

First Century Christian Diversity: Historical Evidence of a Social Phenomenon

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***Abstract:** In light of Ken Howard’s recent “religion singularity” phenomenon, this article attempts to ascertain the nature of Christian diversity during the last seventy years of the first century (roughly 30 to 100 CE). It offers an examination of the two largest Christian movements that existed before the second century, as well as when those movements may have begun and the locations they most likely flourished. The article argues that the earliest Christian tradition was the one persecuted by the Apostle Paul and that later, two breakaway movements splintered off from this tradition: the Pauline and Ebionite movements. The paper concludes that during the first century, of these two splinter movements, the Pauline movement likely preceded that of the Ebionite movement, though they both flourished in many of the same locations. Of interest is the finding that all three Christian movements (the pre-Pauline tradition, Pauline, and Ebionite) flourished in Asia Minor, a cosmopolitan sub-continent which appears to have served as a geographic information nucleus through which diverse ideas easily proliferated.*

***Keywords:** Christianity, Church Demographics, Christian Diversity, First Century Church, Religion Singularity*

Introduction

ACCORDING TO KENNETH HOWARD, present-day institutional Christianity is experiencing a sociological phenomenon which he terms the “religion singularity.”¹ The phenomenon consists of a global expansion in the number of “new and breakaway” denominations or movements.² This explosion of movements outpaces the overall growth rate of the Christian population in a way that, according to Howard, has apparently never happened before in the history of the religion and may result in a change significant enough to be considered a paradigm shift.³ In addition, Howard concludes that because these various new movements will presumably be different in nature from one another, a new age of Christian diversity may be on the horizon, harkening back to the diversity of the first century, a time during which Howard contends there were “many Christianities.”⁴

¹ Kenneth W. Howard, “The Religion Singularity: A Demographic Crisis Destabilizing and Transforming Institutional Christianity,” *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 77–93, <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v07i02/77-93>.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

³ *Ibid.*, 77, 78, 88, 90.

⁴ Howard, “The Religion Singularity,” 87, 90. Elsewhere, Howard notes two genera of Christianity in the first century, which he designates “The Nazarene Jewish Christian Movement” and “The Pauline Gentile Christianity Movement” (Ken Howard, *Paradox: Creating Christian Community Beyond Us and Them* [Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010], 67–76).

Howard is not the only scholar who has studied the varieties of Christianity in the early church. In his landmark work, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, theologian and scholar, Walter Bauer, described a number of Christian movements that prevailed in the second century.⁵ Interestingly, Bauer chose not to consider New Testament literature as a source for his investigation, and he altogether omitted inquiry into the mid-first century.⁶ Similarly New Testament scholar and church historian, Bart Ehrman, catalogued “the wide diversity of early Christianity.”⁷ Here, Ehrman focused on second and third century variations in Christian theology.⁸ Furthermore, Everett Ferguson, in his edited volume *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity*, concedes that this diversity was “present from [Christianity’s] beginning and continuing even after orthodoxy was firmly institutionalized.”⁹ Ferguson’s volume consists of essays from a number of scholars which deal with diverse Christian teachings from the second century and later.

Much like the aforementioned studies, this article also examines diversity in early Christianity; but, in consideration of Howard’s comparison between the twenty-first and first century church, it takes on the task of investigating how Christian diversity manifested itself during that *earliest* period (i.e. from about 30 to 100 CE). This research is important because understanding the similarities and differences between the “Christianities” of the very earliest era furnishes students of religion with an historical foundation upon which to construct subsequent understandings of the social and theological history of the church. Conducting such research should lead to a more accurate knowledge of which Christian elements (if any) were primary, which of these teachings persevered, and which were abandoned. This may also prompt further investigation into *why* certain elements were retained or jettisoned.¹⁰ In short, the research should lend to a greater comprehension of how Christianity evolved from its earliest traditions and the degree to which scholars can reasonably consider those elements paradigmatic to pre-Pauline Christianity. Moreover, this research is necessary because it will help temper assertions that may exaggerate the degree to which first century Christianity was either diverse or unified in its beliefs. An investigation of this type is relevant due to the current cultural emphasis on religious pluralism and diversity.

This article, therefore, offers an examination of the two main movements that broke away from the earliest detectable traditions of the Jesus movement, as well as when those movements may have begun and the locations they most likely flourished. It argues that the

⁵ Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit Und Ketzerei Im Ältesten Christentum* [Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity], 2nd ed., ed. Georg Strecker, Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie 10 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr [Siebeck], 1963), 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3, 5, 81–98. Bauer dealt with those doctrines that emerged in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century, such as those mentioned in John’s Apocalypse and those in the Pastorals, but these doctrines likely did not precede the pre-Pauline or Pauline traditions which manifested in the late 30s and 40s CE. Bauer also treats the topics of Marcionism, Gnosticism, and other diverse doctrines in Edessa, but it is more likely that these emerged and flourish in the second century rather than in the first.

⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), ix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2–3. Specifically, Ehrman focused on Ebionism, Marcionism, Gnosticism, and Montanism. The last three of these are deemed by scholars to have flourished in the second century. Ebionism is treated in this present paper as one of the first century Christianities, though it is likely not the earliest.

⁹ Everett Ferguson, ed., “Volume Introduction,” in *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity*, Recent Studies in Early Christianity 4 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), ix.

¹⁰ See also, Arland J. Hultgren, *The Rise of Normative Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 7-18.

earliest Christian tradition was the one persecuted by the Apostle Paul and that later, two breakaway movements splintered off from this tradition: the Pauline and Ebionite movements. The paper concludes that during the first century, of these two splinter movements, the Pauline movement likely preceded the Ebionite movement, though they both flourished in many of the same locations. Of interest is the finding that all three Christian movements (the pre-Pauline tradition, Pauline, and Ebionite) flourished in Asia Minor, a cosmopolitan sub-continent which appears to have served as a geographic nucleus through which diverse ideas easily proliferated.

The Pre-Pauline Oral Tradition

In his Epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul offers evidence for a pre-Pauline oral tradition when he mentions “the faith he once tried to destroy” (Gal. 1:23, NRSV).¹¹ This “faith” would have had to exist prior to Paul’s conversion, which likely took place two to three years after Jesus’s crucifixion (ca. 30).¹² Paul probably received an introduction to this initial version of Christianity from Peter and James three years after his conversion (that is, ca. 35 to 36).¹³ Ehrman is emphatic about this and highlights the timing by stating, “I should stress . . . that Paul indicates on several occasions that the traditions about Jesus are ones that he himself inherited from those who came *before* him.”¹⁴ There are no extant recordings of any other form of Christianity during the period between the crucifixion and Paul’s conversion, though some core elements of the oral tradition may be discernable in Paul’s writings, particularly through primitive creeds.¹⁵

In addition, Paul suggests he had appropriated this oral tradition for himself. According to his Galatian Epistle, Christians in Judaea had heard, “The one [i.e. Paul] who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith” (Gal. 1:23). The text suggests that Paul had subscribed to and began proclaiming this earlier oral tradition from the years 36 to 40 because, as Ehrman suggests, Aretas (d. ca. 40), the king of the Nabateans, sought to kill Paul because of his newfound faith (2 Cor. 11:31–2).¹⁶ However, Eric Eve cautions that the evidence must not be pressed too much since “this is, of course, more directly a statement about what Paul wanted his Galatian audience to believe than what actually happened.”¹⁷ Based on this, it is possible that Paul adopted the earliest oral traditions about Jesus, at least initially.

¹¹ Howard, *Paradoxy*, 72. This article draws data from the least disputed texts of the Pauline Epistles (the *Hauptbriefe*), namely 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans.

¹² Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, Pbk. ed. (2012; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2013), 130–31. Ehrman places Paul’s conversion around 32 or 33 CE, and Jesus’s crucifixion around 30 or 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 131, 143–45. See also, Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (2013; repr., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 159–69.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129; emphasis added. See also, Gal. 1:17.

¹⁵ Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (1950; repr., New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315836720> and Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 159–69. While portions of the canonical gospels and the Acts of the Apostles cover the period between the crucifixion and Paul’s conversion, their historicity is disputed by some scholars. Regardless, whether one accepts their accuracy or not, they do not attest to a form of Christianity that stands in *contradiction* to the version Paul would have persecuted.

¹⁶ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 130.

¹⁷ Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 168.

It is also apparent that from about 35 to 49, pre-Pauline Christianity, to which Paul claimed to continue, saw the beginnings of a sophisticated Christology, to the extent that Martin Hengel suggests, “In essentials more happened in christology [*sic*] within these few years than in the whole subsequent seven hundred years of church history.”¹⁸ An example may be seen in Paul’s identification of Jesus as “Christ,” “Lord,” and God’s “Son” (Gal. 1:1, 3; 4:4). Paul also understood Jesus to have been raised “from the dead” (Gal. 1:1), who will return again one day (1 Thess. 1:10). According to Paul, he had not developed these christological assertions on his own, but rather had received them from others (1 Cor. 15:3), possibly from Peter and James, particularly the notion that Jesus had been raised from the dead.¹⁹ Ehrman suggests that these traditions had been handed to Paul in much the same way rabbinic teaching was passed on and that they may have been the core of Paul’s message.²⁰ That these christological features remained hallmarks of Paul’s message until at least as late as the year 62 is borne out by similar declarations in his later Epistle to the Romans (written ca. 61–62). Here, Paul writes that Jesus “was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 1:4). Here, Paul cites an ancient creed that suggests continuity between his christological message and the earliest oral traditions.²¹

There is also reason to believe that this primitive Christian movement can be identified with, or at least closely associated with, a group of Christians known as the Nazarenes. The earliest implicit reference to the group appears in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*. Here, Justin describes fellowship with these Jewish Christians and contrasts them with those who do not believe in Christ’s virgin birth (*Dial.* 47–48), potentially linking them to a more nuanced Christology that is later described in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (ca. 80–85). The earliest explicit reference to the Nazarenes comes from Epiphanius (*Anc.* 13.3; *Pan.* 29), who stated they existed prior to the name “Christian” being assigned to disciples in Antioch, which means the Nazarenes may predate Paul’s conversion (*Pan.* 29.1). That they predate the Ebionites is also apparent to Ray Pritz, who concludes, “We have little reason to doubt the other statements of Epiphanius which consistently tell us that the Ebionites were later than the Nazarenes.”²² Furthermore, if the testimony of the Acts of the Apostles (2:10) is to be believed, it may be that inductees to the movement were residents of Rome. If these inductees, having embraced a new messianic movement, returned to Rome and started a church in that city, then there exists a possible connection between Rome and the pre-Pauline oral traditions in Jerusalem.

From a demographic standpoint, how many of the earliest followers of Jesus existed or where their churches were located remains uncertain. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe, based on Paul’s testimony in Galatians, that they began in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18–2:10) and spread to Asia Minor, particularly the Galatian churches (1:1–3:1).²³ According to Rodney Stark, roughly five weeks after the crucifixion of Jesus to the year 40, the number of Christians in the

¹⁸ Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), 39–40.

¹⁹ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 118, 120–27; Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 159–69. Concerning this pre-Pauline oral tradition, Howard asserts, “We know that it was diverse, including Jews from a wide variety of religious origins (from Pharisees to Sadducees to Essenes to proselytes), socioeconomic levels (from fishermen to members of the Sanhedrin), and national origins (from Judea to Egypt, and from Mesopotamia to Rome)” (Howard, *Paradoxy*, 70).

²⁰ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 118–25.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118–19, 130.

²² Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period Until Its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1988), 38.

²³ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 130–31.

world grew from an initial 120 to 1,000.²⁴ A significant portion of this movement would have adhered to a pre-Pauline form of Christianity, likely having spread among congregations in Judaea, Syria, and Asia Minor (Gal. 1:2, 17, 21, 22; 2:11). It is possible that they spread further, but historians are uncertain how far the initial Jesus traditions proliferated.²⁵ Some patristic writers claimed adherents of these initial traditions also took up residence in Pella of the Decapolis across the Jordan River (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.5.3; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 29.7; 30.2).²⁶

In summary, the first of the oral traditions about Jesus existed as early as 30 CE and likely consisted of a Christology that regarded Jesus as the risen Christ, Lord, and Son of God. According to Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, the earliest leaders, such as Peter and James, passed this tradition on a few years after his conversion, though the precise content of what was passed on is unknown.²⁷ Adherents to this initial faith likely wielded influence in Judaea, Syria, and Asia Minor prior to 40. Paul claimed to embrace this tradition about Jesus for at least twenty-five years (i.e. from 35 to 61). However, during those years, Paul apparently developed his own modified form of Christianity, becoming the first noticeable breakaway from the earliest traditions. This "Pauline Christianity," while claiming to retain pre-Pauline beliefs, ended up abandoning certain Judaistic practices in order to proselytize Gentiles outside of Jerusalem.

Pauline Christianity

Pauline Christianity is attested as early as the year 49 when he wrote to Christians in Macedonia, commending their belief in the resurrection (1 Thess. 1:10).²⁸ Indeed, in each of the *Hauptbriefe*, Paul stated his own belief in Jesus' resurrection (Gal. 1:1; 1 Cor. 15:3–4; 2 Cor. 4:14; Phil. 3:10), a belief he likely held until the end of his life ca. 64 (cf. Rom. 10:9).²⁹ However, Pauline Christianity was also a breakaway movement inasmuch as it abandoned certain practices that the initial movement embraced due to it being thoroughly Jewish. Thus, despite one Jesus tradition claiming kingdom entrance is dependent upon a person's faithfulness to Torah (Matt. 5:18–20), a significant evolution occurred as Pauline Christianity abandoned strict compliance to the Mosaic law. He no longer required circumcision (Gal. 2:3; 1 Cor. 7:18) and even discouraged its practice (Gal. 5:2). Similarly, Paul did not enforce Jewish dietary restrictions (Rom. 14), nor did he forbid table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 1:11–14). In general, he did not encourage strict devotion to Torah for either his own Gentile followers (Gal. 3) or for those Gentiles who had become Christians under the leadership of others, such as Roman Christians (Rom. 3–4). From this distinctive feature, Ehrman observes,

²⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 179–82.

²⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 69.

²⁶ See also, Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 122–27.

²⁷ Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 168.

²⁸ Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 117–18.

²⁹ Cf. Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 93 and Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 121–22.

Thus, to be members of God's covenantal people, it was not necessary for gentiles to become Jews. They did not need to be circumcised, observe the Sabbath, keep kosher, or follow any of the other prescriptions of the law. They needed only to believe in the death and resurrection of the messiah Jesus. This was an earth-shattering realization for Paul. Prior to this, the followers of Jesus—the first Christians—were of course Jews who understood that he was the messiah who had died and been raised from the dead. But they knew this as the act of the Jewish god given to his people, the Jews. Certainly gentiles could find this salvation as well. But first they had to be Jewish. Not for Paul. Jew or gentile, it did not matter. What mattered was faith in Christ.³⁰

Demographically, as with the initial movement, it is difficult to tell how many embraced Pauline Christianity, but during the years 40 and 100, when Pauline Christianity arose, Stark maintains that the number of Christians in the world increased from 1,000 to 7,434.³¹ During the church's pre-Pauline period, the Christian religion experienced a growth rate of 24% per year, but that growth rate slowed to a rate of about 3% during the Pauline era of the first century.³² According to Paul's Epistles, between the late 40s to about 100 CE, new churches appeared in cities across the Roman Empire while Pauline Christianity likely competed with other Christianities throughout Syria, Asia Minor, Cyprus, Macedonia, Achaia, and Rome.³³

In summary, the Pauline version of Christianity made its appearance, at the latest, around the year 49 and possibly earlier. This second form of Christianity possibly retained some of the christological features of the earliest oral traditions and passed on the belief that Jesus rose from the dead. However, in some areas of practice, Pauline Christianity differed from the initial movement, at least as far as its Gentile population was concerned. It forsook circumcision, the Jewish dietary restrictions, and strict obedience to the Mosaic law. The period during which Pauline Christianity flourished saw a slowing in the growth rate of Christianity as compared to the period preceding it, but an increase in the number of churches. Pauline Christianity probably wielded influence from Syria, across Asia Minor, and as far west as Rome. In time, a third major form of Christianity broke from the original oral traditions.

Ebionite Christianity

This section describes a form of Jewish Christianity that has come to be known as "Ebionism."³⁴ The earliest explicit witness to Ebionite Christianity comes from Irenæus in the second century.³⁵ According to him, the Ebionites rejected Pauline Christianity, denied the virgin birth of Jesus, and subscribed to only Matthew's Gospel (*Haer.* 1.26.1–2). However,

³⁰ Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 80.

³¹ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 183.

³² These numbers assume Christianity began the year Jesus died per Ehrman's estimation (i.e. 30 CE), and that Stark is correct about the initial group of Christians consisting of 120 persons, growing to 1000 by the year 40.

³³ Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 43–65; Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 186.

³⁴ Petri Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects and Gospels* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 17–49, 161–65, 233, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004217430>. There probably exists another grouping within Ebionism known as the Symmachians. Here, Ambrosiaster's description of the Symmachians matches other patristic characterizations of the Ebionites (*Comm. Gal.* Prologue), and even Eusebius states that Symmachus was himself an Ebionite (*Hist. eccl.* 6.17). See also A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1973), 54, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004268401>.

³⁵ Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 68.

Epiphanius testified in the fourth century that the Ebionites used a *Gospel of the Ebionites* which appears to be a “harmonization” of the Synoptic Gospels (*Pan.* 30).³⁶ He also reported that their edition of Matthew was retracted, leaving out the virgin birth narrative (30.13–14).³⁷ Epiphanius informed his readers that the Ebionites took their anti-Pauline stance due to the apostle’s rejection of circumcision (30.16).

With regard to Ebionite Christology, Irenæus reported the Ebionites believed “Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again” (*Haer.* 3.21.1).³⁸ In other words, according to the earliest account of Ebionite Christology, it appears they believed only the *man* Jesus suffered on the cross while the Christ spirit departed Jesus prior to his crucifixion. In this way, Ebionite Christology differed from what Paul had preached, “that *Christ* died” (1 Cor. 15:3; emphasis added). While there are indications that Paul believed in Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God, whose being was placed into a woman (1 Cor. 10:4, 15:47; Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3), Ehrman concludes, “the Ebionites saw Jesus as completely human and not divine.”³⁹

Moreover, while Paul indicated there was discord between him and some unnamed individuals who disagreed with his anti-circumcision doctrine (Gal. 2:4–5), Paul also argued that he had received endorsement from the leaders of the Jerusalem church (vv. 7–9). Not surprisingly, then, Irenæus reports that the Ebionites “repudiate the Apostle Paul, maintaining that he was an apostate from the law” (*Haer.* 1.26.2). This may serve as the reason why, according to Origen (*Cels.* 5.65), the Ebionites rejected the Pauline Epistles, and it may also be their motive, according to Epiphanius (*Pan.* 30.16), for making false accusations against Paul.

The question of when Ebionite Christianity first manifested remains difficult to answer with precision. Petri Luomanen suggests the possibility that Ebionite Christianity formed when Christians fled from Jerusalem in the wake of Paul’s persecution (Acts 8) and began to proselytize in Samaria, but this suggestion is based on tenuous inferences, and even Luomanen implies it is speculative at best.⁴⁰ The question then becomes, what is the *most likely* date of the Ebionite movement’s inception in relation to the initial Christian movement and subsequent Pauline Christianity? One may be able to infer a possible date based on the following four points. First, according to Epiphanius, the Ebionites did not come into existence as a group until after the fall of Jerusalem (70 CE) when they supposedly separated themselves from the group of Jews that had fled to Pella (*Pan.* 30.2.7).⁴¹ While this testimony is late, it is the only explicit reference

³⁶ See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, xi, 102. Petri Luomanen believes Epiphanius’s report, while not primarily interested in historical facts, serves as “the richest ancient source on the Ebionites available” (Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects*, 31).

³⁷ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 109.

³⁸ Luomanen discusses the textual issues in Irenæus’ statement and concludes that he intended to mean, “Ebionites . . . separated Christ and Jesus” (Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects*, 19–20).

³⁹ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 109; Larry Hurtado observes, “Though scholarly majorities can sometimes be wrong, we should note that the overwhelming majority of scholars in the field agree that there are at least a few passages in Paul’s undisputed letters that reflect and presuppose the idea of Jesus’ preexistence” (Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003], 119).

⁴⁰ Luomanen, *Recovering Jewish-Christian Sects*, 161–65.

⁴¹ A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink believe that Epiphanius wanted to show that the Ebionites stemmed from Jewish Christians who had lived in Jerusalem (Klijn and Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, 29).

regarding the formation of Ebionism. Pritz places the movement about thirty-years later. He maintains a difference between the Nazarenes and the Ebionites:

The Nazarenes were distinct from the Ebionites and prior to them. In fact, we have found that it is possible that there was a split in Nazarene ranks around the turn of the first century. This split was either over a matter of christological doctrine or over leadership of the community. Out of this split came the Ebionites, who can scarcely be separated from the Nazarenes on the basis of geography, but who can be easily distinguished from the standpoint of Christology.⁴²

Second, the Ebionite use of a harmonized Gospel text indicates the movement was in ascension after the Gospel of Mark had been written (ca. 70).⁴³ Third, the Ebionite's anti-Pauline stance suggests that Pauline Christianity already had time to circulate toward the end of the first century. Ehrman surmises that Ebionism may have developed after Paul's Galatian detractors had passed off the scene.⁴⁴ Finally, though admittedly an *argumentum ex silentio*, no mention is made among the church fathers until Irenæus in the second century. First century fathers, such as Polycarp and Papias who, like Irenæus, came from Asia Minor, make no mention of the Ebionites. While admittedly a *terminus a quo* for Ebionite Christianity cannot be established with certainty, the above points, when taken together, suggest that the movement probably did not begin until after the year 70, approximately twenty-years after Pauline Christianity first formed, despite the Ebionites claiming to have descended from the original Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem church, Peter and James.⁴⁵

With regard to issues of Christian demography, as with the previous two forms of Christianity, knowing how many embraced Ebionism is nearly impossible. Nor is it possible to know how many churches (or synagogues), if any, wholly embraced Ebionism, though it is likely they were influential in Asia Minor, Rome, Alexandria, Judaea, Arabia Petraea, and Cyprus.⁴⁶ In summary, Ebionite Christianity may have developed at the end of the first century but most likely flourished in the second century. Ebionism was clearly distinct from Pauline Christology and retained strict compliance to the Mosaic law, including dietary restrictions, circumcision, and Sabbath observance. During this time period, the Christian population increased from 2,730 to 7,434 just as Ebionism and other Christianities spread throughout Asia Minor.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Of course, there were other first century groups that fall under the rubric of Christianity.⁴⁸ However, the two detailed in this article were likely the first to materialize into

⁴² Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, 108. Cf. Darren M. Slade, "Arabia Haeresium Ferax (Arabia Bearer of Heresies): Schismatic Christianity's Potential Influence on Muhammad and the Qur'an," *American Theological Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (January 2014): 50–51.

⁴³ Cf. Donatien de Bruyne, "Les plus anciens prologues latins des Evangiles," *Revue bénédictine* 40 (1928): 193–214, <https://doi.org/10.1484/j.rb.4.03052>; Ehrman, *Forged*, 71; and *Did Jesus Exist?*, 74–75.

⁴⁴ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 100.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Cf. Irenæus, *Haer.* 3.21.1; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.22; Origen, *Cels.* 2.1; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.27; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.2.7; 30.18.1; 40.1.3.

⁴⁷ Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity*, 183.

⁴⁸ These include the teachings of Cerinthus, the Balaamites, and the Nicolaitans.

significant movements. What this article has argued is that the initial movement of Christianity was the movement persecuted by Paul, and that by the end of the first century, two main schisms occurred, namely the Pauline and Ebionite movements. Of these two, Pauline Christianity arose before the Ebionism. Significantly, though, both movements found reception in several of the same regions, particularly Asia Minor.

In relation to Howard's "religion singularity," the implication of first century Christian diversity is that divergent belief systems tend to thrive among geographical melting pots. Hence, something like a present-day Asia Minor may help explain why the explosion of Christian denominations has reached a point of no return. Just as Asia Minor appears to have been a geographic conduit for diverse religious ideas in the first and second centuries, so too does the internet act as a similar conduit for diversity today. Coinciding with the proliferation of the internet, there has been a tendency toward religious pluralism and divergent theologies across the globe as people have access to more information with less external control.⁴⁹ If Asia Minor was a melting pot of diverse ideas, then it makes sense that competing forms of Christianities would exist in the same region. Likewise, if the internet is a melting pot of ideas today, then it makes sense that competing denominations would continue increasing. Of course, the internet was not responsible for the "religion singularity" since the phenomenon had already manifested decades before its invention. Rather than slow down, however, the internet may have aggravated the situation by allowing multiple divergent Christianities to exist unhindered in the same (cyber)space, just like Asia Minor did in the first and second centuries.

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⁴⁹ See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (1979; repr., Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

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