

# Modeling the “Parting of the Ways”

by

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Much of the disagreement in modern scholarship about when, how, why, and indeed whether, the ways of Judaism and Christianity parted in antiquity derives from confusion about differences of perspective. The relationship of one group to another may be seen quite differently by members of the two groups, and differently again by the modern observer. Thus, for instance, someone considered Jewish by a Christian might not consider himself or herself Jewish, and might or might not be considered as a Jew by non-Christian Jews. It is unreasonable to expect ancient authors always to have made the clear distinctions which historians now seek to discover: the relationship between Jews and Christians may generally have been important for Christians as part of their self-definition, but it was much less crucial for Jews, who could ignore for much of Late Antiquity what Christians thought and did.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, occasional contact and conflict between members of distinct groups, and their sharing of theological notions or liturgical practices, need not imply any lack of clarity for the ancient participants of each group about the differences between them: if modern scholars find it hard to decide whether the author or intended readers of a particular text were Jews or Christians, it does not follow that those who produced and used the text in antiquity were similarly in doubt.

In illustrations of these varieties of perspective I drew up, for the last of the seminars held in Oxford before the Princeton colloquium, a series of schematic diagrams for the seminar participants to refine. Crude copies of the revised diagrams were distributed at the start of the Princeton meeting, where they were subjected to further alteration. They were amended yet again in the light of comments by a group in Cambridge and in reaction to the alternative models proposed by the student leaders of

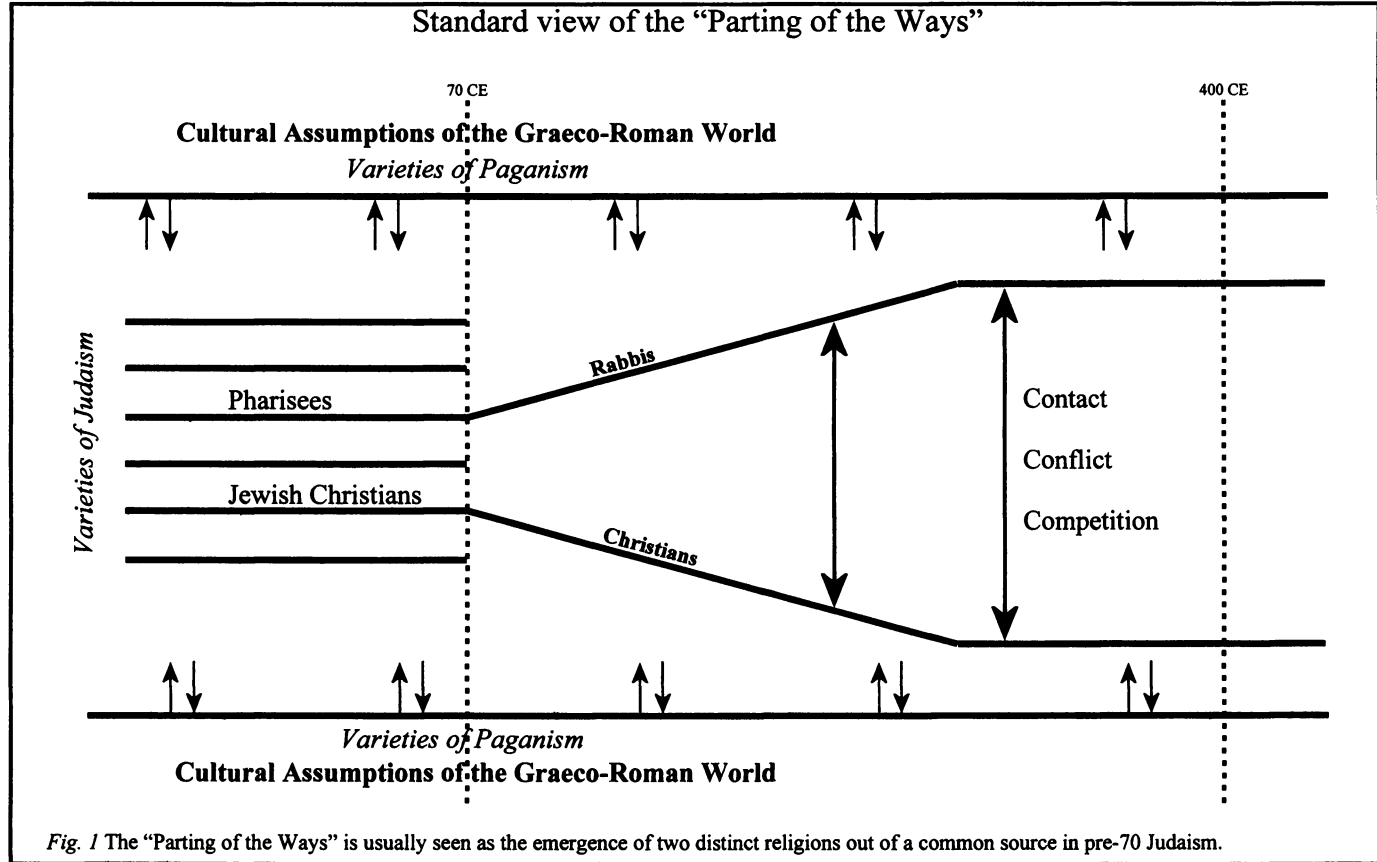
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<sup>1</sup> See further M. Goodman, “The Function of Minim in Early Rabbinic Judaism,” in *Geschichte – Tradition – Reflexion, Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. vol. 1, Judentum*, ed. P. Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 501–10; S. Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); and A. Tropper’s article in this volume.

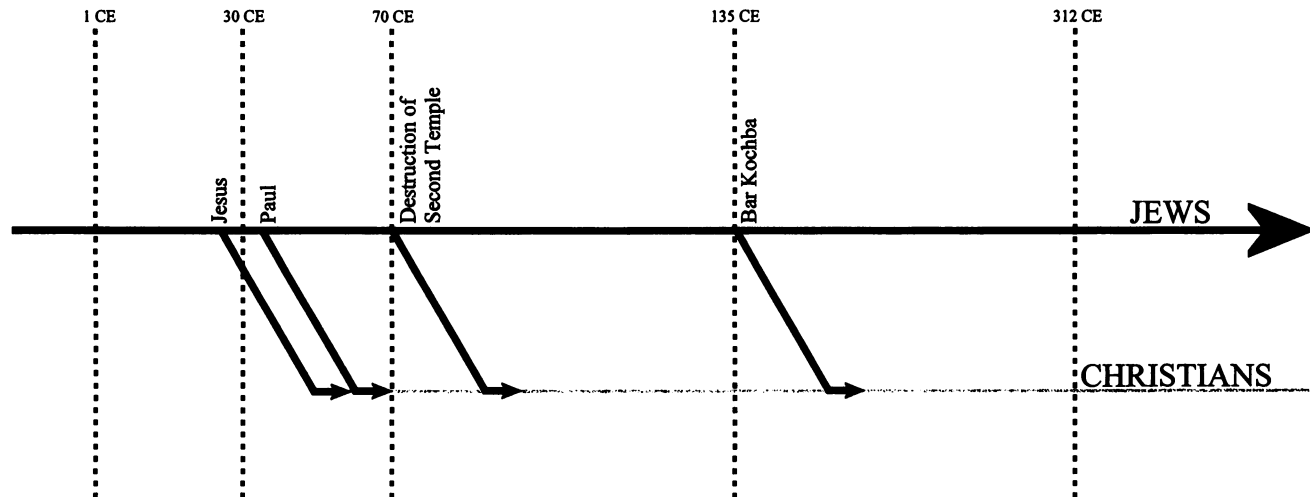
the seminar held in Oxford after our return from Princeton. The final versions presented here are thus very much the product of joint endeavor.

All models are inexact representations of an elusive reality. In the course of discussing these diagrams many useful suggestions were made of what might better represent the complex relationships between Judaism and Christianity on which all are agreed. There was much enthusiasm, for instance, for a three-dimensional model, which might give greater prominence to synchronic variation in religious practice and belief in different places and to the varying significance of the different streams – the idea is attractive, but hard to represent on the page. A water-filled construction to represent the wave model, based on language formation, as proposed by Daniel Boyarin in this volume, is similarly impractical for mass distribution.

If no image is perfect, some images are more useful than others. In any case, models should only be used as heuristic devices for finding out more about the import of the ancient evidence. It is in that minimal spirit that the diagrams are reproduced here, expertly transformed from my incompetent artistic efforts through Jeremy Boccabello's expertise in computer design.

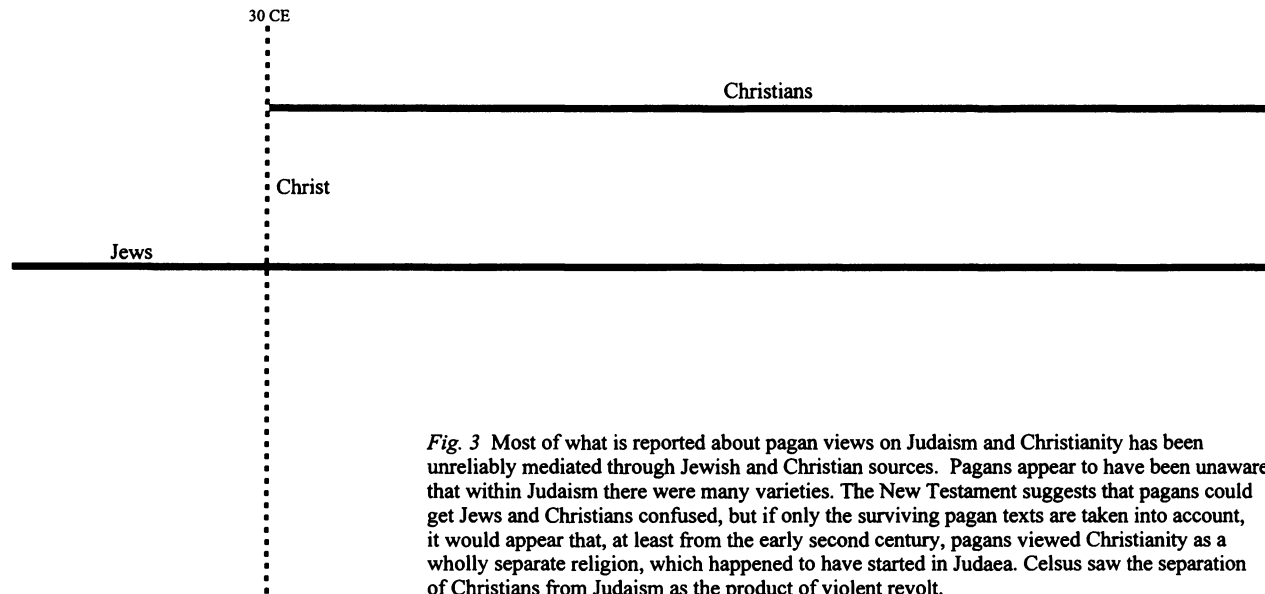


# Different datings of the "Parting of the Ways"



*Fig. 2* There has been much dispute about the precise date when Judaism and Christianity became separate religions. The decisive moment is sometimes presumed to be an event within Christian circles, sometimes a political event that affected Jews more widely.

# Jews and Christians as seen by pagans in antiquity



*Fig. 3* Most of what is reported about pagan views on Judaism and Christianity has been unreliably mediated through Jewish and Christian sources. Pagans appear to have been unaware that within Judaism there were many varieties. The New Testament suggests that pagans could get Jews and Christians confused, but if only the surviving pagan texts are taken into account, it would appear that, at least from the early second century, pagans viewed Christianity as a wholly separate religion, which happened to have started in Judaea. Celsus saw the separation of Christians from Judaism as the product of violent revolt.

# Rabbinic view of the "Parting of the Ways"

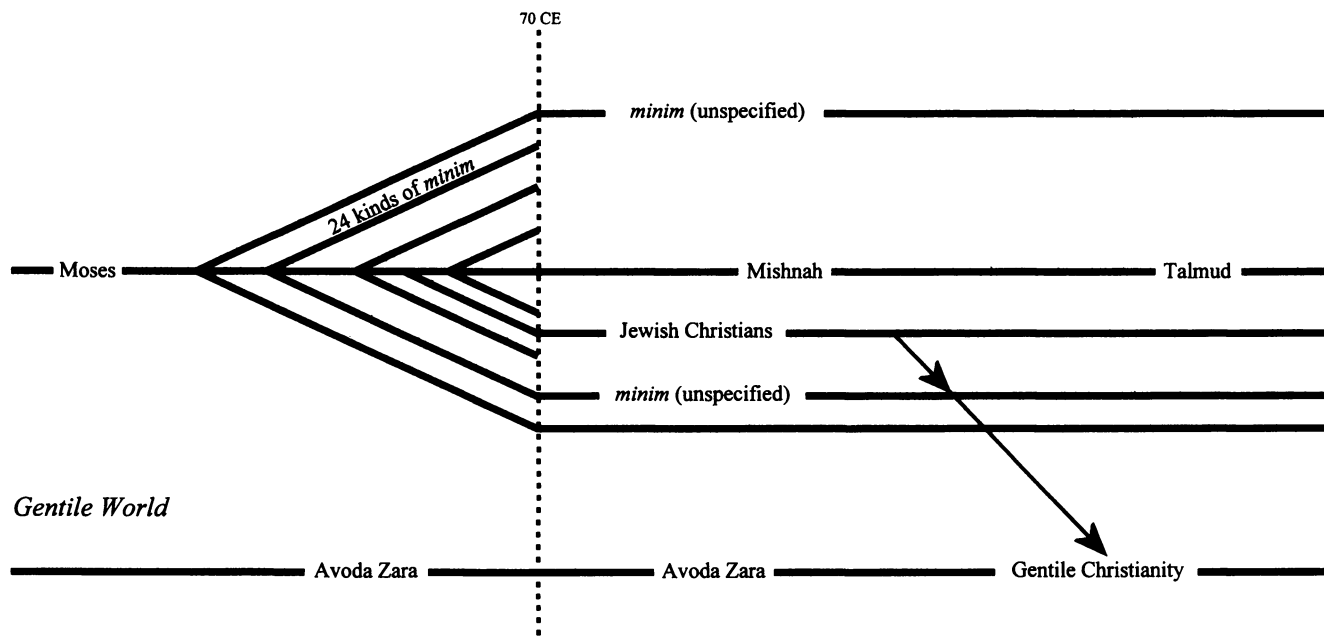


Fig. 4 This reconstruction of rabbinic views is derived from a small number of scattered sources. Rabbis showed little interest in *minim* ("heretics") of any kind. Some scholars assert that rabbinic silence about Christianity was polemical, but this is impossible to demonstrate. Rabbis refer only rarely to any link between Jewish and Gentile Christianity.

## Eusebius' view of the "Parting of the Ways"

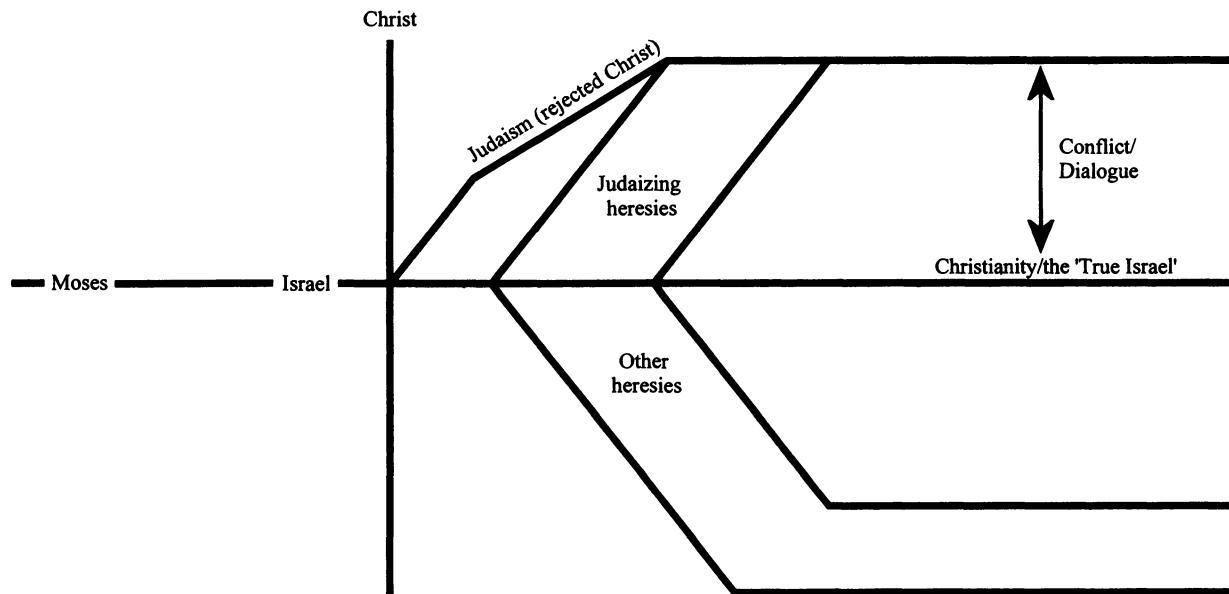
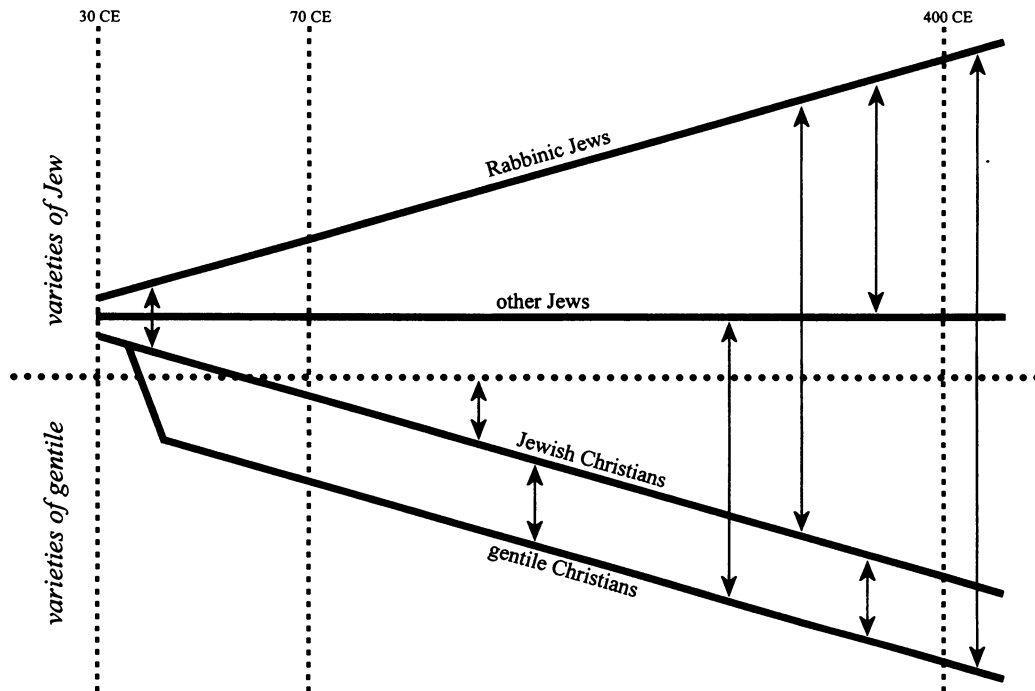


Fig. 5 The images of the Jewish past to be found in Eusebius' voluminous writings are not wholly consistent. This picture reflects most closely what is found in the *Ecclesiastical History*. Other fourth-century Christians, such as Epiphanius, had a quite different picture.

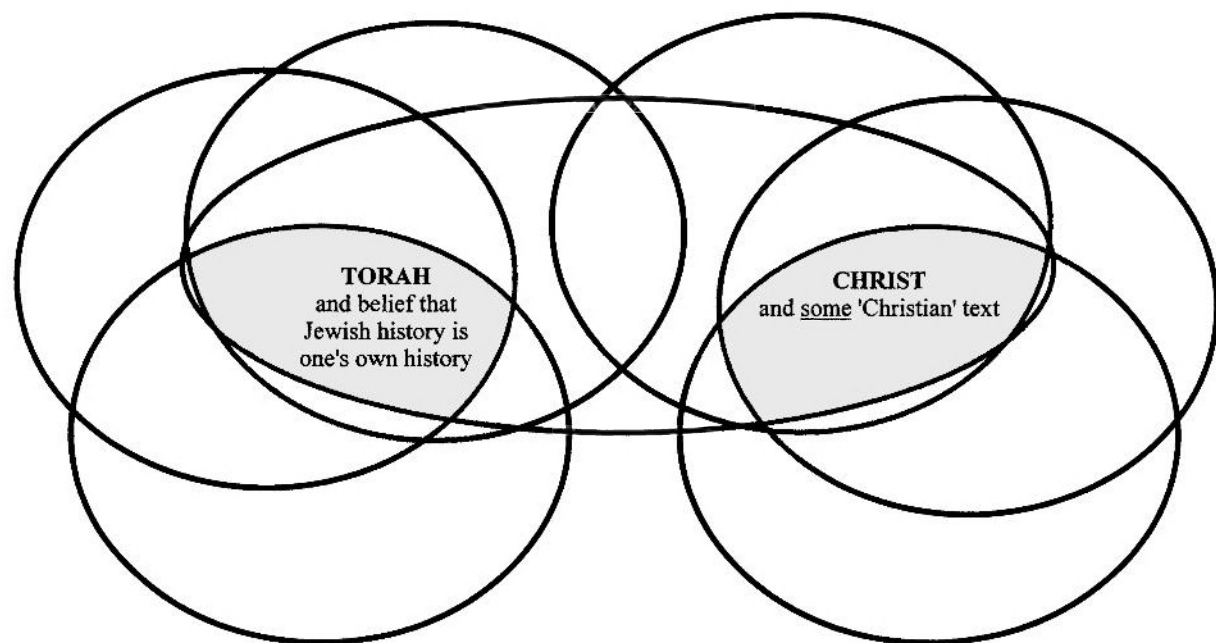
## Social relationships: Jews and Christians



*Fig. 6* The pattern of social relationships depicted in this diagram is largely based on guesswork. It illustrates the difficulties faced by modern exegetes in establishing social realities from literary texts. For example, references in gentile Christian texts to contemporary Jews may have in mind Jewish Christians, rabbinic Jews, non-rabbinic (but non-Christian) Jews, or “Judaizing” Christians who might not have thought of themselves as Jews at all.



## Self-perceptions



*Fig. 7* It is likely that varieties of Judaism continued to exist for many years after 70 CE, and it is certain that many different groups described themselves as Christian. All types of Judaism shared some common characteristics, as did all types of Christianity. It was possible to be both Jewish and Christian, but some forms of Judaism had nothing in common with some forms of Christianity. It was not necessarily the case that the "common core" of either religion was what mattered most to the adherents of that religion.

## Attitudes to boundaries

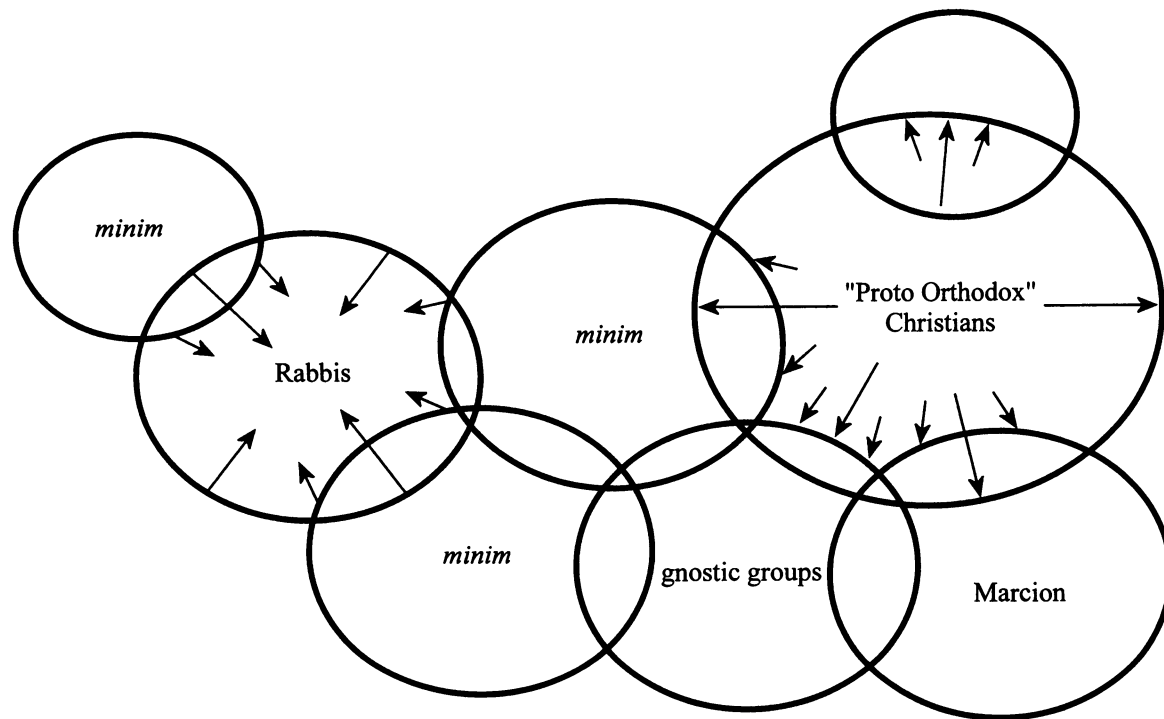


Fig. 8 "Proto-orthodox" Christians went to great lengths to define the boundaries of acceptability by describing different heresies. By contrast, rabbinic self-definition was inward looking and rabbis allowed the definition of *minim* to remain vague.

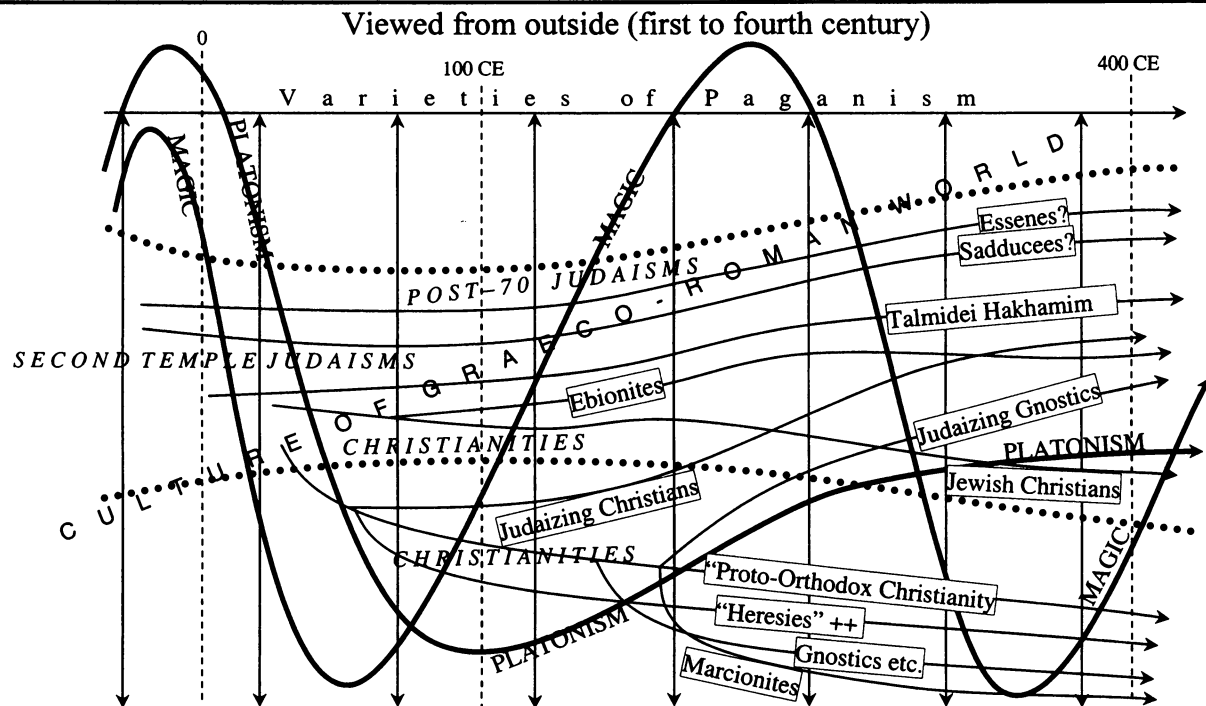


Fig. 9 The relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and the surrounding culture was complex. The designation of each group in this diagram is that used by modern scholars rather than that used by insiders: no Christian group ever described itself as a "heresy." The significance of convergence between groups is that particular groups had ideas or practices close to those of other groups: it should not be concluded that closeness of ideas promoted cooperation or even social contact. Groups may reserve their greatest hostility for similar enthusiasts who happen to diverge from them in some small but (in their eyes) immensely significant detail.