Other Voices:  
Remembering the Marginalized Vegetarian  
in the Study of Christian Origins¹

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Reconciling the Weak and the Strong

The early Jesus movement included both vegetarian and non-vegetarian members. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, the apostle to the Gentiles reports that “some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables (λάχανα).”² The “weak in faith,” however, were to be welcomed. Paul did not want to “offend” the “weak” who were abstaining from meat (κρέα) and wine,³ although he himself personally identified as one of the “strong.” Paul sought to reconcile the two factions, suggesting that “those who eat (meat) (ἐσθίων), eat in honor of the Lord . . . while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.”⁴ For Paul, there was nothing inherently wrong with the consumption of meat. That is, Paul does not affirm “vegetarianism” as an ethical or eschatological ideal.

In Corinth, food (βρῶμα) and meat (κρέα) were a source of stumbling.⁵ There is no compelling reason to suppose that the sociological circumstances or constituencies in Rome were the same in Corinth. Yet Paul is aware that some members of the Corinthian community are eating meat from “idolatrous sacrifices” (εἰδωλολατρικῶν) while others are not.⁶ Since not everyone possesses the “knowledge” (γνῶσις) that idols (pagan deities) do not really exist, and the consumption of such meat defiles those “weak” in conscience (8:7), Paul

¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of JJMJS for their helpful comments and constructive criticism. I would also like to thank Anders Runesson for his editorial assistance.
² Rom 14:1–2.
³ Rom 14:21.
⁴ Rom 14:5–6.
⁵ 1 Cor 8:13.
⁶ 1 Cor 8:1.
suggests that offending the weak should be avoided. Yet Paul also suggests that
the Corinthians can eat “everything” (πᾶν) sold in a “meat market” (μακέλλῳ)
(10:25) and “everything” (πᾶν) that is served to them (10:27), but if they are
informed that the meat comes from an (idolatrous) sacrifice, they should
abstain, not because of their own “conscience,” but out of consideration for the
other. Paul objects to the idea that his “liberty” should be restricted by another’s
“conscience.”

While Paul’s attempt to reconcile the “weak” and the “strong” in Rome
and Corinth may or may not have succeeded, Paul did not regard what we would
call “vegetarianism” as an ethical imperative. For Paul, the unity of the ekklēsia
“in Christ” superseded dietary convictions and/or restrictions. It is tempting to
consider the possibility that this relativizing of dietary concerns subsequently
came to inform the composition of Mark 7:19, where the author parenthetically
clarifies that Jesus declared “all foods clean,” as well as the composition of Peter’s

The history of scholarship on this divisive issue has long held that the
“weak” in question were Jewish vegetarians (in Rome) who abstained from
meat in order to avoid any possible contamination from impure meat.

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7 Dianne M. Bazell, “Strife among the Table-Fellows: Conflicting Attitudes of Early and
Medieval Christians toward the Eating of Meat,” JAAR 65.1 (1997): 73–99 (75–76),
identifies the “roots” of “a distinctively Christian ambivalence toward the practice of
eating meat or refraining from doing so” in Paul’s letters which “minimized the
significance that the conflicting dietary habits of Jews and gentiles appeared to hold.”

8 In Acts 10:1–15, Peter receives a vision from God effectively declaring all foods clean.

9 Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996),
831.

10 Origen, Commentaria in epistolam beati Pauli ad Romanos 9.35. On Paul’s rhetorical
use of the terms, see Mark Reasoner, The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1–15.13 in
Context (SNTS MS 103; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 6–16, 18–20.
Reasoner suggests that the “strong” are “predominantly Gentiles, but included some Jews
(15:1) who were not concerned about what they ate” (202). Richard Bauckham, Living
with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011),
p. 102, suggests that some Jews may have become vegetarians simply because they were
practicing “self-denial” or because meat was a “luxury.” Mark D. Nanos, The Mystery of
Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 85–165, sees
the “weak” (in faith) as Jews who don’t believe in Jesus. Stanley K. Stowers, A Rereading of
Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 317,
regards the “weak” as Gentile followers. For an earlier study, see M. Rauer, Die
“Schwachen” in Korinth und Rom nach den Paulusbriefen (BibS[F] 21.2–3; Freiburg im
Breisgau: Herder, 1923).
particularly meat that had been sacrificed to idols in pagan marketplaces. The reasoning is that Diasporic Jews had difficulties in maintaining *kashrut* among Gentiles. After all, the book of Daniel (c. 165 BCE) envisions the Babylonian-era prophet choosing a vegetarian diet of “seeds” (ם״ענל) instead of Gentile food in order to avoid violating the food laws. Similarly, some Jewish followers of Jesus are thought to have adopted vegetarianism as a way of avoiding the consumption of Gentile meat and its potential impurities as well as a way of maintaining table fellowship with Gentiles. Since Claudius expelled (some) Jews from Rome c. 49 CE, and they were not allowed to return until the time of Nero (c. 54 CE), there is some question as to who Paul’s implied recipients might have been. Assuming, however, that there were both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus in Rome at the time of Paul’s writing, it has been suggested that (some of) the “weak” in question were Jewish followers motivated by (1) concern for the laws of *kashrut*; (2) attraction to Greco-Roman philosophical traditions of vegetarianism; and (3) inspired by the original antediluvian diet prescribed in Genesis 1 in conjunction with their heightened eschatological convictions. Since Romans is among Paul’s later writings, and reflects his attempt to reconcile Jewish and Gentile factions within the community before delivering the “collection” in Jerusalem, it is noteworthy that dietary issues

14 Acts 18:2; Seutonius, *Divus Claudius* 25; Cassius Dio, *History* 60.6.6–7.
15 Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak*, 103–136, outlines three philosophical “rationales” for vegetarianism current in first-century Rome: “(1) arguments based on the metaphysical order of nature . . . (2) arguments based on various forms of primitivism, that vegetarianism is the preferable diet; and (3) arguments based on the spiritual value of purity.”
16 Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak*, pp. 102–131, 219. Reasoner suggests that the “weak” are (mostly) Jewish (Christian) vegetarians motivated by concern for the laws of *kashrut* and attracted by Greco-Roman philosophical traditions of vegetarianism.
(re)surface here, as they did in Corinth, albeit presumably for different reasons. The Roman situation, however, which seems to involve Jewish abstinence from meat thought not to be “clean” (καθαρά) (14:20) or perhaps meat regarded as “common” (κοινὸν) (14:14), does not necessarily represent the dietary practices and motivations of Jesus’ Judean followers, many of whom, including James, Peter, and Matthew, were subsequently remembered as vegetarian in Jewish Christian tradition. In this article, I will suggest that Jewish followers of Jesus, in Rome, Judea, and elsewhere, adopted a vegetarian diet not simply because they sought to maintain a more rigorous practice of kashrut, to defy Roman luxuries through self-denial,17 to maintain table fellowship with Gentiles, or because they were attracted to Greco-Roman philosophy, but predominantly because they believed that Jesus was the messiah and/or inaugurated the messianic age and the kingdom of God,18 which was believed to herald a restoration of the divinely prescribed antediluvian diet.

**The Eschatological Diet**

Paul informed his communities that “the end of the ages” (τὰ τέλη τῶν αἰώνων) had arrived and suggested that their ethical, ritual, and social practices should reflect this temporal transition.19 It would seem, then, that we have different interpretations and conceptualizations of the ideal eschatological diet: “weak” and “strong” relationships to (sacrificial) “meat.” Yet whether or not the Jewish population of mid-first-century Rome was able to maintain a steady supply of kosher meat, there does not seem to have been any pervasive tradition of urban Diasporic Jewish vegetarianism in the historical record. It seems more likely, based on the sociological context implied in Paul’s letters, that table fellowship with Gentiles continued to be a concern for (at least some) Jewish followers of

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17 Gary Steven Shogren, “Is the Kingdom of God about Eating and Drinking or Isn’t It? (Romans 14:7),” *NovT* 42.3 (2000), 238–56, 246: “We can rule out the eating of non-kosher food . . . it was not unkosher meat that was the problem in Rome; all meat was off the menu.” Shogren suggests that Jewish members of the community, like Daniel in the Babylonian court, abstained from meat as a form of symbolic resistance to Roman power and authority.

18 Shogren, “Kingdom of God,” 252–53, points out that Paul’s understanding of the presence of the βασιλεία in Rom 14:7 signifies that “the old food regulations are no longer valid.”

19 To be sure, 1 Cor 10:11 is not explicitly linked to dietary regulations, but subsequent passages (14–22) do refer to the “table of demons” in reference to food sacrificed to idols. Moreover, Paul’s warrant for inclusive table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ is also presumably linked to his eschatological views.
Jesus well beyond the so-called Antioch Incident. After all, if Jesus had really “declared all foods clean,” his first followers – including Peter, Paul, and James – don’t seem to have known anything about it. There would not have been an Incident at Antioch if there were no reasons for Jewish followers to abstain from Gentile meals. Paul does not draw attention to the Genesis narrative which states that vegetarianism was the divine ideal of creation nor does he refer to the Isaianic narrative of eschatological vegetarianism (despite quoting Isaiah 11), foregoing both the Urzeit and the Endzeit of the biblical tradition. Apparently, the argument from creation did not serve Paul’s Gentile mission of relaxing the kosher food laws to facilitate table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

For a variety of reasons, the vegetarianism of the early Jesus movement, which seems to have continued well into late antiquity by “Jewish Christian” followers of Jesus, has been marginalized, both in the history of Christianity as well as in biblical scholarship. New Testament scholarship has given “virtually no attention” to Jesus’ relationship to animals. This curious silence can be explained, in part, simply by understanding that both Judaism and Christianity developed along different trajectories of thought, with Christians focusing on the efficacy of blood sacrifice in Jesus’ atoning death and Jews lamenting the destruction and loss of the sacrificial cult and looking forward to its eschatological restoration. In neither tradition do we even find remnants of the sectarian vegetarianism of late antiquity.

20 The dietary habits of the historical Jesus represent a complex question, especially given the paucity of evidence. The Gospels do not depict Jesus eating meat or fish (with the sole exception of Luke 24:40–43, where the risen Jesus eats a piece of fish). Moreover, the Gospels seem to be intentionally ambivalent about the contents of his last meal in Jerusalem, which would presumably, although not necessarily, have included a Passover lamb. The Qumran community and the Essenes, presumably, would have celebrated Passover without a sacrificial lamb from the Temple in Jerusalem. The problem, of course, is that the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John do not agree on whether the last meal was a Passover seder. Some scholars do not even regard the Last Supper as historical. See Dennis E. Smith, From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); John W. Riggs, “The Sacred Food of Didache 9–10 and Second Century Ecclesiologies,” in The Didache in Context: Essays on Its Text, History, and Transmission, ed. C. N. Jefford (NovTSup 77; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 256–83.

21 Cf. Rom 15:9–12; Ps 18:49; Deut 32:43; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10. Paul’s purpose in citing these passages is clearly to affirm the salvation of the Gentiles, but it is curious that he cites Isa 11:10, considering that Isa 11:6–7 foresees a period of eschatological vegetarianism.

22 Bauckham, Living with Other Creatures, 79.
Today the critical discussion of vegetarianism tends to be relegated to health concerns, environmentalism, animal rights activism, ecology, and eco-
kashrut, and its biblical and early Jewish and Christian context(s) neglected, as are its early proponents. This article is thus an inquiry into a sociological distinction within the early Jesus movement, but also an attempt to shed light on the motivating factors and forces of an eschatological enactment that was subsequently marginalized and yet continues to pose provocative questions about Christian origins.

**Vegetarianism in Antiquity**

The Greco-Roman philosophical discourse on vegetarianism, the consumption of meat, and the practice of animal sacrifice represents a complex spectrum of diverse views on the value of making “offerings” in the ancient world. Although animal sacrifice was ubiquitous, and sacrifice also included vegetable and agricultural products, the language of sacrifice could also be used metaphorically to conceptualize sacrifice as the internalized “offering” of the self. Once the self could be conceived as a sacred offering, animal sacrifice could be seen as no longer necessary or efficacious. Alternative forms of sacrifice could also lead to the rejection of and opposition to sacrifice, whether in terms of its system of reciprocity, its corruption or illegitimacy, its business administration conducted by priests and staff, and/or the kinds of items being sacrificed.

Criticism of animal sacrifice and meat-eating was relatively common among ancient Greek philosophers, including Heraclitus, Empedocles, Theophrastus, Plutarch, Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry of Tyre, Pythagoras,

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25 Fr. 11 and 124 Inwood = DK 115 and 139.
26 On Piety.
27 *Precepts for Preserving Health* 131F–132A; *On the Eating of Flesh* 993C–994B; 995D–996A; 996E–997A.
28 *Republic* 372a–d; *Laws* 781e–783b.
and Apollonius of Tyana. According to Porphyry, the first sacrifices were plants, wine, and honey. Animal sacrifice originated as a result of famine or warfare, as well as a human justification or rationalization of meat consumption (2.11.3). Porphyry advocated the pursuit of pure thoughts and “our own uplifting as a holy sacrifice to God” (τὴν αὑτῶν ἀναγωγὴν θυσίαν ἱερὰν προσάγειν τῷ θεῷ) (2.34). Animal sacrifices were “inappropriate to the transcendent philosophical life.” Philostratus refers to Pythagoras as one who “abstained from all food or sacrifices of things that contain a soul” (1.1.1). Pythagoras is reported to have appealed to a “golden age” when human beings ate only plants. In *Fasti*, Ovid suggests that human beings originally sacrificed spelt, salt, and plants. Apollonius tells the priests of Olympia that “The gods do not need sacrifices (θυσιῶν οὐ δέονται).” Apollonius is portrayed as avoiding animal sacrifice, but making other kinds of offerings “of a bloodless and pure kind” (4.11.1, ἀναιμῶν τε καὶ καθαρῶν). A common feature of these philosophical critiques is not the rejection of the principle or practice of sacrifice, but a preference for non-animal sacrificial offerings. That is, the practice of sacrifice is affirmed, but transformed, a transformation paralleled in certain schools in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

A second feature is that the age of animal sacrifice is contrasted with a primordial era before the age of animal sacrifice. There is a striking similarity here between the Greek philosophical tradition and the biblical tradition of Genesis 1. This philosophical discourse on vegetarianism parallels the biblical account of creation, where the original diet of humanity is vegetarian:

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God said, “See, I have given you every plant
yielding seed (אַלֹ כֶּלֶב נְשַׁב חוֹתָרוֹת)
that is upon the face
of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit
(אַלֹ כֶּלֶב הָאָרֶץ אלהים רַבּוֹ אִמָּם)
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31 See Robert J. Penella, ed., The Letters of Apollonius of Tyana: A Critical Text with Prolegomena, Translation and Commentary (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 46–47. See also Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius of Tyana 1.31.2–1.32.2; 3.41.1; 4.11.1; 5.25.1; 6.4.3; 6.11.3.
33 Metamorphoses 15.103–106. See also Hesiod, Theogony; Works and Days.
you will have them for food/meat (לָאֲכַל) . . .
And to every animal . . . I have given every green herb
for food/meat (הלָאֶכָל לָאֲכַל).

We should not dismiss the symbolic power of this Edenic ideal. The prophet
Isaiah envisioned the messianic age as a time of cosmic dietary transformation —
that is, universal vegetarianism — on earth. This prophetic tradition
envisioned the ideal diet in the world to come as the restoration of the original
creation, forming an Urzeit/Endzeit unit: “The wolf and the lamb will eat
together; And the lion will eat straw like the ox . . . They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain.” 37 The prophet Hosea similarly envisions an idyllic
covenantal restoration of Eden: “I will make for them [you] a covenant on that
day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the
ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land.” 38

Genesis 1:29 indicates that God intended a vegetarian diet for
humanity. 39 Moreover, the first ten generations of “Adam” continue to be
vegetarian. It is only in Genesis 9:3 that permission is given to eat meat and it is
only the legislation of the Torah at the time of Moses that finally legislates
animal sacrifice. 40 No explicit reason is given for why the consumption of meat

36 Gen 1:29–30.
37 Isa 65:25; 11:2–9. On the literal interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecy, see Ravad (Rabbi
Avraham ben David of Posquières, 1120–1197) in Maimonides, Mishneh Torah,
Melachim 12:1; Abarbanel on Hoshea 2:18 and Isaiah 11:3; Radak, Mahari Kara,
Metzudas David, and Malbim on Isaiah 11:3–9; R. Nosson Sternhartz,
38 Hos. 2:18.
39 Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, “A Meatless Dominion: Genesis 1 and the Ideal of
Vegetarianism,” BTB 47.3 (2017), 144–54.
40 Jonathan Klawans, Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in
the Study of Ancient Judaism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 61, citing Gen
4:1–5, 8:20, and 9:1–3, argues that the idea that animal sacrifice was not "originally
intended" by God is a “misconception” because animals were sacrificed by Abel and
Noah. Animal sacrifice, however, like meat-eating, is post-Edenic. Michael E. Stone,
Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 35, 41, 46, 57,
n. 98 (emphasis added), points out that animal sacrifice “is part of the world order
established after the flood.” Gen 8:20 seems to presuppose the practice of “burnt
offerings” and it is difficult to know how Noah was able to sacrifice the animals he had
just saved from the Flood! According to Genesis, the first animal sacrifice seems to have
is now allowed. Rabbinical commentators suggest that the Torah uses concessionary language since this new development contradicted God’s original intention. It has also been suggested that the Israelite sacrificial cult — an institution which undergirds the composition and performance of the Torah — developed from Mesopotamian traditions in which animal sacrifice served as a means of justifying meat consumption, which was generally reserved for elite members of society. This is certainly the role that the Temple cult and its administration came to play in Judean society throughout the Second Temple period, when the Persian-backed priestly Temple-state system of Judea (Yehud) became a well-developed institution and economy enjoying widespread support from the Jewish polity with the relatively rare exceptions of those who refused to participate in its (allegedly) illegitimate administration. The Yahad, for example, developed an oppositional movement that withdrew from the Temple cult in Jerusalem.

The community that collected the Dead Sea Scrolls inherited traditions, like the Enochic Animal Apocalypse, that looked forward to the appearance of a new Temple and a new “Adam.” While the question of whether the Essenes, as described by Josephus, Philo, and Pliny, and/or the Qumran community participated in the Temple cult cannot be adequately addressed here, the Qumran community seems to represent a movement that originally participated in the sacrificial cult yet subsequently withdrew because the Temple had been defiled. As a result, the movement developed substitutes for the Temple sacrifices while simultaneously hoping for the restoration of proper sacrifice in

been conducted by Abel (Gen 4:4). Earlier, the book of Genesis does not quite explain how God made Adam and Eve “coats of skin” (Gen 3:21).

41 Rabbi Isaak Hebenstreit, *Kivrot Hata’awah* (‘The Graves of Lust’) (Hebrew) (Rzeszow, Poland, 1929), 6, suggests that God did not want people to eat meat but after the Flood allowed it because all the plant life on earth had been destroyed. If this were true, however, surely vegetarianism could have been resumed after the plant life grew back!


the future. Their hopes were not realized, of course, but their self-conceptualization as an alternative to the Temple cult facilitated the innovative creation of alternative “sacrificial” rituals including prayer, Torah study, sacred meals, and liturgical worship, leading to the conceptualization of their community as a Temple.

By the turn of the first century CE, the Yahad would not have participated in the Jerusalem Temple cult for over one hundred years. The Rule of the Community (1QS) affirms that prayer and “perfection of way” were now acceptable substitutes for animal sacrifice (9.1–5). Similarly, 4QFlorilegium 1–2 i 6–7 envisions a “Temple of Adam” in which the “smoke of incense” and the “works of thanksgiving” are sent up instead of sacrifices. The Temple of Adam may be an indirect allusion to a restored Eden. 4QFlorilegium refers to a time when God “commanded that a Temple of Adam be built for himself, that there they may send up, like smoke of incense, the works of the Law” (4QFlor 1–2 i 6–7), alluding to the Book of Jubilees, which describes Eden as a Temple in which Adam serves as a priest offering incense (8:19). Similarly, the Temple of Adam is envisioned as a sanctuary of “smoke offerings as works of thanksgiving” (4QFlor 1 i 21 2:6).

The Yahad lived with the eschatological tension(s) of their non-participation in the Temple cult, their anticipation of its future restoration (under their leadership), their self-conceptualization as a Temple without animal sacrifice, and the idea that the eschatological restoration of Eden could eliminate the need for animal sacrifices. There is no evidence to suggest that the Qumran community ever practiced vegetarianism, but their ritual and textual innovations show that willful withdrawal from animal sacrifice was not unheard of in first-century Judaism and could be linked to both ascetic ideals and visions of eschatological restoration. At the same time, we also hear from Philo that the Therapeutae abstained from meat and sacrifice. Philo describes the Therapeutae as philosophical vegetarians, emphasizing their “table kept pure

46 Klawans, Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple, 163.
from the animal food” (τράπεζα καθαρ ὰ τῶν ἐναίμων), and also seems to have idealized, if not preferred, bloodless sacrifices, envisioning sacrifice as meeting “a basic human desire, an aspiration to relationship with the Divine,” with the slaughtered animal representing symbolic aspects of the one sacrificing. These two examples of first-century Jewish practice — in Judea and Alexandria, respectively — simply illustrate a recognizable diversity of Jewish attitudes toward the sacrificial system, the philosophical life, and the eschatological ideal of a restored or renewed creation.

A Jewish Christian Discourse

The emergence of the early Palestinian Jesus movement within (pre-70 CE) early Judaism and its relationship to the Temple cult is a complex topic that continues to be debated, but in Paul’s letters we see the language of sacrifice being used in a variety of registers to refer not only to Jesus’ soteriological work but also to Paul’s own self-offering as a “libation” (Phil 2:14–18) and the identification of community members as “a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom 12:1–2). This transference of sacrificial language and discourse from cultic contexts of actual sacrifice to more symbolic or metaphorical contexts — in which Jesus’ death, Paul’s ministry, and community members’ lives are described in sacrificial terms — may have facilitated the relaxation of ethical and dietary concerns over the consumption of meat sacrificed to idols in Gentile communities. Gentile followers were not to perform such sacrifices, but Paul does not seem to perceive any problem in eating sacrificial meat as long as it does not offend other members. Consequently, some Gentile followers of Jesus seem to have rejected the practice of animal sacrifice while consuming meat sacrificed to idols. Paul’s opinion carried weight and authority for Gentile communities of Jesus followers uninclined to forego normative dietary practices or adopt Jewish food laws. It is not surprising, therefore, that early Gentile “Christian” identity did not mourn the loss of the Temple or prepare for its

50 Contempl. 73–74.
53 Stroumsa, The End of Sacrifice, 72, suggests that Christianity became a religion “centered on” and defined by sacrifice.
restoration, as rabbinical Jews were to do. Yet if most Jews affirmed and commemorated the future restoration of Temple practices as envisioned in the Mishnah, that does not mean that all Jews did so.

The term Jewish Christianity refers to members of the Jesus movement who maintained and combined loyalty towards Jewish law with reverence for Jesus. The term has come under fire as definitionally imprecise and reinscribing a discourse which attempted to expel Jewish influences from Christianity by constructing Judaism as separate and distinct from

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54 After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, Yohanan ben Zakkai asserted that “acts of loving-kindness (ב𝒟ἣ vrou ἀδελφής) were just as effective as sacrifices (Avoth de–Rabbi Nathan, version I, ch. 4). R. Eleazar said that charity was more important than sacrifice (B. Sukkah 49b). Alexander Guttmann, “The End of the Jewish Sacrificial Cult,” HUCA, 38 (1969), p. 138, suggests that post–70 CE sacrifice may have been considered “optional” (M. 'Eduyoth 8.6; B. Megillah 10a). The rabbis may not have explicitly prohibited offering sacrifices after the destruction of the Temple, but they presuppose the end of public sacrifice (M. Sheqalim 8.8; M. Ta'anith 4.6; B. Rosh Ha–Shanah 21b). Pesachim 109a suggests that since the destruction of the Temple, Jews are not required to eat meat: “It was taught, R'Yehuda b. Beteira says, ‘while the Temple is standing, there is no joy unless there is meat, as it says (Deut. 27), ‘And you shall sacrifice peace-offerings and eat them there, and you will be joyful before the Lord, your God.’ Now that the Temple is not standing, there is no joy without wine (טפוח נדם נהפך קורין אתי שמהו אלא ביי').”


Christianity. Indeed, the study of Jewish Christianity is a complex discourse incorporating ethnicity, ideology, practice, geography, Christology, and sociocultural recognition by other Jews, a complex of different kinds of Jewish reverence for Jesus.

Vegetarianism is a motif found in the Pseudo-Clementine literature, the Gospel of the Ebionites, Epiphanius’ reports on the “Ebionites,” Elchasaite traditions, Hegesippus’s references to James, and the Didascalia. Jewish Christian vegetarianism is also part of a broader tradition opposing animal sacrifice, a motif found in the Book of Elchasai, the Gospel of the Ebionites (Pan. 30.16.5), a reconstructed source underlying Recognitions 1.27-71, composed

57 Daniel Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category (to which is Appended a Correction of my Border Lines),” JQR, 99.1 (2009): 7–36, 7, 23. Boyarin argues that there is “only one valuable distinction . . . between Christians who had come from the Jewish world . . . and those who came from the gentiles” (33).
63 Schoeps, Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums, 241.
around 200 CE, and the Recognitions and Homilies, representing two interpretive lenses through which Jewish Christians remembered Jesus.

The Pseudo-Clementines

The Pseudo-Clementine writings represent a literary puzzle with formidable problems. A Jewish Christian source behind Recognitions 1.27–71 has been isolated by a number of scholars, pre-dating the Homilies by over a century. The historical value of the Pseudo-Clementine literature, however, is a matter of debate. The general tendency today is to shy away from constructing models that apply a specific group-marker to the source, although some continue to identify Rec 1.27–71 as Ebionite. Stanley Jones calls it an “Ancient Jewish Christian Source,” a work of apologetic historiography dependent on Luke-Acts as a rival


Stanton, “Jewish Christian Elements,” 305.


account of Christian origins. Jones dates the source underlying Rec. 1.27–71 to c. 200 CE, but cautions against the uncritical use of the term “Ebionite.”

The Pseudo-Clementine texts, as we have them, are fourth-century compositions. This does not mean that earlier “sources” need to be denied, but the distinctive literary-rhetorical goals of the fourth-century author/redactor do need to be recognized. Recognitions 1, for example, portrays Jesus as the “True Prophet” predicted by Moses, where baptism and food regulation are emphasized, and which presupposes a combined Jewish and Gentile mission, with James and Peter as the leaders of the community, and Paul criticized as “the enemy.” Peter is identified with the Jews. Hebrew is the original language of humanity. The blame for killing Jesus is attributed to a number of Jews, but not to “the Jews” as a whole. The essential difference between (Torah-observant) Jewish believers and non-believers is belief in Jesus’ messianic identity. These appear to be very good reasons to think that this Pseudo-Clementine material or tradition represents an early Jewish group of Jesus-followers.

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74 Kelley, Knowledge and Religious Authority, 179.
75 Rec. 4.36.4.
76 Rec. 1.32.1.
77 Rec. 1.30.5.
78 Rec. 1.41.2.
79 Rec. 1.43.2; 1.50.5; 1.44.2; 1.60; 1.62.4.
80 For the Jewish profile of the Pseudo-Clementines, see Daniel Boyarin, “Justin Martyr Invents Judaism,” CH, 70 (2001), 459; Annette Yoshiko Reed, “‘Jewish Christianity’ as Counter–history?: The Apostolic Past in Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History and the Pseudo-
The *Homilies* and the *Recognitions* share a number of elements in common, but represent two distinctive approaches to animal sacrifice. In the *Homilies*, the motif is linked to the Enochic motif of the fallen angels: blood sacrifice is demonic, a form of pagan worship; God neither commanded nor required them. For the Homilist, the true law was given by God at the *time of creation*. The Mosaic sacrificial legislation is a punishment for disobedience as well as a way to protect Israel from pagan idolatry. In the *Recognitions*, sacrifice is linked to pagan idolatry, but animal sacrifice was allowed by Moses as a temporary concession in order to prevent Israel from further idolatry. Although the Pseudo-Clementine discourse is far more about opposition to animal sacrifice than promoting vegetarianism per se, in neither case do these texts represent the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice that replaces animal sacrifice.

**The Gospel of the Ebionites**

Like Rec. 1.27–71, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, usually dated to the middle of the second century, also seems to be the work of Jewish followers of Jesus. There

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81 *Hom*. 8.10.

82 The Homilist further associates sacrifice and sacrificial meat-eating with the “table of demons” (1 Cor 8:1–13; 10:28–29; Acts 15:29; 21:25; Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 2.36–37, 42–43, 49). According to the Homilist, sacrifice was a divine punishment for disobedience and the Torah’s prescriptions of animal sacrifice are understood as “false pericopes” (Hom. 3.45.2).


85 Bauckham, “The Origin of the Ebionites,” 163: there is “good reason to think that this Gospel of the Ebionites was used by the Ebionites of whom Irenaeus knew.”
are seven fragmentary passages contained in Epiphanius’ *Panarion*. The seventh represents its most distinctive and controversial feature: Jesus’ rejection of animal sacrifice: “I have come to abolish sacrifices, and if you do not cease from sacrificing, the wrath will not cease from you.” This passage seems to be an allusion to Matthew 5:17–18 (“I have not come to abolish the Law”). Here Jesus is “condemning sacrifices as no longer valid or as never having been valid.” The *Gospel of the Ebionites* also characterizes Jesus as refusing to eat meat: “I did not earnestly desire to eat meat this Passover with you.”

Various Jewish Christian texts and traditions portray Peter, Matthew, John the Baptist, and James as vegetarians. According to Epiphanius, the Ebionites held that Peter’s diet consisted of “bread alone, with olives and rarely vegetables.” According to Clement of Alexandria, Jesus’ disciple Matthew was also a vegetarian: “Matthew the apostle used to take seeds, and nuts, and vegetables, without animal flesh.” The *Gospel of the Ebionites* also identifies John the Baptist as a vegetarian. Whereas the Gospels of Mark and Matthew both describe John as eating “locusts” (ἀκρίδες), the *Gospel of the Ebionites* refers to John’s diet as “wild honey” which tasted like “manna, like cakes (ὡς

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86 *Pan.* 30.13.1–8; 30.14.5; 30.16.4–5; 30.22.4.
89 Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law*, 507, 516.
90 *Pan.* 30. See also 30.18.9.
92 See *Rec.* 7.6.4; *Hom.* 12.6.4. See also *Hom.* 8.15.2–16.2; *Rec.* 1.30.1. See also *Pan.* 30.15.
93 Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor (Paedagogus)* 2.1.16.1.
94 Ματθαίος . . . ὁ ἀπόστολος σπερμάτων καὶ ἀκροδρύμων καὶ λαχάνων ἄνευ κρεῶν μετελάμβανεν.
96 Mark 1:6; Matt 3:4.
ēγκρὶς) in olive oil,” changing the Synoptic ἀκρίς to ἐγκρίς, and thus associating John’s diet with the “manna” in the Exodus narratives: “its taste like a cake in honey” (ὡς ἐγκρὶς ἐν μέλιτι), “like the taste of a cake from olive oil” (ὡσεὶ γεῦμα ἐγκρὶς ἐξ ἐλαίου).97 According to Eusebius, Hegesippus’ Hypomnemata (Memoirs) referred to Jesus’ brother James as a vegetarian: “He was holy from his mother’s womb, and he drank neither wine nor strong drink, nor did he eat animal flesh.”98

Why did (various) “Jewish Christian” followers of Jesus think that Jesus (probably), John the Baptist, Peter, Matthew, and James were all vegetarian? And exactly how far back do these “Jewish Christian” traditions go? As we will see, these two complex questions are interrelated. Let us consider the former first.

As in Paul’s early ekklēsia, some scholars suggest that these Jewish Christian traditions represent “ascetic impulses” and “a strongly Hellenized (Pythagorean) mentality.”99 Others suggest that Jewish Christian vegetarianism was a “safety measure in a pagan environment,”100 or an “intensification of purity regulations.”101 Jörg Frey, for example, notes that the Gospel of the Ebionites reflects a strict halakhic practice (“eine rigide halachische Praxis”) and suggests that this apparently “complete renunciation of meat” (“völligen Fleischverzicht”) can be explained as a Jewish Christian adaptation to a non-Jewish environment.102 Yet if Diasporic Jewish Christians commonly adopted vegetarianism because they were more halakhically minded than other Jews or because they were more conscientious about their Gentile habits, we would expect to see ancient Jewish vegetarianism far more widespread in the historical record, but we do not.

97 Exod 16:31; Num 11:8 LXX.
98 οὖτος δὲ ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς αὐτοῦ ἁγιός ἦν, ὁνὸν καὶ σίκερα σῶκ ἔπιεν σοῦδὲ ἔμψυχον ἔφαγεν. Eusebius, Eccl. History 2.23.5, citing Hegesippus’ Hypomnemata (c. 180 CE).
First-century Judaism certainly had ascetical elements. An “established tradition of asceticism” was already in place by the time Jesus was born. There is also good reason to think that Nazirite vows were relatively common in the first century. As we have seen, Philo’s Therapeutae abstained from meat and wine. It is possible, then, to see Jesus’ promise not to drink wine again until the coming of the kingdom as a kind of Nazirite vow. There is no question that the Synoptic Gospels envision the consummation of the kingdom of God in terms of an eschatological banquet. But while Ebionite traditions may leave open the possibility of drinking wine again in the coming kingdom, they do not presume the resumption of meat consumption. Moreover, Epiphanius claims their gospel quotes Jesus as saying that he does not desire “to eat meat (κρέας)” on “this Passover” (Πάσχα). The author of this gospel was no doubt aware that the Passover meal consisted of lamb, but Jesus’ reluctance to eating meat is not linked to a temporary vow or the idea that he would resume eating meat once the kingdom arrived (cf. Luke 22:16). Ascetic elements are indeed present in the early Jesus movement, but their motivations seem to be linked to eschatological ideals, ideals that also affected other areas of religious practice and interpretation, one of which may well have been the eschatological restoration of the Edenic diet, prophetically foretold as the “messianic age” in the book of Isaiah.

As for the origins and history of early Jewish Christian vegetarianism, the dating of Jewish Christian texts and traditions is fraught with assumptions

104 Steven Fraade, “The Nazirite in Ancient Judaism,” in Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity (SAC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 213–23.
106 On the Contemplative Life 2, 73–74.
109 The Ebionite Eucharist seems to have consisted of only water and bread (Irenaeus, Haer. 5.1.3; Epiphanius, Pan. 30.16.1).
110 Pan. 30.22.4.
about their “late” and secondary status. Still, we must differentiate between early Jewish Christianity, a category which properly includes Jesus’ family (the δεσπόσυνοι), the Twelve, Peter, James, Jude, and Matthew, and later Jewish Christianity, an equally complex spectrum of ethnically Jewish groups identified as Nazoreans, Ebionites, and Elchasaites by the early Church Fathers. A common argument in contemporary scholarship is the suggestion that these latter Jewish Christian traditions reflect second-century apologetics in light of the destruction of the Temple, with such beliefs developing “in reaction to the destruction of the temple and the end of the temple cult in 70 CE.” Yet the assumption that Jewish Christians only adopted vegetarian practices in light of the Temple’s destruction is demonstrably false, as Paul’s correspondence shows.

It is certainly possible, in principle, to distinguish the Jewish Christian rejection of animal sacrifice from Jewish Christian vegetarianism (given that Paul documents an apparent example of the latter, but not the former), but the earliest evidence of an anti-sacrificial Jewish Christian tradition dates to c. 116–117 CE, and is associated with the Jewish sect of Elchasaites who practiced circumcision, celebrated the Sabbath, revered Jerusalem, criticized animal sacrifice, and discouraged meat-eating. Moreover, the second-century

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112 Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).
114 Jones, An Ancient Jewish Christian Source, 164, n. 21. See also Munck, “Primitive Jewish Christianity and Later Jewish Christianity: Continuation or Rupture?,” 77–93.
115 Reed, “Jewish Christianity,” 211.
116 Bauckham, Living, 100 (emphases added).
118 On circumcision, see Hippolytus, Ref. 9.14.1; Pseudo-Clementine Adjuration 1.1; Pan. 19.5.1; 30.17.5. On the Sabbath, see Hippolytus, Ref. 19.16.3.
119 Pan. 19.3.5–7.
120 Pan. 19.3.6; 53.1.4. Fitzmyer, “The Qumran Scrolls,” 335–372, notes that according to Epiphanius, Cerinthus and the Elchasaites directly influenced the Ebionites.
author of Rec. 1.27–71 represents himself as an heir of the Jerusalem community, stating that animal sacrifice was allowed by Moses as a temporary concession in order to prevent Israel from further idolatry, but when Jesus came, sacrifice was replaced by baptism. Consequently, the destruction of the Temple is linked to Israel’s failure to heed Jesus’ warning and instruction that “animal sacrifice was never intended by God,” but was the result of Israel being influenced by pagan rites, a temporary concession to Israel’s weakness. The sustained scriptural and philosophical arguments employed in defending these non-normative positions suggest that Jewish Christian vegetarianism was remembered as an early practice that obviously needed scriptural justification. The Ebionite rewriting of the Synoptic Gospels was one such strategy. Another was engaging the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. In neither case, however, do we see Jewish Christians lamenting the destruction of the Temple, preparing for its restoration, or lamenting their inability to locate kosher meat markets in a predominantly pagan environment. Nor do we find them affirming the identification of Jesus as a blood sacrifice. Considering the relatively close relationship between the rejection of animal sacrifice and the affirmation of vegetarianism in Jewish Christian traditions (of Jesus, John, James, Peter, and Matthew), it is tempting to draw the conclusion that vegetarianism represents a continuum of Jewish Christian identity from the mid-first century through the fourth century of the common era.

Conclusion

The early Jesus movement, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, included both Jewish vegetarians and Gentile non-vegetarians. Presumably, there were also Jewish non-vegetarians and Gentile vegetarians. Yet insofar as Jewish Christian texts represent multiple vegetarian traditions, it seems safe to surmise that vegetarianism was a relatively common feature of these communities, a network of ethnically Jewish followers of Jesus who regarded him as messianic, that is, as “anointed” in some special sense. Since Paul’s letters attest to vegetarianism already being practiced in the Corinthian and Roman ekklēsiai, and indicate that this was a point of some contention, it is tempting to draw broad conclusions about continuity between early and later “Jewish Christianity.” I will resist that temptation, but there is good reason to think that Jewish Christian vegetarianism may have had less to do with maintaining the laws of kashrut in

122 Rec. 1.37.
123 Rec. 1.54.
124 Rec. 1.36.
foreign lands, lamenting the loss of the Temple, or practicing asceticism, and more to do with efforts to realize and enact their eschatological convictions, one of which was the restoration of the antediluvian diet prescribed by God in Genesis 1, and to develop such early eschatological convictions in a progressively more philosophical direction. I would further suggest that this is what we would expect of a Jewish community convinced that the messianic age had begun or was soon to arrive.

The marginalization of Jewish Christianity was a complex historical process. The destruction of the Temple, the dissolution and disappearance of the Jerusalem ekklēsia, the sudden influx of Gentile members and social networks who followed Paul’s teachings rather than James’s, the identification of vegetarians as “weak,” Mark’s parenthetical reference to Jesus declaring “all foods clean,” the author of Acts’ account of Peter’s vision, and the increasingly hostile heresiological opposition to Jewish Christian texts, traditions, individuals, and communities made it virtually impossible to maintain undistorted memories of the past. Rabbinical Judaism and Orthodox Christianity developed in opposition and contradistinction to Jewish Christianity, purposefully forgetting the Jewish Christian traditions that once bound brothers together in common bond to Jesus.

The study of Christian origins, insofar as it is a discourse of analysis, reconstruction, and restoration, remembers these marginalized voices of the past, not in order to construct a modern hybrid of messianic Judaism, nor simply as an antiquarian novelty nostalgically lamenting a romanticized past, but rather as testimonial witnesses which provide nourishing food for thought, especially for those who call themselves “Christian” because they believe that Jesus embodied and inaugurated the messianic age heralded and predicted by the prophets.

125 Reasoner, The Strong and the Weak, 102–131, 219. Despite the fact that the rhetorical focus of the Pseudo-Clementine literature is on animal sacrifice rather than vegetarianism per se, its philosophical dependence on the creation narrative in Genesis supports this contention.

126 Bauckham, Living, 103 n. 63, affirms Jesus’ kingdom-message as the “renewal of creation” and that human beings will be vegetarian “in the messianic age.”