

CHAPTER TWO

FALLACIES IN SCHOLARLY CONSENSUS

It is usual today to connect the Johannine references to the exclusion from the synagogue with the emergence of rabbinic Judaism after 70 C.E. According to a rabbinic legend, Johanan ben Zakkai managed to escape from the besieged Jerusalem during the first revolt and founded a new rabbinic school in Yavneh (in Greek Ἰαμνία).¹ In previous studies of rabbinic Judaism, this act was often taken as the establishment of a new authoritative body that replaced the priestly leadership which had governed the Jewish people before the destruction of the temple.² The new patriarchate and the rabbinic Sanhedrin in Yavneh were understood as leading forces in Jewish society, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. The early rabbis were seen as the new spiritual leaders who exercised strict halakhic control over other Jews and guarded the unity of the people by dispelling deviant groups from the community.

Many Johannine scholars have become aware of some problems with the earlier view of rabbinic Judaism, but their views on the opponents of the Johannine community are still largely dependent on it.³ Descriptions of the rabbinic movement are not an insignificant

¹ For the critical assessment of various versions of this story, see Schäfer 1979, 43–101.

² For the previous political-historical study of rabbinic Judaism, see Hezser 1997, 1–9. Hezser shows that Heinrich Graetz created in his *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig, 1863–1876) a paradigmatic history of such major institutions of Jewish self-government as the patriarchate and the sanhedrin. Graetz's model has been repeated with minor changes ever since in various studies.

³ Cf. Martyn 1979, 52 n. 67 and 53 n. 68. These two notes contain discussion that is not found in the first edition of Martyn's book; this discussion shows that Martyn is aware, to a degree, of the criticism leveled against the traditional view of rabbinic Judaism. In spite of this, Martyn still refuses to make any essential change to the view he originally presented. He says that "the idealization [in rabbinic sources] does not materially affect the data" that "would seem reliably to indicate a remarkable growth of Jamnian authority precisely under Gamaliel II." Martyn refers here, for example, to an early work of Jacob Neusner (Neusner 1962, 125). In this work, Neusner's conclusions were much closer to the traditional views of the emergence of rabbinic Judaism than the views he has presented in his later works. Also Klaus Wengst has some hesitations concerning the influence and the authority

detail in the recent consensus but an elementary part of it. The early rabbinic movement has provided a convenient foil for Johannine scholars so that they have been able to describe the Johannine community as a Jewish minority group oppressed by the powerful and hostile majority headed by zealous guardians of the national identity of the Jews. The Yavnean rabbis, especially R. Gamaliel II, have been interpreted as the main instigators of those acts which made the life of the Johannine Christians hard and that eventually led to their traumatic exclusion from the synagogue community and even to the death of some members of the community.⁴ In the following analysis, I claim that the problems that many scholars have noticed in the traditional picture of the rabbinic movement should be taken more seriously in the reconstruction of the situation of the Johannine community.

Johannine scholars often describe the formation of the rabbinic movement as the emergence of a kind of orthodoxy that could not accept those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah and so expelled them.⁵ The circumstances after the destruction of the temple are said to form the background for the situation described in John. In these formative years, early rabbis helped the Jewish people through an identity crisis which was caused by the destruction of the temple and the cessation of its cult. The need for a new self-definition turned out to be disastrous for the Johannine group.⁶ A new Jewish identity was founded on the idea of the cultic purity of the people and

of early rabbis, but these hesitations have not affected his view of the rabbinic movement in any significant way. Wengst 1992, 98. In his recent commentary (Wengst I. 21–26), Wengst still repeats his early view.

⁴ Schnackenburg I 146–148; Martyn 1979, 52 and *passim*; Pancaro 1975, 245–254; Barrett 1975, 45–50, 68–69; Brown 1979, 22 and 66; Townsend 1979, 84–88; Manns 1988, *passim*; Rensberger 1989, 25–26; D. M. Smith 1990b, 83; Ashton 1991, 157–158; Becker 56–58; Lindars 1992, 132–134; Wengst 1992, 71 and *passim*; Dunn 1991, 158 and 1992, 199–200; J. T. Sanders 1993, 40, 58–67; Painter 1993, 30 and 77; Moloney 1993, 15–16 and 1996, 136; Casey 1996, 98–110; De Boer 1996a, 56; Magrath 2001, 42.

⁵ Painter 1993, 30.

⁶ Painter 1993, 77. Cf. also Kysar 1993, 121. To be sure, Kysar does not mention explicitly that he is talking about emerging rabbinic Judaism here. Kysar notes (p. 120 n. 18) that "Martyn's earlier contention that the expulsion should be related to the 'Twelfth Benediction' (the *birkat ha-minim*) and the conference of rabbis at Jamnia was countered vigorously and effectively by historical investigations." However, the way Kysar describes a synagogue community that expelled Johannine Christians corresponds to the picture of the Yavnean rabbis as the architects of a new Jewish identity.

the strict observance of the law.⁷ Early rabbinic leaders who affirmed this identity are characterized as vehement defenders of the law who, after gaining power, coerced the people to follow their form of Jewish religion.⁸ In doing so, they did not hesitate to take steps that were aimed against such dissident groups as the Johannine community.⁹ Scholars are quite explicit that it was the confession of Jesus as the Messiah and not some other reason that provoked the hostility of the new Jewish establishment and the exclusion of believers; this is also what the narrator says in John 9:22.¹⁰ Scholars also often understand the words in John 9:22, "For the Jews *had already agreed* (συνετέθειντο) that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue", as an indication of a formal and conscious policy taken up by the early leaders of rabbinic Judaism against the Johannine community.¹¹

According to many scholars, the exclusion from the synagogue was not a separate act but reflects the hostile atmosphere surrounding the Johannine Christians. Scholars may speak of "the anger of the Jewish establishment,"¹² or describe the rabbinic leaders in John's environment as "implacably hostile" and "determined that Christianity should not gain a sizable following" in their locale.¹³ Many scholars think that the consequences of this hatred for those who believed in Jesus were not restricted to the religious sphere of life. Scholars repeatedly refer to the same rabbinic texts that they take as a direct reflection of the social circumstances of the Johannine community. The story of R. Eliezer's arrest for heresy in *t. Hul.* 2:24 is cited as evidence that it was even forbidden to listen to the words spoken by a Christian in John's environment.¹⁴ Commercial interaction with heretics is prohibited in *t. Hul.* 2:20–21, and this text is used to show how severe were the social and also economic consequences the exclusion from the synagogue had for John's group.¹⁵ The situation

⁷ Lindars 1992, 132.

⁸ D. M. Smith 1990, 83; Ashton 1991, 158.

⁹ Rensberger 1989, 25.

¹⁰ Martyn 1977, 158; Lindars 1992, 133; Wengst 1992, 77; Painter 1993, 72; Moloney 1994, 15–16; Rensberger 1999, 130.

¹¹ Martyn 1979, 38; Lindars 1992, 133; Horbury 1998, 100.

¹² Ashton 1991, 140.

¹³ Rensberger 1989, 43.

¹⁴ Barrett 1975, 69; Martyn 1979, 90. In this connection Martyn also refers to Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho (38.1).

¹⁵ Wengst 1992, 101–102. Wengst is followed by Rensberger 1989, 26–27. Cf.

is seen as threatening not only for those who openly confessed Jesus as the Messiah but also for those who were connected to them (cf. John 9:18–23).¹⁶

Numerous scholars also claim that the Jewish persecution of the Johannine Christians did not stop after they were excluded from their Jewish community. The excommunication did not prevent some synagogue members from converting to the new faith, and therefore some of those who were proselytizing among their fellow Jews were arrested and executed by the Jewish authorities.¹⁷ Thus Jesus' words in John 16:2, "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God," are taken as a reflection of the mortal danger which the Johannine believers faced.¹⁸

Leaning on recent studies of the emergence and nature of rabbinic Judaism, I call into the question the idea that the Fourth Gospel reflects a conflict between the Johannine community and the emerging rabbinic Judaism. I have deliberately delayed the discussion about the alleged connection between John and the *birkat ha-minim*, the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions, in order to emphasize that it is not only this question that is problematic in recent reconstructions of John's historical context. It is the whole above-sketched picture that needs to be reconceived. Many Johannine scholars have admitted that the *birkat ha-minim* may not have any connection to John, but they still argue that other elements in the portrayal are correct. It should be noted, however, that if the connection between the *birkat ha-minim* and the Fourth Gospel is denied, the Fourth Gospel remains the only source that suggests that those who confessed Jesus as the Messiah were expelled from the synagogue by the official decree. It is thus proper to begin the assessment of current scholarly consensus by demonstrating why the *birkat ha-minim* should not be linked with John.

also J. T. Sanders 1993, 63 and 67. Sanders says that the stories in *t. Hul.* 2:20–24 "make sense only against a background in which Christians lived among other Jews in something of a pariah status."

¹⁶ Wengst 1992, 123; Rensberger 1989, 48; Cf. also Becker 57.

¹⁷ Martyn 1979, 66, 81; Painter 1993, 425–426; De Boer 1996a, 58–63.

¹⁸ Rensberger 1989, 79 and 128; Lindars 1992, 148; Wengst 1992, 85; Zumstein 2001, 470–471.

2.1. *The birkat ha-minim and Other Suggested Parallels to John*

According to *b. Ber.* 28b–29, Samuel the Small composed one of the Eighteen Benedictions (*'amidah*) in Yavneh at the request of R. Gamaliel II; this benediction (the *birkat ha-minim*) is often quoted as evidence for the anti-Christian steps taken by the Yavnean rabbis.¹⁹ In the same talmudic passage, it is also stated that Samuel the Small forgot the wording of the benediction in the following year; it is stated that other rabbis did not remove him from his post as a reader of the prayer because he had composed the prayer and was thus not suspected of *minuth*. This was an exception to the rule cited as a saying of Rab Judah in the name of Rab: "If a reader made a mistake in any other benedictions, they do not remove him, but if in the benediction of the *Minim*, he is removed, because we suspect him of being a *Min*" (cf. also *y. Ber.* 5:3). This text is taken to show that the original purpose for the addition of the *birkat ha-minim* to the *'amidah* was the detection of those members of the congregation who had heretic beliefs. The reading of the daily prayer in the synagogue is understood as a test for those suspected of being *minim* because it is unlikely that they would have said a prayer in which their destruction was wished for. If a male member of the community faltered when reciting the prayer, the rabbis removed him from the readership and finally excluded him from the synagogue fellowship.²⁰

The actual text of the *birkat ha-minim* is not found in rabbinic literature, but the text found in the Cairo Genizah comprises a version that is often regarded as the earliest extant version of the benediction.²¹

¹⁹ Cf. Ashton 1991, 11. Ashton refers to M. von Aberle who in 1861 already connected the *birkat ha-minim* to the Johannine situation. For later scholarship, see Horbury 1998, 67–71.

²⁰ Cf. Martyn 1979, 59–62. Cf. also Alexander 1992, 10. Alexander discusses how the benediction could have served as an instrument of new rabbinic orthodoxy. His discussion is much more nuanced than that of Martyn, but in light of the following arguments, it is unlikely whether the *birkat ha-minim* has ever had a great role in establishing orthodoxy among the Jews. The whole question of 'rabbinic orthodoxy' should be reconsidered, at least in the case of the first centuries C.E.

²¹ A medieval fragment containing the *birkat ha-minim* was published by S. Schechter in 1898. For different versions of the benediction, see Schäfer 1975, 57–59. The following translation is taken from Kimelman 1981, 226.

For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the *nošrim* and the *minim* be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.

During the recent decades there has been an intense discussion about the original wording and function of the benediction.²² It is not certain that the original wording of the *birkat ha-minim* is that found in the Cairo Genizah fragment. It is almost certain that the term *nošrim*, which may refer to Christians or Jewish Christians in certain rabbinic passages, did not belong to the earliest versions of the prayer.²³ In those versions of the prayer where the term *nošrim* appears, it always precedes *minim*. In spite of this, the benediction is always referred to in rabbinic literature as the *birkat ha-minim*, not as the *birkat ha-nošrim*, which speaks against the wide use of *nošrim* in the oldest versions of the prayer. Furthermore, the term *nošrim* does not appear in the early rabbinic sources but only in the Babylonian Talmud.²⁴ It is likely that it was introduced to the twelfth benediction at a later stage, even though it may be impossible to say when.²⁵ Thus the discussion whether *nošrim* refers to some specific Jewish-Christian groups or to Christians in general is irrelevant as we try to assess the alleged significance of the benediction for Jewish-Christian relations at the end of the first century C.E.²⁶ It is more important

²² See Schäfer 1975, 55–61; Sternberger 1977, 16–19; Kimelman 1981, 226–244; Finkel 1981, 231–246; Maier 1982, 136–141; Katz 1984, 63–76; Van der Horst 1994, 363–368; Setzer 1994, 87–91; Wilson 1995, 179–183.

²³ For detailed arguments, see Kimelman 1981, 233–234; Finkel 1981, 236–238; Katz 1984, 65–69.

²⁴ Cf. Maier 1978, 64, 110, 234–235, 270 and 1982, 158–168; Kimelman 1981, 233–234; Pritz 1988, 95; Zalcman 1991, 411.

²⁵ Cf. Urbach 1981, 288. Urbach says that Christians were included among the *minim* in the twelfth benediction after the Bar Cochba revolt, and to emphasize their inclusion, the *nošrim* were mentioned explicitly. However, a later date for the inclusion of this term may be more likely. See, for example, Van der Horst 1984, 368. Van der Horst suggests, on the basis of Jerome's references to Nazarenes, that, "probably not long before Jerome's time, *notšrim*, in the sense of Christians in general, was added to the twelfth benediction."

²⁶ Pace De Boer 1996b, 199 and 1998, 251. De Boer notes that the *nošrim* were mentioned only by the Church Fathers who knew Palestine well, where the *nošrim* presented a threat to rabbinic authority and orthodoxy. From this de Boer concludes that "the benediction as reformulated by the rabbis in Jamnia, a town in Palestine, may well have referred to *Notšrim* from the start" (1998, 251). However, this conclusion is not supported by Talmudic tradition in which the word *nošrim*

to find out the meaning of the term *minim* that appears more frequently in rabbinic literature.

In some rabbinic texts, the *minim* seem to be Jewish Christians or Christians in general (e.g. *t. Hul.* 2:24). From these kinds of texts, it has sometimes been concluded that in those texts where it is not self-evident who the *minim* are the term must refer to Christians.²⁷ But in many passages the *minim* are neither Christians in general nor Jewish Christians. Some texts attribute clearly non-Christian beliefs to the *minim*; it is said, for example, that the *minim* deny the resurrection of the dead (*b. Sanh.* 90b), believe only in one world (*m. Ber.* 9:5) or worship idols (*t. Hul.* 1,1). Hence the term does not refer exclusively to Christians of any kind or to any other specific heretical group. Rather, the term covers different types of heretics.²⁸

It seems that the rabbis were not interested in defining exactly who the *minim* are. Nor did they give any definite list of those beliefs or practices which make a person a *min*. As Richard Kalmin says, rabbinic sources "give us rough stereotypes and sketches drawn in extremely broad strokes rather than finely nuanced portraits or scientifically precise descriptions."²⁹ Occasionally actions attributed to a *min* in one text appear in another text as actions of an anonymous person who is not called *min*.³⁰ In some texts, the dialogue

appears only in the Babylonian sources but not in the Palestinian ones. Furthermore, de Boer's use of certain rabbinic passages as evidence for the early use of the word is not convincing. A passage in *b. Ta'an.* 27b says that certain temple officials did not fast on Sunday "because of the Nazarenes." But it is highly uncertain whether this saying, attributed to R. Yohanan (third century C.E.), really reflects pre-70 conditions, as de Boer claims. For the problems with this view, see Maier 1982, 164-168. It is noteworthy that there is no reference to *nosrim* in *m. Ta'an.* 4:3, even though the fast on the first day of the week is mentioned; the reason given for fasting on this day is practical: "They did not fast . . . on Sunday, so as not to go forth from resting and enjoyment to travail and fasting, and so perish" (Neusner's translation). It is not very likely that a Jewish-Christian sect could have had so great an influence in the pre-70 Jewish society that the official practice in the temple would have been adapted according to their beliefs. Furthermore, we do not have any evidence that Sunday replaced the Sabbath as the day of rest and worship among early Jewish Christians in Palestine. For a detailed discussion, see Turner 1982, 124-137. Therefore, if *b. Ta'an.* 27b and some other passages (e.g. *b. Abod. Zar.* 6a) refer to Christians or Jewish Christians at all, they must stem from a later period when Christianity was a notable factor in the society where these passages were formulated. Thus Herford 1903, 172; Kimelman 1981, 241-243.

²⁷ Herford 1903, 365-381.

²⁸ Thus Finkel 1981, 238-239; Maier 1982, 137; Katz 1984, 72-73; Miller 1993, 401 and 1999, 151; S. Stern 1994, 110-11; Hayes 1998, 260 n. 29.

²⁹ Kalmin 1994, 169 and 1999, 72. Cf. also Miller 1993, 401.

³⁰ See Miller 1993, 396-397.

between the rabbis and the *minim* may reflect discussions within rabbinic Judaism where unacceptable beliefs are externalized and disowned by attributing them to the *minim*.³¹ Moreover, those texts that show that actual contacts took place between the rabbis and the *minim* tell mostly of an individual *min* and an individual rabbi, not well-organized rabbinic reaction to clearly defined heretical groups.³²

It is thus clear that the way the rabbis dealt with the *minim* is different from the way the Christian Church Fathers dealt with the groups they considered heretical.³³ While the conflict with different heresies was crucial for the self-definition of the early church, the descriptions of the *minim* in rabbinic literature are far too miscellaneous and unsystematic to have given them a great role in rabbinic self-definition.³⁴ The stories about the *minim* do not suggest in any way that the rabbis had a large-scale program to purify the people from deviant beliefs and groups who held those beliefs.³⁵

The possibility remains, however, that some Jewish Christians were included among the *minim* in the prayer. The question whether Jewish Christians were among those denounced in the prayer at the end of the first century cannot be solved only by analyzing the use of the term in the rabbinic writings. Some Church Fathers refer to the custom of the Jews of cursing Christians in their synagogues, which could lend support to the view that, from the second century C.E. on, some Christians may have been included by the prayer.³⁶ But even this view is not without problems.³⁷ The question of how promi-

³¹ This is suggested in the case of *b. Sanh.* 90b-91a by Hayes 1998, 274.

³² Cf. Miller 1993, 400; 1999, 151.

³³ Cohen 1980, 3; Goodman 1996, 507.

³⁴ Cf. Goodman 1983, 105 and 1996, 506 n. 23.

³⁵ Goodman 1996, 508. For a different view, see Alexander 1992, 8-9. Alexander compares other pejorative terms found in the different versions of the *birkat ha-minim* to *minim* and concludes: "These terms are general and uncontentious in a way that *minim* is not. . . . The term marks a significant attempt to draw a distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. . . . In condemning the *minim* the Rabbis were in effect condemning all who were not of their party: they were setting themselves up as the custodians of orthodoxy."

³⁶ Justin *Dial.* 137; Epiphanius *Pan.* 29.9.2; Jerome *Epist.* 112.13; *Comm. Isa.* 5.18; 49.7; 52.5.

³⁷ See Thornton 1987, 419-431. According to Thornton, there is no indication that the imperial authorities regarded Jews as regularly cursing Christians in their synagogues in the 4th and 5th centuries. Thornton also emphasizes how sparse and dubious the references of the Church Fathers are. Furthermore, it is difficult to connect the alleged malediction on Christians in the *birkat ha-minim* to the complaints of some Church Fathers about the attendance of Christians at the synagogue. For

nent Jewish Christians were among those denounced in the *birkat ha-minim* in the Yavnean era must be assessed in the light of what can be said of the relevance of Jewish Christians and their beliefs to formative Judaism.³⁸

It is sometimes understood that formative Judaism defined itself in relation to early Christianity just like Christianity defined itself in relation to Judaism, its mother religion. It is claimed that emerging Christianity posed a threat that compelled early rabbis to define the boundaries of Judaism, a procedure that is reflected, for example, in the *birkat ha-minim*.³⁹ This view, however, is not supported by early rabbinic literature.⁴⁰ We should not retroject later historical circumstances when Christianity became a major political and religious

these complaints, see Kimelman 1981, 239–240. How could the synagogue attract many Christians if they were cursed during worship? And how could the Jews welcome Christians in their synagogues and at the same time denounce them? For an answer to these questions, see Horbury 1998, 101–102. According to him, the malediction was one of those measures that formed “the precondition under which Christian visits to synagogue . . . could be tolerated or even encouraged by the Jewish authorities.” Furthermore, “the condemnation of Christianity in the Prayer would attest to Jews and gentile sympathizers the exclusive rights of Judaism in the biblical inheritance, and knowledge of the attitude which this practice expressed might shake the visitor’s confidence in the Christian surrogate.” As Wilson (1995, 366 n. 47) notes, “this somewhat contorted logic might make some sense from the Jewish point of view, but none at all from the Christian point of view.”

³⁸ Scholars assess differently how high Jewish Christians were on the agenda of the Yavnean rabbis. Kimelman (1981, 232) says that the *birkat ha-minim* “was aimed at Jewish sectarians among whom Jewish Christians figured prominently.” Other scholars do not give such a great role to Jewish Christians. Schäfer 1975, 60: “Mit Sicherheit richtete sich die *birkat ha-minim* jedenfalls nicht ausschliesslich gegen Judenchristen bzw. (später) Christen und war deswegen auch kein ‘Mittel zur völligen Scheidung der beiden Religionen.’ Eine solche Festlegung . . . überschätzt die Bedeutung der christlichen Religion für das Judentum Palästinas um die Wende des 1. zum 2. nachchristlichen Jahrhundert.” Sternberger 1977, 17: “Daß die Formulierung der *birkat ha-minim* durch Schmuël den Kleinen sich primär gegen die Christen gerichtet hat, ist aus historischen Gründen unwahrscheinlich. Die (Juden-)Christen dürften im Einflußbereich Jabne kaum so bedeutend gewesen sein, daß sich die jüdischen Gelehrten speziell damit befassen mußten.” Maier 1982, 141: “Es ist möglich daß die rabbinen auch Judenchristen zu den Minim rechneten, doch weisen die meisten *minim*-Stellen darauf hin, daß nichtchristliche Personen gemeint waren.” Katz 1984, 74: “It was directed against all Jews who after 70 were not in the Pharisaic/rabbinic camp, *not only against Jewish Christians*” (italics original).

³⁹ Barrett 1975, 68–69.

⁴⁰ For the critical study of rabbinic material allegedly referring to Jesus or to Christians, see Maier 1978 and 1982. Maier concludes that there is no tannaitic Jesus-passage in the rabbinic corpus (1978, 268). The passages referring unambiguously to Christians are few (1982, 206–208). Although Maier may push his arguments too far in some cases (cf. Goldenberg 1982), his conclusions are a sound warning against overstating the relevance of early Christianity for rabbinic self-understanding.

factor back to the earliest rabbinic literature that is surprisingly silent about Christians and their beliefs.⁴¹ Christian views may have shaped some rabbinic discussions from the fourth century onwards, but we have no clear references to Christians in the Mishnah, and there are only scattered references in other works that were edited before the fourth century.⁴² This should make us cautious about thinking that Jewish Christians were high on the agenda of early rabbis.

The vague use of the term *minim* in the rabbinic sources makes it unlikely that the prayer could have functioned as a test that revealed those who were *minim*. If a male who was appointed to lead the prayer did not consider himself a *min* in advance, he would not have seen himself included in this general and unspecific category and would not have had any problems in reading the prayer. The *birkat ha-minim* could function as a test only if it used definite terms but this was not the case.⁴³ If, however, it was clear and open who were considered heretics, there would not have been any need for a bizarre probation in front of the community. Why would the Yavnean rabbis, who are described as powerful and resolute leaders of the people, have used such circuitous means for reaching their goals?

Furthermore, even if we took at face value the rabbinic story that tells of the function of the prayer, the prayer does not carry the sense of excommunication. The rabbinic passage cited above (*b. Ber.* 28b–29a) says only that the one who faltered while praying was removed from his post as a reader of the prayer, not from the synagogue or the community. Moreover, this step concerned only the male in question, but it seems that women, slaves and children who believed in Jesus would never have been in danger because they were not asked to

⁴¹ See Katz 1984, 47; Wilson 1995, 170. Cf. also Kimelman 1999, 302: "Christian literature is so full of references to Jews and Judaism that the phrase *obsessed with* may be in order. In contrast, the data on Christianity in rabbinic literature is comparably sparse" (*italics original*).

⁴² Cf. Neusner 1987b, 4–7.

⁴³ Thus Kimelman 1981, 227; Katz 1984, 74–75; Setzer, 1994, 90. For a different view, see Alexander 1992, 9–10. Alexander thinks that the above argument has "some force," but he still says that "anyone opposed to the rabbis would have felt threatened" by the benediction. But this view overestimates the authority of the rabbis over non-rabbinic Jews. To be sure, Alexander seems to be aware of the limitations of the authority and the influence of the rabbis, but this does not prevent him from presenting them as the guardians of new orthodoxy. He admits that "the rabbinic orthodoxy" was not established before the third century (p. 3). De Boer (1998, 251) does not take seriously Alexander's hesitations concerning the establishment of rabbinic authority in his discussion of the matter.

lead the daily *'amidah*.⁴⁴ Thus it is clear that the *birkat ha-minim* could never have functioned as an effective tool for excommunicating a group of believers from the synagogue.⁴⁵

The dating of rabbinic legends and practices should make us cautious about connecting the *birkat ha-minim* to the first century situation. Even though it has become more and more evident that the attributions of sayings in the rabbinic sources to different rabbis are often suspect historically, most scholars have accepted the stories about Samuel the Small in *b. Ber.* 28b-29a and in *y. Ber.* 5:3 as a historical account of the original purpose of the benediction. But we cannot simply be sure of the accuracy of these stories.⁴⁶ In this case, we must be particularly cautious with historical conclusions because the ruling "if a reader made a mistake in any other benedictions, they do not remove him, but if in the benediction of the *Minim*, he is removed, because we suspect him of being a *Min*" is not directly connected to the Yavnean era but is cited in *b. Ber.* 28b-29a as a saying of Rab (third century).⁴⁷ In *y. Ber.* 5:3, a different, anonymous, ruling appears which says that anyone who skipped the second ("Who resurrects the dead"), the twelfth ("Who humbles the arrogant") and the fourteenth ("Who builds Jerusalem") is a heretic. This is said to contradict the ruling attributed to R. Joshua b. Levi (first half of the third century) according to which the leader of the *'amidah* was not made to repeat the prayer even though he skipped two or three blessings. These discussions show that the rulings concerning the daily reading of the *'amidah* were not fixed immediately in the Yavnean period but were still debated centuries later.

Moreover, there seems to be no actual story of someone faltering while reciting the benediction and how this *min* was removed from the post (*b. Ber.* 28b-29a states only that Samuel the Small was *not* removed from his post). Hence, the rabbinic rule preserved in *b. Ber.* 28b-29a may have been a theoretical possibility rather than a well-established rabbinic practice. The original function of the *birkat ha-minim* may not have been the detection and expulsion of heretics but rather the establishment of the self-identity of rabbinic circles in the

⁴⁴ Thus Setzer 1994, 90-91.

⁴⁵ Maier 1982, 139.

⁴⁶ Only rarely have scholars raised doubts concerning the historical reliability of these stories. This is done by Setzer 1994, 90; Wilson 1995, 362 n. 3.

⁴⁷ Maier 1982, 139-140.

face of perceived external threats.⁴⁸ It seems that the connection of the *birkat ha-minim* to the Jewish-Christian schism has hindered the proper understanding of the prayer in its rabbinic context.⁴⁹

The historical development of the daily *'amidah* is seldom considered, as it is claimed that the *birkat ha-minim* is relevant to Jewish-Christian relations at the end of the first century. It has long been taken for granted that the public daily prayers in the synagogue were already an obligatory and established custom during the Second Temple Period. Yet it has become more and more evident that this view is untenable because the evidence for such prayers in Palestine is scarce.⁵⁰ As different sources speak about daily prayers in this period, they most often refer to private prayers at home.⁵¹ We have evidence of daily communal prayers in some sectarian settings, for example, in the Qumran community, but not of wide-spread and regular prayers in synagogues.⁵² Even though the content of the *'amidah* has many points in common with the pre-70 traditions, we have reasons to believe that the practice of common daily prayers was initiated by the Yavnean rabbis, and especially by R. Gamaliel II.⁵³ Many discussions about the details of prayers that are connected to R. Gamaliel and his colleagues become intelligible if we assume that the public daily prayer was a rather new development. It is probable that obligatory and public prayers in synagogues only gradually

⁴⁸ Thus Finkel 1981, 246; Maier 1982, 140; Wilson 1995, 180.

⁴⁹ Thus Wilson 1995, 180.

⁵⁰ For the discussion, see L. Levine 1987, 20 and 2000, 151.

⁵¹ The situation may have been different in the Diaspora where many synagogues were called προσευχή. See L. Levine 1987, 20; Flesher 2001, 127. Flesher notes that even in the Diaspora "specific evidence indicating praying in the synagogues is rather scarce." He explains this by saying that "prayer seems to have been so common that it often went unremarked in our sources." But prayer may not have been the main religious activity in Diaspora synagogues either. Cf. Modrzejewski 1995, 95. "The principal form of the synagogue worship, in Egypt as in Judea, was the reading of the Torah, not prayer in the proper sense of the term, but nonetheless a form of veneration."

⁵² For the discussion of the relevant sources, see E. P. Sanders 1990, 72-77; 1992, 197; 1999, 10-12; L. Levine 1987, 19-20; 2000 151-158. Cf. also Goodman 1983, 86. Goodman notes that "so far as the evidence goes," public prayer was not connected to synagogues before 70 C.E." See also Cohen 1999b, 323. Contrary to his earlier view, Cohen is no longer persuaded that "the notion of 'statutory prayer' really derives from the Second Temple Period, or that prayer ever established itself as an inherent part of the liturgy of the second temple." For the view that sees prayer as an elementary part of the synagogue liturgy before 70 C.E., see Runesson 2001, 342-350.

⁵³ Thus L. Levine 1999a, 134-139; 2000, 510-519. Cf. also Reif 1999, 350-351.

evolved into a final form, and that the number and the content of the benedictions in the *'amidah* were still debated in the Yavnean period.⁵⁴ The daily reading of the *'amidah* could hardly have functioned as any kind of test for the detection of heretics, if the public daily prayers were not an established practice in synagogues.

The above discussion shows that the *birkat ha-minim* should not be understood as excommunication from the synagogue. It should also be noted that the Johannine excommunication passages do not suggest in any way that this act was connected to synagogue prayers. Many Johannine scholars today admit that the *birkat ha-minim* should not be connected to the situation of the Johannine community.⁵⁵ But if the connection between the *birkat ha-minim* and John is denied, John is unique in his claim that those who confessed Jesus as the Messiah were expelled from the synagogue by official decree.⁵⁶ The Greek word ἀποσυνάγωγος is unknown in extant sources before John, and it is also difficult to find parallels to the practice of expulsion in earlier or contemporary Jewish sources.

Some biblical passages seem to refer to the exclusion from the holy people (Ezra 10:8), but we do not have any direct evidence before the destruction of the second temple that a member of the Israelite people or a deviant group would have been cut out from the main body of the community. The Jewish community was religiously very heterogeneous, and there was no central authority that could have carried out the expulsion in practice.⁵⁷ The development of bans is closely connected to the emergence of sects that tried to draw strict boundaries between themselves and the rest of the

⁵⁴ Cf. Kimelman 1997, 185; Reif 1999, 350; L. Levine 1999a, 135.

⁵⁵ See Meeks 1985, 102–103; Rensberger 1989, 26 and 1999, 129; D. M. Smith 1990, 86; Kysar 1993, 120 n. 18. See, however, de Boer 1998, 249–251. De Boer is aware that “much about this famous benediction is disputed” but still writes that “with this benediction the rabbis effectively sought to exclude Nazoreans (and other *minim*) from participation in synagogue life.” Cf. also Horbury 1998, 100–101. Horbury notes that the benediction “hardly suffices of itself” to bring about exclusion from the synagogue. Following Lindars (1992, 132–134), Horbury suggests that “the Jamnian regulation simply reinforced an earlier, more drastic exclusion of Christians, although the imprecise dating of both the gospel and Gamaliel II’s ordinance leaves open the view that the two measures were contemporaneous.” This view ignores the lack of any positive evidence for the exclusion of Christians, and it is also based on the wrong presupposition concerning the character and power of the rabbinic movement.

⁵⁶ Setzer 1994, 92.

⁵⁷ Thus Hare 1967, 50; Forkman 1972, 104; Hunzinger 1980, 161.

society in the late Second Temple Period.⁵⁸ The documents of the Qumran community bear witness to a system of both temporary and limited exclusion from community life and total and final exclusion from membership of the community.⁵⁹ But scholars have been rightly hesitant to connect the detailed and complicated discussion in the documents to the Johannine exclusion passages.⁶⁰

Scholars have also been quite unanimous that the bans discussed by the rabbis are not real parallels to the excommunication passages in John.⁶¹ The dating of these bans is not the only problem. Their nature is also far from the situation described in John. First, bans were levelled against individuals, not a group of heretics, and mostly against an individual sage who did not accept the opinion of the majority.⁶² Second, the aim of bans was not to exclude a disobedient person from the community but, on the contrary, to bring her or him back under the authority of the rabbinic majority.⁶³ Third, the cases that tell of bans show that there was not a central authority that could have enforced bans within the community. Bans were used by a variety of people, but they were not very effective. They did not count as a great threat to the banned person unless she or he acknowledged the authority of the rabbi who issued the ban.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Hare 1967, 51; Hunzinger 1980 161–163. According to Horbury (1998, 43–66), excommunication was not a sectarian practice but a recognized custom among the Jews in the Second Temple Period. Horbury himself acknowledges that the evidence for this view is “sparse” (p. 59, cf. also p. 66: “not plentiful”). Horbury mentions only two actual examples in support of his view, namely *Jos. Ant.* 11.340, 346f. and 3 *Macc* 2:33 (pp. 51–53). But these passages hardly prove that general exclusion was an established practice. For example, in *Ant.* 11.346f. Josephus tells how the Samaritans accepted apostates from Jerusalem who said that they had been “unjustly expelled” (ἐκβάλλω, v. l. ἐγκεκλησθαι “accused”). Josephus also calls the inhabitants of Shechem “the apostates from the Jewish nation” (*Ant.* 11.340). But these mentions are part of Josephus’ anti-Samaritan bias and not historically reliable; Josephus’ discredits the Samaritans by suggesting that “only those who had fallen away from the true community and its God-given practices and way of life could find refuge among the Samaritans.” Coggins 1987, 262–263. Horbury seems to presuppose that there was a “general Jewish body” that regularly excluded apostates from the people. This gives a very monolithic view of the Jewish community in the Second Temple Period. For criticism of Horbury, see also Visotzky 2000, 781.

⁵⁹ *IQS* 6:24–7:25, 8:16–9:2; *CD* 9:21, 23; 12:4–6; 14:20–21; 20:1–8. Different copies of manuscripts show that there was great variety in the constitutional rules of the community, and the question may be raised whether all these rules reflect the actual practice of the community. See Metso 1998, 186–210.

⁶⁰ Schrage 1964, 848–845; Martyn 1979, 44 n. 55.

⁶¹ Strack-Billerbeck IV 329–330; Martyn 1979, 44.

⁶² Thus Katz 1984, 49 n. 26. Cf. also Cohen 1984, 42.

⁶³ Katz 1984, 49; Wilson 1995, 179.

⁶⁴ Hezser 1997, 147 and 394.

The Jewish sources discussed above do not help to explain the Johannine references to the final excommunication of Christian believers from the synagogue. John is the only witness to this kind of practice. To be sure, our knowledge of ancient Jewish practices is sparse. Thus the lack of evidence for this practice in other sources does not necessarily mean that excommunication could not have happened somewhere. Many scholars have suggested that John refers to a local and limited phenomenon that is otherwise unattested in our sources.⁶⁵ But the little we know about the nature of Jewish society in general and the rabbinic movement in particular after 70 C.E. does not support the view that some Jewish groups could expel other groups from the Jewish community. The lack of explicit evidence for excommunication is only an indication of much more serious problems in recent reconstructions that connect the situation of the Johannine community to the emerging rabbinic Judaism. In the light of recent rabbinic studies, these reconstructions misunderstand the nature and power of the early rabbinic movement.

2.2. *John and Formative Rabbinic Judaism*

During recent years, it has become evident that the traditional view of the emergence and authority of rabbinic Judaism is misleading and based on uncritical readings of rabbinic sources.⁶⁶ These sources do not give an unbiased view of the Jewish world but reflect the interests of the rabbis, as William Scott Green has said:

The documents thus present the restricted discourse of a small number of men who appear primarily engaged in observing, discussing, and analyzing ideas, opinions, and behaviors, sometimes those recounted in Scripture, but most often those promoted within the Rabbinic group itself. Rabbinic writing addresses rabbinic specialists; it is a parochial literature wholly obsessed with itself. . . . It follows that the documents' picture of the world and of the rabbis themselves necessarily is overdetermined, manipulated, and incomplete. Rabbinic editors offer no

⁶⁵ Rensberger 1989, 26; D. M. Smith 1990, 86; Lindars 1991, 133; Setzer 1994, 93; Wilson 1995, 175; McGrath 2001, 42.

⁶⁶ In the following, I cite several scholars who use different methodologies. I do not claim that they are unanimous on everything. As far as I can see, however, they all think that the rabbis were not the leading group among the Jews, at least in the first two centuries C.E. Opinions differ, however, as to how the situation of the rabbis changed after the compilation of the Mishnah in the third century. For recent studies, see Hezser 1997, 23–36.

comprehensive and nuanced report, no mirror image, of their colleagues and precursors. They produce instead a vision of their world as they imagined it and described it to themselves.⁶⁷

The stories about the founding of the Yavnean academy are hardly accurate as such, even though they may contain some historical reminiscences. The story about Vespasian and R. Johanan ben Zakkai is a foundation legend of the rabbinic movement that may have been modelled after the scriptural story of Jeremiah and the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar.⁶⁸ Some rabbinic traditions see the Yavnean academy as the replacement of the Jerusalem sanhedrin and R. Johanan as the successor of the high priest. These traditions follow a stereotypical literary structure and are most probably later reflections created to give the impression that the Yavnean court had the authority to establish new rules for the people after the destruction of the temple.⁶⁹

The origins of the rabbinic movement have traditionally been traced to the Pharisaic group in the Second Temple Period. This view is not without problems, but it is nevertheless probable that at least some rabbis were also Pharisees, even though other groups in pre-70 Judaism may also have contributed to the formation of the rabbinic movement.⁷⁰ During recent decades there has been an intense discussion about the nature and influence of the pre-70 Pharisees.⁷¹ There are still many open questions in this discussion, but the traditional view that the Pharisees were the most dominant group among the Jewish people has been severely challenged. The traditional picture of the Pharisees was based on the acceptance of the historical reliability of the accounts in the gospels, Josephus and early rabbinic literature. It has become clearer and clearer that these sources do not give an unbiased portrayal of this group.⁷² Therefore, the view that the

⁶⁷ Green 2000a, 1125.

⁶⁸ See Schäfer 1979, 93; Neusner 1988c, 319–328; Hezser 1997, 66–67.

⁶⁹ For these traditions, see Hezser 1997, 67–68.

⁷⁰ See Cohen 1984; Schäfer 1991, 170; Hezser 1997, 69–77; Stemberger 1999, 91–92.

⁷¹ See M. Smith 1956, 67–81; Neusner 1983a, 61–82; Goodblatt 1989, 12–30; Schäfer 1991, 125–172; E. P. Sanders 1992, 380–412; Hengel & Deines 1995, 1–70; Mason 1999, 23–56; Grabbe 1999, 35–62 and 2000, 35–47.

⁷² The most intense discussion has concerned the role of the Pharisees in Josephus. The point in dispute has been whether there are differences in Josephus's portrayal of the Pharisees between his earlier work (*Jewish War*) and later works (*Antiquities* and *Life*). For a recent contribution to this discussion, see Grabbe 2000, 35–47. Grabbe maintains that the differences between Josephus's works are real and sometimes

Pharisees were only one party among many Jewish parties in the Second Temple Period has gained wide acceptance.⁷³ Recent studies on early rabbinic sources support this view because they indicate that the rabbis, the alleged successors of the Pharisees, did not have much influence on other Jews or Jewish society as a whole in the decades or even in the centuries following the destruction of the temple.⁷⁴

Jacob Neusner has shown in his studies on the Mishnaic laws that the earliest laws in the development of the whole Mishnah reflect the needs of a small group focused on matters of ritual purity.⁷⁵ The obsession of the Yavnean rabbis with purity laws is wholly reasonable, if we assume that they were somehow successors of a group that already closely observed ritual purity before the destruction of

"very great," even though some earlier attempts to explain these differences may have been problematic (pp. 40–41). These differences should caution us not to take Josephus's portrayal as an accurate historical account of the Pharisees. The view that the Pharisees were the leading party in the Second Temple Period is based in particular on Josephus' general statements in *Ant.* 18.15 and 17. For the historical problems with these statements, see E. P. Sanders 1992, 395–399, 468–469 and 488–490.

⁷³ For a different view, see Deines 1993. Deines connects the chalkstone vessels stemming from Palestine at the beginning of the Common Era with the post-70 rabbinic discussions of ritual purity and concludes that the stone vessels bear witness to the great influence of the Pharisees in pre-70 Jewish society (p. 282). But it is not without problems to connect these archaeological findings with later and highly theoretical rabbinic discussions. It is uncertain whether the stone vessels bear witness to Pharisaic rules of purity. Cf. Reed 1999a. Reed argues quite convincingly that the stone vessels were common to all Jews, and not restricted to a single group, either priests or Pharisees. Reed also notes that the sudden disappearance of the stone vessels after the destruction of the temple may suggest that their use was in some way connected to the Temple. (I kindly thank Professor Reed for sending the manuscript of his unpublished paper to me.)

⁷⁴ Pace Deines 1993, 283; Hengel & Deines 1995, 34–35. According to them, the leading position of the early rabbis was based on the authority and influence of the Pharisees in pre-70 Jewish society. But if it took decades or even centuries for the rabbis to gain some authority in the Jewish community, as recent rabbinic studies claim, it is not probable that the Pharisees would have been a leading force in the Second Temple Period.

⁷⁵ Neusner has organized the Mishnaic laws chronologically in his multiseried work on the history of the Mishnaic law (43 volumes). Neusner has gathered the results of this monumental work and developed them further in his *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (originally 1981; my references are to the second edition, 1988). For Neusner's methodology, see Neusner 1988c, 14–22. Neusner's work has been regarded as a breakthrough in the historical study of the Mishnah, even though his methodology has also been criticized. See Saldarini 1986, 443–445; Cohen 1990, 62–65. Despite these complaints, Neusner's conclusions concerning the preoccupation of the Yavnean rabbis with matters of ritual purity and their lack of interest in civil matters and government are confirmed by the study of early rabbinic cases. Cf. Cohen 1992, 162 and 1999a, 969.

the temple.⁷⁶ The Yavnean rabbis do not appear in early legislation as the ones who defined a new Jewish identity and society; at this stage, "no one involved in the formation of the Mishnah evidently imagined that there was need or call for work on civil law and government."⁷⁷ Visions that have the whole society in sight belong to a later stage in the development of the Mishnaic law; according to Neusner, the entire framework of the Mishnah was revised after the two wars (70 and 135 C.E.) so that the range of topics discussed dealt with not only the life of a small group but the social and political affairs of the whole nation.⁷⁸ In his later writings, Neusner has emphasized the utopian character of the final political and social system of the Mishnah: the rabbis "enjoyed no documented access to power of any kind" and were "unable to coerce many people to do very much." Thus their ideals never "attained realization in the structure of actual institutions and in the system of a working government and . . . never actually dictated how people would do things."⁷⁹

The study of legal case stories in early rabbinic sources confirms Neusner's results concerning the nature of early rabbinic legislation. Especially Shaye Cohen has studied what kinds of cases are connected to rabbis of different periods. Cohen's study shows that the number of cases dealing with purity issues declines as we move from the Yavnean period to the time of R. Judah the Patriarch. As also Catherine Hezser notes, "the spectrum of issues which rabbis dealt with seems to have broadened in amoraic times," but it "still remained limited."⁸⁰ The Yavnean rabbis were primarily experts on purity, but they do not seem to have had great influence beyond their own circle in civil matters or in religious matters that are not connected to ritual purity. In such matters as the observance of the Sabbath, people did not need guidance from rabbinic experts.⁸¹

⁷⁶ See Neusner 1988c, 101–111. Cf. also Cohen 1999a, 969.

⁷⁷ Neusner 1988c, 97.

⁷⁸ Neusner 1988c, 76–121.

⁷⁹ Neusner 1999, 265–266.

⁸⁰ Hezser 1997, 360–368. Cf. Cohen 1992, 160–164 and 1999a, 961–971. See also Neusner 1983b, 196. Neusner concludes on the basis of his analysis of the Jerusalem Talmud, that even in the fourth century Palestine "the rabbi as clerk and bureaucrat dealt with matters of surpassing triviality, a fair portion of them of no interest to anyone but a rabbi."

⁸¹ Cohen 1992, 162 and 1999a, 969. Cf. also Goodman 1983, 101; S. Schwartz, 1999, 212.

Even in those matters where the rabbis were acknowledged experts, their influence on other Jews remained limited. We do not have much evidence of persons who accepted the judgment of a rabbi, if they had not approached him in the first instance and thus acknowledged his authority. Thus the influence of early rabbis was restricted to those who accepted their authority, no matter how they might have tried to impose their views on people.⁸² As a matter of fact, the rabbinic literature itself is a prime witness to the fact that rabbinic instructions and ideals were most often ignored. Frequent references to non-observance of rabbinic ideals suggest that the great majority of the Jews ignored these ideals and that the rabbis had no means of enforcing their decisions upon negligent people.⁸³ The Yavnean rabbis were approached mostly on issues of ritual purity, but the purity laws were the most neglected area of rabbinic legislation among Jews who did not belong to rabbinic circles.⁸⁴ For most Jews, the issues dealt with by the rabbis were not of great significance.⁸⁵

The nature of such institutions as the sanhedrin and the patriarchate should also be reconsidered. The very existence of the central council or the sanhedrin has become more and more doubtful, both before and after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. A closer scrutiny of relevant sources suggests that there never was a permanent sanhedrin in the Second Temple Period, and the existence of the Yavnean sanhedrin as the successor of the Jerusalem sanhedrin is also highly questionable.⁸⁶ The same is true as regards the office of the patriarch or *nasi*. It is also unlikely that R. Gamaliel II was the first patriarch whose status as a leader of Jewish community was acknowledged by the Romans.⁸⁷ In those rare cases where the term *nasi* is used in tannaitic literature, it does not refer to an established institution, but is an honorary title used for *any* important rabbi. In the Greek sources, the words 'etnarch' or 'patriarch' appear only in

⁸² Goodman 1983, 101; Lapin 1995, 237; Cohen 1999a, 971; Stemberger 1999, 98.

⁸³ E. P. Sanders 1992, 467-469; Goodman 1983, 102-104; Hezser 1997, 386-394; Cohen 1999a, 967-971.

⁸⁴ Cohen 1999a, 971.

⁸⁵ Stemberger 1999, 98.

⁸⁶ See Efron 1987, 287-338; E. P. Sanders 1992, 472-483; Goodblatt 1994, 77-130; M. Jacobs 1995, 93-99; Hezser 1997, 186-190.

⁸⁷ The view that the patriarchate began with R. Gamaliel II is argued by Goodblatt 1994, 176-231. For criticism of Goodblatt's view, see M. Jacobs 1995, 105-114; Hezser 1997, 408-410; S. Schwartz 1999, 209-214. See also Goodman 1983, 111-118.

the third century sources (e.g., Origen).⁸⁸ The first rabbi for whom the title *nasi* is used consistently is R. Judah the Patriarch who emerges for the first time as some kind of leader among the rabbis; but even in his case it is debated how great a role he actually had in the centralization and institutionalization of the rabbinic movement.⁸⁹

R. Gamaliel II is often named as the chief instigator of the actions against early Christians, but this view overestimates his influence in Jewish society at the end of the first century. The traditions that describe R. Gamaliel II as *nasi* stem mostly from later Babylonian sources and reflect the point of view of later redactors.⁹⁰ R. Gamaliel's prestige among the Yavnean rabbis was not based on an official political position recognized by the Romans but at least partly on his wealth which was exceptional among early rabbis. As revealed by the rabbinic case stories, R. Gamaliel II did not have much influence over non-rabbinic Jews and was certainly not the leader of the Jewish people in Palestine.⁹¹ It is also unlikely that Yavneh became the leading center of postwar Judaism; it may even never have been the only center of rabbinic movement.⁹² Some rabbinic traditions suggest that the people acted according to the commonly accepted opinion of the rabbis in Yavneh, but many other texts suggest that people turned to one particular rabbi and accepted his authority.⁹³ The rabbinic movement was not centralized, and there was not a single leading academy or school that governed the opinions of different rabbis.⁹⁴

The early rabbinic movement may be characterized as a network of circles of disciples gathered around different rabbis whose popularity and influence varied.⁹⁵ Early rabbis demanded that the whole nation should study the Torah, but they do not seem to have had any prepared program or mechanism by which they could reach this

⁸⁸ See Goodman 1983, 112-113; M. Jacobs 1995, 114.

⁸⁹ Cf. Goodman 1983, 114; Cohen 1992, 169 and 1999a 976; M. Jacobs 1995, 350; Hezser 1997, 409-414.

⁹⁰ M. Jacobs 1995, 114 and 348-349; Hezser 1997, 410.

⁹¹ Goodman 1983, 113-114; M. Jacobs 1995, 106-111; Hezser 1997, 410.

⁹² Cohen 1999a, 967.

⁹³ Hezser 1997, 383.

⁹⁴ Hezser 1997, 383-386; Cohen 1999a, 950-956.

⁹⁵ Cf. Hezser 1997, 324-327. Hezser describes the rabbinic network as a "personal alliance system." See also Cohen 1999a, 952. Cohen says that rabbinic schools in the second century were not academies but circles of disciples. Cohen also says that the second century rabbinate "resembled a sect, a guild, or a caste, but it was none of these." Cohen defines it as an "unsalaried profession" (p. 976).

goal. Many traditions suggest that the public was not much interested in the rabbis and their teaching, which speaks against the assumption that they were the teachers of the masses. According to some texts, the study of the Torah is a prerogative of the selected few only, and some passages may even suggest that early rabbis tried to keep their interpretation of the Torah secret from other Jews.⁹⁶ The nomenclature of early rabbis shows that rabbinic status was often determined by birth rather than by scholarly achievements, which underlines the exclusiveness of early rabbinic circles. Some passages contain criticism against the view that Torah study belongs only to the sons of rabbis, suggesting that at least some rabbinic circles had these exclusive views.⁹⁷

As Günther Stemberger notes, early rabbis formed "a private movement without notable support among 'normal Jews.'"⁹⁸ They were not the architects of a new Jewish society. Although they had some visions of the ideal Israel, they did not have power to fulfil them. The early rabbinic movement is repeatedly described in recent studies as an insular group that produced an insular literature.⁹⁹ This view is in sharp contrast to the view that still dominates scholarly discussion about the opponents of the Johannine community. Many Johannine scholars have also taken it for granted that the Pharisees or the rabbis had control over synagogue communities, even though the available evidence points in the opposite direction.

2.3. *The Pharisees, the Rabbis, and the Synagogue*

According to an influential opinion, the synagogue in Palestine was a Pharisaic institution which emerged as a reaction to the temple run by the Sadducees.¹⁰⁰ It is argued that the second temple synagogue

⁹⁶ Cohen 1992, 168 and 1999a, 954–956; Hezser 1997, 100–104.

⁹⁷ Hezser 1997, 96–99; Cohen 1999a, 948–950.

⁹⁸ Stemberger 1999, 98.

⁹⁹ Cohen 1992, 173 and 1999, 975; Lapin 1998, 23; Green 2000a, 1132. Cf. also S. Stern 1994, 200. Stern speaks of the isolationist worldview of the rabbis which "verges on solipsism." L. Levine (2000, 469) says that the rabbis' way of life "was essentially elitist."

¹⁰⁰ Scholars supporting this view are mentioned by Grabbe 1995, 23 n. 21; Hachlili 1997, 37 and 1998, 16; L. Levine 1999a, 37 n. 67. See also the summary of earlier (German) scholarship in Deines 1997, 525–526. For other theories of the origins of the synagogue, see L. Levine 1987, 8–10 and 2000, 19–26; Urman & Fleisher 1995, xx–xxv; Hachlili 1997, 34–37; Runesson 2001, 67–168.

was a central instrument through which the Pharisees exercised their influence among the masses and promoted their own religious program.¹⁰¹ However, literary or archaeological evidence supporting this view is meager.¹⁰² For example, Josephus does not mention synagogues when he describes the party of the Pharisees (*J.W.* 2.162 and 166, *Ant.* 18.12–15). The famous Theodotus inscription demonstrates that at least this particular synagogue was built and run by a priestly family.¹⁰³ The view that the Pharisees had an important role in Palestinian synagogues is mostly based on some passages in the gospels. These passages are tainted by polemic which does not tell much about the relationship of the Pharisees to synagogues. One can hardly take the charge that the Pharisees “love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues” as a valid witness to the important roles of the Pharisees in Palestinian synagogues (Matt 23:6; Luke 11:43; cf. also Mark 12:38–39; Luke 20:46).¹⁰⁴ Because this charge may echo well-established polemical conventions of the time, it is even less credible.¹⁰⁵

The fragmentary archaeological evidence related to pre-70 synagogues does not support the view that the emergence of synagogues in Palestine was connected to a particular religious movement. This evidence shows the great diversity of both practices connected to

¹⁰¹ Cf. Hengel 1971, 180 and 1974, 79–82; Hengel & Deines 1995, 32.

¹⁰² Thus Saldarini 1988, 52; E. P. Sanders 1990, 77–81 and 1992, 398; Grabbe 1995, 23; L. Levine 2000, 37–38.

¹⁰³ See E. P. Sanders 1992, 450–451; L. Levine 2001, 54–56. Sanders notes how Hengel interprets the Theodotus inscription to support his view that synagogue was a Pharisaic institution (for Hengel's view, see above). The inscription says that the synagogue in question was built “for the reading of the law and the study of the commandments.” Hengel sees the study of the law as a characteristic of the Pharisees only, and so he takes this evidence to show the Pharisaic nature of this synagogue in particular and Palestinian synagogues in general. In spite of Sanders' criticism, Hengel & Deines (1995, 33–34 n. 86) still claim that “the doubling of the expression” in the inscription (“the reading of the law and the study of the commandments”) points to the Pharisaic tradition.

¹⁰⁴ Pace Hengel & Deines 1995, 32–33: “[The synoptic gospels] testify unanimously that the Pharisees and the scribes associated with synagogues played an important role in them.” For an analysis of non-rabbinic sources which might indicate Pharisaic or rabbinic leadership of synagogues, see Cohen 1997, 99–114. Cohen emphasizes “the paucity of relevant evidence” that might point explicitly and unambiguously to the authority of the Pharisees/rabbis over synagogues in Palestine.

¹⁰⁵ See Johnson 1989, 430–434, esp. pp. 433–434: “Anyone familiar with the philosophical debates of Hellenism cannot miss the pertinence of the ‘chair of Moses’ (Matt 23:2), occupied by these rival Jewish teachers, who ‘preach but do not practice’ (23:3), who love the place of honor at feasts (23:6), and are ‘hypocrites’ (23:13), outwardly righteous but inwardly full of iniquity (23:28).”

synagogues and their architectual forms.¹⁰⁶ The synagogues of the time seem to have been public and communal places that were used for various religious, judicial, social and political needs of local Jewish communities.¹⁰⁷ We do not have any evidence that the synagogue was seen as a rival or a substitution for the temple at this time. Some early rabbinic traditions describe the synagogue as a holy place, using motifs derived from the temple and its liturgy, but even in these traditions, the holiness of the synagogue is not contrasted with that of the temple.¹⁰⁸ While our sources do not ascribe a great role to the Pharisees in synagogues, some first century sources suggest that priests had special roles in some synagogues, which also shows that the synagogue as an institution was not competing with the temple.¹⁰⁹ Literary evidence suggests that synagogues were used for such religious activities as the reading of the Torah, but synagogues were not yet exclusively religious by their nature. They did not belong to a particular religious group but to a community as a whole.¹¹⁰ It seems that the role of synagogues as distinctively religious centers developed only gradually after the destruction of the temple. Only after the destruction of the temple does 'holy place' become a standard term for the synagogue in the extant Palestinian inscriptions.¹¹¹ A similar enhancement of the religious dimension of the synagogue also took place in the Diaspora.¹¹²

Both the archaeological and literary evidence suggest that the rabbis were not the leaders of synagogues even after the destruction of the temple. Rabbinic regulations concerning the building of synagogues do not correspond to the extant archaeological evidence but are borrowed from temple traditions.¹¹³ Synagogues from the same period and in the same region may differ from each other notably, which speaks for the diversity of Jewish culture.¹¹⁴ Most rabbinic stories

¹⁰⁶ L. Levine 1987, 10–12.

¹⁰⁷ See Hachlili 1997, 41–43; L. Levine 2000, 48–73.

¹⁰⁸ Fine 1997, 30, 59; Hachlili 1997, 46; Cohen 1999b, 323; L. Levine 2000, 40–41.

¹⁰⁹ E. P. Sanders 1992, 201; L. Levine 2000, 125–126. Also many later sources connect priests with synagogues and show that they had a far more prominent role in them also after the destruction of the temple than has often been assumed. See L. Levine 2000, 491–500. Cf. also Kraabel 1981, 84.

¹¹⁰ Hachlili 1997, 47; E. P. Sanders 1999a, 12; L. Levine 2000, 70.

¹¹¹ M. Williams 1999, 85–86.

¹¹² Kraabel 1979, 502; White 1990, 64.

¹¹³ See L. Levine 1992, 218 and 2000, 446–447; Bloedhorn & Hüttenmeister 1999, 278–280.

¹¹⁴ Meyers 1999, 68.

dealing with art reflect opposition to figural representations, but still various symbols appear frequently in synagogue art.¹¹⁵ In the extant synagogue inscriptions, the title 'rabbi' is used as an honorary designation for a wealthy donor. These individuals cannot be identified with any sage known to us from rabbinic literature.¹¹⁶ Epigraphic evidence mentions several officials (e.g., *presbyters*, *archons*, *archisynagogues*) in Greek speaking synagogues both in Israel and the Diaspora but not rabbis.¹¹⁷ Together with other archaeological evidence, these inscriptions support the non-rabbinic nature of synagogues in the first centuries C.E.¹¹⁸

Many rabbinic passages suggest that the rabbis controlled synagogue life.¹¹⁹ The critical study of early rabbinic traditions and case stories, however, casts suspicion on these kinds of sweeping generalizations. The early rabbinic traditions connected to the Pharisees do not mention anything special about their roles in synagogues.¹²⁰ The synagogue is rarely mentioned in the Mishnah or in the tannaitic midrashim (*Mekhilta*, *Sifra*, *Sifre*), which indicates the limited contact of the rabbis with the synagogue.¹²¹ There is more evidence of rabbinic involvement in synagogue life in later sources, but even in light of these sources, the rabbinic involvement in synagogue affairs remained limited.¹²² Many passages show that some rabbis could be very critical towards certain synagogue practices, indicating that many synagogues were run by non-rabbinic Jews.¹²³

The institution the rabbis ranked highest in Jewish society was not the synagogue, the *bet ha-knesset*, but the *bet ha-midrash*, the rabbinic study house or academy where the rabbinic Judaism developed and gradually became the leading force in Jewish society.¹²⁴ The rabbinic study house should be kept apart from the synagogue, even though

¹¹⁵ L. Levine 1992, 215–216 and 2000, 444. There are stories that may suggest that R. Gamaliel II was more liberal in his attitude to art than most of his colleagues. See Levine 2000, 451–458.

¹¹⁶ See Cohen, 1981, 10–12; L. Levine 2000, 443–444.

¹¹⁷ Cohen 1981, 13.

¹¹⁸ Cohen 1981, 15. But see also the cautions mentioned by M. Williams 1999, 80–81 and 87.

¹¹⁹ See Hezser 1997, 221. R. Joshua b. Levi even says in *y. Meg.* 3:4 that "synagogues and study houses belong to sages and their disciples."

¹²⁰ Neusner 1971, 289. Cf. also E. P. Sanders 1992, 398.

¹²¹ Thus L. Levine 1992, 207.

¹²² L. Levine 1992, 207. Cf. also Hezser 1997, 223.

¹²³ L. Levine 1992, 212–214 and 2000, 447–449.

¹²⁴ L. Levine 1992, 203–205 and 2000, 449–451; E. P. Sanders 1999a, 13.

these two institutions have sometimes been seen as the one and the same.¹²⁵ To be sure, in the *bet ha-midrash* the rabbis also discussed such affairs as synagogue liturgy (see above). But this does not mean that early rabbis fixed the synagogue liturgy immediately; it was one thing to discuss some problems in the academy and another to put these discussions into practice in synagogue life.¹²⁶ Various discussions show that rabbinic influence on synagogue life increased only gradually, and perhaps only in early Middle Ages can we speak of synagogue as a rabbinic institution.¹²⁷ But we must not retroject this later situation back to the early phases of the rabbinic movement, not to mention overlay modern leadership structures of some synagogues on ancient synagogues.¹²⁸

The studies discussed above suggest that the rabbis controlled neither the post-70 Jewish society in general nor synagogues in particular. Their main interest was not directed towards the reformation of synagogue life, and they could not purify individual synagogues of unwanted elements or groups that did not follow their ideals. This picture is at odds with the views many Johannine scholars have had of early rabbis as synagogue reformers who excluded the Johannine Christians from the synagogue. It seems that post-70 Jewish society was much more diverse than many scholarly descriptions of that period have suggested.

2.4. *Documentary Papyri and post-70 Palestinian Society*

The documentary material stemming from the years before the Bar Kochba war (132–135 C.E.) is an important witness to Palestinian society between the two revolts, the period (70–135 C.E.) we know so little about from other sources.¹²⁹ Several legal practices in the

¹²⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Urman 1995, 232–255.

¹²⁶ Cf. Kimelman 1997, 185. When discussing when the *amidah* became a synagogue norm, Kimelman notes that we do not know “when the Amidah moved from the academy to the synagogue.”

¹²⁷ Cf. Hezser 1997, 221; Levine 2000, 468–470.

¹²⁸ Cf. Hezser 1997, 224; Rajak 2001, 419.

¹²⁹ For the relevance of these documentary papyri for the study of Jewish society from 70 to 135 C.E., see Goodman 1991, 169–175; Saldarini 1998, 133–145; Cotton 1998, 167–179; 1999, 221–236 and 2000, 23–30. These papyri have been found in different locales in the Judaean desert: Nahal Hever, Wadi Murabba‘at, Nahal Se‘elim, Nahal Mishmar, Ketef Jericho, Wadi Sdeir and Wadi Ghuweir.

documents, e.g. marriage contracts, differ notably from rabbinic discussions of the same matters.¹³⁰ The documents suggest that the people behind them did not live their lives following rabbinic ideals, if they knew these ideals at all.¹³¹

Evidence in this material should not be dismissed by regarding the people behind it as 'non-Jewish.' Rather, the documents should be seen as a reflection of Jewish society of the time.¹³² The documents speak not for a marginal group of assimilated Jews in a certain locale, but the Jews of the documents may well be representative of the Jews in Judaea between the wars.¹³³ This material gives us a glimpse on those Jews who were not influenced by the rabbinic vision of Jewish society controlled by the halakhic-system. The people of the documents did not share the tendency of the rabbis to social isolation.¹³⁴ It is remarkable that there is no evidence of the use of particular Jewish courts in the documents. There is not the slightest hint of the authority of rabbinic circles in these documents; these people felt free to use Roman legal instruments in their affairs.¹³⁵ It seems that it was not the Torah experts who had the legal power or who set the general cultural atmosphere of the period.¹³⁶ The documentary papyri suggest that the rabbinic sources do not depict a real world governed by Jewish sages but an ideal vision. This material helps us to see that "readings of the Mishnah and Talmud that picture Jewish life as separate, independent and self-defining . . . need revision."¹³⁷ Showing the extent of contacts between Jews and non-Jews, this material "throws into doubt the caricature of Jewish social isolation," a caricature that has its roots in antiquity and that still pervades many descriptions of that era.¹³⁸

The above picture of post-70 Jewish society fits poorly the picture Johannine scholars have created of early rabbis as the mighty pro-

¹³⁰ For differences between marriage contracts and the Rabbinic *ketubah* payment, see Satlow 1993, 137–141. Cf. also Cotton 1998, 173–179. Cotton also refers to other areas of legislation where there are clear discrepancies between the legal documents and the Mishnaic law (p. 179).

¹³¹ Stemberger 1999, 98–99.

¹³² Goodman 1991, 174; Cotton 1998 172.

¹³³ For detailed arguments, see Cotton 1998, 172–173 and 1999, 231–233. Cf. also Saldarini 1998, 144.

¹³⁴ Saldarini 1998, 140.

¹³⁵ Goodman 1991, 175; Cotton 1998, 177 and 1999, 234; S. Schwartz 1999, 212.

¹³⁶ S. Schwartz 1999, 213.

¹³⁷ Saldarini 1998, 142–143.

¹³⁸ Goodman 1991, 175.

tectors of a new Jewish community. That we do not have any examples of the ultimate excommunication from Jewish communities is not accidental but a reflection of the nature of Jewish communities in this period. The Yavnean rabbis were not leaders of the people who could have enforced their form of Judaism on those who did not share their beliefs. There was not a supreme authority capable of defining the boundaries of Judaism and establishing a new orthodoxy. If this is true in regard to post-70 Palestinian society, it is all the more unlikely that the rabbis could have controlled Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

The portrayal of the Johannine community as a minority persecuted by a powerful Jewish community headed by the Pharisees/the Yavnean rabbis presumes an isolated world where the internal affairs of the Jews belong only to the Jews. How else could we understand the alleged precarious situation of the Johannine Christians, who are said to have suffered from the serious social, political and economic consequences of the policy of the Jewish leaders in their surroundings?¹³⁹ The conflict of Jesus and his followers with the hostile world in John takes place in a world dominated by the Jews.¹⁴⁰ While this kind of world found some support in older readings of rabbinic literature, the above discussion has suggested that this world most probably existed only in the visions of rabbinic circles.

2.5. *The Pharisees and the Rabbis and the Persecution of Early Christians*

There is one more reason to doubt whether the Pharisees or the Yavnean rabbis were the ones who persecuted the Johannine community: there is not much evidence indicating that the Pharisees or

¹³⁹ Cf. Wengst 1992, 155–156. He says that the exclusion from the synagogue could have been a serious problem only for a Jewish-Christian community that lived in a Greek-speaking environment governed by the Jews. For this reason, Ephesus is not a likely candidate for the home of the Johannine community (p. 158). Wengst locates the gospel to the regions of Batanaea and Gaulanitis where Jewish self-government in the time of Agrippa II would have made the Johannine situation understandable (pp. 157–179). Wengst's proposal is accepted, with some reservations, by Ashton 1991, 196–198. This proposal, however, is very problematic historically. See Hengel 1993, 290–291. Wengst's worst mistake is to overestimate the influence of rabbinic Judaism. It is not only problematic to find a *Greek-speaking* world governed by the rabbis, but recent studies suggest that this kind of world never existed even among *Aramaic-speaking* Jewish communities in Palestine.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Meeks 1985, 101.

the rabbis were the ones who started the actions directed against early Christians. While the synoptic gospels picture the Pharisees as Jesus' main opponents in his lifetime and even attribute to them the willingness to kill Jesus (Mark 3:6 and *par.*), the synoptic passion accounts show clearly that it was not the Pharisees but the priestly establishment in Jerusalem that was somehow involved in the death of Jesus.¹⁴¹ The same holds true in the case of the persecution of Jesus' followers after his death. While Paul, a Pharisee, somehow took part in the actions directed against some early Christians, we do not have any evidence that the Pharisees as a *group* persecuted early Christians or that they were the acting force behind early persecution. Luke reports several times that the priestly circles were active in the oppression of Jesus' early followers (Acts 4:1; 5:17-33; 7:1; 9:1,14,21), but he also tells how a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, spoke in favor of Christians (Acts 5:34-40). Luke also presents the Pharisees as favorable to early Christians elsewhere (Acts 23:1-11), which may reflect his tendency to depict the Pharisees as the Jewish group that was most like Christians.¹⁴² But Luke would not have chosen the Pharisees as representatives of favorable Jews if they were regarded generally as the main persecutors of early Christians. Luke is probably right in attributing the main role in the opposition to early Christians to the temple hierarchy.¹⁴³

A similar picture is derived from Josephus' account of how the high priest Ananus II executed James, the brother of Jesus (*Ant.* 20.199-203). A group of pious Jews, most probably Pharisees, objected to the execution with the effect that the King Agrippa deposed Ananus.¹⁴⁴ That some Pharisees were offended by the mistreatment of a Christian leader suggests that they had at least some sympathy for James and his group.¹⁴⁵ Their action is hardly understandable if they thought that James deserved execution.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Cf. the discussion in E. P. Sanders 1985, 287-293, esp. p. 290.

¹⁴² Cf. J. T. Sanders 1987, 288-290.

¹⁴³ Thus E. P. Sanders 1985, 285.

¹⁴⁴ Josephus says that "those of the inhabitants of the city who were considered the most fair-minded (*ἐπιεικέστατοι*) and who were strict (*ἀκριβεῖς*) in observance of the law were offended" by James' execution. The use of the word *ἀκριβής*, which Josephus often uses to describe the Pharisees, suggests that he also has them in mind here. Thus Baumgarten 1983, 413-414. Cf. also Hare 1967, 33; E. P. Sanders 1992, 419; J. T. Sanders 1993, 28; Setzer 1994, 108; Bauckham 1999, 222.

¹⁴⁵ See Setzer 1994, 108-109.

¹⁴⁶ Pace Bauckham 1999, 222-229. Bauckham says that Josephus' account indi-

Josephus notes elsewhere that "the Pharisees are naturally lenient (πρὸς τὰς κολάσεις ἐπιεικῶς ἔχουσιν) in the matter of punishments" (*Ant.* 13.294). This remark suggests that the Pharisees were cautious about imposing the death penalty even though it was a prescribed punishment for a number of crimes in the Torah.¹⁴⁷ The rabbis were also unwilling to impose death penalty, as the discussions in the Mishnah tractates *Sanhedrin* and *Makkot* show.¹⁴⁸ These discussions show that the rabbis had an "over-cautious ethos in matters of capital punishments."¹⁴⁹ According to these discussions, a person may be put to death only by a legitimate court that has reliable witnesses, and only after a very complicated and cautious process that makes sure that no error is committed. The procedure described is so laborious and offers so much better chances of acquittal than of conviction that it is difficult to imagine that anyone could be executed according to these court processes.¹⁵⁰

The discussions about punishments in *Sanhedrin* and *Makkot* are imaginary rather than descriptions of real court practices; it is unlikely that there ever was a central rabbinic council that could have inflicted such punishments.¹⁵¹ These discussions do not reflect the position of those who had the actual power to execute evildoers, but they may be an attempt by marginal Torah experts to bring into balance scriptural legislation that demanded the execution of various types of sinners and the real world where sinners were not normally executed.

cates that a "difference in interpretation of the law between Sadducees and Pharisees must be at stake." According to Bauckham, the Pharisees agreed with Ananus that James' crime merited death; but while Ananus and other Sadducees regarded stoning as the rightful form of capital punishment in this case, the Pharisees would have confined stoning to cases where the Torah explicitly prescribed it. Bauckham says that the discussions of capital punishments in the Mishnah "cannot be presumed to date from the Second Temple Period" (p. 221), but he still takes them as illustrative of "the sort of halakhic differences that could easily have existed at that time" (p. 228). The dating of these discussions is not the only problem, but also their imaginary nature. Furthermore, Hare (1967, 34) rightly notes that the intensity of the Pharisees in Josephus' account suggests that they "were convinced that the executed persons had not been guilty of a capital crime."

¹⁴⁷ Thus Hengel 1989, 168 n. 124.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. *m. Makk.* 1:10 (Neusner's translation): "A sanhedrin which imposes the death penalty once in seven years is called murderous. R. Eleazar b. Azariah says, 'Once in seventy years.' R. Tarfon and R. Aqiba say, 'If we were on a sanhedrin, no one would ever be put to death.' Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel says, 'So they would multiply the number of murderers in Israel.'"

¹⁴⁹ S. Stern 1994, 168-169.

¹⁵⁰ E. P. Sanders 1992, 420.

¹⁵¹ Hezser 1997, 462 n. 74.

While ignoring the discussions reflecting the lenient attitude of rabbis, Johannine scholars often refer to a more savage rabbinic tradition seemingly advocating lynch law. The tradition, connected to a scriptural story that tells of how Phineas slew Zimri, who was guilty of intermarriage with a Midianite woman (Num 25; *m. Sanh.* 9:6; *Num. R.* 21.3f.), is said to shed light on John's reference to the killing of Jesus' followers (John 16:2).¹⁵² This tradition is said to explain the religious motivation behind these killings.¹⁵³ It is true that the deed of Phineas was taken as an excuse for an immediate execution in certain cases, but *m. Sanh.* 9:6 is incongruous with other Mishnaic discussions reflecting more lenient views, and some of its terminology is also unparalleled in the rest of the Mishnah.¹⁵⁴ It is no wonder then that the deed of Phineas was later said to have taken place without "the approval of the sages;" it was said that Phineas escaped the excommunication of the sanhedrin only because of divine intervention (*y. Sanh.* 9:7). The story of Phineas may have inspired some bloodthirsty legends in which rabbis may slay those who were found guilty of intercourse with a non-Jewish woman. These stories may tell how repulsive this kind of intercourse was seen.¹⁵⁵ It is not appropriate, however, to use this exceptional tradition to illustrate the basic disposition of early rabbis because other early evidence suggests that leniency in the matters of capital punishment was one of their characteristics.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Strack-Billerbeck II 565; Brown 691-692; Schnackenburg III 139 n. 101; Lindars 497-498; Wengst 1992, 86 and II, 154.

¹⁵³ Especially the saying appearing in *Num. R.* 21.4, "if a man sheds the blood of the wicked, it is as though he had offered a sacrifice," is often cited to show the religious motives behind the persecution of the Johannine believers. It should be noted, however, that the saying in the midrash is closely connected to the scriptural passage in question. In Num. 25:13 it is said that by slaying Zimri, Phineas made atonement (כִּפּוּר) for the Israelites. The midrash explains in what sense this was possible: "But did he offer a sacrifice, to justify the expression 'atonement' in this connection? No, but it serves to teach you that if a man sheds the blood of the wicked, it is as though he had offered a sacrifice." It is doubtful whether this exegesis of a particular scriptural story really shows "the lengths to which fanaticism can go" (Lindars 498). It is also quite hazardous to take this passage as an expression of the sentiments of early rabbis: in its final form, *Numeri Rabbah* dates from the 12th century, and even though the later part of the work containing this slim allusion is remarkably older (from the 8th century?), there is still a huge leap from the early Middle Ages back to the first century situation. For the dating of this work, see Strack & Stemberger 1982, 285-287.

¹⁵⁴ See S. Stern 1994, 168-169.

¹⁵⁵ S. Stern 1994, 169-170.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Barrett 484-485: "It would, of course, be a grave error to suppose that either of these passages [*m. Sanh.* 9:6 and *Num. R.* 21.4] gave general approval to indiscriminate bloodshed; or indeed was ever taken very seriously."

I do not claim that early rabbis were liberal and tolerant in the modern sense of these words.¹⁵⁷ They could well argue vigorously with each others, condemn the *minim* to gehenna, or develop cruel fantasies of the fate of the godless. But rabbinic polemics do not reflect directly how non-rabbinic Jews were treated in Jewish society; these polemics should be understood as an attempt by a peripheral group to define its boundaries rather than as a well-developed policy towards dissidents.¹⁵⁸ The vagueness of the term *minim* is very telling in regard to the attitude of the rabbis to those outside their own circles. By blending different heresies together, the rabbis could protect themselves against views they considered potentially dangerous. They did not need to take a stand on different heretic groups in detail, but it was sufficient to add these groups to those considered heretics.¹⁵⁹ The rabbis could maintain their view of idyllic Israel who follows their halakha only by regarding as non-existent those groups who did not match their ideals.¹⁶⁰ As Martin Goodman says, "rather than attack heretical Jews, the tannaim preached that heretics should be ignored."¹⁶¹

- It is probable that the much cited rulings in *t. Hul.* 2:20–21, which prohibit contacts with the *minim*, should also be understood as an attempt to ignore the heretics. These same rulings, as a matter of fact, testify that not even the rabbis could avoid contacts with heretics.¹⁶² These rulings do not bear witness to the inferior status of the *minim* in the society because the rabbis had no means of enforcing other Jews to have no dealings with the heretics.¹⁶³ Moreover,

¹⁵⁷ Pace Cohen 1984, 48–50. Cohen argues that the Yavnean rabbis promoted an "ideology of pluralism" that aimed in "the creation of the society which would tolerate, even foster, disputes and discussions but which could nonetheless maintain order." But Cohen may push his argument too far by making a virtue of the way the Mishnah leaves open many halakhic discussions. Cf. Goodman 1996, 507. Goodman criticizes Cohen and says that the attitudes of the rabbis can not be explained "in terms of the liberal outlook of the tannaim;" what looks like a liberal attitude "may simply reflect the genesis of the Mishna as a compilation of the views of jurists rather than as a law code." For the discussion of Cohen's proposal, see also Hezser 1997, 64 n. 64. Hezser says that the "grand coalition" in Yavneh does not reflect the actual rabbinic society in which different opinions were tolerated; this image was rather "deliberatively created by the editors as a reaction to actual disharmony."

¹⁵⁸ See Green 2000b, 372–373.

¹⁵⁹ Segal 1986, 141.

¹⁶⁰ See especially S. Stern 1994, 132–135.

¹⁶¹ Goodman 1996, 507.

¹⁶² Cf. Setzer 1994, 161; Kalmin 1999, 72.

¹⁶³ Cf. Katz 1984, 53. Katz discusses the rulings in *t. Hul.* 2:20–21 and says that

there is no evidence that the reaction of the rabbis to heretics went beyond attempts to avoid contacts with them; for example, there is no passage that would suggest that the *minim* are liable to capital punishment.¹⁶⁴ On the basis of rabbinic evidence, therefore, it is simply misleading to suppose that the rabbis were the instigators of any kind of systematic oppression of the *minim* in general, or early Christians in particular.¹⁶⁵

I think we should at least clear the reputation of the rabbis as the main oppressors of the early Christians, even though we are not ready to give up the view that the Johannine Christians were faced with actual persecution at the hands of their Jewish opponents—which is what I will suggest below. It is most unlikely that the early Yavnean rabbis were powerful enough to exclude the Johannine Christians from the synagogue and ultimately from Jewish life and to persecute them in other ways.

But might there be some other candidates who could have played such a role in the history of the Johannine community? We cannot rule out the possibility that there was such a Jewish group in the environment of the Johannine group.¹⁶⁶ But the little we know of the government of Jewish synagogue communities speaks against the existence of this kind of leadership class among the Jews. As was argued above, synagogues were local institutions and synagogue authorities did not have any authority other than that given to them by their own community.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, synagogue officials do not seem to have had great authority in the civil matters of the com-

this passage "should be read as forceful social comment recommending the shunning of social intercourse with *minim*," but not as a formal ban. See also Setzer 1994, 161. Setzer notes that *t. Hul.* 2:20–21 "is an attempt to limit contact with people judged to be *minim*. How successful this ruling was is anyone's guess." But Alexander (1992, 16) says that the rulings in *t. Hul.* 2:20–21 are "tantamount to imposing a ban on Jewish Christians." According to Horbury (1998, 100), the excommunication from the synagogue in John is "consistent with the probably second-century Jewish evidence for prohibition of converse with heretics."

¹⁶⁴ Hare 1967, 39 n. 2.

¹⁶⁵ Cohen 1984, 50; Goodman 1996, 506; Setzer 1994, 161.

¹⁶⁶ See Meeks 1985, 102. Unlike most other Johannine scholars, Meeks dismisses the Yavnean rabbis as the opponents of the Johannine community. But Meeks suggests some other Jewish group had sufficient power in synagogues to "expel persons from membership, even to threaten their lives." Meeks locates the Johannine community somewhere in Galilee, Batanaea or "some small *polis*" in a "society dominated by the Jewish community" (p. 103).

¹⁶⁷ L. Levine 1999b, 95 and 2000, 365–366.

munity.¹⁶⁸ For example, as John 12:42 says that some of "the authorities" (ἄρχοντες) did not confess their faith because of fear of the Pharisees, it is as difficult to connect this situation to the post-70 Jewish society as it is to connect it to Jesus' time.¹⁶⁹ In sum, it is not easy to find a group that could have controlled the life of a deviant group in such a thorough manner as is often suggested by Johannine scholars. The basic elements for the portrayal of the enemies of the Johannine community are taken from the earlier readings of rabbinic sources, which have proven very problematic. Consequently, we should abandon altogether the hypothesis of a powerful Jewish establishment rather than go on the endless search for an actual Jewish group that would fit our hypothetical history of the Johannine community.

The recent change in the appraisal of the early rabbinic movement has been coming for some time now, but the traditional picture of the rabbinic takeover still continues to live, especially in the descriptions of the situation of Christians after 70 C.E.¹⁷⁰ I think that scholars may have been unwilling to accept the views on the marginal role of early rabbis partly because the rabbinic movement has been a convenient foil to the development of early Christianity. It has been necessary to describe early rabbis as powerful so that the separation of early Christians from Judaism could be ascribed to

¹⁶⁸ Goodman 1983, 124.

¹⁶⁹ Pace Rensberger 1999, 128–129. Rensberger says that the conflict reflected in John took place at a time and in a location where the Pharisees were the most powerful group in the synagogue community. According to Rensberger, ἄρχοντες in John are members of a traditional authority class in John's locale somewhere in the Diaspora. This group could be intimidated by the Pharisees, who held real power. Nicodemus represents secret believers in the local ruling class, whose open confession could have been of real help to the Christian group as a whole. But this reconstruction is highly problematic even in the area of Palestine, not to mention in the Diaspora, where Rensberger locates John.

¹⁷⁰ See Dunn 2001, 52–53. Dunn's way of reacting to recent changes in the study of rabbinic Judaism is typical of many scholars. Dunn is aware that "it took decades and even centuries for the rabbis to establish their interpretation of Judaism as the only authentic form of Judaism, to establish, that is to say, rabbinic Judaism as 'Judaism.'" But still Dunn notes that "the successors to the Pharisees were evidently able to establish themselves as the only effective political force in the land." Furthermore, John appeared at a time "when, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see only two substantive contenders for the heritage of Second Temple Judaism beginning to emerge from the pre-70 factionalism—Christianity and rabbinic Judaism." Dunn still overemphasizes the political power of the rabbis and overestimates the relevance of emerging Christianity for them. Early rabbinic sources do not suggest that there ever was a contest between the rabbis and early Christians.

their policy. Thus, the alleged anti-Judaism in some New Testament writings can also be understood as a response to the steps taken by the rabbis. General and recurrent references to some rare rabbinic passages have filled the void in the evidence that would support the assumption that the post-70 Christians were a persecuted Jewish minority. But there is not much that would support this view even in the Christian sources.

2.6. *Evidence for Jewish Persecution of the Christians*

It cannot be denied that some early Christians were faced with Jewish persecution, but we must remember that persecution is a very vague term and can mean many different things. A survey through early Christian sources shows that early Christians soon began to see Jews as their principal enemies. But we must not confuse what early Christians thought of Jews in their symbolic universes with what happened in the real world.

We know that some early Christians were killed in events where some Jews were involved. Luke's tells of Stephen's execution in Acts 6-7. According to Acts 6:8-12, some Jews from the Diaspora started the events that led to Stephen's martyrdom, and this detail is hardly Luke's invention.¹⁷¹ But it may be impossible to say what exactly happened on the basis of Luke's account because Luke has modelled the story on Jesus' trial. The lynchmob aspect is more likely to be original in the story, while Luke has emphasized the parallels between this first Christian martyr and Jesus.¹⁷² The reasons for Stephen's death most probably had to do with the proclamation of the so-called Hellenists who criticized the temple and ceased to circumcise gentiles.¹⁷³

Josephus states that James, the brother of Jesus, was executed by the high priest Ananus II (*Ant.* 20.199-203), and Luke relates how Herod Agrippa I killed James, the brother of John (Acts 12:1-3). We do not know if there were any other early Christians who suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Jews. But as Paul speaks of his earlier persecution of Christians, he does not say that he would have

¹⁷¹ See Räisänen 1992, 166.

¹⁷² Cf. Setzer 1994, 171-173.

¹⁷³ See the discussion below in ch. 2.7 pp. 80-81.

been personally responsible for the deaths of some early Christians, even though Luke connects him to the death of Stephen.¹⁷⁴ These early incidents do not speak for a general Jewish persecution of early Christians, but each case has its own distinctive features. It is by no means evident that they were all motivated by religious reasons, but the reasons behind these events may have varied.¹⁷⁵ Early Christian authors saw every single martyrdom as a sign of general persecution and thought that faith in Jesus was the reason for this persecution.¹⁷⁶

Persecution can also mean something other than death threat. We know that Paul "received forty lashes less one" from some Jews (2 Cor 11:24). This is probably a reference to synagogue discipline, to which some passages in the synoptics also refer (e.g. Mark 13:9; Matt 10:17).¹⁷⁷ But Paul boasts here of his many sufferings which make him unlike the false apostles (2 Cor 11:23). The context suggests that all Christians were not disciplined in this way and that mere faith in Jesus did not result in such a punishment.¹⁷⁸ It is, however, quite understandable that, in the minds of early Christians, the incidents that concerned leading missionaries were soon seen as common to all Christians, which may explain more general references to floggings in the synoptics.

Some passages in the Acts suggest that early Christians were subjected to mob violence where some Jews were involved, but Luke describes the crowd violence in a stereotyped way, and so it is difficult to get a glimpse of the real world.¹⁷⁹ Verbal polemics between Christians and non-Christian Jews was more likely than mob violence. The most likely reaction of the vast majority of non-Christian Jews was not the active pursuit of early Christians in whatever form, but a passive rejection of this new faith. In my earlier discussion of rabbinic evidence, I suggested that the rabbis tried to ignore those they regarded as heretics and ostracized them.¹⁸⁰ If this observation has any general relevance at all, it could be that this was an attitude taken by most non-Christian Jews to early Christians. According

¹⁷⁴ Hare 1967, 35.

¹⁷⁵ Hare 1967, 42.

¹⁷⁶ See Hare 1967, 20-43. In a similar vein, E. P. Sanders 1985, 281-287.

¹⁷⁷ See Hare 1967, 43-46; Setzer 1994, 169-170.

¹⁷⁸ Hare 1967, 46.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Setzer 1994, 59-64.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. ch. 2.5 pp. 71-72.

to Christopher Tuckett, silent ignoring was a typical response to Christians by the time the saying gospel Q was finished. Tuckett says also that there is no direct evidence of any systematic persecution or violent attacks in this source.¹⁸¹

The fate of some martyrs and the general atmosphere of rejection had the result that in the *symbolic universes* of early Christians, Jewish persecution soon found its fixed place. The tendency to depict the Jews as the main actors in Jesus' passion and death is clearly seen in all the gospels, and it was only natural that early Christians saw their own situation in the light of what they thought had happened to their Lord. Early Christians did not invent persecutions and martyrs out of thin air, but we must be careful not to confuse how they perceived the surrounding world in their symbolic universes with what happened to them in the real world. "How the reality was perceived, remembered, and manipulated had as profound an effect on the Christian communities as the reality itself," as Stephen G. Wilson notes.¹⁸²

As we move to the period after 70 C.E., the references to Jewish persecution of early Christians become all the more stylized and general.¹⁸³ Of course, we could always say that the lack of signs of Jewish persecution in this period is due to limited source material, but if there is any discernible tendency in early Christian sources on this matter, it is to overstate and dramatize the threat of the Jews, not to play it down. Scholars who imagine Jewish persecution of early Christians at the end of the first century lean mainly on some scattered references in rabbinic sources (the *birkat ha-minim* and *t. Hul.* 2:20–21). But as I have shown in earlier chapters, these references do not warrant the interpretation that the rabbis ever incited persecution of early Christians.

From the Christian side, the main witness for Jewish persecution is said to be found in the second century writings of Justin the Martyr.¹⁸⁴ However, Justin's references to Jewish persecution are

¹⁸¹ Tuckett 1996, 283–323, esp. p. 322.

¹⁸² Wilson 1995, 176.

¹⁸³ J. T. Sanders 1993, 60. James Parkes already noted in 1934 that there is no sign of "any actual persecution of the Christians by the Jews between the death of James the Just and the outbreak of the Bar Cochba revolt." See Parkes 1961 (1934), 93.

¹⁸⁴ Martyn 1979, 67 n. 89; Lindars 1991, 148; Horbury 1998, 154–160.

vague. He does not refer to any single concrete event (the Bar Cochba revolt notwithstanding) nor mention any martyr by name. He refers many times to the willingness of the Jews to kill Christians but hastens to add that they cannot fulfill their evil intentions. These references, as Claudia Setzer notes, prove, "ironically, that Jews, at the time of his writing, were not personally killing or attacking Christians, however he might have attributed to them a desire to do so."¹⁸⁵

Judith Lieu has noted that

persecution and martyrdom become key elements in Christian self-understanding in the second century, providing a context where their distinctive identity could and had to be articulated . . . [It is difficult to] distinguish between the real consequences of actual persecution and the creation of a mental world where persecution and conflict is the norm.¹⁸⁶

I think that it is safe to assume that the development of this kind of mental world had already begun in the first century C.E. We have a lot of evidence which makes understandable that the Johannine Christians felt themselves to be persecuted in a world governed by the Jews, but we have hardly any evidence of Jewish persecution of Christians at the end of the first century. In addition, the portrayal of persecution in John is general and vague. Jesus' sufferings are a model for the sufferings of his followers in the theology of the gospel (15:18). The only concrete actions against Jesus' followers are the expulsion from the synagogue and murder. Even the death threat in John 16:2 is presented on a very general level and contains traditional topics common to all early Christian descriptions.¹⁸⁷ There is no reference to the most likely form of physical violence, synagogue discipline. The symbolic universe reflected in the text may have developed over the course of a long time and be based on those things that the Johannine Christians learned to know of general early

¹⁸⁵ Setzer 1994, 144. In a similar vein with full discussion Lieu 1996, 132–135 and 1998, 279–295; Rajak 2001, 511–533. For a different view, see Horbury 1998, 154–160. Horbury takes all that Justin says of the Jews at face value and speaks of "corporate Jewish rejection of Christianity" (p. 158). Justin shows that "Diaspora contact with the Holy Land continued, and that office-holders and teachers in the communities began to form links with the nascent patriarchate and rabbinic movement." Therefore Justin speaks of "continuity and cohesion in the second-century Jewish community." This all is extremely unlikely, to say the least, in the light of recent developments in the study of early rabbinic Judaism and archaeology in the Diaspora.

¹⁸⁶ Lieu 1996, 282.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Segal 1981, 408 n. 44; Becker 590; J. T. Sanders 1993, 45; Setzer 1994, 96.

Christian experience and maybe, at least to some extent, also experienced themselves.¹⁸⁸ But we do not, however, need to assume any contemporary real world persecution behind this symbolic universe.

I do not think that John is making "defamatory inventions"¹⁸⁹ or that he is "indulging in paranoid fantasy,"¹⁹⁰ even though I do not accept everything John says about the Jews as a direct reflection of the real world situation behind the text. It should be borne in mind that all religious groups create their distinctive symbolic universes around those things that are most important to them. A part of the Qumran community cherished the traditions of the Jerusalem temple and imagined a world where they are a holy priesthood that goes to the war against the nations at the end of time; the rabbis devoted their lives to the study of the Torah and halakhic discussions and imagined a world where all goes according to their rulings; the Johannine Christians believed they had received God's final revelation in Jesus and imagined a world where Jesus and his followers are in a fierce conflict with the hostile world represented by the Jews. These imagined symbolic worlds are not true in the sense that the nations would have waged war against the Qumran community, the Jewish community would have followed all the rulings of the rabbis, and the Johannine Christians would have been under a constant threat of death from the Jews. But these worlds are not lies either in the sense that they would have been created to deceive. These groups created their distinctive symbolic universes so that they could understand themselves better in relation to the surrounding world, no matter how distorted a picture they may have had of that world.

It is quite conceivable that such evil things as the killing of the righteous take place in the symbolic worlds of religious groups, even though such things have not happened in the real world. According to rabbinic polemical tradition, the Shammaites murdered the Hillelites, which is highly unlikely.¹⁹¹ Many scholars today are ready to admit

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Hengel 1993, 288-289.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. De Boer 2001, 262. De Boer says that if the charges against the Jews in John are not taken as historically plausible actions of certain Jews, they must be "the defamatory inventions of the evangelist." De Boer argues, of course, for the former alternative.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Rensberger 1999, 127. Rensberger says that it may not be possible to reconcile the expulsion from the synagogue with what is known of Jewish practice from other ancient sources; however, we should not suspect this piece of information because "there is no reason to think that John is indulging in paranoid fantasy."

¹⁹¹ Cf. *y. Šabb.* 1:4. This charge is a late part of the anti-Shammaite polemic

that the persecutions described in the book of Revelation never took place to the extent described but are "located in the expectations of the author."¹⁹² Even 1 John 3:15 indicates that one Johannine party feared the murderous plans of the other, even though this expectation is most probably exaggerated.¹⁹³ It seems that scholars are ready to accept John's vague reference to the Jews killing Christians (16:2) as historically plausible, while they usually dismiss the passages suggesting that Christians killed each other.

I think we should not accept John's portrayal of murderous Jews as a direct reflection of the reality behind the text because other evidence remains meager. We should not try to reconstruct some unique and particular circumstances unattested in other sources to explain John's references to the Jews. Rather, I suggest that John fits quite well with what we know of the development of Jewish-Christian relations from other sources. These sources suggest that the break between early Christians and other Jews resulted from their views on central markers of Jewish identity rather than from their faith in Jesus as such. We do not need to assume a violent policy by a Jewish establishment to explain this break.

2.7. *John in the Context of Jewish-Christians Relations in the First Century*

One of the basic assumptions of recent consensus is that the confession of Jesus as the Messiah was the reason why the Johannine Christians were expelled from the synagogue. It is assumed that those who believed in Jesus were otherwise completely observant and kept the whole law. The separation from the Jewish community thus took

characteristic of the party of Hillel. See Neusner 1971, 266-268. Cf. also E. P. Sanders 1990, 88. Sanders notes that "the Shammaites and Hillelites did not actually kill one another." Hezser 1997, 243. Hezser says that one should not take the statement in *y. Šabb.* 1:4 too literally, although it "indicates the hostility which went with disagreements."

¹⁹² Räisänen 1997, 40. For the full discussion, see L. L. Thompson 1990.

¹⁹³ Cf. Brown 1982, 447: "The reference to murder [in 1 John 3:15] is hyperbole for maltreatment." Rensberger 1997, 99: "Verse 15 then makes explicit the symbolic meaning of the example of Cain: the murderer is anyone who hates a brother or sister. This seems, at first glance, a very sweeping statement... [but] it is not necessary to suppose that the opponents posed an actual mortal danger to other Christians."

place against the will of the Johannine Christians: "They did not reject the synagogue (i.e. 'Judaism'); the synagogue rejected them."¹⁹⁴ This view does not take into account the possibility that some decisions of the Johannine group contributed to their alienation from other Jews.¹⁹⁵

It is not likely that such a theological conviction as faith in Jesus as the Messiah was the main reason for the separation of the Johannine Christians from their parent Jewish community. It is, however, understandable that this faith is presented as the main reason for the conflict with the Jews in John. The obsession of the Jews in John with faith in Jesus reflects the self-understanding of the Johannine community, where this faith had a crucial role. Faith in Jesus is at the heart of John's theological agenda, but it does not follow from this that this faith was originally the most crucial issue in the controversies that led to the separation of the Johannine community. E. P. Sanders has pointed out difficulties in accepting the reasons early Christians give for their sufferings and rejection. Early Christians saw themselves as being persecuted "for the sake of Christ," or "for his name's sake," which shows that they understood their faith in Jesus as the reason for the persecution; nevertheless, as Sanders notes, "the problem is that we cannot be sure just what it was that the *other side* . . . found offensive."¹⁹⁶

Other early Christian evidence suggests that it was not theological disagreements concerning the role of Jesus as the Messiah that evoked the controversy between some non-Christian Jews and Jesus' early followers. The critical study of early sources suggests that not all those who believed in Jesus were threatened by non-Christian Jews, even though early Christian writers have a tendency not to make any distinctions when they depict the Jewish persecution of early Christians. After telling of the emergence of the so-called Hellenists in the early church, Luke briefly mentions the persecution that followed Stephen's death (Acts 8:1-3).¹⁹⁷ Luke says that the persecution concerned the whole church in Jerusalem, but his picture of the

¹⁹⁴ Von Wahlde 2001, 443. See also Martyn 1977, 158.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Schäfer 1975, 122: "Die Trennung von Juden und Christen erfolgte nicht durch die *birkat ha-mîn* und die Festlegung des jüdischen Kanons. Sie war überhaupt keine einseitige jüdische 'Willenserklärung', sondern ein sich über einen längeren Zeitraum erstreckender Prozess, auf den *beide* Seiten Einfluss nahmen" (italics original).

¹⁹⁶ E. P. Sanders 1985, 284 (italics original).

¹⁹⁷ For a detailed discussion of the Hellenists, see Räisänen 1992, 149-202.

persecution is highly "schematic and unrealistic."¹⁹⁸ Luke's generalizing picture is in line with his description of Christians as facing a constant threat from the leaders of the Jews. Luke clearly has his own theological and political motives for depicting the Jews as persecuting all early Christians.¹⁹⁹

Despite his generalizing tendency, Luke admits that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem although others left the city as a result of the persecution (Acts 8:1). It is not very likely that the leaders of the early Christian movement would have been able to stay in Jerusalem if this persecution concerned *all* those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah and not a more specific group among the early Christians. It is more likely that these events had to do only with the group of Hellenists. The reasons for this early persecution were connected to their criticism of the temple; it may also be that the observance of the Torah and especially the question of circumcision played a prominent role in this early controversy.²⁰⁰

Paul seems to support the conclusion that it was not faith in Jesus as such but observance of some Jewish practices that was crucial in the early controversy. In Gal 1:13–14, Paul connects his persecution of the church to his great zeal for Judaism and "the traditions of my ancestors." It is likely that

the zeal for the 'traditions of the fathers' does not refer to theological doctrines. Observance of the law is in focus throughout the passage. . . . Circumcision and the other cherished customs were at stake.²⁰¹

Paul's letter to the Galatians generally shows that, still in the 50's when Paul wrote this letter, circumcision was a major point of dispute between Paul and his opponents. In Gal 5:11 (cf. also 6:12) Paul regards circumcision as a means of avoiding persecution, no matter what kind of persecution he has in mind here.²⁰² The letter to the Galatians also makes it clear that the apostles, who did not share Paul's liberal stance on circumcision, were in Jerusalem; there is

¹⁹⁸ Räisänen 1992, 156.

¹⁹⁹ For Luke's motives, see J. T. Sanders 1987, 304–317; Wilson 1995, 56–71.

²⁰⁰ See Räisänen 1992, 201–202.

²⁰¹ Räisänen 1992, 23. See also Räisänen 2001, 174; Cohen 1999c, 175–195. Cohen notes that just as in Gal 2:14 the term *ἰουδαΐζειν* means "to follow the customs and manners of the Jews," *ἰουδαϊσμός* in Gal 1:14 means "the observance of Jewish traditions."

²⁰² Räisänen 1992, 186.

nothing to suggest that they were suffering persecution at the time Paul wrote his letter (Gal 2:1-10).²⁰³

Paul's reference to the persecution of Christians in 1 Thess 2:14-16 suggests that he has in mind actions that probably concerned only a certain group of early Christians.²⁰⁴ Paul uses several traditional *topoi* in 1 Thess 2:15, as he describes the persecution in Judaea; he says that the Jews "killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone." In v. 16, however, Paul clearly differs from traditional polemics against the Jews as he says that the Jews "hinder us from speaking to the gentiles so that they may be saved."²⁰⁵ It is noteworthy that when Paul ceases using traditional motifs and gives an actual example of Jewish persecution, he has in mind the problems related to the gentile mission. Presumably, circumcision was again one of the most important of these problems.

It seems that not all early Christians were being persecuted alike. The reason why some early Christians were harassed by their fellow Jews was not their faith in Jesus as such, but deviation from religious practices based on the Torah.

It is understandable that faith in Jesus as the Messiah was not the main cause of early conflict in the light of those beliefs that were connected to the expectation of a messiah in first century Judaism. The expectation of a messiah could find support in some scriptural passages (e.g., Jer 23:5-6; Isa 9:7), and we have evidence that this expectation was alive at the beginning of the common era (*Pss. Sol.* 17; 1QS 9:9-11 and some other texts of the Qumran community). However, it seems that many scholars have overstated the role of messianic expectations among different Jewish groups. As E. P. Sanders notes, "the expectation of a messiah was not the rule."²⁰⁶ Furthermore,

²⁰³ E. P. Sanders 1985, 283-284.

²⁰⁴ This passage has often been regarded as an interpolation, especially because it seems to contradict what Paul says in Rom 11:25ff. But the differences between these two passages may be explained on the basis of different situations. See Holtz 1986, 97 and 109-110; Räisänen 1987, 263 n. 171.

²⁰⁵ For the traditional topics in v. 15, see Holtz 1986, 103-106. Holtz says that v. 16a marks "eine erhebliche Verschiebung" from traditional polemics (p. 106). In v. 16, Paul may refer to his own difficulties with 'the Jews,' who have tried to hinder his mission to the gentiles. Cf. Räisänen 1987, 263 n. 171.

²⁰⁶ E. P. Sanders 1992, 295. Cf also W. D. Davies 1999, 32: "There is little in the Tanak or in later Jewish sources to justify the elevation ascribed to the Messiah in Christian theology."

there was not a fixed idea of what a messiah would be like. Some texts from the Qumran community show that the expectation of at least two or perhaps even three different messianic figures had an important part in the community's hopes for the future.²⁰⁷ Although the expectation of multiple messianic figures would have been unusual among other Jews, we have no evidence that these messianic beliefs had any role in the development that led to the separation of the Qumran community from the surrounding society. Messianic beliefs did not lead to an open schism between different groups if they were not connected to the questions concerning the *practice* of religion.²⁰⁸

I do not suggest that the question of Jesus' messianity would not have evoked any discussion among non-Christian Jews. It is most probable that the claims that Jesus is the Messiah were debated among non-Christian Jews, and, to the best of our knowledge, these claims were refuted by the majority of the Jews. As Stephen G. Wilson says,

messianic differences could lead to puzzlement and frustration that the Jews would not believe, but rarely to outright schism—precisely what we would expect since Judaism itself allowed for a considerable range of messianic convictions.²⁰⁹

The Christian claims for Jesus' messianity could have become a real stumbling block between Christian and non-Christian Jews in a situation in which similar kinds of claims were made for some other messianic candidate. This may have been one of the reasons why Christians were persecuted during the Bar Cochba revolt because,

²⁰⁷ For different messianic figures at Qumran, see Beall 2001, 125–146.

²⁰⁸ Thus also W. D. Davies 1999, 60. Cf. also pp. 206–208. Davies says of the Johannine community that “it was not messianism as such that the sages objected to but the Christian variety of it.” This leads Davies to conclude that in the period after 70 C.E. “the center of the sages’ concentration had shifted to the claims of Jesus of Nazareth, which now that so many Gentiles had so obviously embraced Jesus, was taken with a new seriousness by the sages.” Therefore, according to Davies, “until the success of the Gentile mission—a visible fact, not merely a speculation—had emerged, the sages could have regarded early Christianity as a passing phenomenon.” I do not accept Davies’ views of rabbinic Judaism as the main opponent of the Johannine Christians, but he is probably right as he says that the growing role of gentile Christianity was important to the separation of Christianity from Judaism. Also Schiffman (1985, 75–78) says that the ascendancy of gentile Christianity made the rabbis deal with Christians as members of different religion. This suggests that the faith in Jesus as the Messiah was not *alone* a sufficient reason for the parting of the ways.

²⁰⁹ Wilson 1995, 7.

at least in some circles, Bar Cochba was regarded as the Messiah.²¹⁰ But the atmosphere and circumstances during the revolt were exceptional, not typical of Jewish-Christian relations in general. The example of Bar Cochba shows, on the one hand, that in some particular circumstances Christian faith in Jesus as the Messiah could have become unacceptable in the eyes of other Jews. On the other hand, however, even some rabbis and part of the masses regarded Bar Cochba as the Messiah, which shows that it was fully possible to adopt messianic beliefs and remain a loyal Jew.²¹¹

The particular circumstances of the Bar Cochba revolt notwithstanding, it seems that the early Christian faith in Jesus as the Messiah could lead to an open break with non-Christian Jews only in the case of those who somehow called into question the significance of some religious practices on the basis of this faith. As Reuven Kimelman notes, "one who celebrates as a Jew functions as a Jew." However, Kimelman continues that

this does not negate the assumption that change in belief can generate change in ritual—only that it is change of ritual itself that brings about a shift in the boundary markers of religious community.²¹²

The faith in Jesus as the Messiah may have had an important role in the separation of early Christians from other Jews if it led to the abandonment of some central Jewish religious practices. This is what happened in the case of the Hellenists and later in the Pauline churches, and this may have happened in the community of Matthew, although he emphasizes in his gospel that Jesus has not come to abolish the

²¹⁰ Wilson 1995, 7. For the question whether Bar Cochba was regarded as the Messiah or not, see Reinhartz 1989, 171–194. Reinhartz argues that "there was no single view or perception of Bar Kosiba among the rabbis or indeed among the populace as a whole" (p. 194). Some circles regarded him as the Messiah, which evoked criticism when revolt failed. Some other circles were impressed by Bar Cochba's success and regarded him as a great military leader but not necessarily as the Messiah. Both these views probably originated already from the period of the revolt's success.

²¹¹ For a different view, see Wengst 1992, 99. Wengst says that the faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the messianic claims made for Bar Cochba were different. No one regarded Bar Cochba as the Messiah after the failure of his revolt, whereas faith in Jesus as the Messiah emerged only after his death. Wengst says that the early Christian faith in Jesus as the Messiah was final and eschatological, which made it look like a sectarian self-understanding and thus was unacceptable for non-Christian Jews. But Wengst fails to explain why not all who believed Jesus to be the *resurrected* Messiah were persecuted.

²¹² Kimelman 1999, 305.

law and the prophets but to fulfil them (Matt 5:17). After discussing Matthew's view of salvation, Petri Luomanen concludes that

we can be quite sure that his [i.e., Matthew's] stance has been more liberal than in the communities of his Jewish contemporaries. Most probably, circumcision was not required in connection with the baptism, and food laws and Sabbath observance were not practiced literally.²¹³

Craig E. Evans is on the right track when he says that "Christianity's radical view of proselyzation" explains "why Christianity eventually emerged as an essentially non-Jewish religious movement."²¹⁴ Evans also notes that "the real cause of the rift was the role of Torah" and not "High Christology," even though this is claimed by some scholars.²¹⁵ Questions related to Jesus' person could have been significant if they changed the attitude of the believers to the particular markers of Jewish identity.²¹⁶

2.8. Conclusion: A New Way to Assess John's Jewishness

This survey has made it clear that we can no longer regard John's portrayal of the Jews and Jewishness as a response to the hostile policy of the rabbinic establishment. The separation of the Johannine group from the synagogue was not due to the violent policy of the early rabbinic movement. There was not a strong leadership class in post-70 Jewish communities which could have defined a new orthodoxy where there would have been no place for those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah. Early Christian evidence does not yield support for the idea that Christians were facing Jewish persecution

²¹³ Luomanen 1998, 283.

²¹⁴ Evans 1993, 12.

²¹⁵ Evans 1993, 12 n. 18. Thus also Stemberger 1977, 18; Grabbe 1977, 150–151; Kimelman 1999, 305.

²¹⁶ For a different view, see Luz 1999, 64–73. Luz sees that the Christian confession of Jesus played a crucial role in the partings of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. Luz notes that the significance of this issue is in peculiar contrast to the fact that in Judaism the messianic question was not usually a starting point for a schism: "Der Autoritätsanspruch Jesu war so umfassend, dass es zum Konflikt kommen *musste*" (p. 70, italics original). But if Jesus already started the separation of Christianity from Judaism, it is difficult to understand why Jesus' followers were, long after Jesus' death, very much caught up in discussions concerning the central markers of Jewish identity. E. P. Sanders notes (1985, 246) that such controversies are incomprehensible had Jesus already taken a critical attitude towards the law. Thus also Räisänen 1992, 164.

sometime at the end of the first century. It seems also that it was especially those matters connected to basic matters of Jewish identity that caused a break between some early Christians and other Jews, not merely faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

I suggest that things did not go differently in the case of the Johannine community. We do not need an outdated view of early rabbis as the new leaders of the people to explain the break between the Johannine community and its parent body. Instead of speculating what the alleged opponents of the Johannine Christians may have done, I propose that we should ask how these Christians themselves saw their faith in relation to basic markers of Jewish identity. This leads to the question: What is John's relationship to central matters of Jewish identity? I search for an answer to this question in the following chapters, where I analyze what John says about some matters that were essential to Jewishness. I suggest that this analysis shows that the relationship of the Johannine community to their Jewish heritage was highly ambivalent, which speaks for a growing alienation from the community's Jewish roots.