

48. Toleration in the Synagogues

Tosephta Shabbat 13:5

Up to this point, Christians had continued to be Jews, and as such to take part in synagogue worship. Their texts, if any (one was probably the Gospel of Mark, their first authority statement; another may have been a copy of the circular letter of Jacob), were accordingly sometimes kept in the synagogue. Grand synagogue buildings, meant to replace the Temple whose rebuilding was no longer a viable possibility, were rare until the 3rd century. Before then, especially in the smaller towns, Jews may have met in someone's house, just as the Jesus followers did. One way or another, the first century situation was that members of the Jesus sect often kept their special texts in the same place as the more mainstream Jews did. This we know because the Rabbinic texts provide for it, by specifying what should be rescued from a fire. The Rabbis disapproved of the Jesus texts, and had hard words for them, but the hard words attest the presence of the texts. The fact that these Jesus texts contained the name of God, which had to be treated with respect, was a complication. Here are several rulings on the issue, by two named Rabbis:

The books of the Evangelists and the books of the minim they do not save from a fire. But they are allowed to burn where they are. They and the references to the Divine Name in them.

Rabbi Yose the Galilean says, On ordinary days, one cuts out the references to the Divine Name which are in them and stores them away, and the rest burns.

Said Rabbi Tarfon, May I bury my sons, if such things come into my hands and I do not burn them, and even the references to the Divine Name which are in them.



Reflections

The God in the Jesus texts, starting with the Gospel of Mark, was the same God worshiped by all Jews. The Jesus sect was thus an internal problem, the hardest kind of problem to deal with.

For a while, the tension created by this disturbing textual presence went uncorrected. Under Yoḥanan, the Jesus people were still tolerated. Since the problem was there to be decided, it must be that Jesus sect writings were at least sometimes kept in the synagogues, alongside the recognized Scriptures.

That practical toleration would eventually change under Gamaliel II, Yoḥanan's successor at Yabneh.

Meanwhile, the Jesus sect leaders were working with their own mixed doctrinal heritage: Alpha along with Beta, faith contending with works as the key to salvation. This slumbering opposition, papered over by Paul's editors,¹ would presently break out. Meanwhile, Paul's onetime manager Onesimus, a man of peace and an adroit manager, presides over another delicate balance by keeping the Alpha/Beta compromise steady for the Christians of Ephesus, whose Bishop he has just become.

¹See Chapter 41.