

Competing Missions in the Early Church:

The Hebrews, the Hellenists, Paul, the Historical Jesus and the Risen Christ

David C. Sim

Australian Catholic University

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Introduction

The topic of competing missions in the early Church raises a number of complex issues and involves a range of New Testament documents as well as later Christian texts. The sheer depth and complexity of the subject matter entails that it cannot be adequately examined in a study of this length. What this study proposes to do, therefore, is to spell out in general terms how those scholars who accept the notion of competing missions in the early Church evaluate the evidence and construct their arguments. In such a wideranging study not every point can be evaluated in the detail it deserves, but I point the reader to other scholarly discussions, often my own, where the arguments are presented in depth. Similarly, I am well aware that there are contrary views to those I present here, but again limitations of space preclude a full analysis of these. The intention of this paper is thus not to solve all the problems associated with this important area of study, but to present a hypothesis, to contextualise that hypothesis and to raise a number of important issues for further discussion.

The study will proceed as follows. It will begin with the ‘father’ of the competing mission hypothesis, Ferdinand Christian Baur, whose important work provides the basis

for the modern proponents of this thesis. The discussion of Baur will be followed by a reconstruction of the competing missions to the Jews in the early Christian church. This will involve an analysis of the relationship between the so-called Hebrews and the Hellenists in the primitive Jerusalem community. The next section will investigate the competing missions to the Gentiles which emerged later. One mission was championed by the itinerant Paul, while its competitor was sanctioned by the leaders of the Jerusalem church and was specifically designed to counter the influence of Paul and to convert his Gentile converts to a Law-observant version of the Christian message. Finally, the discussion will move to a neglected area. Where do these different missions have their origins? Can any of them be traced back to the teaching or example of the historical Jesus or to the demands of the risen Christ?

The Spectre of Baur

Many scholars might perhaps be disinclined to accept the very idea of competing Christian missions in the first century. After all, in his account of the apostolic council in Gal. 2:1-10 Paul relates that there were indeed two distinct and independent missions in the early Church, but that they were complementary and supportive of one another and not in competition. He states in Gal 2:7-9 that an agreement was reached in Jerusalem that one mission would be directed towards the Jews or the circumcised while the other would be aimed at the uncircumcised or the Gentiles. The Jewish mission would be undertaken by the Jerusalem church under the leadership of James, Peter and John, while the Gentile mission would be led and supervised by Paul himself and Barnabas. The former would proclaim the gospel to the circumcised, which can only mean observance

of the Torah alongside faith in Jesus as the Christ. The Gentiles, however, would receive a different gospel, the gospel to the uncircumcised, which involved the good news about Jesus and, at the very least, a relaxation of the Jewish ritual laws, including circumcision. These two missions to different ethnic groups and with different messages could not be in competition with one another, but would complement one another as the good news of Jesus was taken throughout the Jewish and pagan worlds. It was this view of different but complementary missions following the apostolic council that informed the important work of A. von Harnack a century ago,¹ and which still commands a good measure of assent today.

Yet this portrait of harmonious and co-operative Christian missions has been questioned. As early as the end of the eighteenth century, some scholars argued that the early Christian movement comprised opposing parties, which led in turn to competing missions for converts.² This view came to real prominence, however, in a series of influential and controversial writings by F. C. Baur in the early to mid nineteenth century.

³ Baur argued the early Church was divided into two distinct factions or parties, a Law-observant Jewish Christianity centred in Jerusalem and a Law-free Gentile Christianity led by Paul. That these two versions of the Christian message were in constant conflict

¹ So J. L. Martyn, 'A Law-Observant Mission to Gentiles', in J. L. Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 7-24 (7). Von Harnack's classic and influential treatment of this topic is *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (2 vols; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906); ET *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (2 vols; London: Williams and Norgate, 1908).

² M. D. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (LPS; Peabody; Hendrickson, 2001) 1, traces this hypothesis back to the work of J. E. C. Schmidt in 1797.

³ Baur first aired his thoughts in a long article, which has never been translated into English; 'Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz der petrinischen und paulinischen Christentums in der ältesten Kirche, Petrus in Rom', *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 4 (1831) 61-206. This initial work was followed by F. C. Baur, *Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi – sein Leben und Wirken, seine Briefe und Lehre: Ein Beitrag zu einer kritischen Geschichte des Urchristentums* (2 vols; Stuttgart: Becher und Müller, 2nd edn 1845); ET *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, His Life and Work, His Epistles and His Doctrine* (2 vols; London: Williams and Norgate, 1876), and idem, *Das Christentum und die christliche Kirche der drei ersten Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig: Fues, 1853); ET *The Church History of the First Three Centuries* (2 vols; London: Williams and Norgate, 1878-79).

with one another is clear from Galatians, Romans, Philippians and the two letters to Corinth. Baur further contended that much of the New Testament and other early Christian literature was written in the light of this factional dispute with individual texts representing one side or the other. This inner Christian debate was resolved, according to Baur, at some point in the mid-second century when the two opposition movements, now threatened by the rise of Gnosticism, eventually merged together to form early Catholicism. The advance towards reconciliation is most clearly perceived in the book of Acts, which Baur dated well into the second century and which was dominated by an agenda to harmonise the two dominant factions and present a more unified portrait of the early Church.

Needless to say, Baur's views came in for heavy criticism. Some of these critical responses were not valid. A constant complaint from Baur's time until now is that his reconstruction of Church history had been too heavily influenced by Hegel's dialectic theory of thesis (Jewish Christianity), antithesis (Gentile Christianity) and a resultant synthesis (early Catholicism),⁴ but this charge is easily rebutted by the evidence that Baur had formulated his general position based upon historical evidence prior to his exposure to Hegel.⁵ This is an important point, for many of Baur's critics have sought to diminish his work by arguing that he had conformed his historical reconstruction to a philosophical theory when in fact Hegel's dialectic theory simply confirmed his own views that were based upon rigorous historical methods. The strength of Baur's work in fact lies in its application of legitimate and sophisticated historical-critical methods which largely stand the test of time even after a century and a half. Baur's many works are still worth reading

⁴ See, for example, S. Neill and T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 23-24.

⁵ So correctly Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Missions*, 10-13; and G. Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 6-7.

for their many insights, and it is a great tragedy that most modern scholars, especially many who criticise Baur or anything remotely ‘Baurian’, have never read any of his prodigious literary output.

But having said this, it must be noted that Baur’s work is not beyond criticism. I too would question his portrait of a single and changeless Jewish Christianity as perhaps a little simplistic, and I have severe reservations that early Catholicism (however we define that entity) was a simple synthesis and transformation of Jewish Christianity and Pauline Christianity. In similar vein I would quibble with his early date for Matthew and his late date for Mark, which necessitated his acceptance of the Griesbach hypothesis. I would also reject his views concerning Judaism, which unfortunately reflect the prejudices of nineteenth century European Christian scholarship. But despite these and other criticisms, the major aspects of Baur’s work – that the early Church comprised factions that differed fundamentally over the role of the Torah in the Christian tradition, that these factions were in opposition to one another throughout the first and second centuries (and perhaps beyond), and that the Acts of the Apostles was written with an apologetic harmonising agenda – are basically correct in my opinion. And I am far from alone in this judgement. While it is true that many modern studies of the history of the Church and its missionary activity make little or no reference to Baur, his spirit refuses to be exorcised completely from the field. As M. Goulder has wryly remarked, just as Saul recalled the ghost of Samuel, the ghost of Baur continues to be called into the service of early Christian historical reconstruction.⁶ The last two decades or so have witnessed an

⁶ Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Missions*, 1.

increasing emphasis on Baur's work, especially with regard to the opposition between the Pauline and the Jewish Christian traditions.⁷

Competing Missions to the Jews

When most scholars refer to competing missions in the early Church, they usually focus on the two missions to the Gentiles. It is clear, however, that there was for a time a competing mission to the Jews. This situation occurred very early in the history of the Christian movement and was relatively shortlived. But its importance should not be underestimated, for the competing Gentile missions that came later had their origins in this particular episode. Our only source for these Jewish missions are the early chapters of Acts which, given Luke's overt harmonising agenda, makes it difficult to reconstruct with absolute certainty the historical situation. And even when we strip away Luke's attempts to play down the differences between the various Christian parties, there are still significant gaps in our knowledge. None the less, despite the inherent problems in the bias and limited scope of our major source, a reasonably clear picture emerges.

⁷ In some cases the debt to Baur is fully recognised. See Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Missions*, and his earlier and more popular work, *A Tale of Two Missions* (London: SCM, 1994). Goulder acknowledges the prior work of Baur (*Paul and the Competing Missions*, 1-15) and builds upon it. See too the important work of Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, which discusses Baur's work in some detail at the beginning (1-12). More recently, see I. J. Elmer, *The Galatian Crisis in Its Broadest Historical Context* (WUNT 2/258; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), especially 4-7 where he refers to the pioneering work of Baur. Also worthy of mention here is the recent and massive history of the Christian movement from its inception until the destruction of Jerusalem by J. D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making. Volume 2. Beginning From Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Dunn mentions the work of Baur (31-36), and his reconstruction of the early Church owes much to the prior work of Baur. In other cases the debt to Baur is more muted. For example, my own reconstruction of the Antiochene Christian tradition and the place of Matthew's Gospel within it is deeply influenced by Baur, even though his works receive scant attention in the footnotes. See D. C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 63-107, 165-213, 257-87. The same can be said of the many Pauline studies of J. L. Martyn, whose understanding of the opposition to Paul is fundamentally Baurian, but who refers to Baur sparingly. See his 'A Law-Observant Mission to Gentiles', and 'A Tale of Two Churches', in Martyn, *Theological Issues*, 25-36. See too Martyn's majestic commentary; *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997).

The original members of the Jerusalem church comprised the disciples and the family of Jesus as well as other Galilean followers (Acts 1:13-14). This group largely spoke Aramaic, observed the Torah and participated in the Temple cult (Acts 2:46; 3:1). Its distinctive message about Jesus the messiah involved no breach with the very broad parameters of first century Judaism, though it did mark them as a distinct sect or party within Judaism.⁸ Luke gives these Aramaic-speaking Christians the name ‘the Hebrews’ to distinguish them from another group in the very early Christian movement, the Hellenists, who were presumably early converts. The Hellenists were largely Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora who had settled in Jerusalem and who frequented the Greek-language synagogues in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9).⁹ There is good reason to believe that relations between the Hebrews and the newly-converted Hellenists were never especially close, despite their joint allegiance to Jesus. J. D. G. Dunn reminds us that even the chosen designations, Hebrews and Hellenists, implies not simply difference between the two groups but also suspicion and perhaps hostility.¹⁰

Luke relates that an issue arose concerning the neglect of Hellenist widows in the daily distribution of food (6:1), but it is likely that Luke is papering over a more serious division within these groups. While there must have been bilingual members in each group, the different languages and cultural backgrounds must have made communion between the majority very difficult, and it is probable that as a result the Hellenists began to forge an identity quite independent of the Hebrews.¹¹ This is indicated by the fact that

⁸ Elmer, *Paul*, 44-51; Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 178-240.

⁹ See M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1983) 4-11. Cf. too the more recent discussion of Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 246-54.

¹⁰ Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 249-51.

¹¹ See Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 66, Elmer, *Paul*, 55; and Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 253-54, 257, 277. It is interesting to note that Baur’s understanding of the Hebrews and the Hellenists does not go this far. Baur claims that there was a degree of unity between the two groups, but the gap between them widened after the Hellenists had left Jerusalem and especially once the Gentile mission had begun.

when the Hellenists were later persecuted by their fellow Diasporan Jews, the Hebrews were not similarly targeted (Acts 8:1). Even outsiders were aware of the significant differences between the two groups and their subsequent independence of one another.¹²

The persecution of the Hellenists raises a further question. Why were these followers of Jesus persecuted but not the members of the original Aramaic-speaking church? The answer lies in the distinctive message of the Hellenists, which they proclaimed in the Greek-language synagogues in Jerusalem (6:8-10). While it can be assumed that much of their message about the good news of Jesus paralleled the preaching of the Hebrews, they differed from their Christian counterparts in two distinct ways. Luke provides an important clue when he reports that Stephen, the leader of the Hellenists, was charged with criticising the Temple and the Torah (Acts 6:11-14). Despite Luke's best efforts to protect Stephen from these charges by describing his critics as false witnesses (Acts 6:13), historically speaking the accusations were probably justified. This means that the Hellenists, unlike the Hebrews, accepted that the appearance of the messiah had rendered unimportant or even invalid both the temple cult and the Mosaic Law.¹³ It was this attack upon these fundamental institutions of contemporary Judaism that was met with a violent response by the Jews of the Greek-speaking synagogues.

The Hellenists' radical understanding of the Christ event must have distanced them even further from the original members of the Jerusalem church. The disciples and

See Baur, *Paul*, I, 39-40.

¹² Baur, *Paul*, I, 40-41; Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 70-71; Elmer, *Paul*, 58-59; and Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 274-77.

¹³ Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 19-24; Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 67-69; Elmer, *Paul*, 56-59; and H. Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and Torah: Collected Essays* (JSNTSup 43; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) 201-02. Dunn presents a modified version of this position by arguing that the Hellenist attack was directly mostly against the temple; *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 259-62. A similar thesis is argued by Baur, *Paul*, I, 42-58. But a Hellenist critique of the Torah as well as the temple at this early stage makes best sense of later events.

the family of Jesus must have disapproved strongly of these Hellenist theological innovations, which led in turn to an even greater division between the two over and above the original linguistic and cultural differences. It is also probable that the Hebrews did not oppose the persecution of the Hellenists by the Diasporan Jews. The fact that they escaped any persecution suggests not simply that they were perceived to be different by other Jews, but also that they did not identify themselves with their Christian associates who were under attack or come to their defence.¹⁴ The breach between the two was apparently complete.

This above reconstruction evidences that within only a few years of the establishment of the Christian movement, there were distinct factions with different theologies which engaged in competing missions to the Jews of Jerusalem. The Hebrews conducted a Law-observant mission largely directed at the Aramaic-speaking population, while the Hellenists conducted an alternative Law-free Christian mission to the Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora synagogues. These two missions were not a unified missionary effort by the Jerusalem church in general, as some have argued,¹⁵ but totally independent enterprises overseen by different Christian groups which disagreed on a number of fundamental issues and which were probably at times in direct competition with one another for converts. As we shall see, this scenario provides the most plausible background to the later competing missions to the Gentiles.

¹⁴ See J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1991) 273-74; idem, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 277. Cf. too Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 70-71; and Elmer, *Paul*, 59.

¹⁵ An alternative view of the relationship between the Hebrews and the Hellenists has been proposed by C. C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division within the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). Hill argues that the Hebrews and the Hellenists were not so different from one another, and that it was the Hebrews who authorised the distinctive Hellenist mission to the Greek-speakers in Jerusalem (36-37). A similar view is presented by E. J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission. Vol. 1. Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 654-55, 661-62. For a response to these views, see Elmer, *Paul*, 61-64; and Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 253-54.

Before we move to that topic, it is instructive to examine the outcome of these alternative Jewish missions. The Hellenist mission in Jerusalem came to an abrupt halt when the surviving Hellenists fled Jerusalem and returned presumably to their original locations in the Diaspora. It would make sense to assume that the Hellenists mostly continued to proclaim their message about Jesus to their fellow Jews.¹⁶ Acts relates that the Jerusalem church lent considerable assistance to the Hellenists at this time (cf. Acts 8:14-25; 9:32-43; 11:22), but this motif can be questioned. We have here a clear example of Luke's agenda to minimise the differences between the two groups and to highlight that the apostles ultimately oversaw the development of the Christian mission.¹⁷

Luke provides better information when he states that the Hellenists who traveled to Antioch seemingly abandoned the Jewish mission and began to speak to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19-20). This momentous act marked the beginning of the Christian mission to the Gentiles, and would change forever the nature of the Christian church.¹⁸ It must be assumed that the abandonment of the Jewish mission by the Hellenists in Antioch was the result of the failure of that particular missionary endeavour. This is not surprising, given that the gospel of these Christians married faith in the Christ with a relaxed emphasis on the necessity of Law-observance, a combination that had led directly to their persecution in Jerusalem. There is no need to suppose that the Jews of the Diaspora, for whom the ritual elements of the Law were an essential identity marker among Gentile populations, responded any more positively to this message than their counterparts in the Jewish homeland.¹⁹ Most Jews in the first century accepted without question that the laws

¹⁶ Acts 8:4-40 reports an exception to this rule in that Philip evangelises the Samaritans.

¹⁷ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 71-75.

¹⁸ So many scholars; see most recently Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 297-302.

¹⁹ See D. C. Sim, 'How Many Jews Became Christians in the First Century? The Failure of the Christian Mission to the Jews', *HTS* 61 (2005) 417-40 (430-31).

delivered to Moses at Sinai were to be obeyed forever (cf. Deut. 11:1; 12:1; 29:29), and any suggestion that the Jewish messiah had annulled any of them would have been met with understandable scepticism.²⁰ We need to remember that the Hebrews within the Christian movement did not share this Hellenist understanding of the significance of Jesus' ministry. It is probable that as news of the successful Gentile mission in Antioch reached other Hellenist centres, they too gradually replaced the original and unsuccessful Jewish mission with its Gentile counterpart. This development left the Law-observant Hebrew mission in Jerusalem as the sole Christian mission to the Jews. Paul acknowledges as much in his account of the apostolic council when he accepts that Peter had been entrusted with the Jewish mission, and that this mission was the sole responsibility of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:7-9).

It should also be mentioned that the Law-observant Jewish mission by the Hebrews fared little better. Despite the testimony of Acts that the original Jerusalem church attracted many thousands of members (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 21:20), the evidence is clear that it failed to make significant inroads into the Jewish population in Jerusalem and elsewhere.²¹ Writing in the late 50s to the Romans, Paul acknowledges that the mission to the Jews led by the Jerusalem church had been a dismal failure, and he attempts to find a theological explanation (Rom. 9-11). Some three decades later, the Gospel of Matthew also perceives the Jewish mission in these terms (Matt. 22:1-10). In this case the rejection of the Christian message did not involve the issue of Torah-observance because the Jerusalem church continued to abide by the Law. The reason why this version of the Christian message failed to make any real impression among the Jews

²⁰ See D. C. Sim, 'The Failed Christian Mission to the Jews: A Historical and Theological Defence of the Jewish Position', in W. Mayer, P. Allen and L. Cross (eds), *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church, Volume 4: The Spiritual Life* (Sydney: St Pauls, 2006) 37-48 (39-40).

²¹ For a detailed discussion, see Sim, 'How Many Jews?', 419-30.

is provided by Paul in 1 Cor. 1:22-23, where he states that the proclamation of Christ crucified presented a major obstacle to Jewish conversion. To put the matter simply, the Christian claim of a messiah dying a shameful death on a cross did not cohere with the complex of contemporary Jewish messianic expectations, and this led most Jews to dismiss the Christian identification of Jesus with the messiah. Once again this negative response is entirely understandable.²² After the destruction of the Jerusalem church in 70 CE, the Jewish mission was severely compromised and it was carried out by the few pockets of Jewish Christians that remained. It enjoyed even less success in the post-war period, since now it was in competition for converts with a resurgent and aggressive Pharisaism. By this time the Christian movement was largely Gentile and was heading towards a completely Gentile future.

Competing Gentile Missions

As noted above, the Gentile mission originated in Antioch when certain Hellenists abandoned the mission to the Jews and concentrated on evangelising Gentiles. This Law-free mission was by all accounts successful (Acts 11:21), and Paul soon traveled to Antioch to participate in this new development (Gal. 1:21). It is probably the case that this mission was initially confined to the large metropolis of Antioch, but it was eventually extended to surrounding regions. Acts reports that Paul and Barnabas were sent to Cyprus and southern Asia Minor (Acts 13-14), and there were probably other missions to other areas as well. There is no reason to deny a good measure of success to these missions, in which case the period of the early to mid 40s witnessed a flourishing and expansion of the Hellenist Law-free Gentile mission and a static Law-observant

²² Sim, 'Failed Christian Mission', 40-44.

mission to the Jews conducted by the Jerusalem church. While Luke refers to extensive interaction between Jerusalem and Antioch in this period and depicts the Jerusalem church lending assistance to the Gentile mission (11:22-30; 12:25), this too can be dismissed as a further example of Luke's harmonising tendency.²³ A more accurate picture of the relationship between Jerusalem and Antioch is provided by Paul when he states that after he left Jerusalem for Antioch, he did not return for fourteen (or twelve) years (Gal. 1:18-21; 2:1). Since Paul is informing the Galatians of all his dealings with the Jerusalem church, the implication is that there was no contact between Antioch and Jerusalem in the years between 36 and 48.²⁴ This is not surprising given the previous history between the Hellenists and the Hebrews.

Relations were restored when certain people from Judea came to Antioch and informed the Gentile Christians that their salvation was dependent upon circumcision and presumably observance of the whole Torah (Acts 15:1). The reason for this incursion by Jerusalem is not immediately clear, but it is reasonable to assume that it was generated by the success of the Gentile mission and also by a change of leadership in the Jerusalem church which saw the rise to power of James, the brother of Jesus.²⁵ This attempt by the Jerusalem church to impose its will on the Gentile Christians in Antioch marks an important development in the strategy of the Jerusalem church, and can be loosely described as its initial foray into the Gentile mission. The arrival of these messengers led to the so-called apostolic council, which was essentially a meeting between the two major wings of the Christian movement. The only topic for discussion was the validity or otherwise of the Law-free gospel and the Law-free Gentile mission.

²³ Sim, *Mathew and Christian Judaism*, 73-75.

²⁴ Sim, *Mathew and Christian Judaism*, 79. Cf. too Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 13.

²⁵ Sim, *Mathew and Christian Judaism*, 80-82.

The two accounts of this meeting in Gal. 2:1-10 and Acts 15 agree on some points but conflict on others. Most scholars give precedence to Paul's version because he was a participant at the events in question, in which case the dominant view is that an accord was reached that the Jerusalem church would oversee the Law-observant Jewish mission while the Antiochene church would continue to conduct its Law-free mission to the Gentiles. It seems to me, however, that there are problems as well with the Pauline account, and we simply cannot take his account for granted.²⁶ For our purposes, it does not really matter what happened at this meeting in Jerusalem because the dominant issue was not resolved in the long term. It emerged again a little later in Antioch.

In Gal. 2:11-14 Paul refers to a major dispute between himself and Peter in Antioch, the so-called incident at Antioch. For an unknown reason Peter had traveled to Antioch, and while there was content to eat with Gentiles. But when certain men came from James (in Jerusalem) he ceased to do so out of fear of the circumcision party. He was joined in his withdrawal from the Gentiles by the other Jews, including Barnabas. Paul was outraged by Peter's actions and accused him of hypocrisy. How could Peter live like a Gentile and not like a Jew before the men from James arrived, but now compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? Despite attempts to draw a clear distinction between James and the circumcision party,²⁷ the logic of the text belies such an interpretation. The fact that Peter feared the circumcision party in a message sent by James means that any real distinction between them is somewhat artificial.²⁸ The other point to note in this connection is that the message sent by James was that Gentile Christians were to observe the whole Torah, including circumcision for males. This is suggested by the mention of

²⁶ See my discussion of both the Acts and Pauline versions of the council in Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 82-92.

²⁷ So even Baur, *Paul*, I, 127-29.

²⁸ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 92-93.

the circumcision party in the context of James' message, and also by Paul's sarcastic question to Peter where he accuses the chief disciple of compelling the Gentiles to live like Jews. The verb 'to compel' (*anagka/zein*) is also found in Gal. 2:3 and 6:13, and in each case it is explicitly associated with the active intention to circumcise. The expression 'to compel to live like Jews' must therefore be taken in strongest sense as meaning a total conversion to Judaism.²⁹ We find in these events, no matter what actually transpired at the apostolic council, a second foray by the Jerusalem church into the Gentile mission that parallels the first mentioned in Acts 15:1.

It is generally conceded that, since Paul left Antioch to forge independent missions in Asia Minor and Greece, he lost the battle there. Accompanied by a number of helpers, he established many new Gentile Christian churches based upon the Law-free gospel. However, the Jerusalem church continued its established policy of sending emissaries to inform these new Gentile converts that their salvation was dependent not simply upon faith in Jesus but also on obedience to the Torah. Paul's letter to the Galatians provides very clear evidence of this. Not long after Paul had established the church(es) in Galatia, it came to his attention the Gentile Christians there were deserting his gospel for another (Gal. 1:6, 9). This was the gospel to the circumcised (2:7), which involved circumcision (5:2-6; 6:12-15) as well as other ritual requirements (cf. 4:10), and which was seemingly supported by the story of Abraham's circumcision.³⁰ It was introduced by outsiders because Paul directs his comments to the Gentile Galatians and always refers to those who preach the Law-observant gospel in the third person (e.g. 1:7-9; 3:1; 4:17; 5:10; 6:12). Part of the strategy of these people was to question Paul's apostolic credentials, a

²⁹ For detailed discussion of this interpretation and critiques of alternative views, see Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 94-100. Cf. too Elmer, *Paul*, 104-10.

³⁰ For a sympathetic reconstruction of this message, see Martyn, 'Law-Observant Mission', 12-24.

charge that Paul refutes by stating a number of times that his apostleship derives from the risen Christ (Gal. 1:1, 11-18).

The issue that most concerns us is the origin of these intruders and whom they represented. There seems little doubt that they derived from Jerusalem. Paul mentions Jerusalem more often in Galatians than any other epistle (1:17, 18; 2:1; 4:25, 26), and in 4:25-26 he contrasts the present Jerusalem which is enslaved to the Torah with the Jerusalem above which is free.³¹ As to whom they represented, many scholars contend that they did not necessarily act on behalf of James and the other Pillars but represented the false brothers of 2:4 and/or the circumcision party of 2:12.³² But it is unlikely that any ‘rogue faction’ existed in the Jerusalem church that differed substantially from the position of James. As stated above, such a distinction between James and the circumcision party in the incident at Antioch cannot be maintained. Moreover, Paul betrays his feelings about the three Jerusalem Pillars when he refers to them as those reputed to be something (2:2, 6, 9) but what they were makes no difference to him (2:6).³³ The Galatian crisis can and should be seen as a third attempt on the part of James to introduce (or enforce) the Law on Gentile Christians.³⁴ It was a continuation of his policy that led in the first instance to the apostolic council (Acts 15:1), then to the public dispute between Peter and Paul in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14) and now to the situation in Galatia.

The two epistles to Corinth suggest further incursions into Pauline communities by the Jerusalem church. While it is clear that not every problem faced by Paul in Corinth can be attributed to the machinations of the Jerusalem church, there is sufficient evidence

³¹ See Martyn, ‘Tale of Two Churches’, 27-36.

³² So, for example, Baur, *Paul*, I, 251-53; Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 721-22; Martyn, *Galatians*, 119-20; and Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 100-01.

³³ Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 452-53.

³⁴ Elmer, *Paul*, 158-59, 162-63.

to suggest that it was behind some of them. Long ago Baur had argued that the factional dispute in the early chapter of 1 Corinthians involved only two parties, those aligned with Peter and with Paul (1:12; 3:22).³⁵ The faction associated with Peter presumably had its origin in the arrival of outsiders (cf. 1 Cor. 9:2-3) who championed the cause of Peter and questioned the apostleship of Paul (9:1-27). In the course of his defence Paul even mentions the brothers of the Lord and Cephas and suggests that he is as legitimate an apostle as they are (vv. 5-6). A number of scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Paul's response in this chapter recalls the events at the apostolic council, thereby suggesting that, as at Galatia, an alternative version of that meeting was circulating in Corinth.³⁶ In second Corinthians we find a clearer picture of these opponents. They are Jews (11:22) and Christians (11:23), who have come into the Corinthian community from outside (11:4) preaching another Jesus and another gospel (11:4; cf. Gal. 1:6-9). As in Galatia this alternative gospel centred on the Torah, which Paul describes as the written code that kills (3:6), the dispensation of death (3:7) and the dispensation of condemnation (3:9). These people too question Paul's apostleship (2:17; 11:5; 12:11-12; cf. 5:19-20) as part of their strategy to impose the Law-observant gospel, the gospel that leads to enslavement (11:20; cf. Gal. 2:4; 4:25-26). While Paul does not in 2 Corinthians directly tie these opponents in with the Jerusalem church, the fact that they carry letters of commendation or authorisation (3:1-3) may indicate this.³⁷ There is, in short, plenty of evidence to suggest that much of the trouble Paul faced in Corinth was a continuation of the earlier conflicts in Antioch and Galatia.³⁸

³⁵ Baur, 'Christuspartei', 76-78. Cf. too more recent statements in Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission*, 17-32; Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 75-78; and Elmer, *Paul*, 168-72.

³⁶ Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 68-72; and Elmer, *Paul*, 173-74.

³⁷ Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission*, 33-34; Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*, 841-42; and Elmer, *Paul*, 177.

³⁸ Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission*, 16-46; and Elmer, *Paul*, 177-83, 185-88.

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, the competing Gentile missions were very different in terms of scope and target audience. While the Hellenist and Pauline missions ventured into virgin pagan areas with a truly universal perspective, its Law-observant Christian competitor was much more limited in scope. That mission was not interested in the Gentile world in general, but was restricted to Gentile Christians. Its missionaries tracked down those Gentile churches that were based upon the Law-free gospel, and tried to convince these Gentile believers that Law-observance was a necessary component of their Christian faith; it was therefore specifically designed and operated to counter the activity of Paul and others like him.³⁹ Unlike the Hellenist and Pauline Gentile mission which was intended to bring pagans to faith in Christ, the Law-observant Gentile mission was focused on transforming Law-free Gentile Christians into Law-keeping proselyte Christians.⁴⁰

An alternative view is proffered by J. L. Martyn, who contends that the Law-observant Gentile mission was also universal in outreach. Its missionaries preached to all manner of Gentiles without restriction, just like the missionaries of the Law-free gospel. When these people encountered Law-free Gentile Christians, they sought to impose the Torah upon them but this happened more through chance than design.⁴¹ Martyn more states his thesis than defends it, though he does suggest that the two covenants of Hagar and Sarah in Gal. 4:21-5:1 represent the Law-free and the Law-observant Gentile missions.⁴² But even if this interpretation is accepted, it still does not mention or even hint at a broader Law-observant mission to the whole Gentile world. Further, Martyn does not

³⁹ Elmer, *Paul*, 214-17. Cf. too Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 113.

⁴⁰ So correctly Baur, *Paul*, I, 252.

⁴¹ Martyn, 'Law-Observant Mission', 8-9.

⁴² Martyn, *Galatians*, 431-57.

spell out how or when this mission began or how it was related to the primary Jewish mission conducted by the Jerusalem church.

The Competing Missions, the Historical Jesus and the Risen Christ

It is inevitable that any study of the competing missions in the early Christian movement must ultimately face the issue of their origins. Do any of these missions have their origin in the teaching or practice of the historical Jesus? Can any of them be traced back to the demands of the risen Christ? The results of such an enquiry are extremely interesting and thought-provoking.

I shall begin with the mission to the Jews since that is the easier of the two to answer. Where did the Law-free gospel of the Hellenists originate? While some have argued that the Hellenists built upon the historical Jesus' own critique of the Torah,⁴³ this is rather difficult to believe. The Hellenists were not followers of the historical Jesus, but converts to his movement after his death and resurrection. Anything they knew about Jesus must have been communicated to them by those who did know Jesus intimately, the Hebrews in general and the disciples in particular. Yet the Hebrews remained faithful to the Law. It is of course possible that the Hebrews misunderstood Jesus on this fundamental issue, but how then could they have taught the Hellenists that Jesus had adopted an anti-Torah posture? A much more likely proposition is that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom involved obedience to the Mosaic Law, though, like other teachers and movements of the time, Jesus had probably devised his own interpretation of the Torah. On this scenario the disciples and other followers simply adopted the practice of Jesus, and it was the Hellenists who introduced such a radical innovation to the

⁴³ So Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 22-24; and Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, I, 662-63.

Christian movement.⁴⁴ In support of this, we can appeal to Paul who, in his many arguments against the necessity of Law-observance, never once cites the teaching or the example of the historical Jesus. On the contrary, his description of Jesus as one born under the Law in Gal. 4:4 suggests that Paul was well aware that Jesus fully observed the Torah.⁴⁵

But even if it is conceded that the Hellenists did not adopt their Law-critical view from the practice of the historical Jesus, might they have learnt it from a revelation of the risen Christ? This is possible, but there is no evidence for it. Acts certainly gives no indication of this in its early chapters, where it details the appearance of Jesus and a subsequent revelation at Pentecost (1:3-8; 2:1-36) but fails to mention the need to abandon the Torah. Even in the schema of Acts, the Hebrews continue to obey the Torah, and it is not until chapter 10 that Peter receives a personal revelation that there are no longer unclean foods.⁴⁶ While it might be the case that the Hellenists received a private revelation as well, there is nothing in our sources to confirm it.

Given the lack of detail in our sources, it is not possible to determine with any certainty why the Hellenists came to the realisation that faith in Jesus as the messiah necessitated an abandonment of the Law. In the light of this, my sympathies in terms of the nature and terms of the Jewish mission lie with the Hebrews who at least remained faithful to the practice of the historical Jesus.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 69-70; Elmer, *Paul*, 64-65; and Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and the Torah*, 164-65, 189-90.

⁴⁵ J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1993) 216.

⁴⁶ The historicity of the visions of Peter and the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18 are doubtful. See E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 357-83, and more recently Elmer, *Paul*, 67-70. The major problem here is that this information in Acts cannot be reconciled with Paul's testimony that Peter was entrusted with the Gentile mission alone (Gal. 2:7).

⁴⁷ Elmer, *Paul*, 154 makes a similar point.

Having made this point, we may move on to the competing Gentile missions. Did either of these have their origin in the historical mission of Jesus? Some scholars have argued that Jesus did conduct a mission of sorts to the Gentiles,⁴⁸ but this is unlikely for a number of reasons. First, in the Galatian passage cited above, Paul claims not just that Jesus was born under the Law but that his mission was to redeem those under the Law (Gal. 4:5). This suggests that his historical activity was restricted to the Jews. Moreover, when defending his own apostleship and mission, Paul does not maintain that he is modeling himself on the prior example of Jesus; on the contrary, he states that he was charged with initiating and overseeing the Gentile mission by the risen Christ (cf. Gal. 1:12; 16-17). Second, the original Jerusalem church did not in its initial phase conduct a Gentile mission.⁴⁹ Acts specifies that its members preached only to Jews and proselytes (2:5, 10, 22, 3:12-13), and this is confirmed by Paul's witness that the Jerusalem authorities had traditionally been involved only in the Jewish mission (Gal. 2:7-9).⁵⁰ Historically, their involvement in the Gentile mission began when emissaries were sent to Antioch demanding that Gentiles obey the Torah, the episode that resulted in the apostolic council (Acts 15:1). So we have the same problem as that in relation to the Torah mentioned above. If Jesus was involved in a Gentile mission but was misunderstood on this point by the members of the Jerusalem church, then how could the latter have communicated his true position to the Hellenists?⁵¹

⁴⁸ See the recent studies of Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, I, 327-86, and M. F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* (LNTS 331; London: T & T Clark International, 2007) 26-177.

⁴⁹ Sim, 'How Many Jews?', 426-29.

⁵⁰ Of course the Great Commission in Matt. 28:16-20 states that the disciples were commissioned by the risen Christ to evangelise 'all the nations', but this late witness conflicts with the evidence of Acts and Paul.

⁵¹ See the more detailed statement of this argument in D. C. Sim, 'Matthew and Jesus of Nazareth', in D. C. Sim and B. Repschinski (eds), *Matthew and His Christian Contemporaries* (LNTS 333; London: T & T Clark International, 2008) 155-72 (167-71).

Other scholars accept the much more plausible proposition that Jesus conducted no active mission to the Gentiles. According to one version of this position, the Gentiles simply did not figure in any meaningful respect in the actions or the teachings of Jesus.⁵² Another and more popular version is that Jesus may have spoken about the ultimate salvation of the Gentiles but was not specific as to how this would be achieved.⁵³ On either view, it is clear that neither of the later Christian Gentile missions can be traced back either to the practice or the commandment of the historical Jesus.

This leaves us with the possibility that it was the risen Christ who initiated the mission to the Gentiles. Needless to say, Paul states categorically, as noted above, that he was commissioned by the risen Lord to initiate and oversee the Law-free Gentile mission. Most modern scholars of course simply take Paul at his word here, and accept without question the reality of his revelation and his commission, but it is arguable whether the situation was as straightforward as this. First of all, the source behind Acts 11:19-21 recounts a very different origin of the Law-free Gentile mission. This text specifies that it was the Hellenists in Antioch who first approached the Gentile population. If this information is correct, then the Law-free Gentile mission developed as a result of the failure of the Law-free Jewish mission with no supernatural intervention from the risen Christ. On this scenario Paul then encountered this mission for the first time when he traveled to Antioch after his visit to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:21).

Secondly, it is clear from Paul's constant defence of his Law-free gospel and his apostolic status that many in the early Christian movement did not believe his claim that the risen Christ had commissioned his Law-free mission to the Gentiles. It is very

⁵² E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985) 212-21.

⁵³ The most prominent proponent of this thesis is J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958). For a more recent statement of this view, see J. D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making. Vol. 1: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 537-59.

significant that Paul seems not to have been included in the official list of resurrection witnesses compiled by the Jerusalem church, which Paul recounts in 1 Cor. 15:5-7. This list begins with Peter and ends with all the apostles. Paul is forced to tack on his own encounter with the risen Christ in v. 8. Moreover, the fact that the traditional list states that Jesus appeared to all the apostles effectively closes this office and excludes later claimants, including Paul. Paul was aware of this and tries to explain his omission on the grounds that he is the least of the apostles and unfit to be called an apostle because of his prior persecution of the Church (v. 9).⁵⁴ Paul's omission from this list is perfectly consistent with the questions marks over Paul's apostleship by those who infiltrated the churches in Galatia and Corinth.

In my view the suspicion of the Jerusalem church towards Paul's claims is perfectly understandable. The three Pillars of that church, the disciples Peter and John and James the brother of Jesus, were themselves recipients of visitations of the resurrected Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 15:5-7). Yet Jesus had not commissioned them to embark on a Gentile mission, nor had he communicated to them that he had commissioned Paul to do so armed with the Law-free gospel. We know this from Paul's own witness about the apostolic council, where he states that he laid before the Pillars the gospel he preached to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:2) and that he had to convince them that he had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised (Gal. 2:7). The strong implication here is that the Jerusalem apostles were largely ignorant of the details of the Law-free gospel and Paul's authority to conduct the Gentile mission. It might be objected that Paul would have informed Peter and James of these issues on his visit to Jerusalem three years after his

⁵⁴ So correctly Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 72-73.

conversion (Gal. 1:18-19)⁵⁵ but, if that was the case, why was it necessary for him to spell it out again at the apostolic council? It is more likely that, whatever was revealed to Paul at the time of his conversion, it was not until he reached Antioch that he was exposed to the Gentile mission and he began to formulate in earnest his Law-free gospel. The conclusion to draw from the Jerusalem church's prior lack of knowledge of Paul's mission is as inescapable as it is potentially embarrassing. The risen Christ imparted one message to Peter, James, John and others in the Jerusalem church, and an entirely different message to Paul.⁵⁶ It might even be said that the two revelations were not just different but inconsistent, at least from the perspective of the Pillars, because they took active steps to counter the Pauline mission.

The origin of the Gentile mission therefore remains shrouded in mystery. It did not begin with the historical Jesus, and it did not begin with the Jerusalem church. It probably began with the Hellenists in Antioch as a result of the failed Jewish mission there, but Paul himself provides an alternative account that the risen Christ commissioned him to commence and to supervise that particular mission. While it is impossible now to test the truth or otherwise of Paul's claim, what is clear is that the leaders of the Jerusalem church, all of whom had visitations themselves from the risen Jesus, did not receive the same information and were thus not necessarily convinced by Paul's testimony.

⁵⁵ So, for example, Martyn, *Galatians*, 172.

⁵⁶ D. C. Sim, 'The Appearances of the Risen Christ to Paul: Identifying Their Implications and Complications', *ABR* 54 (2006) 1-12 (7-9). This fairly obvious point has been all but ignored in scholarship. One exception is T. L. Donaldson, who concedes that Paul and James understood the revelations of the risen Christ quite differently. See his 'Israelite, Convert, Apostle to the Gentiles: The Origin of Paul's Gentile Mission', in R. N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 62-84 (62-63).

Conclusions

The hypothesis presented in this paper has its origins in the seminal work of Ferdinand Christian Baur, which continues to influence modern scholarship. It was argued that the history of the Christian movement in at least the first three decades was dominated by different factional groups and competing missions. The first of these competing missions concerned only the Jews. The Aramaic-speaking wing of the Jerusalem community continued the practice of Jesus by proclaiming the message about Christ within a Law-observant context. This mission can be contrasted with the mission of the Hellenists, early converts who soon formed their own community and who engaged in their own missionary activity in the Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem. For some reason that can no longer be identified, these Christians proclaimed a message about Jesus that involved a radical critique of the Torah and the temple. The Hellenists were driven from Jerusalem and settled in the cities of the Diaspora, and it was in Antioch that the failed mission to the Jews was replaced by the much more successful mission to the Gentiles. At this point the competition for Jewish converts came to an end.

However, the two major factions in the Christian movement were soon again in active competition but this time over Gentile converts. James sent agents to Antioch to bring the Law-free Gentile mission under his direct authority and control, and was eventually successful after the public showdown between Peter and Paul. The latter left Antioch and independently established churches of his own around the Aegean basin. Continuing his policy that had been successful at Antioch, James sent further emissaries to these Pauline churches with the message that Gentile Christians were expected to proselytise and observe the Torah as a necessary component of their allegiance to Jesus.

An important strategy in this regard was their critique of Paul's apostleship. This Law-observant Gentile mission was therefore much more limited in scope than its Hellenist and Pauline counterpart. It was directed not at the whole Gentile world but only at those Gentiles who had already made a prior commitment to Christ.

Of all four missions, only the Law-observant mission to the Jews can be said to have had its origin in the teaching and example of the historical Jesus. The alternative Law-free Jewish mission of the Hellenists had no basis in the practice of the historical Jesus, and there is no evidence that it was revealed to the Hellenists by the risen Lord. The Law-observant mission to the Gentiles also had nothing to do with either the historical or risen Jesus. It was adopted merely as a countermeasure once the Law-free Gentile mission experienced great success. The origin of the Law-free Gentile mission is less certain. It clearly did not begin with the historical Jesus, and it is not especially clear that it can be traced back to the risen Christ. Paul is adamant that this was revealed to him at the time of his conversion, but there is good evidence that Paul was first exposed to this mission when he went to Antioch. Furthermore, there is no confirmation of Paul's claims by others who also experienced the risen one. The Jerusalem church did not include Paul in its official list of resurrection witnesses, and its emissaries in Paul's churches questioned his apostolic credentials. It is most likely that the Gentile mission originated with the Hellenists in Antioch, not as the result of a divine revelation but as a new missionary initiative occasioned by the failure of their mission to the Jews. These conclusions have serious theological implications in terms of the missiological activity of the early Church and even for the Church today, but these issues cannot be dealt with here.

