrew Matthew: (1) Exaltation of John the Baptist, (2) Continued Relevance of the Baptism of John, (3) Delayed Inclusion of the Gentiles, (4) Delayed Recognition of Jesus as the Messiah, a comparison is made with the theologies of several Jewish Christian groups mentioned in the New Testament and later Christian literature. Although the distinctive motifs in the Hebrew Matthew are generally represented within Jewish Christianity, no single group is a good candidate for publishing this text. A general date within the first four centuries is, therefore, suggested for the Shem-Tob type text.