CHRISTIANITY’S SPLIT FROM JUDAISM

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

collective names for Christians

(1) “Nazoreans”

The earliest name by which Christians as a distinct group were designated seems to have been “Nazoreans” (Ναζωραῖοι). This term was used by the lawyer Tertullus; he was employed by the Jews of Caesarea Maritima to address Antonius Felix, the Roman procurator. In Acts 24:5 he calls Paul “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes [Ναζωραῖοι].”

*Wikipedia* says that “Nazoreans” “simply designated followers of Jesus of Nazareth, as the Hebrew term נוֹצְרִי (nôṣrî)” still does. “Nazoreans” may well have been the term that the apostles themselves used.

(2) “the Way”

Here are all the verses in the New Testament in which following Jesus is called “the Way.”

Acts 9:2, Paul “asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Acts 18:25, “He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.”

Acts 18:26, “He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.”

Acts 19:9, “When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.”

Acts 19:23, “About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way.”

Acts 24:14, “But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets.”

Acts 24:22a, “But Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way, adjourned the hearing . . .

(3) “Christian” seems to have been a somewhat later name for a follower of Jesus.

Acts 11:26, “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians [Χριστιανούς].””

Acts 26:28, “Agrippa said to Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?””

1 Pet 4:16, “Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace . . .”

The root of Greek Χριστιανούς (*Christianous*) is Χριστός, “Christ.” Χριστός meant “someone anointed with oil” (chrism); it was the standard translation for מָשִׁיחַ (*mashiach*, “messiah”). “Kings were anointed in Israel and Judah, as were high priests. There is also limited evidence for the anointing of prophets.” (Collins)

(4) collective names and the split from Judaism

The use of these collective names indicates some distinction between Christians and Jews. But there are two possibilities. Christians could be seen as different but still as Jews (i.e., they are a sect within Judaism, like the Pharisees or the Sadducees). Or Christians could be seen as so different that they are no longer Jews.

In Acts 11:26 one cannot determine whether those in Antioch who used the term “Christians” were followers of Jesus or outsiders. That is because the sentence (“in Antioch . . . the disciples were first called “Christians””) uses passive voice (“were called” by whom?). Hence, I don’t think “Christians” or the other names help us determine when Christianity split from Judaism.

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A New-Testament scholar, J.N. Sevenster, wrote a book called *Do You Know Greek?* *How Much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Known?* (Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* 19. Leiden: Brill, 1968.) Sevenster used both written documents and archaeological data to answer the question in his title. When scouring first-century ad cemeteries, for example, he noted that a large number of grave stones were trilingual: their information (name, dates, a message) was provided in Aramaic, Greek, and Latin.

That fits with the times.

The two superpowers of the ancient eastern Mediterranean were Egypt and Mesopotamia (the latter consisting of Assyria in the north and Babylonia in the south). One country in between Egypt and Mesopotamia was Aram (adjacent to and northeast of Israel). Aram took advantage of its position and made itself indispensable to the shipping of goods from one superpower to the other. As a result, starting around the 600s bc, both the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, to move their goods, had to learn the language of the Arameans, Aramaic. Aramaic became the international language of commerce. (By the first century ad, Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the everyday language of Judea and Galilee. That is why Jesus’ mother tongue was Aramaic, as can be demonstrated by the instances in the gospels where Jesus uses Aramaic: “*Talitha cumi*,” “*Eloi*, *Eloi*, *lama sabachthani*,” etc. That is also why Hebrew remained a dead language [except to scholars] until the late 1800s, when Zionists resurrected it for everyday use.)

Alexander the Great, however, prior to his death in 323 bc, united the Mediterranean lands and the Near East, from Macedonia and Egypt to present-day Pakistan. So governments and businesses adopted Greek as the new international language. In the Levant, Greek now overlay Aramaic.

But in the last two centuries bc, the Romans created the Roman Empire. Pompey conquered Judea in 63 bc. Hence, Latin now overlay both Aramaic and Greek.

That is why the gravestones were trilingual. It was a situation rather like Switzerland today: many Swiss speak German, French, and English.

But would Jesus, the Twelve, and early Christians have known Greek? Quite possibly. Few people realize that Sepphoris, a Hellenistic town that was thriving in Jesus’ day, was only 5 miles from Nazareth! Here is what *Wikipedia* says about first-century Sepphoris:

. . . some of the people there [in Sepphoris] did speak ancient Greek. A lead weight dated to the first century bears an inscription in Greek with three Jewish names. Several scholars have suggested that Jesus, while working as a craftsman in Nazareth, may have travelled to Sepphoris for work purposes, possibly with his father and brothers. Casey states that this is entirely possible, but is likewise impossible to historically verify. (The reference is to: Casey, Maurice. *Jesus of Nazareth*: *An Independent Historian*’*s Account of His Life and Teaching*. New York: Clark, 2010. 163, 166-67.)

According to the *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*: “Sepphoris was a major ancient city located in lower Galilee, in what is today Israel. Most prominent in the Roman era, the city was located about 6 km from Nazareth. Sepphoris became an important commercial and political center in the first century ce . . .” While Nazareth may have had less than a thousand inhabitants, “Population estimates for first-century Sepphoris range anywhere from about 10,000 to 25,000.” (Gale)

on Christians accepting Gentiles

According to Acts 10, Peter was the first to realize that Gentiles should be admitted into Christian congregations. Acts 10:1-2 says that Cornelius, a Roman centurion, “was a devout man who feared God . . .” (In the first century ad “godfearer” was the term used to indicate a non-Jew who adopted Judaism to some extent.) Peter then has a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, full of animals, including unclean ones (those excluded by Jewish dietary laws). A voice says to Peter, “kill and eat.” Peter is aghast (10:14): “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” But (10:15) “The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”” Peter then goes to Cornelius and those Cornelius has assembled. He says (10:28-48), “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. . . . 34 I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Acts continues (10:44-48), “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles . . . Then Peter said, 47 “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 So he ordered them to be baptized . . .”

But, as we all know, Paul became the “apostle to the Gentiles” par excellence. Gal 1:16 says that God revealed Jesus to Paul “so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles . . .” Gal 2:7 says that the apostles “saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised . . .”

Gal 2:11-14 describes an event called the “Antioch incident.” The passage suggests that Peter was ambivalent about Gentiles being Christians. Here is Gal 2:11-14: “But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Surely, the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles would have been offensive to Jews and may well be what precipitated the split between Christianity and Judaism.

on Christians ceasing to be Jewish

Christians probably did not begin to think of themselves as a religion separate from Judaism (rather than a sect within Judaism) until around ad 90. That is when Jews added an anti-Christian prayer to their services. (The prayer was added to a collection of prayers now known as the “Eighteen Benedictions”). The prayer says, “God, I thank you for not making me one of the *minim*.” *Minim* means a heretical group. But in the cultural context of c. 90, it was clearly aimed at Christians.

Soon even Jewish Christians began skipping synagogue services and attending only Christian services. See Acts 20:7, “On the first day of the week [Sunday] . . . we met to break bread . . .” And Rev 1:10, “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day [Sunday] . . .”