



THE HISTORICAL JESUS VIII:

The Origins of Christianity

“THEY USED TO CALL the church a virgin’, wrote Hegesippus in the second century, ‘for she had not yet been corrupted by vain teachings’; and the virgin-church theory has been held by most Christians ever since, simple believers and scholars alike. . . . [But] as far back as we can trace it (to the 40s) there never was a single, united church.”¹

Jerusalem Christians: The Obedient Ones

Just 10 days after the ascension of Jesus Christ, the Jewish day of Pentecost occurred:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. — Acts 2:1-4.

As the 12 Jerusalem apostles, reflecting the 12 tribes of Israel, meditated on this event, they were impressed that God had spoken to them on the 50th day after Passover (Pentecost = 50), just as he had spoken to Moses on Sinai, 50 days after the Exodus.² Thus, for the Jerusalem believers this epic event confirmed the validity of the Mosaic covenant and all its commandments.

The Jerusalem believers also imitated the recorded instructions of Jesus regarding the conduct of the early disciples’ ministry:

And as ye go, . . . [p]rovide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses, nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes, nor yet staves: for the workman is worthy of his meat. And into whatsoever city or town ye shall enter, inquire who in it is worthy; and there abide till ye go thence. — Matthew 10:7-11.

Because the Jerusalem community abstained from work, shared all their belongings, and depended upon the “worthy” for their sustenance, they were called Ebionites (Poor Ones).

The Ebionites — who included Peter (*Petros* = Rock), James and John, as well as Jesus’ brothers — claimed the leadership of the church.³ This branch of Christianity, also known as Jewish or Petrine Christians, adhered to the Mosaic Law and all its commandments, since they believed that God himself acted by command (e.g., Psalm 33:9).

Furthermore, like the Pharisees, the Ebionites believed that the indwelling

Law (Torah) constituted the indwelling God and that obedience to the Law was thus the manifestation of God himself. The Pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit was interpreted as explicit confirmation of this belief. For the Ebionites this gift was the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy:

... [B]ut this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. — Jeremiah 31:33.

Based upon this Old Testament passage and upon the events that endowed these words with post-resurrection authority, the Ebionites believed that God had been explicitly “re-ligioned” (re-ligated, re-tied) to themselves. As a result, they tracked and countered all alleged Christians who opposed their beliefs and practices. Moreover, they persisted in these efforts until the Roman siege of Jerusalem (66-70 CE). They then escaped from Jerusalem and fled to Pella, across the Jordan River. From there they continued their ministry for hundreds of years. One of their followers, Waraqua bin Naufal — a cousin of Mohammed’s first wife, Khadija — was presumably a tutor of Mohammed.⁴ The Ebionite teachings may well have contributed to Mohammed’s ministry, to the Koran, and to the subsequent emergence of Islam. Shortly thereafter the Ebionites themselves disappeared and perhaps were absorbed into Islam itself.

Gnostic Christians: The Possessive Ones

Meanwhile, not long after Pentecost, the disciple, Philip, left Jerusalem and journeyed to Samaria, where he launched his mission. A large number of people, including the sorcerer, Simon Magus, believed Philip’s message and were baptized by him.

Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (for as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost. And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this [possessive] power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee,

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because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me. — Acts 8:14-24.

Soon after Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, Simon Magus began his own ministry. He was one of the principal leaders in translating earlier possessive Jewish Gnosticism into subsequent possessive Christian forms. Believing that he possessed divinity, Simon Magus declared that he himself was the true Yahweh and that the Jewish Yahweh was the fallen God, who had created the evil world and managed to possess the true God in fallen human bodies. Only the gift of true knowledge (*gnosis*) would liberate the true God from his imprisonment in the created order and ultimately bring the destruction of the fallen Creation. Christian Gnosticism soon was manifested in various cults and sects and in numerous apocryphal Gospel documents — including the Nag Hammadi scrolls.⁵ Because “orthodox” Christianity vehemently opposed these “heresies,” the Gnostics went underground. Nevertheless, below the surface they have long survived and even blossomed. Today Gnosticism is rampant, and its possessive mentality permeates the convictions and practices of fundamentalist American Protestants.⁶ They implicitly believe that “re-ligion” re-ligates (re-ties) them to their original divine being.

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Pauline Christians: The Submissive Ones

Remarkably, about the same time that Philip began his ministry in Samaria, an ardent Pharisee named Saul secured letters from the high priest in Jerusalem with the intention of going to Damascus to detain the “disciples of the Lord” and return them bound to Jerusalem.

And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. — Acts 9:3-6.

Arriving in Damascus, Saul — later named Paul — was met by a disciple named Ananias, whom God had appointed to lay his hands on Saul so that he might receive his sight, be baptized, and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Upon returning to Jerusalem, Saul (Paul) did not meet with the high priest but with the Jerusalem apostles. Then, after an interim period in Caesarea, Tarsus and Arabia, Paul began his mission to the Gentile world.

Paradoxically, Paul repudiated the commitment of the Jewish Christians to the Law (Torah) and gave his Gentile converts the freedom to engage in table fellowship, free of all “kosher” and other restrictions. Of course, this led to a serious and prolonged division between Paul and the Jerusalem leadership. In defending himself, Paul referred to God’s revelation to him on the Damascus road. He further declared that he was an apostle equal to the Jerusalem Twelve — for example, referring to himself as “Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)” (Galatians 1:1).

Furthermore, Paul indicated that he had been “caught up to the third heaven” — even “caught up into paradise, and [had] heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Corinthians 12:2, 4). Thus, Paul emphasized the authority of his Gentile mission for Jesus wholly apart from the Jerusalem leadership. Paul and his followers adopted a communal fellowship led by the head of a household. This ultimately developed into the hierarchical authority of the presbytery — bishop, priest, deacon, etc. This hierarchical structure called for the submission of all believers to the power leadership. And this rapidly emerged into the power structures of Christian orthodoxy that have persisted down to these postmodern times as Greek-, Latin- and Anglo-Catholicism and as moderate Protestantism, such as Lutheranism. Orthodoxy contends that true believers will ultimately be “re-ligioned” (re-ligated, re-tied) to God. As the early church father, Athanasius, declared, “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.”⁷

Conclusion

All three forms of Christianity — Petrine, Gnostic and Pauline — emerged from Judaism. However, they tragically failed to remember that Israel originated in the conviction that the One-and-Only God would himself become human and that — in anticipation of this — human, personal self-consciousness first emerged in the time of King David. All three forms of Christianity thus failed to discern that, by becoming irrevocably human in his manifestation as Jesus Christ, God moved beyond command (Petrine), possession (Gnostic) and power structures (Pauline). They failed to understand that, as the One-and-Only God, Jesus Christ alone is the ultimate Authority (Religion) — “the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever” (Matthew 6:13). They failed to perceive that, as the Human One — the nonhierarchical Head of humanity — God as Jesus is himself both the “Author and Finisher” (Hebrews 12:2) of our faith, hope and love. He himself is relationally our rest, our peace and our everlasting life.

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Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. — Matthew 11:28.

Endnotes

1. Michael Goulder, *St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. ix.
2. “. . . [T]he Pharisees insisted that Shavuot [“Weeks”] be observed on a fixed day because they wished to affirm that the festival commemorated the Sinaitic theophany which occurred on the 50th day [Pentecost = 50] after the Exodus (following the general Pharisaic belief in an oral Torah reaching back to Moses . . .)” (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. [1997], s.v. Louis Jacobs, “Shavuot”).
3. “And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock [*petros*] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18, 19).
4. “Muhammad . . . became greatly influenced by the Abionites through his wife, Khadija, who was a part of this cult. Khadija’s cousin Waraqua bin Naufal was an Abionite priest and an influential religious leader in Mecca. He became Muhammad’s mentor, teaching him about Christianity. . . . This priest also taught Muhammad about the faith of the Jews” (Mark A. Gabriel, *Islam and the Jews: The Unfinished Battle* [Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2003], p. 69).
5. The early Christian Gnostics emerged as various cults and became known as Ophites, Valentinians, Marcionites, Montanists, Manicheans, etc. See Joan O’Grady, *Early Christian Heresies* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1985).
6. See Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). A prolific writer, Harold Bloom is himself a Gnostic. However, unlike other of Bloom’s books, *The American Religion* — a uniquely revealing publication — is mysteriously unavailable from publishers or bookstores. It may occasionally be located by searching for used and out-of-print books.
7. “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God’ was written by Holy Father Athanasios the Great, Archbishop of Alexandria . . . in his refutation of Arius during the First Ecumenical Council” (Melkite Greek Catholic Church Information Center, at www.mliles.com/melkite/godman.shtml).