

## **The Cost of Discipleship: Lessons from the First Century**

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It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a detailed historical review of the relation between the synagogue and the church in the first century, although such a review might throw some light on the costs which Jesus-believers had to pay to preserve their identity as believers. Instead, I intend to concentrate on a few lessons which are connected with the costs of faith and which I think are relevant to be considered by us who are involved in Jewish evangelism. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to speak right about the hardships of faith, both those experienced by other people and those experienced by oneself. These matters are sometimes presented in such a way that the result is believers who whimper over the troubles they meet and who immerse themselves in an apathetic and destructive selfpity. Nothing good can come of that.

When in the following I shall speak about suffering and afflictions, what I have in mind is first of all such sufferings and afflictions as are imposed on the believers by other people.

### **1. Do not call all sufferings Christ afflictions!**

Christ sufferings are part of a Christian's life. A Christian has been placed in a fellowship of suffering with Christ (Phil 3:10). The concept is an analogy to the Jewish concept of the afflictions that herald the Messianic era. The Christians of the first century experienced these Christ sufferings in various ways. Christ had suffered for them. Now they experienced suffering for his sake. Surprisingly enough the Apostle Peter sees these sufferings as a pledge of the glory and joy which await them when Jesus comes again (1 Peter 1:1-9).

What Peter writes, in his first letter, about the sufferings of Christ and the Christians is worth studying. Peter had warned his Master against taking on suffering and he was blind to the good news contained in the sufferings of Jesus. That was the reason why Jesus addressed him "Satan" (Matth 16:23). But now Peter's eyes have been opened to the importance of the sufferings of Jesus (1 Peter 1:18-21). He has also realized that there is a connection between the sufferings of Jesus and the sufferings of the Christians, so that Christ may be seen as an example for the Christians (1 Peter 2:18-25). When we are zealous for what is right no one can harm us. And we should always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls us to account for our faith. It is, under all circumstances, better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong (1 Peter 3:13-17). This theme is resumed in chapter 4: Peter mentions a "fiery ordeal" (v. 12; cf. 1 Peter 1:7), he speaks about joy in connection with sharing Christ's sufferings (v. 13), and proceeds:

If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God (1 Peter 4:14-16).

Three lessons emerge from this.

First: Sufferings and afflictions belong to the life with Christ.

Second: These sufferings should not be turned into destructive selfpity, on the contrary, they should be understood and seen in the light of the coming glory.

The third lesson is a particularly important one: Not all the afflictions which a believer might meet with should be termed Christ sufferings. If one suffers because he is a murderer, he should not call it Christ suffering. If one suffers because he is a thief, he should not call it Christ suffering. If one suffers because he lives just as lovelessly as others, although his lips speak about love, he should not call it Christ suffering.

One should be careful not to call all adversities Christ sufferings. Some of the nasty and negative things that are said about us Christians are things which we have only ourselves to thank for. The history of the Christian Church towards the Jewish people is one the clearest examples of this.

The next lesson to be reminded of is that there is nothing new or surprising in the fact that the people of God meet with trouble. Even from a Jewish point of view the Christian position should not be difficult to accept. The new element in the New Testament compared to the previous Jewish tradition is that to suffering for God's sake has been added for Jesus' sake. Jewish theologians may want to distance themselves from this "addition", but the substance of it, that faith and suffering belong together, is not something new which "Christianity" has introduced.

## **2. Shema Israel - suffering for the sake of Jesus**

I want to take my point of departure in Shema Israel. One reason is that the rabbis have often placed the understanding of Shema Israel in an affliction context. Another is that in the New Testament Jesus is incorporated in this Shema Israel, thus becoming an illustration of the Christology. By this is indicated one of the reasons for the opposition to the new Jewish sect of Jesus-believing Jews in the first century.<sup>1</sup>

In Shema Israel (Deut 6:4-5) it is emphasized that the Lord is one and that obedience to Him must be unconditional and undivided. "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart (levav), and with all your soul (nefes), and with all your might (meod)". Traditionally the rabbis understood meod as mammon (mammon). In their interpretation of this text the rabbis stress that one should not be divided (chalok) (e.g. Sifre Deut 6:5 #32).

"Hear, O Israel!" The confession to the one God puts Israel under an obligation, obedience. The obedience implies that Israel places herself under God's sovereignty. Israel is to love God

- a. with all her heart (undivided, without any reservation)
- b. with all her soul (even if it should cost the life)
- c. with all her might (material resources, possessions and power, or in a word: mammon).

As to the three elements it may be argued that the first includes the other two. It is not possible to love God with more than all one's heart. The last two elements describe the consequences of the whole-hearted, undivided love.

In the gospels Jesus quotes Shema Israel (Matt 22:37 and parr.). This is not in any way surprising. He was a Jew. It is much more surprising that in the New Testament Jesus demands the same obedience to himself which the God of Israel exacts from his people - as expressed in Shema Israel. In other words: Jesus himself is incorporated in that which Shema Israel demands.

From the Gospel of Matthew the following may be mentioned: Jesus is the Son of God conceived of the Holy Spirit and originating in God (Matth 1:18-25). He has a divine exousia from Heaven, power, authority: he acts on God's behalf (Matth 21:23-37). He forgives sinners their sin (Matth 9:1-8). As God exacts obedience to his word, so Jesus exacts obedience to his word (Matth 7:24-29). The requirement is not merely to hear the word of Jesus but also to do the word of Jesus, which corresponds to the old theme: hear and do the word of God.

Now, let us focus on the second element of the Shema: with all your soul. If we consider statements in the Gospel of Matthew on sacrifice and suffering for Jesus' sake, we realize that to the requirement to love God with all one's soul has been added for Jesus' sake. Jesus says: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it"

(Matth 10:39, cf. 16:25). Through the Books of Maccabees we get an impression of what the believing Israelite in the second century B.C.E. sacrificed for his faith, the faith in the God of Israel, and for the sake of the Temple, the Law and tradition.

Let us go on to consider the word pair confession - denial. Israel is bound not to deny but to confess God, even if heathens forbid it and punish their confession with death. In a similar way the Jesus-believers are bound to confess Jesus, not to deny him, even if it ends in death. In Matth 10:32-33 it is said:

So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

These words are found in the speech when Jesus sends his disciples to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matth 10:6). The prospects that are held out to the disciples are that they will be delivered up to councils and be flogged in synagogues (v. 17), that they will be dragged before governors and kings (v. 18), that family members will deliver each other up to death (v. 21). "You will be hated by all for my name's sake" (v. 22). They must expect to be persecuted (v. 23). It should be enough for the disciple to be like his teacher. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household (v. 25). And yet the disciples should not fear those who kill the body (v. 28). "The hairs of your head are all numbered," Jesus says (v. 30).

In other words: Jesus is placed in Israel's Creed, in Shema Israel, as a kind of fulfilment of Shema Israel. Same obedience to Jesus as to God. Same confession to Jesus as to God. And - which is not least important to our theme - the same consequences, namely a readiness to suffer for the sake of the Jesus confession, even if it means death.

Readiness for martyrdom, however, is not the same as actively wanting or seeking martyrdom. And what is foreshadowed does not necessarily occur. How much of this did the first century believers experience?

### **3. Review of forms of persecution in the New Testament**

To ask whether the afflictions which, according to the gospels, were held out to the disciples by Jesus did actually set in is to raise a very difficult question. To this must be added that it is a very sensitive subject owing to the anti-Judaism and antisemitism which interpretation history has given rise to. And not only have we to consider interpretation history but also the allegation that antisemitism and anti-Judaism are to be found in the New Testament itself, not as isolated verses: it is maintained that the very fundamental structure is anti-Judaistic. The question of the dating of the New Testament writings is also a question that has to be dealt with. It is not an irrelevancy in our context if the gospels were written before or after the fall of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., or if they describe the time when they were written rather than the time of Jesus. The reliability of the New Testament sources is also something we have to consider. Must the information given in the gospels be "proved" by other sources in order to be regarded as historically reliable? And if it is not, is it then un-historical? Even more questions present themselves.

One reason why this question is so sensitive is that if one says something disadvantageous about some Jews in the first century, it may be used by non-Jews to a frontal attack against the Jewish people as such, and Jews may accuse one of attempting to revive and support traditional antisemitism.

Seen against that background it is no wonder that some people choose the simple solutions: to stamp the New Testament as antisemitic and/or to tone down the responsibility which some Jews share for the persecution of some Jesus-believers in the first century.

In the ensuing review I shall be following Douglas D.R.A. Hare's survey in his book The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to St Matthew.<sup>ii</sup> I shall, however, forgo a critical assessment of a number of issues, particularly Hare's position on the Gospel of Matthew<sup>iii</sup>, where I diverge from him. But Hare's view that there was no Jewish forerunner in the first century of the Spanish Inquisition is one that I fully share.

### 1. Violent death

Stephen belongs to this group (Acts 6:9-8:2). The question is whether he was judicially executed or lynched. Hare finds that a careful analysis of the narrative supports the latter alternative.

The next case is James son of Zebedee. According to Acts 12:2 Herod Agrippa I was responsible. Maybe James criticized the king the way John the Baptist had done (Mark 6:17-18).

The next case is James the Brother of Jesus. His execution is not mentioned in the New Testament. According to Josephus the High Priest Ananus indicted this James and some others for being law-breakers. The trial seems to have been highly irregular. Perhaps the reason why Ananus wanted James and "certain others" put to death was personal animosity.

The Book of Acts reports two Jewish mob attacks on Paul (14:19; 21:13; cf. 2 Cor 11:25, where Paul says that once he was stoned). The first attack took place in Lystra, the other in Jerusalem. With Hare:

Mobs may have attacked Christians without intending to do more than inflict insulting blows; in some instances the result may have been none the less fatal. It cannot, however, be maintained on the basis of available evidence that violent death was frequently inflicted on Christians by Jews.<sup>iv</sup>

### 2. Judicial flogging

The question is whether the flogging of thirteen-nine lashes, which Paul claims to have received five times (2 Cor 11:24) and which, according to the Mishnah (Sanh. 1:2), was given for the violation of a negative precept of the Mosaic Law, falls under judicial flogging. There does not seem to be positive evidence that Paul disregarded the Mosaic requirements. Hare sees the flogging of the apostles in Acts 5:40 as given for a breach of the peace, not for a religious offence per se. With a reference to Mark 13:9 (Matth 10:17) Hare thinks it possible that local councils of elders in the Diaspora as in Palestine were empowered to employ various sanctions, including corporal punishment, for the maintenance of public order among the members of the synagogue. He stresses that flogging was not a penalty which confronted all Jewish Christians on account of their faith.

### 3. Imprisonment

A sharp distinction must be made between imprisonment as detention pending trial and imprisonment as punishment. Perhaps Acts 8:2 and 22:19 refer to punishment. Most references to Jewish imprisonment in Acts allude to detention (Acts 4:3; 5:18; 12:4; cf. 9:2; 14:21).

### 4. Exclusion from the synagogue

Here places like Luke 6:22; John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2 are relevant. I shall return to this question under section 7 below.

### 5. Economic reprisals

There is evidence of economic boycott by Jews against Minim in e.g. Tosefta Hullin 2:20f:

"One does not sell to them or receive from them or take from them or give to them. One does not teach their sons a trade, and does not obtain healing from them ..." Hare believes that the application of this kind of persecution was, of course, individual and voluntary, and he mentions that he has not found specific mention of such actions in Christian literature.

#### 6. Social reprisals

Under this term fall social ostracism and verbal insults. the New Testament has a good deal to say about how to answer this (e.g. Matth 5:11; Luke 6:22).

If we now go on to ask where, geographically speaking, the various forms of persecution occurred, there is no denying that some took place in Palestine but most, and probably also those mentioned by Paul in 2 Cor 11:23-27, took place in the Diaspora. That was also where he himself had persecuted the Jesus-believers. It is not a question of an organized Jewish opposition to the Jewish sect of Jesus-believers. According to the picture in Acts, Jews were, on occasion, the instigators of Gentile persecution of Christians. This is what happened in Pisidian Antioch (13:45) and at Iconium (14:2-5). At Lystra trouble developed only when Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived (14:19). The situation in Thessalonica (17:5) is like that in Pisidian Antioch (17:5). The Lystran situation is repeated in Beroea: the local Jews received Paul happily, but Jews from Thessalonica appeared "stirring up and inciting the crowds" (17:13).

But also the Gentiles show their hostility, cf. Acts 16:19-24; 19:23-41. In 2 Cor 11:26 Paul writes: "... in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles ..."

In summary we can say that as far as the New Testament is concerned, persecution in the form of death and flogging did occur, but generally speaking it was not something that happened to rank-and-file Christians, and only rarely to Christian leaders. Persecution in the form of social ostracism and insults at the hands of hostile Jews has probably been more common.

Although this review is insufficient, it is possible to conclude with Hare "that prior to the first war with Rome the church in Judea was not on the whole a persecuted church. During this period the Jewish Christian missionaries in the Diaspora who proclaimed the Gospel to the Gentiles were more likely to be persecuted than Christians in Judea."<sup>v</sup>

We are now going to deal with the question of the relation between the afflictions which the Jesus-believers met with and those which the Gentile Christians experienced.

#### **4. The costs of discipleship for Jewish and non-Jewish believers**

The question we might ask now is whether Jesus-believing Jews in the first century met with more opposition than non-Jewish believers. If we turn to some of the letters of Paul that were written to churches which were either non-Jewish or which had a non-Jewish majority, it seems pretty easy to get an answer to the question.

An example:

In I Thessalonians we meet a church about whom it is said that they "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Cor 1:9). Although this church has probably had a few members of Jewish descent (cf. Acts 17:4), 1:9 suggests that the majority were non-Jews. Now, what is Paul saying to them?

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews (1 Thess 2:14).

Without entering a discussion of how 1 Thess 2:14-16 has been used for antisemitic purposes, we may notice that the afflictions which non-Jews met with in Thessalonica are comparable to

those which the Jewish believers in Judea met from their compatriots, the Jews. These verses speak of persecution and hindrances to the declaration of the gospel to Gentiles. Paul mentions the suffering and ill-treatment that he himself met with in Philippi (1 Thess 2:2), and he is ready to give his own life for the church (1 Thess 2:8), the church which consists of members who are "beloved by God" and who are called "chosen" (1 Thess 1:4). Apparently, these designations are not reserved for the Jewish believers.

So, about 51 A.D., in one of the first Pauline letters - if not the first - the costs which non-Jewish believers are facing are compared to the costs which Jesus-believing Jews in Judea have had to pay. It is not a question of greater or smaller costs. The costs are of the same nature.

I am not denying that there may be some differences. At the time when the letter was written we have no positive evidence that Gentile Christians had suffered martyrdom. But to me the similarities are more striking. And if there is a difference, it seems to be that in the time to come Gentile Christians suffered more than Jewish Christians.

Perhaps the situation is not so very different for us today. We cannot simply say that the costs experienced by the Jesus-believing Jews of our time are of a more troublesome nature than those which non-Jews are faced with. Therefore it cannot be taken for granted that the adversities which a Jesus-believing Jew is confronted with today in principle should be of a different nature than what other believers may encounter in their environments. I think we non-Jews are doing our Jesus-believing sisters and brothers a questionable favour if we say otherwise.

## **5. The relation between Christians' Christ sufferings and non-Christians' sufferings**

Now I want to draw attention to another matter. This is not a lesson which can be inferred from the New Testament but it is found in other material from the first century. Jesus-believing Jews have always been a minority in the Jewish people. Even so in the first century. They were regarded as a Jewish sect, and Birkat ha-Minim in Shemoneh Esreh, the benediction against Jewish heretics and others (which I shall return to in section 7), did not change the fact that they continued to be seen as Jews, although heretical Jews. However, we should not forget that there were other Jews at the same time who were also seen as heretical Jews. These Jews also met with opposition from fellow-Jews. And there were Jews who met with political opposition from other Jews, an opposition which they construed as opposition owing to their faith.

Let me mention an example: Jesus son of Ananias, this unfortunate prophet of woe who four years before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. prophesied it. Josephus tells us that this Jesus, the prophet of woe, met with opposition from "certain of the most eminent among the populace".<sup>vi</sup> This prophet was flogged and released. Although the reason for this flogging was hardly that his words were regarded as blasphemy but rather as a threat to the peace, I think it is safe to say that, in a subjective perspective, it was an affliction due to his faith. (By the way, he was proved right!) The nature of this flogging was the same as the flogging which some of the first Jesus-disciples experienced. They also disturbed the peace in the Jewish establishment, even in a double sense: both their peace of mind and the peace in the streets.

Or think of the Pharisees who were killed by Herod the Great. Or the struggle between Sadducees and Pharisees. When the Pharisees came into power after 70 A.D., the Sadducees suffered the humiliation that they, who denied the resurrection from the dead, had no portion in the world to come. What the believing Sadducee encountered of affliction is comparable to the affliction which Jesus-believing Jews encountered.

Or think of Josephus' account of the Essene custom of punishing any blasphemy against their law-giver with death.<sup>vii</sup> Hare says about this: "Josephus would not have

mentioned this as a distinguishing characteristic of the Essenes had it been a common practice in Judaism as a whole." He is probably right about that. But that did not hinder some Jews from punishing other Jews because of their faith.

Examples from the first century are numerous.

If it is true what Josephus writes, that 600 Pharisees were executed by Herod, then this is something which goes far beyond what happened to Jesus-believing Jews. As we have seen, the New Testament mentions only 2, namely Stephen and James the son of Zebedee. If we include James, the Lord's brother, there are 3!

Later came persecution of the Christians, like the one under Nero in the 60's and the one under Domitian in the 90's. But here Gentile Christians were the victims. Let it be mentioned in passing that there is no substance in the popular idea that Jews should have been behind the persecution under Nero.

I am not going to deal with the history of martyrdom, a phenomenon which in the main befell Gentile Christians. Nor am I going to deal with the afflictions which brothers and sisters in the Lord have encountered in totalitarian states - and perhaps are still encountering in a few places today.

For most Jesus-believers - Jewish or non-Jewish - the threat of death for their faith is a theoretical question today. The question may arise, it is true, but then as a thing of the future. But today it is still a dangerous thing to be a political dissident in a totalitarian regime. Whatever reservations one may have about the so-called liberation theology, there is no denying that the followers of this are among those who risk being killed for their conviction today.

The point which I am driving at is that, in an objective perspective, the sufferings and afflictions which a Christian may encounter are comparable to the sufferings and afflictions which non-Christians with a firm conviction may face. That means, for example, that it is impossible to conclude that the person who suffers afflictions must also have a genuine faith. The matter is rather more complicated.

## **6. The relation between death and ostracism**

We grade sufferings and afflictions: small afflictions, big afflictions, extreme afflictions. The ultimate affliction is to be put to death. Among the minor afflictions are shrugging of the shoulders, contempt, and various forms of social ostracism.

It goes without saying that people do not choose their own kind of afflictions. It is, however, a fact that it is not only severe afflictions that may have disastrous consequences for the faith and lead to apostasy. "Small" afflictions may also do that. Just as the devil may appear as "a roaring lion" (1 Pet 5:8) and "an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14), so "big" afflictions and "small" afflictions may equally lead to apostasy.

This means that it is not only those who encounter severe trials who need care. Actually, there may be many more who have lost their faith because of "small" afflictions than because of "big" ones. When it is a fact that "small" afflictions can lead to apostasy, we are not in any way helping those who are experiencing them if we insist on speaking to them about the "big" afflictions. And besides, what in an objective perspective is a "small" affliction, may in a subjective perspective be experienced as something big and insurmountable. In Zeist 1991 Susan Perlman told about an elderly Jewish believer who renounced the faith when he was told by the antimissionaries that he would not be buried in the Jewish cemetery next to his deceased wife because of his faith in Christ.<sup>viii</sup> This is a good example of what I am dealing with. Compared to losing one's life for Jesus' sake, it was a "small" affliction which this man met with. But when the result for the believer is that he renounces his faith, that "little" affliction

has big consequences.

I am afraid there is reason to fear that much of our talk today about suffering for Jesus' sake will not be seen as at all relevant but rather as empty words. We use pompous words about laying down one's life for Jesus, which to most of us today is not a problem - and we forget those with the "small" afflictions which have disastrous consequences for the faith. Let me make it clear that I do not think we should stop speaking about the willingness to risk one's life. It may be relevant for us in the future, whether near or far.

## **7. The relation between Birkat ha-Minim and our Birkot ha-Minim**

Hardly many people will deny that the Minim who are cursed in Shemoneh Esreh in the benediction against the heretics (Birkat ha-Minim) included Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Scholars discuss whether the word nozrim, which is found in versions from the Cairo Genizah, belongs to the version which Shmuel ha-Katan composed in Yavne (Jamnia) in the early 90's, or if it did not appear till the second century. The latter is maintained by David Flusser.<sup>ix</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman, on the other hand, thinks that nozrim is found already in Shmuel ha-Katan's version.<sup>x</sup> We are not going into that discussion but I would like to quote from the Cairo Genizah in Schiffman's rendition:

For the apostates, may there be no hope unless they return to Your Torah. As for the noserim and the minim, may they perish immediately. Speedily may they be erased from the Book of Life and may they not be registered among the righteous. Blessed art You, O Lord, Who subdues the wicked.<sup>xi</sup>

Flusser has argued that there were different pre-Christian versions of Birkat ha-Minim, dating back to the late Maccabee times.<sup>xii</sup> In the 90's Shmuel ha-Katan served as an editor, and in this capacity he is said to have brought together two previously unlinked benedictions. One was directed against heretics (Minim), the other against the "dominion of arrogance", probably a reference to the Gentile dominance of Rome.

Flusser's hypothetical reconstruction of the original text reads:

For the "separatists" (parushin) and for the apostates and for the traitors let there be no hope, and the heretics (minim) shall perish as in a moment, and the dominion of arrogance (zadon) do Thou speedily uproot. Blessed are Thou, O Lord, Who humblest the arrogant.<sup>xiii</sup>

If Flusser is right, it is a confirmation of an observation we made above. Then I argued that the opposition which the Jewish sect of Jesus-believing Jews encountered was comparable to the opposition which other Jewish sects encountered from the religious and/or political Jewish authorities. Flusser says about Birkat ha-Minim in its original form:

It was originally coined against dissidents, apostates and traitors - including those who delivered Jews to the Gentile government - and similar wicked men who separated themselves from the Jewish collectivity, a group which at one time probably also included the Essenes.<sup>xiv</sup>

So, we see the Pharisees, both before and after 70 A.D., distance themselves from other Jewish groups. Among them are the Sadducees and the Hellenizers and other sectarians who departed from the Pharisaic standards and beliefs. Shmuel ha-Katan's version "was not so decisive a step in the departure of Christianity from Judaism as is commonly suggested", says Flusser. And he continues:

Even without any special change in the benediction on the part of the Synagogue in the period after the Destruction of the Temple, Jews understood the word "heretics" as directed mainly against Jewish Christians, and the Christians themselves could assume that the benediction was directed against them.<sup>xv</sup>

Jews who denied the resurrection (e.g. the Sadducees) and therefore by the Pharisees were seen as heretics (cf. M. Sanhedrin 10,1: "The following are those who do not have a portion in the world to come: the one who says there is no resurrection of the dead, [the one who says] the Torah is not from heaven, and the 'apikoros'") and Jesus-believing Jews who did believe in the resurrection were uniformly cursed through this "benediction" by the victorious Jewish party after the destruction of the Temple, namely the Pharisees. Birkat ha-Minim served to exclude Jewish Christians from serving as precentors in the synagogue. Naturally, they could not curse themselves. The lesson which is affirmed by this is that there were Jews besides the Jesus-believing Jews who encountered contempt and opposition from fellow-Jews in the first century.

It is surprising to hear Flusser say about the period before the destruction of the Temple: "... neither Jesus nor Jewish Christians were attacked [by other Jews] because of their faith."<sup>xvi</sup> Surprising because we know that in the Maccabean period Jew fought against Jew - The Books of Maccabees describe not only the struggle between Jews and Gentiles but also the struggle between the Jews who fought for the Torah and the Temple and the Jews who had made a compromise with the Gentiles - and we know that the Pharisees fought against other Jewish heretics and distanced themselves from them, in "pre-Christian" time and throughout the first century. With a reference to the words of Jesus in Matth 10:17-18 and the words of Paul in 1 Thess 2:14 Flusser says:

"Nothing about such persecutions is known from Rabbinic literature, but the tension itself against Christians is attested there, as is also the close connection between the rabbis and the Jewish Christians."<sup>xvii</sup>

If one ascribes the same degree of reliability to the New Testament sources as the rabbinic sources, the picture is not quite so simple. Flusser does not do that when he speaks about Jewish opposition to the first Jesus-believers before 70 A.D. When he speaks about Christology, he is right in emphasizing that it is made up of Jewish elements and that Christology developed from Jesus' exalted self-awareness and what happened to or was believed to have happened to Jesus and from various Jewish religious motifs which became connected with Jesus. It is a fundamental idea with Flusser that only from the Synoptic Gospels do we know the faith of Jesus; outside them, it is the faith in Christ that is mostly presented and developed. I do not agree with this distinction, which I think is an over-simplification. Flusser goes on to say: "It is in Gentile Christianity - a Christianity which came into existence through the missionary activity of Hellenistic Jews - that the Christological drama is central." And yet he thinks that the birth of Christology took place in Palestine during the period between Jesus' death and Paul's conversion. However, those Jewish Christians who developed it formed only a minority in the Mother Church. And this minority, without desiring it, caused Christianity to become a new religion. It was this developed Christology, and not Jesus' faith, that became the main content of the Christian religion.<sup>xviii</sup>

Against this background Flusser has more to say about "Anti-Judaism Among Christians",<sup>xix</sup> which he finds a clear expression of in e.g. the Gospel of Matthew, whose author - Matthew - Flusser does not think was a Jewish Christian, than he has to say about "Jewish Hatred of Christians".<sup>xx</sup> He admits that there were tensions, but since the majority of Jewish Christian heretics did not profess the developed Christology of the Gentile Church this does not explain the lack of any criticism of the faith of Jesus and the principles of Christian religion in rabbinic literature prior to the end of the second century. In this context Flusser concludes: ... neither Jesus nor Jewish Christians were attacked because of their faith.

What there may have been of opposition to Jewish Christians arose, according to Flusser, mainly on a social and national level. As to the persecutions which Jewish Christians

met with from Bar Kochba during the uprising against the Romans in 132-135 A.D., it is Flusser's belief that Bar Kochba did not force others to accept that he was the Messiah and that, although it was required of the Jewish Christians that they should deny that Jesus is the Messiah, they were not required to blaspheme Jesus. (In a Christian perspective it a question whether this does not amount to the same thing.) Flusser says:

Bar Kokhba punished Christians because they refused to fight together with him against the Romans. They evidently refused to do so because of their belief that the Messiah had already come and that he had not now returned in Bar Kokhba. It seems to me that in this way the punishment of the Christians by Bar Kockba and their belief that Jesus was the Messiah were connected. But even here, the political and not the religious aspect was decisive.<sup>xxi</sup>

To me it is an open question whether Flusser is right when he concludes that it was the political and not the religious aspect which was decisive for Bar Kochba's punishment of the Jesus-believing Jews. But there is no doubt in my mind that the two aspects have to be connected if one wants to understand the opposition which a Jewish minority movement such as the first Jesus-believers encountered from parts of the Jewish community. It is rather surprising that these ideas are not connected when Flusser deals with the earliest Jewish opposition to the first Jesus-believing Jews. If the New Testament sources are taken into account it appears to me that Flusser exaggerates when he speaks about some of the New Testament writers' anti-Judaism, and that he understates the Jewish opposition to the Jesus-believing Jews. The first Jews' faith in Jesus did not exist in a vacuum. They did not keep it to themselves. They put it into words. It disturbed the peace and was a danger to the peace.

Therefore we can conclude: Even if the opposition to the Jesus-believers in the sight of some of the religious authorities was of a political nature, seen with Jewish Christian eyes it was a consequence of their faith.

And although Flusser may be right in maintaining that the first Jesus-believers were not persecuted because of their belief that Jesus was the Messiah - after all, there were other groups with their Messiah pretenders - then the first believers did not merely say: Jesus is the Messiah. When they made statements which were related to their faith in the Messiah, they may have been understood and they may not have been understood, but Stephen's case shows that he was charged with speaking "blasphemous words against Moses and God" (Acts 6:11). Acts 6:13 mentions false witnesses who said: "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law." And whether or not the Sanhedrin, judicially, had the authority to execute a death sentence because of blasphemy, and whether or not they actually did it in the first century, then law is one thing and moral another.

Above I have made a point of stressing that in no way do our sources suggest that the whole of the Jewish people should have persecuted all Jesus-believing Jews in the first century. That would be historically incorrect and an expression of antisemitism. But neither is it possible, on the basis of the same sources, to clear all Jews of their opposition to the first Jesus-believing Jews. In exceptional cases this opposition resulted in murders of Jewish Christian leaders. The number of these liquidations is small when compared to, for example, Herod's liquidation of Pharisees or Jewish zealots' liquidations of fellow-Jews who collaborated with the Roman occupational power, not to mention Christians' liquidations of Jews down through history, which surpasses everything. The opposition to Jesus-believing Jews has mainly been expressed in words. And, what does not come out sufficiently in Flusser's work: the opposition was also religiously conditioned, i.e. some Jewish groupings saw the faith of the Jesus-believing Jews as an expression of blasphemy. No community, political or religious, is without extremists. The Jewish community in the first century had their

share of them. A Jew from Tarsis named Paul was one of them! His zeal for his Jewish faith made him fight against the new Jesus faith.

Back to Birkat ha-Minim. If, prior to the version from the 90's, there existed other versions of Birkat ha-Minim which included the term Minim, it is possible that some Jewish Christians were included in this. The general idea is that Birkat ha-Minim was not a tool of excommunication, but a recitation which proved to be a "test" involving self-exclusion. The Johannine passages which speak of the Jewish Christians being "put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) have often been taken as circumstantial evidence that the Gospel of John was not written till the end of the first century, which means that we here have the word of the evangelist, not of the earthly Jesus. But if one considers that the Qumran congregation practised either temporary or permanent exclusion for punishing violators, it cannot be maintained with as great certainty as is sometimes done that Jesus could not have uttered these words recorded in the Gospel of John.<sup>xxiii</sup> Add to this that rabbinic literature distinguishes between nidduy, which normally involved a thirty-day period of isolation from the congregation, and herem, an unlimited exclusion from the congregation which could, however, be lifted. To what degree these exclusions were practised in the first century is still being debated. Some subscribe to the view that the term from the Gospel of John, "to be put out of the synagogue" may have a reference to a kind of informal social ostracism.<sup>xxiii</sup>

But whatever opposition there may have been to the Jesus-believing Jews, it is a fact that their belief did not change their status as Jews. Here they had a common destiny with other heretics and apostates (Meshummadim). Lawrence H. Schiffman has demonstrated - to me convincingly - that neither the heretic nor the apostate is deprived of his Jewish status.<sup>xxiv</sup> (For Schiffman it is belief in the case of the heretic and actions in the case of the apostate/meshummad.) Even when it is a question of disagreement on fundamental issues of theology, law, biblical exegesis, social and political matters between Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Dead Sea Sect "no sect ever claimed that the others were not Jews".<sup>xxv</sup>

Today the situation is a different one, at any rate when a Jesus-believing Jew wants to be considered under "The Law of Return", a relevant theme which I cannot deal with here.

I have given this section the title: Birkat ha-Minim and our Birkot ha-Minim. This is because I venture to say something positive about Birkat ha-Minim.

Seen from the point of view of the Jesus-believers it must have been painful to be put out of the synagogue. I assume that they were convinced that the synagogue should accept the gospel. I dare not guess how long it was before the Jesus-believing Jews no longer wanted to participate in the synagogue service. But that time came.

On the other hand, when I try to understand the non-Jesus-believing Jewish authorities in the first century A.D., it is not difficult for me to see that, from their premises, they did the right thing when they obstructed the participation of Jewish Christians in the synagogue service. This assertion, which may surprise some, springs from the acknowledgment that every religious community is bound to distance itself from others. The rabbis did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and therefore the only sensible thing to do was to find a solution so that the Jewish Christians excluded themselves.

I do not think there are many religious communities that do not have their own "Birkot ha-Minim". Down through the history of the Christian Church quite a few have come into being. With our Birkot ha-Minim we distance ourselves from others. They are expressed in the formulations of faith or confessions of the Christian churches. When a church defines its positions, it also distances itself from others. When Messianic Jews set up formulations of their faith, there is also a distance. Sometimes the distance is due to circumstances in the Gentile Christian church's history. But there is always a distance to the Judaism which denies that Jesus

is the Messiah, no matter how strongly one might otherwise, as a Messianic Jew, identify oneself with one's Jewishness. Merely to say that Jesus of Nazareth was - and is - the Messiah is to express a distance. My point is that it is a human right to give expression to one's reservations. Anyone who has a faith, a living faith, must be prepared to distance himself and to be distanced from others.

The pain felt by Messianic Jews today of not being accepted as Jews or of being regarded as bad ones has been aptly expressed by David H. Stern: "Nevertheless, being included and accepted by our brothers in the flesh cannot be our main aim. Only knowing, acting upon and communicating the truth and love of God can fill that role."<sup>xxvi</sup>

And let me now conclude with a lesson which the Apostle Paul gives.

### **8. Paul's reaction to afflictions**

It is worth paying attention to the way Paul reacts to the treatment of him which he himself feels to be unjust. Often we hurry through this description, probably because we are more interested in a more "pious" Paul than the man whom we encounter in such places.

Think of the situation in the prison in Philippi. First Paul and Silas were beaten with rods by the magistrates, thrown into prison where they spent the night singing hymns to God and evangelizing. The night ended with a good meal in the newly converted jailer's house, and in the morning they were told that they might leave (Acts 16:20-36).

Many a good Christian would have said Hallelujah, I suppose, and then gone to his friends and thanked God for his release and rejoiced because something bad - his imprisonment - by God had been turned into something good - namely the opportunity for evangelization, which even proved a success. But Paul does something surprising. He says about the magistrates: "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now cast us out secretly? No! let them come themselves and take us out." They had to do it, and they even apologised to them (Acts 16:37-38).

Or think of the situation in Jerusalem after the third missionary journey. Paul addresses the Jews (Acts 22). When they are about to scourge him Paul says: "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen, and uncondemned?" And when the tribune came and said that he had bought his citizenship for a large sum, Paul replies: "But I was born a citizen" (Acts 22:25-28). A proud answer.

Or think of the situation when Festus asks Paul if he wishes to go up to Jerusalem and have his case tried there. "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried," Paul answers. "To the Jews I have done no wrong ..." (Acts 25:9-12).

With these examples not all has been said about Paul's attitude to external afflictions. This is what he writes to the church in Philippi: "Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Phil 1:23). The church is encouraged to rejoice together with Paul even if he should lose his life. In the same letter he can even write: "For it has been granted to you [literally: by grace] that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil 1:29). One thing is that faith and grace are connected concepts. That may be difficult enough to maintain. But that suffering and grace are also tied together is much more difficult to maintain. This is what Paul does. Suffering for the sake of Christ is a manifestation of grace!

I do not think it is going too far to claim that all through his life as a Jesus-believer Paul struggled with his experience of having been under suspicion and having been humiliated - by Jews as well as by non-Jews. Perhaps the difficult question of what constituted "the thorn in the flesh" should be considered in the light of this. Anyway, some Bible expositors believe

that Paul had smearing, suspicion and external persecution in mind when he speaks about "the thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7). In 2 Cor 11:23-33 Paul mentions a number of afflictions he has suffered. Does it not seem as if Paul has them at his fingertips, as if he can give an account of them anytime? And the pride in Paul's character, which I have given a few samples of, is transformed so that now he is proud not only of being a Hebrew, an Israelite and descendant of Abraham (2 Cor 11:22) but also of his weakness. "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Cor 11:30). And after Paul has mentioned that three times he besought the Lord that "the thorn in the flesh" should leave him, then the Lord answered him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). And then Paul says: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). Here we find weakness defined, anyway it is possible to read it this way. Weakness is made synonymous with a number of words that describe the afflictions and sufferings which Paul has encountered. Through Paul's powerlessness Christ's power should reveal itself. On the one hand Paul feels a reluctance to accept the afflictions, on the other hand he learns that this is the way in which God's power is made perfect in his ministry.

This is a lesson we should keep trying to learn!

## 9. Postscript

By the way, I am content that today the Christian Church has no political power. The history of the Church shows that when it did have power it used it to inflict sufferings on others. I have no reason to believe that the Church would act differently today if it became powerful again.

The power of the Christian Church consists of words. The word of the crucified and risen Christ, the word which is folly to both Jews and Gentiles but at the same time God's wisdom.

This word we will maintain - no matter the costs!

## Notes

1) I am indebted to the Swedish Professor Birger Gerhardsson's for his New Testament studies concerning the Shema Israel, published in the articles "Andlig offertjänst enligt Matt. 6:1-6,16-21" [Spiritual sacrifice according to Matthew 6:1-6,16-21] and "Monoteisme och högkristologi i Matteusevangeliet" [Monotheism and High Christology in the Gospel According to St Matthew] in: "Hör, Israel!" Om Jesus och den gamla Bekännelsen ["Hear, O Israel!" Of Jesus and the Old Confession], Lund, 1979, pp. 76-84 and 171-190. See also his The Testing of God's Son, Lund 1966, and "The Shema in Early Christianity" in The Four Gospels 1992, Festschrift Frans Neiryneck, Leuven 1992.

2) D.R.A. Hare, The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel according to St Matthew, Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 19-79.

3) D.R.A. Hare, op. cit. pp. 80ff.

4) D.R.A. Hare, op. cit. p. 43.

5) D.R.A. Hare, op. cit. p. 78.

- 6) Cf. D.R.A. Hare, op. cit. p. 27.
- 7) Cf. D.R.A. Hare op. cit. p. 24.
- 8) Susan Perlman, "Faith in Crisis: A Return to the Synagogue", in: LCJE, Zeist 91, Aarhus 1991, p. 184).
- 9) "The Jewish-Christian Schism I-II" in: Judaism and the Origin of Christianity, The Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1988, pp. 617-644.
- 10) Who was a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism, Ktav Publishing House, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1985, pp. 53-61.
- 11) L.H. Schiffman, op. cit. p. 55.
- 12) D. Flusser, op. cit. pp. 637-643. Cf. also Marvin R. Wilson, Our Father Abraham. Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith, Eerdmans Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1989, pp. 64-73).
- 13) D. Flusser, op. cit. p. 641.
- 14) D. Flusser, op. cit. p. 639.
- 15) D. Flusser, op. cit. pp. 642-643.
- 16) D. Flusser, op. cit. p. 636.
- 17) D. Flusser, op. cit. p. 635.
- 18) D. Flusser, op. cit. pp. 619-625.
- 19) D. Flusser, op. cit. pp. 625-630.
- 20) D. Flusser, op. cit. pp. 635-637.
- 21) D. Flusser, op. cit. p. 637.
- 22) Cf. M.R. Wilson, op. cit. pp. 69-72.
- 23) L.H. Schiffman, op. cit. p. 49.
- 24) L.H. Schiffman, op. cit. p. 3.
- 25) David H. Stern, Messianic Jewish Manifesto, Jewish New Testament Publications, Jerusalem, 1988, p. 13.

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xxii See John A.T. Robinson, Redating the New Testament, London, 1976, pp. 272-275. Robinson argues that the New Testament was essentially complete by 70

A.D.

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