



THE HISTORICAL JESUS XI:

The Petrine Gospel¹

THE EARLY CHURCH was born in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Virtually all its members were practicing Jews first led by the apostles Peter, James and John and, later, by James, the brother of Jesus. Because all the members held their possessions in common and abstained from work, they became known as Ebionites (Aramaic for “Poor Ones”). They remained in Jerusalem until the first revolt and the siege by the Roman general, Vespasian (66 CE). They then fled to Pella, across the Jordan, and remained there for generations. Meanwhile, they regarded themselves as the preeminent authority for the “church” and engaged in missionary and counter-missionary activities throughout the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Peter, James and John were very close to Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. Of course, the siblings of Jesus were with him from his early childhood. Together, the early disciples and siblings believed that they were the only ones who truly perceived who Jesus really was:

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1. They were convinced that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. In fact, it was through Joseph that Jesus had descended from King David (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38). They knew that Jesus had left his work as a carpenter soon after the age of 30, following his decision to visit his cousin, John the Baptist, who was ministering at the Jordan River (Luke 3:16, 21-23).

2. They witnessed Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan and the subsequent descent of the Spirit as a dove upon him. They believed that the Spirit was an ethereal and heavenly angelic power who came down as the Christ (Messiah = Anointed) to possess Jesus, the earthly man. Possessed by Christ (possessional Christology), Jesus then began his prophetic ministry.

3. They believed that when Jesus incurred the wrath of the Jews for his blasphemy and of the Romans for treason, he was condemned and taken to Calvary. At Calvary they believed that Christ immediately left Jesus and returned safely to heaven. It was the prophetic man, Jesus alone, who suffered, died and was buried in the tomb.

4. They believed that on the third day the man, Jesus, was “spiritually” raised from the dead. Forty days later, after a number of “spiritual” appearances, Jesus’ soul was taken to heaven.

5. They believed that the resurrection and ascension of Jesus signified that the kingdom of heaven indeed had already come. All that God promised had already occurred. This was fully confirmed on Pentecost when the Spirit descended upon the believers, just as it had upon Jesus at the Jordan. In fact, they thought that “they were already spiritual, even perfect, that in baptism they had been raised from eternal death to eternal life. When they died, their body would lie a-mouldering in the grave, but their soul would go marching on.”²

In firmly maintaining their convictions, the Jerusalem believers sent Peter and John to Samaria to baptize Philip’s converts with the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17). It was here that Peter encountered Simon Magus, the reputed founder of Gnostic Christianity. Later, the believers sent Peter and other Jerusalem agents to Antioch, Galatia and elsewhere to confront Paul and his mission. Also, they commissioned Silas to accompany Paul to Thessalonica in order to monitor his ministry. Because of their possessional Christology, the Petrine/Ebionite believers did everything possible to preserve the traditional Jewish concept of the promised Messiah — probably even conspiring in Paul’s eventual arrest, imprisonment and martyrdom.

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Endnotes

1. See Michael Goulder, *St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994). Peter did not write a canonical Gospel, but his views regarding the “good tidings” of Christ are well known.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 169.